# Australians at War Film Archive

## Alan Righetti - Transcript of interview

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## Tape 1

00:41 **Can you start from the beginning?**

My name is Alan Righetti, so all my life I've been asked where did the Righettis come from? And they came from Canton Ticino, the southernmost part of Switzerland, from a little village called

01:00 Someo. Quite a number came out from that district in 1850 for the Gold Rush days in Ballarat and my grandfather, Serafino Righetti was only 15 years of age when he came out, and they looked fairly unsuccessfully for gold in Ballarat, and settled first in Daylesford. Then some of the

01:30 family stayed in Daylesford but my grandfather went down to a little place called Heywood, just out of Portland in the Western District of Victoria and he set up a general store there, and a sawmill. So Righetti & Co Heywood were there for many, many years and he had two boys, a girl, and two boys, five in the family.

02:00 They were very widely spread out in age. My father was the youngest and the oldest, Uncle Ted Righetti, went off to the Boer War three times from Victoria and was badly injured the last trip he made. He was really the start of our war career [meant war service]. Now

02:30 his son, Alan Serafino Righetti, my cousin, was three years older than my father. That's how those families were spread out in those days. He went to Gallipoli with the 2nd Light Horse. He got through Gallipoli OK but he was killed in the battle of Romani as a young lieutenant and I was named

03:00 after him when I was born in 1918. So I inherited his revolver, which his father had at the Boer War with him, that plus photos of Alan Righetti, were amongst my prized possessions as a kid. I kept that revolver for 60-odd years before I handed it to the Australian War Memorial along with a lot

03:30 of the memorabilia, photographs of his grave and all sorts of things like that. At Righetti & Co Heywood the older boys had left. My grandfather and grandmother were getting very old and they both died during the war years, so Dad was left to look after the store. So he did not go to World War II, which worried him

04:00 all his life. He never really got over that. I'm sorry I think I said World War II. I meant World War I he didn't go to. So when World War II broke out and he had two boys, a girl, and two boys, we all joined up. I think Dad was very proud of us all because of that. Dad

04:30 or Len Righetti, as he was very well known in the district, was a very good sportsman. He was a crack rifle shot and a good tennis player, a good cricketer, a good footballer. He played in the local team, had quite a few Aborigine boys in it. Some of them would walk ten or twelve miles to play football with the team. Very few wore boots. Some with great big hands could mark a

05:00 ball with one hand and they became quite a crack team in the Western District. On one occasion when Dad was captain of the Western District team, South Melbourne went down to play football against them and South Melbourne didn't even bother to change ends at quarter time. They beat them so easily, so everything is relative. Dad did very well with the store

05:30 but in 1922 he decided that he would like us all to go to city schools, so he and my mother went off for a world trip first, and had a look around the world, so we all got ready to come up to Melbourne to live. We

06:00 were very excited when they came home because Dad brought with him a big Minerva motorcar, which was quite something in those days. Motorcars in those days were very different. My mother and father had the first motorised wedding in the Western District of Victoria and I have photos of that, sitting up in the car with my mother with a big hat with lots of fruit on. So it was very exciting

06:30 when the Minerva car rolled into Heywood and the whole township was out to see it come in. Dad was

Shire President for quite a long time there. Mother was a Watson. Her people were pioneers very much in the Portland area, short head behind the Hentys in settling there. At

07:00 Watson's and Cains they owned the Gordon Hotel in 1900 in Portland. So it was quite an event when Dad and Mum married there. When we shifted up to Melbourne, we lived first in Malvern and we all went to a state school there, Spring Road Central School, and

07:30 it was a very, very good school with a magnificent maths teacher. It was a wonderful grounding for all of us. We were very competitive, being five in the family. We all wanted to emulate Dad with his sporting prowess, so I can remember we all tried to outdo each other in everything. Mother was

08:00 extremely gifted musically. She was a conservatorium graduate, had a beautiful contralto voice and taught the piano, played beautifully. My eldest brother Lloyd inherited that gift. He played violin for the Malvern Symphony Orchestra and played the piano very nicely but the others were not quite so gifted, and I wasn't at all, unfortunately. So

08:30 I had to make up for it with sport. We all inherited Dad's ability rifle shooting and my brother Lloyd shot for the Victorian Rifle Team when he was very, very young, and I was Victorian Cadet Champion, and my younger brother also. He was a member of the Earl Roberts team the only time it has ever been won in Victoria, in

09:00 Australia. So that was very competitive. My sister was quite a good shot too with small-ball rifle shooting. I didn't have to practise much at rifle shooting. It seemed to be in the blood, so in my first attempt at open competition, the King's Prize, I won a King's badge on the first attempt but

09:30 really what I wanted to be was a champion tennis player. I didn't have as much gift that way but I did eventually win the Victorian School Boy Doubles Championship. My partner Colin Long went on to play Davis Cup tennis and he used to dispose of me easily in the singles. Tennis and rifle shooting were two sports in which I was particularly interested. After we left

10:00 Spring Road, the family, all of us except me, went to Melbourne Grammar School. My sister Yvonne went to Merton Hall, which is the equivalent girl's school to Melbourne Grammar and that was a wonderful education. I didn't regret going to Melbourne High School. It was a wonderful school, very much emphasis on studies but at the same time we had

10:30 some great personalities there. Bluey Truscott, who later became a... he was a famous footballer for Melbourne Football Team but became the head of 452 Spitfire Squadron in England and later was killed in an unfortunate accident up north of Australia. He was a year older than I was. I knew him very well and Keith Miller, our champion all-round cricketer, was a year younger. We had

11:00 an Australian champion sprinter at the school. Bill Woodfull was the senior maths master at that time. He was captain of the Australian Test Eleven in the 1930s and later headmastered Melbourne High School but not whilst I was there. So I was there for two years and

11:30 then I went to Melbourne Grammar. I had three years then at Melbourne Grammar and at the end of the first year I had a wonderful experience. Twenty-four Melbourne Grammar boys went off to India on a tour and in those days this was quite unheard of. These were the days when England was... it was Britain in India and

12:00 we travelled all over India. We were billeted at schools and with British business people in their homes. It was the most wonderful trip. We were entertained at a Bengal garden party and in New Delhi, the Viceroy of India, Lord Bullington [meant Viscount Willingdon], had us there to a luncheon party with a servant behind each chair.

12:30 We all lined up to meet him. Unfortunately the AD COM [aide-de-camp], who was a meticulous young British officer, got the names one out, so we were all introduced one out, the whole line. We didn't correct him. That was a wonderful experience and

13:00 we went with the British Army right up through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan border in the old days when the Afridi tribesmen were murdering people from the hilltops, so some things haven't changed much in that area. When I got back to school I wasn't brilliant at my work but I had no trouble

13:30 passing. I was fortunate enough to become a Prefect and a House Captain very quickly there and played in, not in all the top teams, mainly in the Ath's team [athletics team], and rifle shooting, and the tennis, which absorbed a lot of our time. It was a wonderful schooling and when I look back, going to a state school and

14:00 high school, and the grammar school, I found it was a wonderful education. My ambitions at the time, I wanted to be a wool-buyer because wool-buyers were so important in Australia and they got to go overseas every couple of years, so that seemed to me to be the ideal thing to be. From the time that we were?

14:30 particularly at Melbourne Grammar where the Cadet Corps was very strong, there was a feeling that war would be coming along again. We were not too sure when but after people went to the 1936 Olympic Games and the whole of Germany was in uniform,

15:00 people began to get very uneasy about it. I was lucky to be chosen amongst a group each year to go to Somers Camp, which was a Power House organization run by Doc McAdam. It was a mixture of schoolboys from all schools, private schools, high schools, state schools and business, technical colleges,

15:30 all mixed up. We all played sport against each other for a couple of weeks. Now Doc McAdam never ceased to lecture us about the "Yellow Peril", "Watch the north. Yellow Peril." So that, plus the uneasy feeling about Germany, made us very keen to continue, not only with the Cadet

16:00 Corps but most of my friends joined the militia with me as soon as we left school. I joined the 6th Battery, 2nd Field Brigade Light Field Artillery, old 18-pounders and we opened up the first camp at Trawool 50 miles north of Melbourne near Seymour, not far from Puckapunyal, the permanent camp that

16:30 the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] later opened. That was a great experience. We used to have three months in camp and a month out, and then a month in, and I was a gunner. I had a three-star Barr & Stroud rangefinder, and lugging that around the hills around Trawool, and in pretty rotten weather, convinced me that I was not going to join

17:00 the army. When I won my King's Badge, then Major Rowell who later became very high, wanted me very much to join the AIF but that was still a little bit in the distance. I'm still really talking 1938.

17:30 Now because I wanted to be a wool-buyer I had to get through my technical college course in wool-classing, so I had 18 months in which I was going backwards and forwards from the wool stores in Port Melbourne, and things were pretty tough in the Depression years. I used to get a ride on the back of a coal truck and things like that, to get to William Houghton & Company, the big store down at the docks.

18:00 I learned my wool business the hard way. I went off then to sheds up in the Riverina and class sheds in the Western District of Victoria, and that was a tremendous experience for a young chap to go away. It didn't do my tennis much good of course because I was away too much or my rifle shooting but nevertheless it was an experience I wouldn't

18:30 have missed. In the wool store the bench that I was working at, an old supervisor said, "You know laddie, that bench you're working at? Errol Flynn [famous actor] used to work there when he first came up from Tasmania! He was quite a guy, very quiet but used to read a lot instead of chatting to people.

19:00 In our smokos [smoking break] he'd prefer to go away and read plays. One of the more senior people in the stores was inclined to pick on him and once even called him a "sissy". Errol Flynn put down his book and got up, and finished this chap off very quickly

19:30 with a couple of very nice upper cuts, and that was end of his time in William Houghton's", so I was privileged to occupy his bench. Many of my friends were in the wool business and some of the people, their fathers, and their grandfathers, people like Laycocks

20:00 of Laconia Blankets, said, "You know laddie, you've always wanted to be a wool-buyer but one man can buy an awful lot of wool and they're a family business. You'll never really get to the top that you might want to do. Why don't you go to university and get yourself a degree because we don't have practical wool people with degrees." So that's what I did. Now by this time

20:30 it was '39 and things were looking very bad, so I nevertheless started at the university. I went to Trinity College up at Melbourne University and did agricultural science, and then war was really underway. It had broken out in September '39, so we all decided it was time to give away

21:00 studies and get into it, and to my horror they wouldn't let me go. They said, "We will join you up. You can enlist now but you won't be called up until you've done your first year exams and we'll give you early examinations." I thought it was terrible. I thought the war was going to be over, I'm going to miss it because

21:30 French Maginot Line and the wonderful British Navy? I thought it was terrible, especially when my mates were going who were not at university. In retrospect, that was such a wonderful thing to do. There was no way in the world in which I would have come back and gone to university if I hadn't done that first year. As you can imagine

22:00 it was pretty hard doing the first year with the thought of waiting to be called up but we had our little reservist badges on and I think they marked us fairly easily too, to help us get through that first year. A lot of people had said, "Why were you so sort of anxious to dash away and help England because she's on her own in this?" But in actual fact

22:30 that wasn't the feeling at all when I was a kid growing up. We were terribly proud to be members of the British Empire and we were very, very much Australian, as opposed to people who were English. The Poms got just as much criticism in those days as they do today but it was the British Empire. We were part of it

23:00 and if England was at war, we were at war in our opinions. I mean we saluted the flag and gave an oath

at school, and that sort of thing but the British Empire was a solid core that we all belonged to. People who say that we went to help England just really don't understand what they're talking about. The British Empire was under threat and World War I

23:30 was still very much in people's memories. We'd all lost uncles and things like that in World War I. If we played games the Germans were the enemy and the songs we sang around the piano, "Where ever ye be, keep your eye on Germany." All those sorts of things, so it was not really a case of

24:00 rushing off to help England, although we did know that she was very, very much on her own and things did not look too good. In the earliest stages of course, as I mentioned, we thought that the French Army and the British Territorials going over to France, it would be over in no time, that Hitler wouldn't get very far.

24:30 I had considered the navy because my eldest brother Lloyd, who was married, unfortunately he only saw his little daughter once, and from there on he went off on the HMAS Perth to fight in the Mediterranean. My second brother Ivo joined the air force as a Catalina pilot. He was a captain

25:00 of a Catalina, pilot, and did two tours, and was a test pilot. My sister Yvonne is probably the only female aerodrome control tower officer ever. She was in control of the tower at Mascot for a short time and then down to Essendon in Melbourne where she was known as "Rickety Kate" because

25:30 of Righetti. She was always called Rickety Kate and for the whole war she served there in charge of the tower, not with the air force but with the Department of Civil Aviation. I was next and had decided definitely on the air force. My younger brother Syd, who was a cadet lieutenant in the militia,

26:00 left that and transferred to the navy, and went away as a naval seaman, the same as my eldest brother. So we all joined up and away we went. First when I was actually called up, it was the 3rd of January 1940.

26:30 I beg your pardon, 1941. 1941 we went off to Somers Camp to do our drilling and learn the rudiments of marching, and so on, and a great crowd of people down there but I didn't really want to do my air force training in Australia. It was a bit too close to home and I thought Mum and Dad would be worrying about "Are you coming home this weekend?"

27:00 and "How did you get on last week?" So we were given the alternative of doing our training in Australia or in Rhodesia. Now Southern Rhodesia at that time was a complete? I knew nothing whatsoever about it but I thought, "Well if we're going to be in it, we'll be in it." So number ten course, which was the course that I was on, we went off on the fifth draft to do our training in Rhodesia. We went over

27:30 on the old Ceramic. We left in March in 1941, so I did not fly at all in Australia. There were 80 of us on this course and it was a great ship, well looked after, good conditions, and a great way to start off going to war. We landed at Durban and we went by train

28:00 up to Southern Rhodesia, and wherever we stopped, the train stopped, we'd be given cups of tea by the equivalent of our Country Women's Association, that sort of treatment, and we felt very welcome. Everything started very well. They divided us into two lots of 40, those who wanted to go onto twin-engine aircraft and those who wanted to be fighter pilots.

28:30 The younger ones and when I say young, some of them hadn't had their 20th birthday yet, I was a little bit older, and those who played a lot of sport, mainly seemed to go for the fighter pilot. The older ones seemed to choose the twin-engines. Although I was 22 there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to be a fighter pilot. We went

29:00 to different stations in Southern Rhodesia and the one I started at was a little place called "Guinea Fowl" in the centre of Southern Rhodesia, onto Tiger Moths. I'd had no experience whatsoever of flying before but I didn't find it difficult. Some chaps took a long time to get the hang of it, the knack of flying but I got off very early,

29:30 one of the earliest on my first solo and got through that OK, and made friends with a group, a small group of six to eight chaps that I kept for a long, long time during the war. There was Geoff Waugh, who was a little bit older, always cheerful, the sort of father figure. We all went to him for advice,

30:00 up earliest in the morning, always helping people, wonderful chap, "Woggy" we used to call him. David Borthwick, six feet three, slightly eccentric to say the least, went to Geelong College. He was a great mate. John Hooke, who in the overall picture of things probably was the most successful of the lot of us as far as war

30:30 was concerned. Jimmy Watchorn from Hobart, he's pride of the family there. I think Jimmy still has a brother living in Australia but a very, very nice chap. Kyle Sellick from South Australia. Kyle was very young, very inexperienced but what we would call today "cool". He

31:00 looked the part and his name "Kyle", he got to be called "Killer". So that was the little group of us that were together. We then transferred to Thornhill not very far away from the Tiger Moth base and we learned to fly Harvards, which were a Canadian built aircraft

31:30 from which our Wirraway was copied really. They were tricky aeroplanes. You had to be very careful with them. They were inclined to stall if you messed around. At low level and tight turns you had to be a bit careful with them and our casualties were very, very high considering that it was the whole time I was in Rhodesia

32:00 the most perfect weather. Rhodesia is up on a 5000 foot plateau and in what we'd call our summer months, nearly all the time the weather was just beautiful. That was unfortunate in that we didn't have much chance to fly in cloud, so we used to get a bit bored and we'd fly down in the big

32:30 dry riverbeds, get right down into the dry beds, and try to get around the corners, and pop over the trees, and whiz over the native villages, and frighten the natives. We had far too many casualties. Only 600 Australians went to Rhodesia to train and the casualty rate was far too high considering but it was really more

33:00 through boredom than anything else. We got new Harvards, "Harvard IIs", which were also very tough on the stall, so much so that, not on our station but on one of the others, one of the instructors, an Englishman who was very confident said, "You chaps are getting nervous about these

33:30 Harvards. I'll give you a demonstration." He went out and he took one of the ground staff chaps with him, and did a few great aerobatics, and then did a climbing turn, then another one, stalled, and then showed how you can get out of the spin but when he got out of it OK, it then spun the other way, and he went straight into the middle of the aircraft in front of everybody, the aerodrome

34:00 in front of everybody, which didn't help confidence much at all. There have been remarks in books, one written by the professor of the Defence Academy in Canberra, saying at one stage the losses in Rhodesia, that there was talk of refusing to fly. That was absolute nonsense. There was never the slightest suggestion of that. Unless you measured up

34:30 in every way you got scrubbed anyway and the thought of being scrubbed or even being sent back to be an air gunner or navigator, that was horrific. The great thing was to get through and there was never any suggestion of that. It is in an addendum at the back of his book but it is incorrect. My small group and a few others passed out

35:00 without any setbacks, and we got our wings there. Looking back on it, it wasn't easy because of the wide variety of instructors that we had. Some of the instructors were Englishmen who were a bit thwarted because they were a little bit too old for the war. They had been sent out as instructors, when they wanted to be

35:30 flying in action. Some were South Africans who didn't like the Australians much and some of them were very, very abusive when they were teaching you. Some of our chaps just couldn't take that and answered back, and got scrubbed off the course. But overall I think it was as good a training place as we could have had.

36:00 One system they have there is? and this is something that worried me during the whole of my time in the air force. It didn't seem to worry my mates as much as me but I just felt that it was a very unfair business. During the course, before you got your wings, some were selected as officers, at first as cadet officers and then

36:30 commissioned, of course. Well now throughout the whole of the air force, with all your training, an officer doesn't receive any different training from anybody else. He does exactly the same work. He has no additional responsibilities but the conditions that he lives under from there on are a real hangover

37:00 from Nelson's navy [Horatio Nelson], the upper and the lower deck. Perhaps as young officers, they have a batman to four officers, they live in much better conditions, they eat better food and I could never really get over this. The interview that you go for, I remember mine. You were usually interviewed by

37:30 a ground staff officer. In our case it was an Australian. Mine consisted mainly of "Righetti? Where did you get that name from? Why aren't you flying for the Italians?" and "What sort of family did you come from? Are you a wealthy family?" I frankly got quite

38:00 annoyed with him. I asked him at one stage whether the interview was for me or my father. He was asking so many? Anyway, that was a whinge that I kept right through the war really, that for no reason at all that you could determine? I'm not saying that chaps who were picked for officers weren't good chaps but really the real leaders, like one or two of

38:30 my little group I thought, were not even considered. Now we didn't really suffer at all. That's because the conditions were very good in South Africa, until we got down to Cape Town because we'd decided we would go to England. Things were still pretty bad in the UK, so we went off by train down to Cape Town, a group

39:00 I suppose of about 15 of us and we had a wonderful time in Cape Town. I played quite a bit of tennis there waiting for the ship to go and that sort of thing. Incidentally, that was one of the things the instructors didn't like us doing very much through our training in Rhodesia and that was beating them at sport! Finally we left

39:30 Cape Town on a ship, a Dutch ship called the Christiaan Huygens and the conditions below deck were just indescribable. We had a lot of deserted British troops on board and some of the? I've been through the sheds, the shearing sheds but I've never experienced anything like this. This was my first

40:00 taste of the difference. The few of us who'd been commissioned were not even allowed to come down and even look at the conditions and I was put in charge of trying to keep the Mess clean, and that sort of thing down there with these fellas that were a very rough mob indeed. Most of them were going back to be jailed in Britain. The food

40:30 was indescribably awful and that was not a pleasant experience at all. When you went up on deck to walk around the deck, you were asked to salute your mate and call him "Sir", the one who had been commissioned when you weren't because the army officers on board would pull things up if you didn't. Of course, as you know in the navy

41:00 below deck is not even allowed to speak to the officers but at least those officers were trained to be officers. They had extra responsibilities and so on.

# Tape 2

00:33 The Christiaan Huygens was an unpleasant experience but I think I mentioned that we were even robbed. A lot of our kit bags were riffled by some of these fellas we had on board.

**Actually you didn't mention that. Maybe you can go into a bit more detail about that?**

01:00 I'm not too sure where they picked these deserters up and thieves, and people who'd dropped out generally in the army but they were being taken back to England to be imprisoned and we were just unlucky enough to be on that ship, and below decks. The chaps who were not below decks thought it was the most wonderful ship to be on but we were unaccompanied across the southern

01:30 Atlantic at a time when the German submarines were at their most dangerous. So we sailed due pretty much west until we hit the South American coast and went up there right up to Halifax in Canada. There they decided that they would strengthen the

02:00 ship as far as companionways and weld over portholes because it was really a summer-built ship. It was built for equatorial waters, not really the north Atlantic. We had two or three weeks whilst there ... we went down to Saint John, New Brunswick [Canada] where the tides are

02:30 enormous and so it is a great dry dock area for ships. So we got a bit of leave there. Saint John, New Brunswick was quite interesting. Halifax is a terrible place, as any other Australians will tell you who went through Canada and did their training in Canada. They nearly all left to go to England from Halifax, very miserable [place]. By this time of course winter was starting to set in, in the northern hemisphere, so it was very cold but we enjoyed ourselves

03:00 at Saint John, New Brunswick and boarded the Christiaan Huygens to cross the Atlantic. We went back up to Halifax to pick up the convoy. There were nine merchant ships in the convoy and because America was not yet in the war, they still accompanied us half way across the North Atlantic.

03:30 We ran into very, very heavy seas in the North Atlantic and we were doing our watch patrols two hours on, and four hours off, looking into pitch dark at night-time. We were not too sure what we were looking for. It was supposed to be submarines but we had about five American battleships and some destroyers, wonderful escort. So we felt pretty safe.

04:00 When we got to the half-way mark the Americans handed over to the British and the Brits had just two destroyers way out in front, which we never really saw again. So the nine ships were just plodding along through these extremely rough seas. In retrospect, we had no idea just how dangerous it was. When we found out that

04:30 it was at probably the worst time of losses in the North Atlantic, we were losing a tremendous number of ships but we didn't know that at the time and thought that the whole business of lookouts was a bit unnecessary. We landed in Liverpool in an English winter and then we began to see what the war was all about for the first time because of the devastation from

05:00 the bombing, and the Blitz. From there and our train travels down to our Australian base at Bournemouth, we didn't see too much but enough to know that we were finally going to war. We had a very good base at Bournemouth and we had a little time off there before we were posted to our various operational training units.

05:30 In the air force you do 50 hours initial training on your Tiger Moths and then we did 100 hours on the Harvards in Rhodesia to get our wings, and then you need to do another 50 hours on an operational training aircraft. We were sent to number 55 OTU, Operational Training Unit, just near Newcastle-on-

Tyne, up in the north of England on the North Sea, in the middle of winter

06:00 and it was freezing, and the snow, and ice all over it. It was three months by this time since we'd flown an aeroplane and so it was quite a change from the perfect conditions that we had in Rhodesia, to this very small aerodrome at Usworth, where there were really only two very short

06:30 runways, one of them particularly so. The fog was so bad usually, off the North Sea that if you could see the end of the runway you took off, but not otherwise. We often had to shovel the snow off the runways before we could clear them to take off and if you didn't turn in the fog before 500 feet you'd hit the Newcastle balloon barrage.

07:00 So this was all quite a change for us. Now as I say, not having flown for three months, the British instructors, who were great blokes but they were mostly survivors from the Battle of Britain, pilots who had survived and were on rest as our instructors, were pretty impatient. They didn't have much time. You either lived or you didn't, in their opinion.

07:30 I know my instructor said, "Righto! Hop in this Miles Master", which was a two-seater aircraft and he screamed off the runway, round the perimeter of the aerodrome, and said, "Ok, put her down." So I grabbed the joystick and just touched the wheels down, and he said, "I've got it!" Around he went again. He did that three times and my logbook will show that that

08:00 was 35 minutes of flying, and when we taxied in he said, "Ok, there's the Hurricane." I said, "Sir, I don't even know the cockpit" and he said, "I'll show you the cockpit. Why don't you want to fly it?" Any suggestion of not wanting to fly, you would be accused of lack of moral fibre and all sorts. So he showed me the rudiments

08:30 of the cockpit. Of course it was an English aeroplane and everything is opposite to the American aeroplanes and the Canadians' aeroplanes, where the undercarriage controls are quite different and you've got a spade grip on the joystick for? not a spade grip? I've forgotten what they call that? for compressed air brakes. Whereas the American

09:00 aeroplanes have the toe brakes and you can guide the aeroplane much more successfully with toe brakes. These were very indeterminate, not a precise piece of equipment at all. The cockpit layout was quite different from the aeroplanes we had been flying, pitch controls, everything.

09:30 Anyway I taxied out and opened up the throttles, and I felt as if I'd been hit in the back with a hammer. The acceleration was so great and pulled back on the joystick, and got off the ground OK, and straight into the fog. Then I wound the canopy forward, as you do to cut out the noise and my seat

10:00 was a bit high, and it hit the goggles just above my helmet, and knocked them half over my eyes, so I had to put my head on one side because I couldn't find how to put the seat down. I still had the undercarriage down, so with a different hand from the American aeroplane, I'm trying to get the undercarriage up and I can't move it. So the aeroplane was starting to kangaroo around the sky

10:30 a little bit and I'm starting to get a bit worried, and then a voice calls, and says, "Hello Akbar, is your cockerel crowing?" Now that's the call sign from the base station for indication of friend or foe. So you have to answer, "This is Akbar" but I didn't know how to work the radio. I didn't know the switch or anything,

11:00 so that means you're likely to have a squadron of Spitfires on your tail to shoot you down because you haven't indicated. By this time "Righetti, A" is getting into quite a bit of trouble. The aeroplane's kangarooing around the sky a little bit and I'm in complete fog. I thought, "Now don't panic. It doesn't matter if you can't get the undercarriage up, just try to turn

11:30 roughly a reciprocal and fly back generally, and hope for the best." So I did that and I was perspiring fairly freely by this time, even though it was freezing, and I had the greatest bit of luck. There was a swirl of fog and I saw a monument that I knew was just off the aerodrome. I focussed on that, got down below the fog, came around

12:00 in the circuit and turned in, selected the flaps up instead of down because of the different controls, came in over the fence at 120 instead of 90 [miles per hour], and got a Verey pistol-light [flare] fired at me, which meant go around again but there was no way I was going around again. So I got it down and managed to pull up without running off the runway, and tipping it up on its nose, finally taxied in to

12:30 our disposal, and I got out, and I could hardly stand up! But at least I had done my first solo and I was the first of the course to go solo, and the weather really clamped down then. We didn't fly for a few days but every half an hour or so a day, I'd get a chance to fly, so I got up quite a lot of hours and my mates

13:00 hadn't really started. So I got a lot more leave than the others, which was good, so I used to go up to Scotland and see a family friend, a doctor up there. That wasn't so bad but whenever anybody ever asks me what did I fly and where during my air force, I always say, "I flew Hurricanes in England and Kittyhawks out in the western desert."

13:30 I don't tell them that I did not fly in action in England because I consider that my training in operational training at Usworth, on those Hurricanes was the most dangerous flying that I did in the whole of the

time that I flew. I think we were under as much risk from the conditions as we were from the German fighters.

14:00 Losses were appalling. Out of the two courses that were there at the same time we lost something like 17 out of 35 people. Our casualties were much higher than any operational squadron at that time in England. It was? well it was murder really. We flew into each other. We flew into the ground. We flew into fogs. It was terrible.

14:30 But I was very lucky. I had one or two near-miracles, which make you very fatalistic about life. On one occasion I had to fly across to another aerodrome to pick up a Hurricane that was armed and then fly that out over the North Sea to meet up with

15:00 a Fairey Battle [light bomber] that was towing a drogue, like a windsock being towed about 100 yards behind the aeroplane. You make attacks on it. You were learning to fire as you would against an enemy fighter. So I completed that exercise with two other chaps and then we turned to go back, and by the time we got halfway back we were in absolutely

15:30 thick fog. You couldn't see your wing tips. Now in those days the old TR9D radios were almost useless and I tried to call up. I couldn't get anybody on the radio. I lost track of my mates, so I started to put down to try to get under the fog and I got down to about 800 feet, which was lower than some of

16:00 the hills around where we were flying. So I thought that this was no good. I climbed up and up until I was sitting above the fog and then I thought, "Well I either climb up and bail out or I try to fly down south, keep going south hoping to run out of the fog, or I go out over the North Sea, and then I can put down on the altimeter down to perhaps a few hundred feet,

16:30 under the fog perhaps, and try to come back then until I hit the coast, hit the beach, and crash land on the beach." I decided to do that, so I then went steadily down through the fog losing altitude all the way till I reckoned I was just about over the sea and all at once there was a clearance, and an aircraft whizzed past me

17:00 and it was the Fairey Battle. Now this would be 25 to 30 minutes after I'd left the battle. The chances of that happening were just absolutely nil, to come back and fluke seeing that aeroplane. So I screamed into a right turn on it, and formatted on him, right up close to him, and

17:30 made gestures, "I'm lost!" He just gave me the thumbs up sign, so I just kept right on to his wing tip and he took me down along a beach, hopped over a ridge into a little airport called Acklington, which was right on the coast. That's where he was based. So I taxied in with him and once again, I was really shaking at the knees. But that's the sort of luck. The other two fellas; one of them crashed, the other one

18:00 flew down south and was so shaken, he never really flew again. That's where the luck comes into it. It wouldn't matter how good a pilot you were, there you just needed the luck. I think our little band of brothers, at this stage we were very, very close together because it was a very dangerous thing. We valued each other

18:30 so much. We got to know each other better than you'd know your own brother. If one went on leave you'd lend him your shoes or your shirt, or anything like that. We went on leave. We got to London. We'd go together. One or two of us had friends or relatives in England. The others would just stick together. So

19:00 we had a lot of fun. Our leave, we really made the most of. Up on the station we had very much again the officer-sergeant pilot business. At some of the sergeant pilots' dances and occasions like that, on the door would be at dances

19:30 in the sergeants' mess "Sergeant Pilots Excluded". Now this may sound awful but a lot of the ground staff on those English stations had probably taken 15 years to get their three stripes for a sergeant and we were newcomers who were sergeants after just a few months, so they sort of resented us quite a lot. And the instructors, some of the Battle of Britain chaps

20:00 were great. Others were not so good and very, very officer, sergeant non-commissioned-conscious, but that's England. Because we had our own little group of chaps and we stuck together, it didn't worry us too much. When you go down to England [meant London] you're not allowed in a certain club or you're not allowed to drink in a certain part of a hotel

20:30 bar, that sort of thing and we found that pretty hard to take. On the course we had Canadians and some of those chaps were pretty good but they had terrible casualties. Their training hadn't been as good as ours and they had more casualties than we did. We had many funerals to attend to, some of our best mates there. Lenny Wright, who

21:00 wanted to be a? he wanted to get places in the Church of England after the war. That was his whole desire. He was very excited when he found a new version of the Bible that he was reading. He was a great chap and he was involved in a head-on collision in which four were killed, so we buried poor old Lenny. His Bible didn't help him much.

21:30 Some of the sport that we played was very limited because of the weather. We played a bit of squash against the Englishmen particularly. I wasn't a very good squash player. I used to play tennis on the squash court. Squash players would know what that means but I managed to beat their number one player and he walked off, an officer, he walked off the court without even shaking hands! But we still had

22:00 a lot of fun there just the same. When I look back though it really was the toughest bit of the whole war I thought. Now, from there we were posted to different squadrons but at the death knock they said, "We want you out in the Middle East. Things are going very, very badly. Rommel [German General] is sweeping

22:30 the Australians back in North Africa and they are retreating, so you've all got to go out there." So we went to Greenock, which is the port for Glasgow and we joined up with a convoy there. We were on a submarine supply ship for the Royal Navy called the HMS Adamant. We had lots of warheads

23:00 and all sorts on board. So this was our first taste of the Royal Navy and it was great. They were a great crowd, great crew, no real feeling of differentiation. We were certainly below decks but we were well looked after, tucker [food] was good, so we sailed off away from the English winter, which suited me very well. We had a pretty big convoy,

23:30 a few merchant ships but mainly navy ships, some of them breaking off to go into the Mediterranean. We had the [HMS] Illustrious leading us and a destroyer right beside us called the [HMS] Javelin, and we got attacked a couple of times in which the whole convoy split up, German submarines.

24:00 We understand that the Javelin was successful in sinking one. We didn't get very much information of course. On the Illustrious they were flying old Swordfish [aeroplanes] off the decks and practising dropping mines, and they had one unfortunate accident. They were practising gunnery with the light guns and the gun jumped its traverse

24:30 and pointed into the next one, and blew that one off the deck. They had several chaps killed there. Then we had a tragedy onboard the Adamant. One of the crew went down into the depths of the ship to get an item of equipment and apparently there had been a leakage of carbon monoxide from the warheads of the torpedoes that they were carrying, and anyway he just passed out on the floor,

25:00 and his mate didn't really notice. He just thought something had happened to him, got down the ladder to pick him up and he crashed. The third chap realised something was wrong and he tried to rescue them by holding his breath but anyway, out of it there were three died. So I had my first experience of burial at sea at night time of the sliding the canvas bags over the side with the officers all lined up and saluting,

25:30 which was very sad but very impressive. At the entrance to the Mediterranean half the convoy went into the Med including the Illustrious and we went off down to the Gold Coast of Africa. We came into Freetown there where there were quite a few ships and we got the usual thing that everybody got right through the war,

26:00 "Not expecting you. Who are you?" That always happened. You were never expected anywhere. So we stayed there in tents under pretty bad conditions but the Australians weren't too bad on tents and we fixed up little Coolgardie safes, and showed the Englishmen how to keep food cool. We had to watch for malaria

26:30 but we stood it all right, still waiting to see what they were going to do with us. They then moved us by ship to Takoradi, which was also out on the west coast of Africa and that ship was very comfortable, very good conditions indeed, quite a bit of luxury on that.

27:00 So once again of course, they weren't expecting us at Takoradi but we set up there in quite good conditions, in huts and there was a Hurricane there, which we got the chance to have just one fly on it because we were going to ferry fighter aircraft all the way, right across the North African desert, right across the Sahara, a very, very long flight.

27:30 The first contingent of five fighters and a Blenheim flown by an English crew, took off, and there were some pretty bad thunder storms around, and the Blenheim got lost, cruised around all over the place trying to find its way until all the fighters ran out of petrol, and the Blenheim came back again, and landed. So they left five of our chaps down.

28:00 nobody got killed fortunately but all the aeroplanes were wiped off. So instead of me flying the next lot of fighters, they said, "We're not going to have this happen again. You'll wait here until an American aircraft comes through, picks you up, and flies you across." That would be an old DC3 or DC2 probably then, Dakota.

28:30 We waited, an interesting sort of a place but nobody knew quite what? America was well and truly in the war by this time but we had ships like the Richelieu. Free French ships were cruising. Nobody knew too well which side the French were on at this stage because of all the disasters that had happened in France.

29:00 We were very anxious to get to the western desert because we felt that we might get a chance to get

from there back home because of the Japanese. I didn't mention earlier of course that the Japanese enormous victory at Singapore, a tragedy for us, happened whilst I was in England. That was one of the things that

29:30 we found pretty hard too. I can remember I was coming down in an elevator in an English hotel talking to Woggy Waugh or Kyle Sellick when Singapore had fallen and we were saying, "Can't believe it. Singapore's impregnable. There's no way it would fall." Of course we didn't know Singapore had all its guns pointing out to sea when the attack came

30:00 from the land. The British officer, a major, said, "I can't help but hear what you're saying, worrying about things back home but look, England is the heart of the Empire and even if Australia is overrun by the Japs, we'll get it back some day, so don't worry about it!"

30:30 That was the English. They were characters! I'm a good flag-waver for the English but only an Englishman could say that! It was at that time too when I'd heard the Perth, HMAS Perth had been sunk in the Java Sea and I was terribly worried as to whether I'd hear that my brother Lloyd had gone down and had

31:00 perished with it. At that stage we didn't know but that's why it was great to have good mates. Anyway, getting back to Takoradi, finally a DC2 came through with an American civilian airline pilot with about 20 000 hours, Lieutenant Colonel Robinson, I think his name was. It is in my logbook there somewhere and his crew, who looked like ex-footballers. They

31:30 were ex-American grid iron footballers. Well they were the funniest crowd. They virtually didn't know where they were going. I don't know how they stayed in the air. He was a very good pilot of course and his co-pilot was OK but he was an exceptional pilot having flown so much in civilian life.

32:00 We took off with them and the aircraft was full of parachutes and greatcoats, and all sorts of equipment. They were going right through to India, going right through over the "hump" as they call it. We could not help but wonder whether they would ever get there. Our first stop was Kano [Nigeria], going from Takoradi right across from the

32:30 west coast of Africa, right across to the Nile, a long, long trip. So our first stop was Kano and we were in the air circling above it when the captain came back, and he said, "Say you guys, we can't find this Kano on the map. Do you boys know where this is?" We showed him. "Oh God damn! I don't know! I guess we weren't pronouncing it the right way!"

33:00 So that was our first stop! The next one was up near Lake Chad, N'Djamena I think it was called and we ran into a dust storm that was up to 11 000 feet. We couldn't see a thing. We flew and flew, and flew, and the captain came back, and said, "How do you boys feel like spending a night in the desert? We're just

33:30 getting no place. We're getting what they call a Q Code. Any of you heard of a Q Code?" We said, "Oh yes, that's your direction to fly." "Well we're flying that direction and we're not getting anywhere!" We said, "You have to fly a reciprocal. They give you the bearing from the course to you, from the base station to you. You have to fly 180 degrees different from that."

34:00 "God damn, why don't they tell you these things!" He said, "Also their Morse code it's just too fast!" One of the chaps on board was a wireless operator from a Sunderland, so he went up front and he was very, very good at it. He got us in and one of the strips had big crosses all over it but looked all right, so that was good enough for the captain. He put

34:30 the aircraft down then and taxied in. A young English officer came racing out in a jeep and said, "Who is the captain of this aircraft? You've landed on an unauthorised airstrip. It is under repair!" "Lieutenant Colonel Robinson, how do you do and where do we eat?" So he didn't have much time for nonsense, the Colonel.

35:00 As we flew across Africa, N'Djamena, El Fasher, to the Nile, the difference in the American setup and the British setup in these places was unbelievable. They had air conditioning. Their bread was in little pressurised cans. I remember saying to the Colonel, "You've got everything here except ENSA Girls!" ENSA Girls were the entertainment

35:30 girls [Entertainment National Service Association]. "We're doing something about that!" he said. They were a great bunch of fellas but how they ever got anywhere, I don't know. On the second-last leg we had to go to Khartoum, which was 2000 miles up the Nile from Cairo and Alexandria, and their navigation consisted really of just hitting the Nile.

36:00 Then they started arguing as to whether to turn left or right and the offsider to the captain, the second pilot, was all for turning right. The captain wanted to turn left. Anyway, we turned right and there was Khartoum. "There you are Captain. I told you that! I told you Captain! I told you!" "OK! OK! You win the fur lined pisspot, now shut up!"

36:30 So that will give you some idea of what sort of a crew they were! Anyway, we put down. We had a great old time in Khartoum and then we flew down the Nile, and stopped off at Luxor, had time to look at the temples there, and the Valley of the Kings, and then on down to Cairo at Alex. The name of the aircraft

was "Rags 2" because when it left America

37:00 it had bits of rags thrust into the air intakes and whatnot, in sabotage efforts, so not everybody in America wanted to go to war. We thought, "Well now, here we go!" I think we'd travelled 22 000 miles to do that 50 hours of flying in England. We were back in Africa.

37:30 We found Africa, around Cairo and Alex, British Headquarters in complete chaos. Rommel and his Africa corps, and the Italian army supporting him, or hindering him as some people think, really pushed our chaps right back. They were getting very close to taking

38:00 Alex and Cairo, and of course that meant the Suez Canal would go, and that meant our supply line out to the Far East. Everything would have to go around the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa and oil supplies would be cut off. Australia would be cut off as far as that side of war was concerned and

38:30 it was a case of holding the Suez at any price. But to our amazement everyone was panicking. Records were being burnt, the ground staff were leaving bases, closing up offices, so they said to us, "Who are you? Where have you come from? We didn't expect you."

39:00 So they put us on to trains and barges, and we went all the way back up to Khartoum. It was the most fearful conditions in the 3rd class carriages with no windows and the dust. We had dust in our teeth and it was filthy. Some of us were sleeping up in the luggage rack,

39:30 others were sort of trying to sleep side by side, others lying on the floor in the dirt. The barges, we just slept side by side on the deck with nothing at all. There was no bedding of any sort but the weather was good, cold at night. We finally got to Khartoum to a place called "Gordon's Tree",

40:00 not far from the great Battle of Omdurman, the last great cavalry charge in British history. Some of us got quite ill there after it, including my mate David Borthwick. David got a touch of malaria that he got from West Africa, the Gold Coast. So he went into hospital and I was

40:30 mooching around the place with mixed crew, mixed airmen. I forgot to say that when we were at Takoradi on the air base there, an English officer who had a squadron, 128 Squadron I think it was called, of these Hurricanes, they didn't really have much to do except a little bit of patrol

41:00 work, invited us to volunteer to stay with him where we would be commissioned, and fly a tour there where nothing much would happen, and then go back to England. Woggy, Geoff Waugh was pretty keen to do that and Kyle Sellick, who treated Geoff as a sort of father-figure,

41:30 he wanted to also, and so did Jimmy Watchorn. They'd all had enough of being sergeants I think! But Dave Borthwick and I, and Johnny Hooke, said, "No, no! We're on the way to the desert, on the way home, on the way to better weather than we flew in, in England." So I only had Dave Borthwick as my closest mate at Gordon's Tree, at Khartoum.

## Tape 3

00:39 So the governor, Governor George Bredin met David Borthwick in hospital and said, "When you are convalescing, why don't you come and bring a mate with you, and come, and stay with me at Wad Medani on the Blue Nile. If you can get

01:00 ten days leave, which you will probably need to get over this malaria, you might enjoy having a look at my part of the world, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan." Dave said, "I'll bring Alan Righetti with me." So we went along to the governor's residence there and he was one of the finest Englishmen you could possibly meet.

01:30 Everybody was equal. The native boys, he treated them with the greatest respect. They worshipped him. We had the most luxurious quarters to live in. We'd get up very early in the morning and have morning cup of tea with the governor while they groomed his horse, and then he would ride off to his

02:00 office for two or three hours work. Then he'd come back and we'd have breakfast. Then he would take us on a visit to one of his centres or something like that, till lunchtime. After lunch you had a siesta and then a gathering of the officials around the area, and shoot a pig or two, and then

02:30 perhaps a game of bridge, and then you'd all go, and change, not that we had much to change into, and then we'd have dinner probably at about 11 o'clock at night, and their day would conclude around about one o'clock in the morning. So that was the way they lived there in the heat. The highlight was that the governor and this is what he really wanted us there for, was going on his

03:00 paddle steamer further up the Blue Nile to Roseires, on the Abyssinian border. He was going to see the village dignitaries in their little villages, solve court cases and things where there had been trouble, and we were going to shoot crocodiles. So we went on his paddle steamer, the Sultan Hussein.

03:30 I'm talking about this because it would be an experience that very, very few Australians would ever have been lucky enough to have had. We'd chug along to a port and the Sheik, and all his officials would come out to meet him, and they had marvellous respect for him, and he for them. Then we'd go into a little

04:00 bit of a hut, the equivalent of their courtroom, thatched room and they would tell him stories such as; "This man raped this man's wife, and in retaliation this fellow burnt the other fellow's house down. What are we going to do about it?" The governor would open a big book of English law and say,

04:30 "Well it says here that raping the wife, that's worth three pigs. You're going to have to provide three pigs and you sir, are going to have to rebuild that chap's house. Next case?" It was like the old Edgar Wallace stories of "Sanders of the River". It was the most incredible experience. We played a lot of bridge. We talked. He told us

05:00 all the history of the place and it really was the most wonderful trip but it just seemed unreal that here were two Australians, sergeant pilots, sitting on that boat shooting crocodiles. I shot a big one and the governor sent me the skin later on. They were very easy to shoot but not easy to stop because they'd get into the water and roll around but on this one the governor

05:30 stopped where there was some boys who eat the white meat of the crocodile, and they skun it for me, and cured it, and sent it back for me a long time ago. But it just seemed incredible that we were doing this whilst our chaps were fighting like hell to save Cairo and Alex. It just wasn't real. We got back to Gordon's Tree to find everybody had

06:00 gone back and there had been a big storm, and they had mud huts that the rooves had washed in, and the gear was an awful mess but it was David Borthwick's 21st birthday I remember, so we got a bottle of Scotch and had a party for his birthday. That was the end of those good times. It was time to

06:30 make ourselves useful and we finally got back, train and barge, not quite as bad conditions as those we came up on where we couldn't even wash. We used to have to get under the hose that they filled the steam engine with water; we'd get under that. It wasn't as bad as that on the way back down the Nile this time. We got there in June '42 to find that our chaps had held a line,

07:00 which they were digging in, from El Alamein, a little place about 20 miles or so from our air base, from our camp station. Amariya it was called. It would be a bit further than that but they were holding the line there and had managed to sort of straighten it, and were digging in. The American equipment was pouring in. We were getting instead of

07:30 Tomahawks, we were getting Kittyhawks and a lot of medium bombers were arriving, and Montgomery had taken over at Alexandria, and they were getting ready. They had straightened the line and they were getting ready, not only to hold Rommel but to counter-attack. So we had to be converted on to Kittyhawks.

08:00 We went to a place called El Ballah near Ismailiya on the Suez Canal and they were pretty beaten up old aircraft but once again we had to change from the English Hurricane back on to the American, which is everything back the other way again. Because we'd flown the Harvards in Rhodesia we didn't find it too bad at all.

08:30 We had about seven hours conversion there and then we were shifted to Wing Base as it was called, just near the Pyramids. We had another seven or eight hours conversion there, so we had about a total of 15 hours conversion on to, first Tomahawks, then Kittyhawks. On one occasion there, some of the things we were

09:00 practising like dog fighting and all sorts, there was one exercise called shadow-firing, and that consisted of going out with one other chap, and he would lead. He would fly pretty close to, a pretty low altitude, about two or three hundred feet and his shadow would be going over the sand dunes in the desert. You would follow along behind him

09:30 and dive on the shadow, and open your guns up at the shadow, and you could see where the sand was going, so it was pretty good practice for ground strafing in particular. It was introduced by Group Captain Clive Caldwell, who was our number one ace in the desert, in fact the most successful Australian fighter pilot of the war. This gets a bit boring after a little while, so on one occasion I was

10:00 leading. I was concentrating on instrument flying to pretend that I was in a dust storm because I thought you might as well do that, keeping it straight and level. I knew that the other guy was shooting away at my shadow and he yelled out over the radio, "Alan where the hell are you going?" So I had a look over the side. The shadow had gone.

10:30 I'd gone right through British troops manoeuvring. They were on training. It was only a training thing but they were out in the desert doing their manoeuvres! He was concentrating on the shadow and of course went right through. Fortunately we didn't hit anybody but we raced back to base as fast as we could and taxied the aircraft out, and got into the Mess

11:00 there, and reading magazines, and the phone rang, and the officer in charge there said, "Yes? No! Well, no they won't be back yet but we'll get them when they come back! Yes! Oh Yes!" The other pairs as

they came in got absolutely grilled! We didn't say a word! We quietly read our magazines. In the end because nobody got hurt it was treated as a joke

11:30 but it could have been quite serious. Then I had probably the most fortunate break so far, as far as flying was concerned. I was disappointed that David Borthwick was posted to 450 Squadron and I was posted to 3 Squadron. 3 Squadron was an Australian squadron. It was the first to leave

12:00 Australia to go overseas during the war and it was an Australian squadron from way back in 1921, one of the first squadrons formed, a very famous squadron, and all Australian. 450 was mostly Australian, also a very good squadron but 3 Squadron was the squadron to get to. I was posted there on my own

12:30 and it was 22nd of October 1942. Battles on the frontline were really solid but the big offensive hadn't started. When I arrived at the squadron, I met one chap in particular that I knew and Johnny Hooke was there,

13:00 which was great because he'd been a great mate right through. He'd already got 20 or 30 hours up while we'd been doing our cruising on the Blue Nile. So I had an awful lot to learn and I was chatting to him, and a fairly solidly built but only five feet four airman came in with his

13:30 jacket on, and said, "Who are you?" I said, "Righetti sir!" "Oh! I'm Bob Gibbes, how do you do? Now, you'll be on the next flight." "Right sir!" "Have you ever dropped a bomb?" "No sir!" "OK well you're off it but you'll be on tomorrow morning." That was my introduction to 3 Squad.

14:00 Bobby Gibbes was probably the most successful leader of a squadron in the western desert, on any side. He was a wonderful leader, not spectacular as an individual, like Clive Caldwell but very successful. He shot down 12 or 14 aeroplanes but he was like a mother hen. He kept the squadron together. He looked after

14:30 you. A wonderful stroke of luck to go to a squadron with somebody so experienced. His two flight commanders were chaps who'd trained in Rhodesia. Keith Kildey, who was quite a famous fast bowler. He bowled against the English Test Team, although Keith wasn't in the Australian Test Team [cricket]. It was one of the visiting matches. He came from Tasmania, an excellent flight commander. The other flight

15:00 commander was Lloyd Boardman, used to be called "Danny". Danny Boardman was a gentle guy, a really nice chap with a lovely voice and he used to sing "Oh Danny Boy", so he was known as Danny Boardman. I'll just refer back here to what I was making my little whinge about earlier. Those two had just been commissioned acting

15:30 officers. They each lead the whole wing. Now a wing is four squadrons and our wing was 239 Wing, consisting of 112, the Shark Squadron, 450 the other desert squadron, a semi-Australian squadron, and 3 Squadron [and 260 Squadron]. They lead, on several occasions, the whole wing as sergeant pilots because they were the most

16:00 experienced in the desert. They had flying behind them, squadron leaders and flight lieutenants. So to get onto my hobbyhorse again, that's how unfair the system was over this nonsense of commissioning people in the air force when they had no higher responsibility or different training, or course [means Officer Course].

16:30 Another reason I was very lucky to go to 3 Squadron was because 3 Squadron and 450 copied them, had developed a pilots' Mess (not an officers' Mess, and a sergeants' Mess) for the squadron. This wasn't difficult to do in the desert because the squadrons were small and the numbers were

17:00 not that great. There were 24 usually in each squadron, 24 pilots. So that wasn't difficult but it made all the difference in the world to the morale because instead of sergeants going off to one tent to sleep and the officers to another, there was none of that at all. Bob Gibbes said to me, "Now look Alan! Here we don't differentiate.

17:30 The only thing is I can't do anything about your pay. An officer gets seven and six a day hard living allowance. You get sixpence." But he said, "All you've got to do here is live. You do the job and live, and you'll be commissioned." So I think from the time that I left home

18:00 to that moment, was really the happiest time I'd been in the air force because you just felt you were in amongst a crowd of really good people, really good people and they were! The ground staff were magnificent. They'd been with the squadron ever since it left Australia and that was in '40, over in the desert. They were all like brothers and they

18:30 just couldn't do too much for you. They'd try to look after your aeroplane. They'd look after your tucker. The tucker was quite good. Bully beef, I think they had about 130 ways of cooking bully beef and meat and vegetables in tins, but it was good. It was fun. It was great fun, a very, very exciting time.

19:00 The next morning I took off on my first op [operation] and Bob Gibbes said, "Now Alan! You just hang on to my tail wheel. You fly behind me." We flew what they call "fluid sixes". The leader, "Shabby" was our squadron call-sign. "Shabby Red Leader", which was Bob, Bob Gibbes or the "Boss" as he was always called. Nobody else was called "Sir"

19:30 but he was always the "Boss" or "Sir". So he flew in the middle of the six and his number two right behind him, and then he had another aircraft on his left, and one on his right slightly higher, about 200 yards out from him, and a little bit ahead. They each had a number two behind them, so that meant that all the aircraft in that six could weave to look for

20:00 enemy aircraft. So they weaved and your head went right around the full circle as you were searching the skies whilst he could navigate. So he kept straight and level virtually and did the navigating. So for a new boy the thing was to hang on to his tail wheel and he'd get you through. The first flight we took was

20:30 quite a hairy one, as they called it. We ran into 109s [Messerschmitt] and we had quite a dogfight, and a lot of chaps there had been there 20 or 30 hours, and never seen enemy aircraft, and not fired their guns but I got into a dogfight the very first time, and followed the Boss down in a big spiralling turn. Six of us were escorting bombers, so we were

21:00 a bit tied to that. Anyway, it was a very hectic flight for my very first operational flight and I was flying an old 'Kitty 1' with an Allison engine in, and the Boss was flying a 'Kitty 3', which was quite a bit faster. So I had to over-boost a lot to try and keep with him but after we got through the dogfight and chased this 109 down, we turned for home,

21:30 got the bombers home all safely, and I landed right behind the Boss, taxied in and he said, "Bloody good show Righetti!" So, I'd made it! Then that night 800 guns opened up on the line and the Battle of El Alamein was underway. This was the huge battle,

22:00 which was the first time that the Germans had been defeated, first time we'd beaten them and within a few weeks of that the Battle of Stalingrad occurred, and that was the first time they'd been beaten there. Then Coral Sea was holding the Japs. At least it stopped them, so at that time the war,

22:30 for the first time, that's October 24th on, we started to gain the offensive. In the desert of course, we had been going up and back under Wavell. All the troops had advanced right up to Benghazi. We were holding Tobruk and then Churchill took away half the troops to try to defend

23:00 Greece and Wavell couldn't hold on with that, so they were seesawing backwards, and forwards in the desert all prior to this but we had not really inflicted a defeat on the Germans until El Alamein. Life became very exciting and I found that an experience

23:30 you would never really want to have missed. It was so exciting. Everybody was concentrating so hard on getting the job done. We were in a theatre of war where we weren't hurting anybody except each other, two armies. We weren't destroying villages and the sorts of things that were happening in Europe. It was

24:00 a good war. We escorted bombers a great deal. We ground-staffed. We dive-bombed on armed reconnaissance flights. We did a multitude of different jobs. The biggest disadvantage we had was the Kittyhawk was a fighter bomber and a fighter bomber is equipped to do all these different sorts of jobs. It is quite a heavy aeroplane, big heavy aeroplane. Our

24:30 opposition, the 'Messerschmitt 109' particularly, is just a specialised fighter. They had Stuka dive-bombers and they had transport aircraft, and they had JU 88s for medium bombing, and high reconnaissance but we had to do the lot. This put us at a tremendous disadvantage in flying against the enemy. The Italians had a very good fighter

25:00 in a 'Macchi 202' but they were not as aggressive as the Germans. They didn't really have their heart and soul in the war. We shot down our 200th enemy aircraft not long after, just at the end of the Battle of El Alamein, which was the highest scoring squadron of the desert and at that time

25:30 that score, we thought was deadly accurate but it was proven to be a little bit exaggerated in records after the war. It should have been more like 190 or something but two people would report shooting the one aeroplane sometimes, so you can't avoid that happening. The Battle of El Alamein raged for about eight or ten days and we

26:00 flew two or three trips a day, and we lost a lot of chaps but we were getting reinforcements through, and I was starting to learn very quickly how to stay alive. The Germans had tactics that we couldn't copy. They would circle, particularly if we were escorting bombers, they would circle around from the head of us right?

26:30 what we call your directions as you would call a clock face. You'd see them coming from say two o'clock and they would circle right around to six o'clock behind you, particularly if the sun was in that direction. Then they would dive and come up underneath us, and keep going right on up. So we had to wait and wait until they started to attack, and then we would

27:00 turn about, all six aeroplanes, if there were six escorting the bomber. We'd have six as top cover, so particularly the top cover would do what we called a "Turnabout" and all turn as quickly as they could, and all open up at the same time. As the 109s came up underneath they'd have to go through this barrage of anti-aircraft fire, which was pretty considerable

27:30 because each Kittyhawk had six canons, point fives, Brownings and they were very effective. So we got to be fairly confident about staying alive and doing our job, in spite of the superiority of the 109, which in one way they didn't have the six

28:00 guns that we had, the point fives but they had a 20 millimetre canon shell that went right through the spinner. That's the big round nose of the aircraft. That was devastating because they had a great range with it and it was a fearsome sight to be in a steep turn trying to turn inside a 109, and you could see the spinner pointing straight at you, and going

28:30 "Pop! Pop!" But because you were in a turn, if he was pointing straight at you, he was missing you behind. It was when they got a bit ahead of you that you had to worry but they didn't often come in and mix it. We had probably the most concentrated air battles other than the Battle of Britain in our advance up the desert. We broke through

29:00 after about eight or ten days with the 24 hour a day bombardment and we were flying from dawn till dark, get up for the first flight in the morning. People say, "Were you frightened with your first op?" There's a lot of discussion about fear. I never felt frightened but I felt apprehensive.

29:30 The sort of apprehension or tension that you get or some people get, I do, if you have to make a speech in front of a large crowd of people, or if you're going to sit for a final exam, really tight in your nerves and muscles, and we couldn't enjoy our breakfast or anything like that. Sometimes you were not sure whether

30:00 to be ill before you take off. That developed more as you got more experience. When you first got there and you didn't quite know what to expect, it wasn't quite so bad but whilst we all had this tension, I wouldn't call that fear. Fear I find it? if I say, popped into, out of my depth in a rough sea

30:30 and you're on your own, I would be terrified or if I was swimming and somebody said a lot of sharks here, I would be terrified. That's a different feeling. The feeling that I had I would say was sort of tension. Bob Gibbes always claims that he was frightened, very frightened but I'm quite sure that he's got a different interpretation of the word. I'm quite sure that

31:00 what he was feeling was tension not fear. Other great pilots didn't seem to feel anything. Leonard Cheshire, the famous British VC [Victoria Cross], Guy Gibson, they didn't, according to their books, sort of felt anything. Anyway I could go into great descriptions of the many battles that we fought

31:30 as we pushed Rommel back in the desert but I think perhaps I'll just name a couple on the way. One particular, when we got up towards? I think we were operating out of a base called Martuba. The forward enemy fighter base was at a place right around

32:00 the big bend of the North African coast, around Benghazi and down into a little place called Magrun, and that's where they had their main fighter base at this time. It was a fair bit of flying distance from us but we pushed them back pretty quickly and they, at that time, were on the defensive well, and truly. So we

32:30 decided to send six aircraft out at dusk when we would arrive there in fading light. Now we didn't fly at night time. We weren't equipped to fly at night time, so they wouldn't be expecting us. Danny Boardman led and I was one of the six with another couple of mates, and flew at ground level

33:00 out to sea, out to the Med keeping right below radar detection by being very low, and then we went right past Benghazi, and the turn round to Magrun, and then slowly climbed up to about 10 000 feet well west of the target. Then we turned and came back

33:30 flying east down over the target, so we put our noses down, and came down to about 50 or 60 feet from the ground level, six of us spread out side by side, flying abreast as they call it, and straight in over the aerodrome at Magrun. Danny hit the telephone

34:00 wires that were very low right near the airport and we all opened up at the same time. Danny had wires and insulators streaming off his wing but we all opened up, and we all scored hits, and set fire to quite a few aeroplanes, German aeroplanes, the one or two transports there but of course, there was no going back with that. You had to make one run

34:30 and that was it. We just about cleared the aerodrome, very happy with what we'd done and there was a lot of anti-aircraft fire, and a Bofors gun, which is a pretty powerful anti-aircraft gun. I saw the tracer coming around in a big sweeping arc towards me but it didn't seem to quite have me

35:00 in its sights and the next moment there was an enormous bang in my aircraft, and the cockpit filled up with smoke, and the airspeed indicator went off the clock, and the rudder pedals just went flat. The elevators were working. I just edged back the joystick and she started to

35:30 lift up OK. The ground was pretty rough. There was no chance of a forced landing. I would have been killed immediately. I climbed back slowly, slowly until I got three or four thousand feet height and I called up. These radios used to slip off frequency but one chap, Garth Clabburn from Victoria,

36:00 fairly experienced, he was hearing me but he couldn't send, so he came over and formated on me, and I said, "I haven't got any rudder control so I won't be able to use the toe brakes back at base, which means that I'll probably run into something. Do you know a strip anywhere where you can put me down,

36:30 lead me in because I haven't got an airspeed indicator?" So he waggled his wings. I said, "I'll try putting the undercarriage down. Would you have a look at it and if it looks OK, waggle your wings again?" So we did that and he came back, and waggled his wings. In meantime Danny was just about out of sight leading things and we were all flat out trying to catch him. The pitot head,

37:00 which is the instrument that measures your airspeed, when he hit the wires it had bent, so that the air impact on the pitot head was at angle, so he was showing quite a low speed. In actual fact he was going flat out. He thought he was losing power but in actual fact it was the misreading. That left Garth and me together

37:30 but Garth knew of an aerodrome that we had used previously, and the enemy had used it, at a place called Tmimi. So he lead me in there and I formatted on him to get my airspeed correct, and just as we went to touch down he kept going, and I touched down. The aeroplane kept straight for quite a while, about 200 yards I suppose. I had my feet well away from the

38:00 rudders and then it started to swing. Because I had no toe brakes, I couldn't keep it straight. I swung around in what we call a "Ground Loop" and it went up in its nose but I was OK. I was well strapped in. So he flew once past and I waved, and that was it. By this time it was almost? I wouldn't say quite dark but very, very?

38:30 I'd say quite a heavy dusk. You could just see him disappear. So there I was, stuck there and so I got out, and had a look at the base, bottom of the aircraft, and there was a hole in it the size of, you could put a head and shoulders in it. It had cut the wires of the rudder control but not the elevators. Now the elevator, if it had cut those

39:00 I'd have gone straight in without any doubt. That's once again, the luck in it. Those wires were about half an inch apart, that's all. I thought, "Well this is going to be a long night!" I was sitting there. I got back in the cockpit. It was pretty cold and part of the Long Range Desert Group, which were a wonderful British

39:30 Army Division that used to go in jeeps miles out on their own for weeks, and weeks at a time, came through. They said, "You're OK mate?" "Yes, quite OK." "Well look, don't attempt to leave because there's a minefield around the place but we have fixed one track and some Army units will be coming in later on." "Right!" So in an hour or so these Army units moved in

40:00 and I was sort of the big shot of the occasion. They all wanted to hear about it, so the story got better and better as it went! Then they gave me a blanket and some tucker but I slept in the cockpit because they were very anxious to souvenir things I think! So early in the morning they moved out.

40:30 They had to have their blanket, so away they went. Then about two o'clock the next afternoon a truck came in with an engineering officer and one ground staff, ground staff from 3 Squadron. They'd found their way in through the minefield and they picked me up, and I got back to the squadron at Martuba just as half the squadron were moving on. I was a bit lucky

41:00 to get out of that one. What the squadron was doing at this time was splitting in two and leap frogging as we were chasing the enemy. The forward six would go forward and fight, and then come back to the strip they'd been on. In the meantime the other half would have moved up to another base, so we were leap frogging. Sometimes we only had eight or ten of us

41:30 at a time flying. We tried to get 12. We should have had 12 but there were casualties and new chaps. Bobby Gibbes was very strict. If the fellas didn't measure up they went back for more training. Generally flying in the desert for me was a piece of cake compared with what I'd been through in England.

# Tape 4

00:33 **Can you tell us about being at that airstrip and the dangers?**

Tmimi was an airstrip that had been used by the Germans earlier. All these airstrips, after being vacated by the enemy, were mined and the most dangerous mine was a little three pointer mine

01:00 just below the surface, which if you trod on it or if you ran over it with a vehicle, a small explosion would occur, and a container about the size of a jam tin would bounce out to about truck height, and then it would explode, and the shrapnel would then mow down personnel.

01:30 At Marble Arch we had a most unfortunate experience in that way. A truck with a lot of our ground crew in ran over one and the bomb just came up to the level of the back of the truck, and exploded right into

the back, and I think we lost five or six people. You expect to lose the pilots but you don't expect to lose the ground crew. We did every type of

02:00 operation that you could imagine in our advance up the desert. We were dive bombing, bomber escort, fighter sweeps, armed reconnaissance. Sometimes just perhaps six of us would go out on an armed recce, as we would call it. Other times even the whole wing would be out on a big job. [General] Montgomery's policy was to

02:30 try to entice the enemy to stand and fight, not just to chase them all the time but in actual fact they were very mobile, the Afrika Corps, with their two Panzer divisions, were very mobile, and it was very hard to trap them at all. Trapped many, many hundreds of Italians but not too many of the Germans. Probably

03:00 one of the greatest advantages I had having had all those flying conditions in England was that when we flew into dust storms, a lot of chaps had problems with them and a lot of experienced pilots had troubles. There were two things you could do. You could fly out to the Mediterranean till you got out of the dust and then got down to shore level, and come in over the coastline if you knew just where your aerodrome was

03:30 but because of all the fog that I had experienced in England I didn't have any trouble with instrument flying. I could fly on instruments in the desert in a dust storm very well and that stood me in very good stead. Particularly on one occasion when Keith Kildey lead us out on an armed reconnaissance, we ran into shocking weather

04:00 and we came out, dropped out of the cloud right over the top of the 21st Panzer Division, which opened up with the heaviest "ack, ack" I've ever experienced at any time. We all got hit but we did get home in heavy cloud, which I didn't have any problem doing that. That was a fairly dicey op.

**What does it feel like when the "ack, ack" hits you?**

It doesn't feel it has got

04:30 anything to do with you. It is popping around you and the aircraft is jumping a bit, up and down, and it is only when it actually does hit that you realise that you might be in their gun sight. The number of times I got hit with small "ack, ack" and didn't know until I got home, and the ground crew pointed out holes in the main plane,

05:00 sometimes a chip in the windscreen. You could get that sort of thing. Anywhere near the two Panzer Divisions was pretty dangerous flying. That particular flight with Keith Kildey, he described that as one of the worst he'd ever had in those conditions. So once again the English flying helped me there, as it did with John Hooke and I guess Dave Borthwick over on 450 Squadron.

05:30 Dave went missing when I was about halfway up the desert getting close to Benghazi I think it was and his story I'm sure would be published other places but very briefly, a German shot him down, and his aircraft was seen to crash, and no parachute was seen. In actual fact he bailed out

06:00 in the last 15 feet and the explosion opened the chute, and deposited him on the ground with very badly wounded legs. He crawled for four or five days ignoring a German patrol that went past rather than be captured and had given up things. He thought that was it. He was hallucinating badly and they picked him up just in time, and he was invalided home.

06:30 I got leave from the 3 Squadron to go to see him in the hospital at Abbassia. He was a terrible mess but still the same old David. He got mentioned in despatches for his efforts in getting back. The whole time we were losing people, it is hard to describe it exactly because the Mess is pretty

07:00 small with only 24 in it at most. You'd think that the loss of one of your chaps would be a terrible blow but you always felt there'd be a chance he was a prisoner or that you might pick him up or that he might walk back and you were so busy all the time flying that you became quite fatalistic about it. It was always the other chap that it happened to, never to you.

07:30 So even the worst of the losses were not as bad as they might have been, perhaps on a bomber squadron, I'm not too sure about that. Anyway, we had another duty to do and that was a pilot would take it in turns to go with the ground crew as we moved forward and

08:00 I went forward at the last stage into Marble Arch, which is an enemy aerodrome where [Benito] Mussolini built this big archway on the border of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. This huge marble arch standing in the road right there was quite incongruous, way out in the desert. The

08:30 enemy had occupied that aerodrome too. Now this was quite an experience going forward with the ground crew. This chap the driver, we had a lot of materials to carry in his station wagon truck but we set off and we were supposed to get there first, and prepare the site for 3 Squadron to occupy.

09:00 We were two or three days getting there and we were right up with the very front line of the Army troops with not the faintest idea except that the road along the coast was the general direction. I'd like to be able to describe the chaos that we saw with trucks blown up with mines, tanks, bodies still lying

around waiting to be

09:30 buried, both sides. The equipment that goes into making up a war was unbelievable with the thousands of vehicles, prisoners being transported back. The road was pretty dangerous because they had a different type of mine for that. They had a mine there that when you ran over it, it didn't go off, the first one. The

10:00 second vehicle mightn't set it off but the third one would. It was on a sort of a ratchet principal and we lost two of our very good blokes, and high up. Squadron leaders Dawson, and his offsider were blown up in a jeep going over one of those. This was an education to me, this ground staff driver. He was capable of fixing any type of thing that went wrong with it but we'd just

10:30 lie down in the desert there beside the vehicle at night, put up a bit of a tarpaulin and he would tell me of all the places he had driven, and a bit about the life of a ground crew, which we didn't see much of. I wrote a lot about that in my diaries of that particular trip. At one stage, because I had my Irving jacket [RAF sheepskin flying jacket] on and everything, and he didn't know what rank I was,

11:00 I was saluted by a very senior British Army guy who said, "Sir where are you going?" I said, "I'm going forward to prepare a base at Marble Arch for 3 Squadron." He said, "We heard some very senior Air Force personnel would be coming through. Just be very careful. Don't get off the right tracks." "Righto! Thank you."

11:30 That night we were sort of? there was nothing in sight. It was hard to believe there was a war there. There's just two of us, a vehicle, plenty of tucker. We could have turned and gone all the way back to Cairo, nobody to answer to, nobody for directions, nothing. I think that certainly we were the first Air Force personnel into

12:00 Tripolitania. We got there and the sappers were clearing these mines off Marble Arch, so we were being very careful to know exactly where they had been cleared rather than just going into an empty space. To our horror they were finding these mines with the bayonets on their rifles scratching the ground in front of them rather than

12:30 use the mine detectors. They were using those but mainly they were? they just found that they were used to the bayonet thing. The young lieutenant in charge of them when I queried it said, "I haven't got a man here who has ever made a mistake." I thought about that and he said, "Yes! That's what I mean! They only make one mistake." So I wouldn't have swapped jobs

13:00 with that outfit! On the last? I think December the 30th or the 31st, we went out on an armed reconnaissance with Danny Boardman leading. I was on his left. By this time I'd qualified to a leading aircraft, not to lead the whole squadron but to lead

13:30 six or at least be in front and have a number two. At one stage I had a flight lieutenant flying behind me as a number two. We were attacked by fifteen 109s. Now this was most unusual, very unhealthy to have them in that number and instead of their usual tactics of circling around, and diving up from underneath,

14:00 they came straight in and mixed it with us because they had us so outnumbered. We flew into a pattern where we were ready for our turnabout and as they came into us, Danny called, "Turnabout! Turnabout right! Go!" I turned the wrong way and to avoid the others I had to pull up,

14:30 and I found myself right in amongst the 109s, and turning in a battle with them. After a couple of violent manoeuvres, I found myself in a circle chasing a 109. He wasn't attempting to dive away. He was trying to turn inside me and I was gaining in the deflection.

15:00 I just allowed on the gun sight what I thought was the right deflection when the gun sight went out. The gun sight is a ring of light reflection on a glass little mirror in front of you and if you've got your head to one side, too much to one side, the circle is not complete, so it makes you keep your head centred, and it is

15:30 absolutely essential to have it. But every fourth round in our armament is a tracer and I saw the tracer that I'd fired just go in front of his right main plane just below the engine. I kicked on a little bit of top rudder and fired another burst, and immediately glycol started to pour out behind him. I thought at first

16:00 it might be their supercharger that they put in and they just zoom up, and away they go, and we've got no chance of catching them but he made no attempt to do that, and half rolled out the other way. By this time I was getting up fairly close to him, gave him another good burst and then black smoke started to pour out. I saw a bit of flame in the engine and I knew that I had him. So I did the unforgivable

16:30 and that is I followed him down instead of keeping my altitude but I did look around to see that I was not being followed by another 109, and I gained on him, and gained on him to about 2000 feet. I gave him one last burst and I saw the canopy fly off, and then some white, obviously maps or something, come out of the cockpit,

17:00 and then he bailed out. The aircraft crashed. I was a bit tempted to go down and shoot him up because they had been doing that to our chaps but I was very glad I didn't because he was well inside our lines,

and he was picked up shortly afterwards apparently. I didn't meet him but

17:30 some of the chaps further back met him and an American war artist sketched him, so I have a very good sketch of this German. He was a particularly nasty type apparently and apparently had been shooting up hospital tents. Many years after the war an Englishman sent me this copy of, his name was

18:00 Millenz. So I was sort of terribly excited about this, not just because it was very hard to get a 109 but because it was my first victory. I'd had a probable and a few damaged but no confirmed victories, so that was a great day. We had a great party in the Mess over that. When we got back we found that Danny Boardman

18:30 had got a 109 confirmed. He saw mine go in and confirmed that for me, and we had a squadron leader permanent air force? he was acting squadron leader. He was going to take over from Bobby Gibbes, named Watt or "Watty" as we used to call him. He'd got one and a probable, so that

19:00 our six aircraft, having been attacked by fifteen 109s, had got three, and a probable, and we got our number twos home safely. It was one of our squadron's best efforts really, particularly as we did it without Bobby Gibbes. So the RAF [Royal Air Force] photographers came along and took special photos of us for 3 Squadron's good effort.

19:30 Other operations that I flew, I flew one with Keith Kildey that was an exciting one. We had an American squadron with us on this day and we were doing a top cover whilst they looked for barges, petrol tankers, things like that coming into North Africa. We were trying to cut their supply lines

20:00 and they had finished their strafing when we saw an Italian petrol barge further up along the coast. We called up and said, "There's one more there." So the American commander said to Keith Kildey, "We'll take over top cover. You go down and have a go." So Keith and I, and another couple of blokes, went down line abreast, and

20:30 we all fired but Keith was first. I think Keith probably did the real damage but we blew it up in a very spectacular fashion. The last we saw was 10 or 15 Italians swimming for the coast. That was a spectacular one!

**Can you describe the feeling as you were coming in line abreast on a target like that? What's your personal feeling?**

It is very exciting. You've got 100 percent

21:00 concentration. You're a little bit conscious of the fact that you must fly the aircraft straight. Although I was a very good rifle shot as a kid and I could shoot as straight as Clive Caldwell, our number one "Ace", I couldn't fly an aeroplane the way he could. If you're sitting in the aeroplane and you've got somebody absolutely dead

21:30 square in your gun sight, that's not good enough if you've got rudder on, and your aeroplane is not flying straight because aeroplane is yawing or skidding a little bit. It doesn't take much and you're actually missing when you think you've got everything dead set right. After a quick manoeuvres and turning, to get your

22:00 aircraft suddenly flying straight whilst you aim, that is the trick. That's why a chap like Caldwell was so outstanding because in a flash he could straighten up his aeroplane, very good shot, and would shoot them down in quick bursts, and they were gone. But it is exciting to line up a target. It might sound a little callous to be perhaps shooting up

22:30 the road with German vehicles but this sort of thing is war and if you could set them alight, that was even better. In dive bombing you were triumphant if you got direct hits. It is very satisfying, great to come back to the squadron after the tension and apprehension before take-off, and

23:00 then that all goes in the atmosphere of actual combat. A little bit of tension while you perhaps first see them, much as you get tension before you see a snake but then you're concentrating and you're into it, and all that sort of disappears because you're working so hard on that

23:30 very moment of firing your guns. The triumph in shooting down an enemy aircraft is indescribable because that's the aim of the game. That brings me to a point that I always think a lot about, which once again is a hangover from World War I and in a way it is

24:00 rather childish but Fighter Aces were measured by the number of aeroplanes they shot down. Now that's straight out of World War I where you had little biplanes chasing each other around in circles and these enormous air battles that they had. In this day and age, particularly of World War II,

24:30 if you were lucky enough to run into a crowd of Stukas, dive bombers, the chances were you could get two or three of those quite easily or you might see two or three transport aircraft you could shoot down. Now you're an Ace if you shoot five or more down but some guys who shot those down, shot old Savoia and great big lumbering transports down, and Stukas, which were not hard to shoot down?

25:00 well quite frankly, I never saw any. I saw nothing but 109s and "Macchi 202s", and later on, "Fokker

Wolf 190s". To shoot those down with a Kittyhawk is a hell of a lot harder than if you had a specialised fighter like a "Spitfire" or later on, the "Mustang". So I always felt it was quite unfair. Chaps would get perhaps four enemy aircraft shot down

25:30 and finish their tour but they would receive no recognition for that. Had they been lucky enough to run into a couple of Stukas parties, they might have had eight or ten and they would be an Ace, and down in the books as such. Bob Gibbes was not individually minded in that regard. Bob shot down 10, a little bit more and later, long after the records were all completed, and the war was

26:00 finished, he probably got 12. Bob at the time was not an individual in the sense that that was what he was looking for. His thing was to get out, get his blokes home safely, get that job satisfactorily. Even if he had to go back and do it again, he'd get the job done but his big consideration was to get the chaps back. He thought a great deal about that. When fellas went missing or were

26:30 killed, he went to great pains to write to their parents or next of kin. It used to upset him very much. But the atmosphere in the Mess tent? and the ground crew used to fix them up very nicely with a big tent, and a bar? we of course couldn't drink a heck of a lot when we were flying, especially if we were doing the dawn patrol but we had some great parties.

27:00 It was always exciting. In January, early in January '43?first we had our big New Year's party at Marble Arch, a Christmas party there and then a New Year's party in which 3 Squadron turned on the most remarkable food. I don't know where our fellas got it from. They must have driven all the way back to Cairo to get it I think. We had a wonderful

27:30 dinner there in which we waited on the ground crew, which is the traditional thing in the air force. We had plenty to drink and party on with on that occasion. I particularly, because I didn't have to fly the next morning but to my horror at about four o'clock in the morning a shake on the shoulder, "Alan you've got to fly!" So I led that six the

28:00 next day and we were flying very much straight, and level but the greatest cure for a hangover is oxygen, so even though we weren't flying high enough to really need it, we used a bit of oxygen that day, and fortunately got away with it. Early in January we had the worst catastrophe that occurred whilst I was flying with 3 Squadron. Fortunately for me I wasn't on it but Bob Gibbes

28:30 was leading the six that were escorting the bombers and we had another six up on top cover, and a large number of 109s attacked head on, which they never do, straight into it. I think we lost either seven or nine in one go, including Bob Gibbes. Danny Boardman and Keith Kildey had just finished their tours before this, so we had two

29:00 new flight commanders. They'd had a fair bit of experience but not so much in leading and the new "Watty", Squadron Leader Watt from the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], took over the squadron. Now that was the lowest point in the squadron whilst I was with them; the thought of losing the Boss and suddenly the Mess was nearly empty.

29:30 A lot of new pilots came up who had no experience whatsoever and the war was very much flat-out at the time with enemy action. What was making it worse was that we were doing a lot of standby and readiness. When you sit in the cockpit for a couple of hours just waiting until

30:00 they fire a Verey pistol to say take off and then you get your orders in the air, and nothing happens. You're just sitting there and the old tummy is churning. You don't know whether to get out and be ill. That was really more tiring than actual fighting and I did a lot of that just at that time. For the first time in my diaries I've noted that

30:30 I feel very, very tired. I can't remember saying that earlier but so tired I was really quite depressed. We had fairly new wing commander over the whole of the wing. His idea was to take the whole wing out at a time and he was not familiar with the desert. A couple of times after a lot of effort, we'd all get organised and take off with the four, the whole four squadrons,

31:00 fly out to sea, and then come in to attack the enemy in their retreat, only to find that we'd turned in too soon, and have to come home again. That happened two or three times in a row and it was a very low point for the squadron. Then to our great delight, Bob Gibbes walked back! It took him two or three days to do it and he had to hide behind scrub

31:30 to miss the Germans but it is quite a story which you'd read about in his own book. He published his own book called You Only Live Once and it is well written up there. With the boss back, that was tremendous news and now we were getting closer to Tripoli, and we were going to get leave in Tripoli. We'd previously only had seven days leave in

32:00 three months, so we were all looking forward to this very much. On January the 22nd I was flying as one of the leaders in bottom cover to attack an aerodrome at a place called

32:30 Zuara, "Z-u-a-r-a", which was just up past Tripoli, quite a way past Tripoli. The idea was to knock this aerodrome out if we could and any aircraft on it because we were getting very close to Tripoli. As we flew over Tripoli that day we could see the New Zealand Army Div [Division] moving in and trucks and

33:00 everything streaming along the west out of Tripoli. Actually I think really that's the day Tripoli actually fell to the troops. Anyway the top [cover] went across the Zuara airstrip first and then we followed, and I fired a long burst across

33:30 the aerodrome, and we think we hit a few trucks and things on the road, and then we climbed up, and we were heading south into the desert when I saw three, apparently afterwards there were four but I saw three 109s, at "Angel's Two", that's another 2000 feet above us at two o'clock, circling around

34:00 to come behind us. So I called up our leader, who was one of the newer squadron commanders and said, "Enemy aircraft two o'clock!" A voice said, "I see them!" So you keep quiet then, you don't break radio silence.

34:30 I watched them come around, around until they got right to six o'clock, the usual thing and then they made their classic attack. They dived down I suppose 500 feet below us and then came up underneath, and still nothing from the leader. So if that happens you can call, turn about yourself and everybody turns at the same, so I said, "Turn about right!

35:00 Shabby aircraft go!" "Shabby" was our call sign. As I turned I nearly hit the leader as I went around. Nobody else had got the message. Now in the heat of the moment I didn't really realise that they were not coming with me. I saw blue flashes on one of our own aeroplanes at the rear of

35:30 our six and I opened up, and as they came up they flew through the stream of lead that I was firing but I didn't see any damage, and the next moment I'm alone. At that speed aeroplanes disappear very quickly and I just couldn't believe

36:00 that all of a sudden I was left there with three 109s, and a fourth that I didn't know about but I should then? I think perhaps it was the shock value. You don't think very well when you get a shock like that and I called out, "Give me a hand back here" and a few adjectives, if I remember rightly!

36:30 The next moment I'm twisting and turning amongst these 109s but they did it very professionally. There was one on one side, one on the other and one above me. If I turned into the one on the right I would expose the belly of the aircraft to the one on the left but I diced around for a little while, I think not flying terribly well because I couldn't quite believe it still, that I was

37:00 left to it. If I had, I'd have rolled on my back, dived for the deck (because the Kittyhawk used to dive very fast, it was such a big, heavy aeroplane) and got right down to ground level, and tried to stream away from him. But having shot down that 109 a few days before, I was a little bit cocky and I thought I might get one! But Major Muncheberg of the

37:30 German Air Force who'd already shot down 126, made me his 127th in fairly quick time. In actual fact I wasn't going too badly when I felt this bang in the base of the aeroplane and I felt my legs go numb below the knees, and some shrapnel had hit the throttle quadrant and opened up my hand a bit,

38:00 and the aeroplane went into a spin. So I pushed the joystick forward (to keep your airspeed), which you must do to get out of a spin in a Kittyhawk, kicked on the opposite rudder and held it, and she came out of the spin still diving very quickly, and I knew she was flyable. So I began to think, "I'm going to be OK."

38:30 I started pulling back on the stick and looking around to see that I wasn't being followed down, and I wasn't. So the aeroplane was pretty full of smoke, the cockpit. I wound the canopy back rather than jettisoning it. I wasn't in much of a panic and I started to pull it back to where she was almost straight and level, still looking around. I had heard a voice

39:00 over the radio say, "There's one of your chaps in trouble back there, Shabby aircraft!" That was 450 Squadron. They'd got my radio message but nobody in my group had and I could feel the blood running down the back of my legs, so I knew what had happened was that the shell had exploded, 20

39:30 millimetre canon shot, had exploded in under the seat. Of course the armour plating is very thick that you're sitting on and your back but there's no protection down, from the seat down, but "I'm going to be OK." So as I say, I wound the canopy back, had the aircraft just about straight and level and a tongue of flame started to come in over,

40:00 from the left main plane, and over the edge of the cockpit. Now my belief always was that those things, if they start to burn, get out. Don't attempt to crash land them because so many chaps used to get down to perhaps three or four hundred feet and then their aeroplane would blow up or it would burn too much for them, and they lose their lives. So I set about getting out pretty quickly and I first went to

40:30 pull my helmet off, and the strap? I suppose I was pulling down instead of out but it was tight, and I couldn't get it off quickly and easily, so I did two things. I made one mistake. I undid the harness and let go of the joystick to grab the helmet with both hands, and the aircraft was still nose heavy with that big heavy engine, and it bunted me forward

41:00 just like a cork out of a bottle. I went straight out of the top over the windscreen, smacking my knees on the windscreen as I went out. I felt my neck rick as my helmet came off with my oxygen mask and

everything on it, and the next moment I'm in the air beside the burning aircraft, and I pulled the ripcord, and as I pulled the ripcord the aircraft blew up.

41:30 The aeroplane just moved away immediately. You don't move when you're in a parachute. It's virtually like being suspended. The aeroplane dropped away quickly, just a mass of flame. I just got singed a little bit over the eyebrows and forehead, and a little bit on my arm. The parachute opened beautifully and I always had it pretty tight, and I had no problem with it opening.

## Tape 5

00:35 People say, "You must have been terrified." No, the great feeling is one of relief to be out of the burning aeroplane. You just had that feeling, "I'm alive. I'm out of it." The other great experience is one of the silence. It is absolutely

01:00 dead silent from the noise and the crashing, and the action that you'd been through. All of a sudden you're just hanging in the air. So I had a good look around to see that the 109s were not coming back or anything. No sign of anything in the sky at all, just my aeroplane going down and crashing. I started to take a pretty good look at where I was going to land and it was really nothing but

01:30 medium-sized sand dunes, perhaps 30 feet high. I could see away in the distance a bit of a donkey track but nothing else at all. I started to sort of side-slip the parachute a little bit trying to get towards those donkey tracks but I was a bit nervous about that because I had no experience with it, using a parachute. I thought I might spill the air out and cause it to collapse, so I didn't do

02:00 very much of that. I was at about 5000 feet when all this happened, so there was no panic and my legs were completely numb by this time. My hand was a bit of a mess and I had a bit of a gash over my eye where the oxygen mask had been jerked off. It had opened up my forehead but I thought I wasn't in too

02:30 bad shape. So I landed fairly heavily but not too badly, because my legs were numb I didn't really feel that too much, on the side of a sand dune and I suppose a mile away from where the aeroplane was burning. I could see the smoke. I opened up my trouser legs and had a look at the wounds, and I thought, "I'm going to lose both legs." They looked a terrible mess.

03:00 Actually there were lots and lots of little bits of shrapnel but you're not experienced with those sorts of things, and it looked to me as if I could easily lose both legs. So I cut up the parachute. I had a pocket knife and bound up my legs, and my hand, and I thought, "Well here I go towards those donkey tracks, so I'll stand up here" and there was no way that I could stand up.

03:30 I thought, "Well my legs are not hurting. They're numb. I must be able to!" I could not, nothing I could do to stand up and an aeroplane from 450 Squadron "OK" instead of our "CV" for sign mark, came in low, and I waved. I thought, "Well at least they'll know I'm alive." He apparently dropped rations to me,

04:00 which I didn't find out at the time until after the war, I was told that. So I made very slow progress because I was only able to go from hip to shoulder. I did this for about an hour and I came upon a sort of an orange type fruit on a bush, and there was a bit of shade there, so I got in under that for a while. I thought, "I'll find out whether these things are edible

04:30 and I'll just take it a bit quietly, and make off later on. There's no panic." Then I saw the shoulders and heads of two Arabs on the other side of the dune going towards the smoke of the aeroplane. So I sang out and they got quite a fright, and came over very cautiously to me.

05:00 I knew a few words of Arabic and I had a little Arabic dictionary, so I said, "Inglesi? .. faloose"; money. "Igri"; quickly. "Homar"; donkey. "Multi-faloose"; plenty of money. "Oh right!" So I gave one of them, seemed to be the leader, my pocket knife

05:30 as a present. I had my Smith and Wesson 38 calibre there but I didn't attempt to? or were they 32s? I've forgotten. I just left that where it was and they seemed quite friendly, and had a bit of a look at my legs. The blood was coming through the parachute a bit but one

06:00 of them stayed with me and the other one went away. I was trying to make conversation, not very successfully and then the first chap came back in about I suppose half an hour, with a beautiful donkey, nice big strong donkey, and a white sheet, and another 10 or 15 Arabs. They spread the sheet out on the ground

06:30 and I thought, "I'm not too sure what they're going to do with it. Are they going to put me on that first and lift me up or what were they going to do?" All of sudden there was a call from one of them and they just left me. I'm lying there. The sheet's there and the donkey's there, and I'm just on my own. They just? away they went. They seemed to stop up on the top of a dune and then over the crest,

07:00 in a semi-circle of dune, 10 or 12 Italians appeared, all with automatic weapons. So yours truly put his hands up very quickly! They didn't have an officer with them. There was a sergeant guy who seemed to be in charge. They came over in a semi-circle very cautiously

07:30 and the first thing they took of course was my Smith and Wesson. Then they started to ask me questions. My Italian was nil because old Serafino Righetti, when he became an Australian, wouldn't let anybody speak Italian. He said, "We've got to learn English" way back, so nobody spoke Italian. I tried with sort of

08:00 schoolboy French but mainly with hand movements. The sergeant seemed to be, "First of all, where was the other chap who was in the aircraft with me?" They wouldn't believe me when I said there was, "Uno! Uno!" "No, no, deux!" "No, uno!" So finally they believed me on that or I think they did and then the sergeant got very cross.

08:30 He said, "You bombardment hospitali Zuara!" I said, "Italiano aerodrome hospitali together" putting my fists together like that. "I bombardment aerodrome."

09:00 "Hospitali it hit! Boom!" because this was a great trick of the Italians. They always surrounded their aerodromes? even if they weren't hospitals, they painted red crosses over everything. So this really upset him and he took out his Beretta revolver, and he pointed it at me six inches from my forehead,

09:30 right between the eyes. I could see the rifling in the barrel. He said a few words that I imagine were not at all complimentary and I think if the heart ever does actually miss a beat, well it did then. But the chap with him grabbed his arm and jabbered to him in Italian. I imagine he was saying, "Look we've come all the way out in the desert to pick this bloke up, no point in shooting him."

10:00 Anyway they talked amongst themselves for a bit and the sergeant calmed down. Then they put me onto the donkey and away we went with only one Arab coming with us. Whether the Arab went and told them where I was or whether the Arabs, generally on the side of whoever is occupying? they had no love for the Italians because Mussolini

10:30 had occupied all that area for a long time, and they'd had a bad time at the hands of the Italians but I think any preference for the English would have been overridden by the fact that the Italians were there. So we went for I suppose about four or five miles on the donkey and by this time my legs were beginning to thaw out. They began to be extremely

11:00 painful every time they bounced against the side of the donkey. We made it to a desert track in which they had a flat-topped truck and another vehicle of some sort, which went on and took most of the Italians. I think three in the front seat and one on the back of the truck with me. I was just lying on the back of the truck and away we went.

11:30 By this time it was dark, night time. We hit the main road somewhere west of Zuara and turned east, so that surprised me a bit. I thought probably with the big retreat I wouldn't have been going there but anyway, I wasn't terribly worried. I was more worried about my injuries. I was not worried about them getting me

12:00 out of North Africa because there was virtually no chance of that. We'd been picking our own chaps up in hospitals on the way as they retreated. So that wasn't worrying me. What was worrying me was I was feeling pretty ill with the pain in my legs. Then the Hurricane night fighters started strafing the road!

12:30 I'm lying on the truck and they'd come over "Rrrrr" firing. Of course as soon as they'd hear them, the fellas in the front seat and on the back, would leap into the ditches on the side. I would watch there as the tracer would come over but I didn't get hit. Had I been able to get into the front seat, I would have been able to drive away but there was no way. I couldn't possibly. I don't think I could have crawled.

13:00 After a while I was half asleep, sort of not caring about things too much. We were bumping along and the Arab chap who was just next to me, I felt his hand on my sleeve, and I knew what he was after, my watch. So I just grabbed the end of my watchstrap, just like that and stayed with my eyes closed, and he's fumbling around

13:30 not able to get at the strap. He's tugging at it and I said, "Waaah!" He got such a shock he jumped off the track and I didn't see him again! Anyway, we finally got to Zuara I suppose about ten o'clock, into the very hospital that we were accused of bombing and I have never seen such a mess as in that hospital.

14:00 They were, I suppose 50/50 German and Italians, wounded but oh some of the wounds were dreadful. The doctor came up to where they'd put me on a stretcher to take me off the truck. He had a look at my legs and I'm not sure but I think he gave me an injection. It was very hazy. I was feeling very ill at this time but I was certainly not the most popular man

14:30 in that hospital! I really wasn't looking forward to what was going to happen there but the doctor was very aware of it, so he had me taken away from where all the wounded were and they put me in a little store room, and it had things like condensed milk and wine. I thought, "This will do me! I'll stay here till 3 Squadron

15:00 picks me up!" So really nobody came near me after that for quite a while and then about midnight, they brought in a British colonel with bullet through his knee, and he was there for a while, and then they shifted him away, and then a young Army Britisher, and he had two big black eyes.

15:30 He'd been hit fair in the forehead with shrapnel. I mention him particularly because he was later to die in his bed next to me in the prison hospital in Italy. Anyway, I did have a chance to reassure them that there was no chance in the world that we'd be leaving North Africa because, having seen from the air the thousands of vehicles and the panic that was on to get

16:00 west towards Tunisia, that we'd be right. Then about one o'clock in the morning the Royal Navy opened up shelling the road, trying to stop the retreating troops and blow up the road. They were ranging along [the road], so you'd hear the shell away in the distance and then the next one would be a bit closer, and a bit closer. "The next one's

16:30 going to be close! Boom!" Then away it would go again slowly. At about four o'clock in the morning I got to the stage where I was getting good at estimating these things. I thought, "The next one's going to be close" and "Bang!" They blew the end off the hospital. There was glass and screams, blackout, dreadful mess. I thought, "Well there's no need to worry now. They won't be worrying about me from here on!

17:00 They'll probably evacuate what they can out of the hospital, leave most and just get out." At about half past five two men came in, two Italians, picked me up in a stretcher, took me out to a truck, down to the wharf in Zuara onto a fully packed hospital ship that was all ready to sail and I was gone.

17:30 I just could not believe it. I could not believe my bad luck! I mean if that ship had sailed even an hour or something before, but I was the only British onboard that I knew about. I don't know what happened to the other two. So the next minute I'm off for Italy. The wounded in the ward that I was in,

18:00 some were badly wounded. They were all stretcher cases except for one or two on crutches. They didn't even really speak to me for quite a while and then an Italian doctor, very well educated man came along, and undid the bandages around my legs, and had a look at them. He said,

18:30 "They are not very bad injuries. More damage would be done trying to take the shrapnel out. You will be all right." And that was it. I knew then that my fears for my legs were quite unjustified and so I started to think, "What happens now?" I'd been flying in my flying

19:00 boots and I had them standing in the aisle just beside my bunk. For a start nobody would speak to me because they had a German Storm Trooper, "SS" as we called them, in charge of the ward and he wouldn't allow anybody to speak to me but when he wasn't around a little Italian guy in a bunk just not far from mine, he was very friendly. He considered

19:30 that I was his saviour. I couldn't understand too well at first because when I said, "Non capito Italiano. Francais, petite. Petite ecole!" School French. "Ah!" So he spoke enough French. I think actually his French was pretty good but he was using it for me to

20:00 understand. We'd use a word like 'parapluie'; umbrella for a parachute, that sort of thing but I got my meaning over to him a little bit. He said that he was in the hospital when we were strafing and that he was quite certain that I personally? he'd been in there with a touch of malaria

20:30 or something like that but it might have only been a bad cold, when he got hit in the foot in the hospital. "La guerre finito!" No more war! He considered that I'd done all this just for him. He was out of the war, very happy. The Germans didn't really want to speak to me at all and I didn't feel much? I was feeling pretty sick. I didn't feel much like

21:00 talking but the little Italian chap kept talking to me. We were not attacked at all in the hospital ship. It took us a couple of days, two or three days. We got into Naples. They took everybody off out of the ward. I was last and my Italian friend, Enrico Martano, went on crutches, and as he went past my boots I just saw him drop something in the boot, one of my boots.

21:30 So off he went and when the ward was empty I put my hand down in the boot, opened it up, and it was his name and address, and 100 Lira note, which had the Germans seen him doing this, he'd have been bumped off immediately. They'd have shot him for that. I folded it up into a terribly tiny roll and tucked it behind the wings on my flying jacket

22:00 which were fairly loose, and I managed to tuck in there behind the wings, so that stayed there. They took me off on the stretcher, onto a truck and took me to a hospital at Caserta, which is just out of Naples, run by a very poor order of nuns, so I began my convalescence there.

22:30 We had a lot of raids, Liberators bombing, that sort of thing and to my amazement the nuns used to get quite excited and happy about it. They would clap. They were very much against the Germans and all for Italy getting out of the war. They were very pleased. Some of the

23:00 fellas in the hospital who were getting a little bit better, were taken out on work parties. A group of them had an idea that when I could walk again that they might be able to get me to an aerodrome. We might be able to get help. Entirely nonsense that people that haven't flown didn't understand. So the idea of

23:30 escaping didn't even cross my mind. It was out of the question. After a month in Caserta they took me to a hospital just been built at Nocera, another suburb of Naples. The hospital wasn't badly set up. The plumbing of course being Italian, didn't work but at the same time we were quite well looked after.

Once again, the

24:00 staff of nuns were very kind and I think for a non-commission officer, ordinary troops hospital, we were pretty lucky. My legs began to get better and I had a couple of little goes on crutches, when I had a most wonderful scheme evolved. French Foreign Legion,

24:30 who had been operating in Tunisia, had been picked up and were being virtually repatriated to France because with the French capitulation they were no longer enemy. They were on work parties and things like that. They wanted them back in France for all sorts of duties and this party had? these were members of the French Foreign Legion who'd been wounded,

25:00 some of them slightly, some of them fairly bad injuries but they were all just about ready to leave for France. They were led by Monsieur Bocerean from Morocco and Monsieur Bocerean said to me, "I have an idea for you. We will put one of our men in your bed

25:30 and we will tie a bandage around your mouth so you don't have to speak, and we will be going in a few days by train around the coast from the Italian Riviera into the French Riviera, and there's a place called Aix le Bain, which I know very well, and you and I will get off the train there. We will jump off the train. It is not far to Lake Geneva

26:00 and I know it very well, and we will get a boat, and we will escape into Switzerland." So this was wonderful and a couple of mates there were very excited. They were all going to help me and there was one chap, a South African with a fairly heavy accent, who'd been very helpful. He didn't seem to be very badly wounded but he was very keen about the idea.

26:30 The next day the commandant of the hospital came to my bed and he said, "Righetti campo!" "Oh no! I cannot walk properly! No campo!" This means I'm off, sent to a camp. "No! Campo." So they packed me up there and then,

27:00 with crutches, and away I went, and terribly disappointed because this was the great chance. They took me to a transit camp, a dreadful camp full of fleas and lice, and bedbugs, and I didn't see any of those chaps again. I didn't see Monsieur Bocerean after that or this South African, whose

27:30 name was Ivo St Leger. Ivo's father he claimed was Dr St Leger, who lived in Cape Town and was a very well-known family. Whilst I was in the hospital I was allowed to write a card, sent through the Red Cross, home and Ivo suggested that I write, and tell them that I'd met Ivo in hospital,

28:00 and maybe our parents would swap notes. Well I didn't find out until three years later, because mail was always vetted carefully and you couldn't write much but it wasn't really until I got home, and saw the correspondence that did take place between my people and Dr St Leger. I still have the letter where Dr St Leger

28:30 said, "Thank you for your letter. I'm glad your son Alan is alive. My son was killed in North Africa and the man that was in hospital with your son is a German spy." So that accounted for what happened and why I was sent off to

29:00 "campo" before I should have been. So that was a terrible blow. I missed Monsieur Bocerean, who was completely bald but he had a bullet furrow at least a quarter of an inch deep across his skull, which was thick enough that it hadn't made any difference to him! Monsieur Bocerean, they used to give us a dreadful concoction of acorn coffee [coffee substitute]

29:30 as a fluid to drink and Monsieur Bocerean used to take his to the window of this multi-storey hospital, and look down until he could see a German guard looking out. He'd get above him and he'd say, "Fait attention Monsieur" and then back away. By the time the chap looked up he'd get the coffee and they never knew where it was coming from. They'd go to each

30:00 of the windows above where the chap had been but that was his great enjoyment, Monsieur Bocerean. This awful transit camp, it was a mixed bunch, mainly army chaps, a couple of Australians that had been captured a long time before, was indescribable

30:30 for the fleas and lice and bedbugs in it. I very quickly became an expert in dealing with vermin. I could write a book on that! One night a German aircraft, a night fighter, had gone up and coming back? we knew it was because of the

31:00 sound of the engine, it hit a hill just nearby, and once again, the Italians were quite pleased about it. We heard it blow up and there was no doubt they wanted out, wanted to be out of the war. From there, they sent me up in a cattle truck. By this time I was managing without the crutches. I suppose I was about two to three months in hospital.

31:30 The cattle truck was marked "40 men or 8 Horses" on the side but we had about 110 in it. There was not room for everybody to sit down at the one time. We went up through Rome, I saw the Colosseum in the distance, up to a camp called Gruppignano, which was an Italian camp just close

32:00 to Udine, which is about 30 miles west [meant north] of Trieste, above the Adriatic Sea, not far from the

Yugoslav border, a long, long way from Switzerland. There we were in long huts with three bunks, in three rows of three bunks, so a lot of chaps in each. There were about probably

32:30 15 airmen in it [the camp]. The rest were all army, some navy. My true prison camp life started there really. We'd had visits [in the desert] from people like Air Marshal Sholto Douglas, telling us that another front would be started in Italy

33:00 and they expected it to be very successful, and it gave me great hope that war would soon be over, and keeping the strictest of lookouts for the Italian guards, I used to go to each hut and give pep talks about this. "We'll be out by Christmas!" That's what I used to tell everybody.

33:30 The weather wasn't too bad up in this camp at this time at Gruppignano. The rations were absolutely basic and the idea of getting a Red Cross parcel was an absolute treat. You never got one per person ever but you might have one to share between four people and enough vitamins, and things like that to keep yourself going. With the Italians,

34:00 you could do a little bit of trading, unofficially of course. The English Red Cross parcel had a little packet of tea in them and we got used to brewing a cup of tea, and then drying the tea leaves out in the sun, putting them carefully back in the packet, and doing it up again. If there were no bad guards around we could

34:30 perhaps toss this over the fence in exchange for an onion or another loaf of 'brot', which was a little loaf of bread and sometimes a tomato or something like that. We learned to cope with things pretty well. For escape, it wasn't terribly difficult to cut the wire

35:00 perhaps and get out. My legs at this stage were not good enough to think about that but our problem was that the only place we could go was towards Yugoslavia, which was nearby and the Yugoslav rebels were shooting everybody on sight, and that had happened to two or three already. To go the other way, the Germans used to laugh and say, "We'll give you three days start before you get across the Po Valley to the mountains of Switzerland", which are like a

35:30 vertical wall almost. So nobody succeeded in escaping whilst I was there. The Italians were not cruel to us but they were very excitable and if you defied them, they were very jumpy, and likely to shoot before they were really thinking, which happened. One of our chaps, a navy lad, had made a cricket ball out of rope

36:00 and somebody had got hold of something that resembled a cricket bat, and they were playing cricket when this Italian guard walked on to the middle of the cricket pitch, and just sort of held things up. One of our Army Australians, I think his name was "Tyson". I'm not sure now? "Sox" Simon, that was his name, went up and said, "Oh na, na?", and

36:30 the Italian sort of panicked a little bit, and shot him dead. They were more likely to do that. You were in more danger from the Italians getting over-excited than being deliberately cruel. All the guards had the most beautiful voices. They used to sing away beautifully but they couldn't understand our mania for wanting to keep

37:00 clean. Little Ghurkhas [regiment of Nepalese fighting under British command] in the camp were an object lesson for everybody. They used to set fire to their bed bunks in the joints with spills of paper and burn every joint to kill the bed bugs. They would strip right down, all their clothing, to look for lice and they'd go everywhere

37:30 at the double together. Their discipline was incredible. The Australians were next best, New Zealanders next, English next, Indians the worst! The Ghurkhas would pick up any old wool, bits of wool. If a parcel came in with socks or anything and people discarded old stuff. They were knitting all the time. They were most industrious, wonderful

38:00 troops. The year went by and the landing of course occurred "Anzio", and the progress was excruciatingly slow. They were advancing so slowly up there. The landing was a very bad setback, for the Americans particularly and we began

38:30 to think they'd never get up to us but in the end the Italians capitulated, so we were free. The most senior guy in the camp was a warrant officer. I should perhaps say at this stage why I was not. After El Alamein, I think I mentioned to you that Bob

39:00 Gibbes said to me all you had to do was live. He kindly sent me over to Wing Head Quarters for an interview for a commission and that was accepted but it takes three months for that to go back to England, and for that to be gazetted. So I was still a sergeant pilot when I was shot down. I was in camp as a sergeant pilot there and that's why also in the hospital I was? it was no officers in the hospital.

39:30 So the warrant officer and the chaplain went to the commandant, and said, "Open up the gates. Take away the guards. We're going to get ourselves south to meet up with the British somehow." Even though the fighting was still going on that way, the Italian capitulation had happened. The commandant said, "Now look! The Yugoslav rebels, you will have

40:00 tremendous losses and I want you to come with me, and I will show you there are no Germans in the

area. Tomorrow we will take small numbers and we will put you on trucks, and we will see that you get free. We may even be able to arrange for you to go to Switzerland." So they agreed. We slept that night still in the camp

40:30 and the next morning we woke up to find the whole camp surrounded by Germans. The commandant was later hanged. The Germans said they didn't want us either, that they would send us south but they said, "You will do it our way and if you want to escape, OK. We're going to march you out in blocks of 50 to the trucks

41:00 and each block of 50 will have an automatic weapon pointing at them. As you march along the road there will be one at each corner. If you wish to escape, escape. We will not bother to chase you but we will shoot the other 49." So you've never seen fellas march more carefully! They did it with very few troops

41:30 brilliantly.

# Tape 6

00:34 So we were in our blocks of 50 marched onto these cattle trucks, some of us still naive enough to think that maybe they were going to send us south and we probably didn't have as much warm clothing from our comfort fund parcels as we should have had. That was wishful thinking. We

01:00 set off north up through the Villach Pass into the Austrian Tyrol, where it was bitterly cold. The train slowed down quite a bit as we came to the Pass and we were jammed into these cattle trucks, no way that we could all sit down at the one time. We had I think one comfort stop,

01:30 very, very short time. The Germans let us off just a few at a time and there was no chance of escape there. From the trucks it was possible to squeeze out through an opening but at every three or four trucks they had a German guard with a rifle ready to shoot down the length of the train. So I'm

02:00 whether anybody tried it successfully but nobody did in my truck. We eventually got to a camp called "Markt Pongau" in the Austrian Tyrol, which was probably the worst camp that I was in. There were a lot of Russian prisoners there in one compound and we were put into another one, another compound.

02:30 The huts were dreadful, just brick floors and vermin were terrible but I was pretty good at dealing with vermin by this time. We weren't allowed to talk to the Russians. We tried to throw little messages across occasionally. What we did find out was that they were completely and utterly fatalistic. If the Germans ordered them

03:00 to do something, they would think about it and probably refuse to do it. If the Germans threatened to shoot them, they would say, "Well shoot! I can't do what you want me to do if you shoot" but if they got threatened with a rifle butt, they would do what they were told. They didn't like to be hurt but they were quite fatalistic about living. One Russian, after curfew

03:30 when the huts were closed, went over to the toilet, which there was only one toilet block in the compound and he of course shouldn't have been out of his hut but he strolled across quietly, so the Hundt [Dog] Fuehrer, the man in charge of the German dog, let a dog go, and the Russian had something like rolled up paper

04:00 in his hand. As the dog rushed at him he just held it up and the dog grabbed at the paper, and the Russian just kicked the dog in the underbelly. He rolled over howling and the Russian didn't even take that much? he just strolled on into the toilet block, and as soon as he came out they opened up, and shot him dead. That's how they were, quite fatalistic. Whilst I was in

04:30 Markt Pongau, I had about 16 air force chaps there with me. The first card came through that I'd had delivered. [break] The first card from the Red Cross came through addressed to

05:00 "Pilot Officer Alan Righetti". The Germans noticed that and finally when we did leave that dreadful camp, and we continued up in cattle trucks to Salzburg, I was taken away from my air force mates, and sent to "Stalag 8b" at Lamsdorf, which is an

05:30 army camp but kept in the Fore-Lager [Lager D compound or section] of the camp, along with 20 or 30 doctors who'd been captured, quite a mix of different nationalities. They said I was to be held there until I went to an air force camp. I met a few Australian mates who were in the bulk of the camp.

06:00 I used to speak to them through the wire and they were going out on work parties, and you had more chance of escaping going out on work parties, and also getting a little bit better food. So I wasn't too sure whether [I was pleased] the commission had been gazetted and come through or not. One day a young lieutenant colonel paratrooper came in.

06:30 He'd been in the invasion of Sicily and had landed in a pig sty from his parachute, and they had grabbed

him, and he was incarcerated there temporarily too. Lieutenant Colonel Young was his name. So we arranged an escape for him. It was his suggestion. He wanted

07:00 us to switch him for somebody of his own size, which was considerable. He was about six feet one and very, very well built, and we were to smuggle this chap in under the wire into the Fore-Lager, and the colonel would go out. Then he'd get out on a work party and try to escape. We fixed it all up very, very quietly and

07:30 when the searchlights were not playing on this area, we got through this substitute, who was a corporal in the British Army, big chap but not too bright. So we said to the colonel, "Righto colonel, quietly now. Hush, hush" because the dogs were in the compound but the colonel was commando-trained. He said, "Stand back!" Away he went with the usual commando leap,

08:00 up onto the wire and over. "Crack! Bang!" Of course everybody in the camp ran like hell for their huts because nobody was supposed to be out of their huts after curfew. The dogs were barking. The searchlights were going. Then there was silence. The next morning at roll call or "appel" as they called it, a German with an American accent who was in charge, lined us up for the usual count,

08:30 which was also by name. He stood right in front of the first chap, the corporal who had the colonel's uniform on. "Colonel Young?" "Present" said the corporal. "Colonel Young?" "Present!" They were only a foot apart. "Colonel Young?" "Present!" "Excuse me gentlemen! If you don't

09:00 produce the colonel, you're not going to eat for a long time!" He just completely and utterly ignored the corporal, made no pretence that the corporal even existed. So he said, "You can make up your minds", turned on his heel and walked out. So they caught the colonel. It took them a little while to find him, he was well hidden in the camp but they got him. Everything got back to normal! So they

09:30 took me away. One thing of interest there, the Germans were looking for doctors to go to various camps and to hospitals, and they said to this young group of Australian doctors, "Now who will do the surgery?" They said, "We all do surgery." "Well what about general medicine?" "We all do general medicine!" They couldn't believe how well-trained our

10:00 medicos were, with the full treatment [meant full training]. Although they were only young doctors the Germans could not believe that they hadn't specialised right from the start. So they took me away from there on my own to Nazi Headquarters at Gorlitz and I didn't know at that stage, what a sinister place it was but they put me in solitary confinement there in a cell about

10:30 12 feet by 3 feet, with just a little bit of light up at the top. I got pretty nervous there, especially as they sent in an SS guy to go through my few belongings in a kit bag and he was extremely nasty. He'd had a nasty face wound and he was the worst type of German. I began to think, "I

11:00 don't like this at all." They didn't speak to me at all but they just delivered food to me and let me out for an hour's walk in the compound a day, and a Roman Catholic priest came in, into another cell. He said, "Don't worry. I think they're going to send you to

11:30 an air force camp." After a few days they did. So one guard took me on a train and we moved away, right up through Regensburg, up to Stalag Luft 3, which was an air force officer's camp about 120 kilometres from Berlin, on to the east of Berlin, almost in line with Warsaw. It's in the old Silesia,

12:00 which used to be Polish before the Germans took it over. Now that camp, there's been a lot written about it, so I won't go into a lot of detail about it, just a few of the highlights. It was run almost like an air force base in that the most senior officers, wing commanders, they were usually called "Sir" or "Wings". The senior British officer, Group Captain Massey, was certainly

12:30 "Sir". You were under definite control of the senior ranks in the camp. It didn't amount to direct orders but they were running it, quite unlike any other camp. It was Goering's [Hitler's advisor] prized camp for air force. He'd had it specially built for air force officers and having been a pilot in the first war, he considered it a sort of brotherhood, to have this camp especially

13:00 built, and to be completely and utterly escape proof. I was taken to Squadron Leader Jennens, who was an Englishmen who was the adjutant for the camp and he said, "OK Righetti! Now we're going to put you in a certain room and a certain hut. Nobody will really speak to you much until somebody identifies you personally." I said, "I don't think it will be very

13:30 difficult because you know, we had a lot of losses." Sure enough, in the room that they put me in there was one chap I knew quite well, another one a little bit, so there was no trouble about acceptance. The highlight of the camp undoubtedly, was the security. It was unbelievable. As Squadron Leader Jennens pointed out to me,

14:00 "Escape activities are taking place from the camp. Do you wish to be in them?" "Yes sir, I do." "Right well, after your settling in, "Little S", that's the man in charge of security in your hut, will take you for a walk around. Nobody will talk the word escape whilst they are inside a building and "Little X",

14:30 the chap in your hut who is in charge of escape, between the two of them, they'll answer any questions

that you need to know but nothing that you don't need to know because if the Germans torture you, you just don't know. So we have escape activities that are underway. Your job will be what they call a "Stooge" job.

15:00 You will sit on the step at the end of your hut where you can see the main gate and if Chief Guard?" or "Ferret" as we used to call them, who used to come in searching for tunnels every day, "? or six guards come in at one time, that means an investigation is on. The Chief Ferret particularly?"

15:30 we used to call him "Rubber Neck", "? if he comes in, you walk across to that incinerator and put that cardboard box on the ground, and go back to where you were seated. You are on honour, as everybody else in the camp, to make no inquiries whatsoever about who was receiving that signal." So I used to do that.

16:00 Then Little S, the security guy, said to me, "Look, we'll go for a walk around the compound and the escape guy will just tell you a little bit." So as we walked around the compound or "bashing the circuit" as it was called, because we were never allowed out of the camp, it was explained to me that tunnels were being dug and that

16:30 the main people working in the tunnel, at the tunnel face, would get automatic tickets to go when the escape took place, and that would be 30 people, and there would be another 200 that they would pick out of a hat. I said, "Well how many in the hat?" He said, "About 600." So

17:00 the months went by. The Germans came in. "Rubber Neck" on one occasion walked past me and said, "You can tell them we are in." So the Germans knew but they just could not find the tunnels. Apparently there had been an earlier tunnel, this was in the north compound of Stalag Luft 3 and it was too close to the surface, and running around with German trucks with troops in the back, various jobs, it gave

17:30 way. So we had three tunnels going called "Tom", "Dick" and "Harry", which have been written lots about but they went down an enormous depth, and then slowly up to the surface, under the wire, and into the woods, and just up inside behind the woods. Now the Germans became increasingly aware of this

18:00 and the searches were more and more frequent. In the camp there were 2 500 officers and there was really nothing that somebody was not expert on. Wireless operators had built radio sets. They built them out of bits and pieces, except for the radio valves, which they got

18:30 through virtual blackmail. If a Red Cross parcel came in, they were pretty infrequent but they were always eagerly sought-after, the contact men that were a group of British officers, who had been prisoners for four and five years, got to know the guards, spoke absolutely fluent German, they would start perhaps

19:00 giving a packet of cigarettes to one of the guards or something like that, getting a bit friendly in return for perhaps a fountain pen, or a pen with a nib or ink, showing some of the drawings they liked to do, how artistic. Of course these were going to the forgers, who were doing the passports, all the identification papers and they were being stamped with the rubber heels of boots that were engraved with the

19:30 German stamp. They get perhaps extra needles and cotton, things like that because some of the chaps were stitching up their clothes and shirts but of course they were making civilian clothes out of the linings of our greatcoats, which we got through the Red Cross. So we had tailors, we had compass makers. The main compass maker was an Australian, called Al Hake

20:00 and he magnetized, short-circuited electrical systems, and made coils, and magnetized gramophone needles, and mounted them on? we had a few old records that were in old wind-up gramophone players. He melted those into a casing and made brilliant compasses,

20:30 even stamped "Made in Stalag Luft 3, 1944"! But I don't think that any of our fellas who actually escaped took that "Made in Stalag Luft 3" with them! The camp generally, the food was bare rations. It would just keep you alive but not much

21:00 less than the local troops were getting. The old Volksturm, People's Army, were all like our Dad's Army [television series] and they were pretty hungry too. We were always hungry. The Red Cross parcels were the things that kept us going. They had a bit of everything in them, minerals, vitamins and there were various sorts; English parcels,

21:30 American, Canadian, and New Zealand. I think I could itemise all the items in them! We had a food market, which was a brilliant set-up. It was like the stock exchange. If there was, say a tin of condensed milk in a parcel, that might be established at 36 points in the market. If you got a

22:00 Red Cross parcel for your room, there were nine or ten of us in each room on wooden bunks with a straw palliasse, if you wanted something particular you could take that to the market and then they would bid for it. It might be say a chocolate bar, a Hershey's

22:30 chocolate bar from the Americans. They'd say, "28 points? 28? 29? 30? 31?" slowly until? if they had say 20 bars of chocolate, until 20 were left. So a market was established for that item of food. Everything

was bartered on the stock exchange. So with the contents that we got we made? I'll call it

23:00 "Buzz Off Fudge" but it had a ruder name than that, which we kept for emergency. It was oatmeal perhaps and all good hard tucker, and we'd make it into this sort of fudge, and perhaps chocolate bars if we had them to spare, and kept them as a reserve because we didn't really know what was going to happen.

23:30 People ask, "What were your feelings in prison camp?" The awful one is that you don't know whether you're ever going to get out. By this time we at least knew that we were going to win the war but the awful emotion is that you don't really know whether you're going to be shot or what's going to happen to you. You don't know how long it is going to last, so the gnawing

24:00 pain of being a prisoner in that particular camp where the conditions were quite good, were more mental than physical. We didn't suffer anything like the Japanese? in the hands of the Japanese. But mentally I think there would be as many suicides or more and mental cases

24:30 coming out of Germany because in the Japanese prison camps, every day our chaps were trying to stay alive. We were not like that. We were not as hungry as that. We were hungry. There were no fat people in prison camp but we had more time to think and wonder, and probably worry, get more introspective, and that really was the hardest

25:00 part of prison life. Not being cooped up with ten men in a room exactly the same size as this office, three bunks [meant ten bunks], and we had little wood-burning stove, and they used to give us the odd bit of coal because in that part of Germany, particularly in the winter of '44, the temperatures dropped down to 25, 30

25:30 below [degrees below zero]. So balaclavas came in with parcels sent from overseas for us. They were allowed in. The Red Cross used to see that they got to us, YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] sent books in. In the middle of those winters, walking around the icicles would be hanging off the mouthpieces of the balaclavas it was so cold.

26:00 The conditions in the camp were far superior than anything I'd been in up until then, so there was a lot of time for thinking, a lot of time for reading. When I first got there everybody was playing contract bridge and I thought, "Well now! If I start doing that,

26:30 we're going to be doing that for 16 hours a day, day in and day out" because we were not allowed out at all, no working parties, anything. I decided to study and soon found an English Naval officer who was in the camp, "Fleet Air Arm". He was a senior lecturer at Edinburgh University in chemistry, so he taught me organic chemistry,

27:00 which you can do without instruments and without the chemicals. It was more a case of family history than inorganic chemistry and that was one of the subjects that I needed when I got back to Melbourne University, so that was useful. I studied Russian because I thought that it was more likely that the Russians would come through Warsaw and pick us up, and I needed to be able to sing out something like, [speaks in Russian]

27:30 "(UNCLEAR)" or "(UNCLEAR)", and tell them who I was pretty quickly because they were very trigger-happy. They put on wonderful little shows. We had lots of very artistic people. The son of Lewis Casson and Dame Sybil Thorndike was in there, John Casson. He

28:00 used to put on reviews. Some of the shows were so good that they ran for some years in London after the war, quite incredible. Most of the details of the camp, of the escape and the tunnels, I won't go into great detail because they are pretty well written up in books. Paul Brickhill, who wrote the book The Great Escape

28:30 was a personal friend. He was an Australian journalist before the war and he's written quite accurately about it but it was a masterpiece of engineering, the three tunnels. "Harry", which was the one they decided to concentrate on because the Germans were getting too close to finding it. The slowest part of the work was disposing of the earth that we dug out because it was

29:00 quite a different colour to the surface of the ground that we were walking on. So we had what we called "Penguins", chaps who had artificial linings in their trousers and they'd walk through the hut where the tunnel was being dug, and their trouser linings would be filled up with sand from tunnels, and then they would go out, and we'd stage a little boxing match or something like that, where there was a crowd of us. The Penguins had

29:30 cords with pins at the bottom of their false lining legs and they'd pull those, opening up a little gap like that, and as the sand poured out they would shuffle it under the surface. So that's why they were called Penguins because their feet were just like penguins. That was pretty slow, so when it was decided that we'd better get a

30:00 hurry on with "Harry", they started disposing of the earth from Harry into "Dick", one of the other tunnels because Americans were coming in, in such large numbers with the big bombing raids over Germany, the "500" and the "1000" bombers with eight chaps in each, ten in some, so when they were shot down they were coming in like an army. So they built a special compound for them, the "West

30:30 Compound" and took the Americans who were in our compound all into the new compound, the "West Compound". That speeded the tunnel up considerably. The tunnel had tracks in it where because it was loose soil it had to be all boarded up, shored up. The Germans of course couldn't imagine where we could have possibly got the

31:00 boards from but we slept on eight or nine boards on our bunks and then the straw palliasse but by having one partly split, and standing over the little stove in the room, we pretended that we were burning the boards because they weren't giving us enough coal. They would say, "If you burn them you're going to be sleeping like that, with about three boards.

31:30 That's your bad luck if you choose to do that." But of course we were using the bed boards for shoring boards. So it had a little track in it, an electric light right through it because our chaps, the wireless electric people, shorted the German system and saw where they could save wire. There were halfway tunnels and chaps

32:00 pulled along on the tracks but all of that's written up, and is all in detail, and is in fact quite accurate in the film The Great Escape. Unfortunately the second half of that film is completely inaccurate. The escape took place in winter with snow on the ground. There were no motorbikes, no wire fences and no Americans! Just to digress for a moment, what happened there was when Paul Brickhill returned

32:30 with us to England, he published articles in Beaverbrook's papers [newspapers], being a journalist he had the contacts, about the escape. Then he wrote a short story for Reader's Digest and then he wrote his book. Now he wrote also The Dam Busters, the story of the bombing of the Mohne Dam and Guy Gibson's story. Then he wrote Reach for the Sky, the story of

33:00 Douglas Bader, the legless, tin-legged pilot. Now these were so good the Brits immediately made The Dam Busters and Reach for the Sky into documentaries but they didn't want to make The Great Escape into a film because it was a bit too sensitive because, as I'll say later, 50 were murdered, and those people's parents lived in England. So the Brits weren't too keen about that but the Americans were

33:30 very keen, so he sold it to the Americans. Of course the Americans had to put an American hero in it and that's how it got so twisted with Steve McQueen, and the baseball, and the motorbikes, and the Luger pistols, all of which was totally incorrect and spoiled the film. I believe it is being remade accurately. I hope so. We knew very little, next to nothing about

34:00 the actual tunnel, unless you were actually digging it until I suppose three nights before the escape took place. Little X, the escape chap came in to our room and he said, "George?" "George Wiley", my little Canadian friend, "? you got a ticket. Alan,

34:30 you missed out." Two others had missed out. I didn't really know what George was doing but I said, "Oh you lucky devil!" He said, "I don't know whether I'm lucky or not." He was about 21, fair haired, blue-eyed kid. We then started making arrangements to

35:00 get him all set up to go, gave him our collection of fudge and a bit of extra chocolate. He said, "Look Al, I know I won't get far. I can't speak German or anything like that and we're miles to go before we get anywhere but I've just got a few bad vibes about it. If anything did happen would you see that my folks get? there's only my mother and sister, these few photographs and things back",

35:30 which was a strange request because there were other Canadians in the room but we were good friends. Maybe he sort of felt a bit embarrassed about saying that he had bad vibes because everybody was so envious of anybody who had got a ticket to escape. We were told then that they planned to get 230 out. The 30 would be chosen who had done the face digging, automatics tickets

36:00 and the other 200 were the lucky ones who had been drawn out of the hat. It started to snow and there was quite a lot of snow on the ground, bitterly cold but they decided to go ahead, push as far as they could. When the main tunnelers got to where the tunnel had come up to, outside the camp and up into the woods,

36:30 they broke through, and to their horror they found they'd made a mistake in calculations, and they were just short of the woods. That meant that the hole would show, especially in the snow and the tracks from the hole to the forest would show up, so there was a little delay where they made a little fence to stand between the hole and the searchlights from the "Goon Box", as we used to call the

37:00 sentry boxes. That was fixed, not that we knew the average because all we knew was that we got somebody from [another hut]. All the escapees were in the one hut and so we got other people in, strangers in our room, to cover for that night because we were counted every night. Halfway through the evening we knew that escape was on.

37:30 The air raid siren went. The bombers were bombing down at a place called Cottbus just down the road a bit and I think there was also another raid on in Berlin. We couldn't hear those but we could see the flashes from Berlin. So that held things up because there was a blackout in the tunnel but when the lights came on? although the camp's blacked out, you've still got the lights in the rooms,

38:00 they got going again. Then a big Englishman with his pockets full of rations and things, in the tunnel as

he was going along, hit one of the shoring boards, and there was a sand fall, quite a bad fall. That sand had to be shifted into a halfway house to get the track going again, so they got them moving along again and had a most ingenious air pump system made out of kit bags

38:30 working like a concertina, and the big air line made out of Canadian milk tins called Klim tins, milk backwards. Our tin makers used to make the pipelines out of that for the air to get to the face of the tunnel. They got all that going again and got things going but instead of getting 230 out, they only got 78 out when the Germans

39:00 finally saw the hole. Of course the sirens went and there was pandemonium and shots. We heard shots fired and the people who were in the tunnel were brought back as quickly as possible. Some of the escapees were grabbed not far away.

39:30 I think the Germans started firing shots in the tunnel then, along the tunnel. The entrance to it was put back exactly as it had been all the time, so the Germans had to use the other end to come in and find where it started, it was so good. It was underneath one of the little stoves and the whole of the base of the stove it was sitting on lifted up like a big lid, and it went down through brick

40:00 supports that upheld the huts but inside the brick support there were other bricks laid, and it was solid in between the outer bricks and the inner bricks, so that the ferrets when they were putting their wire spikes looking for this very sort of thing, always got resistance, so they never found them. The other two entrances, the other two tunnels, were even more ingenious, incredible. But anyway, they got the people out of the tunnel. Nobody was

40:30 killed there. The Germans were furious, fired a few shots, threatened everybody and before long they had the concrete trucks in to fill up the tunnel. Some of the chaps who had been close by, we knew were in what we called 'The Cooler', which was a local little prison and the Fore-Lager. They'd be on bread and water

41:00 for 30 days. I think we got 73 away altogether, if I remember rightly.

# Tape 7

00:34 We were bitterly disappointed that we hadn't got more than at least 230 out but at the same time, very proud of the fact that we had the whole of the area and the German Army rushing all over the place looking for our fellas. The Germans knew the rules. It was our duty to escape and there were escape rules. Once you surrender you

01:00 are put back into prison camp and given a tough time on perhaps bread and water for a while, a month or so but they knew the rules, and we were supposed to know them in our camps. As far as I know we did obey them. Somebody might have left the gate open at Cowra when the Japs got out but anyway I think generally speaking we stuck to the rules very well.

01:30 The letters that we got from wives of Englishmen and the families of Englishmen, used to say how the German or Italian prisoners in the area on work parties? on one occasion a wife told a friend of mine that she'd even loaned this chap his golf clubs, and hoped that he was getting treated just as well in Germany. So

02:00 there wasn't any apprehension really, not the sort of apprehension that was justified. We didn't hear much then for quite a while. Our senior British officer, Group Captain Massey, was being repatriated as a 'grand blesse' as we used to call the very badly wounded

02:30 and they would be swapped on an exchange system with a German. The prisoner didn't stay in England very long. They were sent off to Canada and places further away. Group Captain Massey was just about set to leave and the German commandant came in one day, and he said, "Group Captain,

03:00 it is my unfortunate duty to tell you that 50 allied officers from this camp have been shot trying to evade capture." Group Captain Massey said, "You mean there was nobody wounded?" He said, "That is all I have to say", turned and walked out. So of course we were shocked and the

03:30 Red Cross were due to come to the camp, and of course everyone was waiting on that but the Germans then sent in a request. The one in our room was for a towel, soap and a toothbrush. We said, "Oh thank heavens! OK!" So we wrapped up a little parcel for George Wiley and these

04:00 all went off, and we said, "Thank goodness!" So the Red Cross had come and they'd heard the whole story, so they were relieved too. Group Captain Massey was repatriated and just after he'd gone the Germans said, "If you would like to assist us in building a vault, the urns of the 50 officers who have been shot trying to

04:30 evade capture our now coming to the camp." So then we knew that it was a blind so that Group Captain Massey wouldn't know the truth when he was taken back but they didn't know that we had a secret code. It was a most ingenious code and it had to do with a 'grand blesse' who'd gone back, and had

memorized a lot of names.

05:00 These names were prisoners who had folks in England and they were told where to put the word for the month in a letter to make it fit into a 30 word message. This has never really been talked about but it was a foolproof system. Anthony Eden got up in the House and said, "Gentlemen it is my unfortunate duty

05:30 to tell you that an escape occurred from Stalag Luft 3 and 50 allied officers have been murdered." So this caused terrific chaos in the House. Everybody said, "How do you know that?" Anthony Eden couldn't tell them. They just said, "You'll cause trouble in other prison camps now" and all that sort of thing.

06:00 "That is the truth." He said, "After the war every man that caused these murders will be tracked down and exemplary justice will be carried out!" After the war RAF Police and ordinary police, and some of the top prisoners,

06:30 set off into Germany, and every man was tracked down except one. I think he got right away. They were taken to the trials. The early ones were hanged quickly, found guilty and hanged. Others got life sentences according to what part they played in it and it was all finally written up in a book called Exemplary Justice. So that was a terrible

07:00 blow to everybody. I for one wouldn't have gone if they left the gates open after that. What the Germans did was to recapture everybody except three, who got right away. Those three were sort of European RAF. I think one was Lithuanian. They all spoke other languages and passed themselves off as displaced personnel but everybody else was captured, and taken to Gorlitz,

07:30 interrogated, and taken away in small numbers, and shot in the back, murdered. So The Great Escape really I would think, was a blow to Goering with his wonderful air force officer's camp. It was fairly traumatic the whole business, mentally. We didn't suffer more

08:00 physically than we had but it was a terrible blow. But we kept up the escape business, not with quite as much fervour as before. It was getting then into the middle of winter. The escape took place in March '44. Coming into the winter of '44

08:30 the Russians were really moving west and they stood off Warsaw while the rebels in Warsaw rebelled, when the Russians let them get mainly killed. Then they moved in and Warsaw fell, and they were on their way. So in the middle of winter, midnight one night, we'd been rather

09:00 expecting it might happen, they marched us out, 30 degrees below and with what food? they issued us with Red Cross parcels, one each, which was unbelievable. You never got anything like that. After the war they found three million Red Cross parcels in the Berchtesgaden, so that's where most of them had been going.

09:30 When we thought that we were going to be marched out, we made a little sled out of two hockey sticks. Six of us, particular friends; Keith Baxter, an Australian, Ken Money, an Englishmen, Ray Guest, a Canadian, and we piled our goods we had, and what blankets onto the sled,

10:00 just in case. Others preferred to just carry what they could carry. So it was a very dramatic moment when the Germans said, "Everybody out!" So away we went, midnight, it was snowing loose snow. We marched for 24 hours. We only had the old

10:30 Volksturm guards and they didn't know where we were going. We didn't either but we set off in groups of 2500, that's each compound. There were 10 000 of us marching in that column and it was not easy. I

11:00 fortunately still had my flying boots and I'd got a pair of ordinary boots through the Comforts Fund, so I used to march in my boots, and then put my flying boots on, which were fur lined, so I escaped frostbite, which most people got. When they realised we couldn't go any further they would put us into any sort of shelter they could find, like big barns.

11:30 The first night I slept in a big barn with straw all over the place and got into this one space we could find because it was crowded out, and I shivered all night. We had two or three friends on each side but we were still freezing. In the morning in daylight we scraped the snow away and we were sleeping on top of a well, which was frozen, so we were sleeping on the ice. Our sled

12:00 came into a little bit of trouble about the fourth day out. We ran into a patch where the snow wasn't so heavy and we came through cobblestones in a village, and so Ken Money ingeniously fixed up a sort of an axle, and got a couple of wheels from a pram, so we had wheels as well. We just got going with that and we got hit by a German truck,

12:30 and smashed the whole sled, so our little group were really down in the depths but we reassembled our parcels, and did what most of the Canadians do because they're used to trekking. We put half the weight on the front and half on the back with straps over so we could walk upright, and we did pretty well then. We started moving up in the column. We had news all the time that was being passed back by a bloke that still had his radio going behind a big scarf.

13:00 Finally we got to a place called Muscau and there they put us onto trucks. We got a few days rest in a glass factory where it was warm and we were able to thaw out a little bit but we were all getting very bad dysentery. Finally they put us onto these cattle trucks, which were appalling with people with dysentery and everything, and not able to get off the truck at all. You can imagine

13:30 what it was like. They took us north to Bremen, which was just a pile of rubble and heavy bombing, and into a camp called "Milag-Marlag Nord", which was a naval camp. We got there in the middle of the night. It was raining and cold, miserable. Some of the chaps inside the camp sang out, "Who are you?"

14:00 Saying who we were. "How long have you been prisoners?" "Oh some of us three years, four years. How long have you been prisoners?" "We were born here!" The blokes, they felt like that! The camp that they put us into at Milag-Marlag Nord was very bad for vermin but I for one was a complete expert! We were ahead of the bedbugs, ahead of the lice, knew all the tricks.

14:30 Then the spring came and the 2nd British Army broke through from France, Belgium and Holland, and so the Germans marched us out again. This time they marched us east towards Lubeck away from the advancing British Army. This time the march was a piece of cake. We were getting closer to Lubeck where the parcels were coming in from and the Germans

15:00 knew that their number was up. Bombers were coming over in daylight, American bombers at 10 000 feet, "500" bombers with none of them being attacked. The Germans couldn't believe it and where they used to sort of rush out and spit at us when we first got taken prisoner, now they were all rushing out wanting to be friends. The cruelty of the

15:30 guards and what not, had all disappeared. If a kiddie ran out in the early days in prison camp to us, to perhaps to see if they could get a bit of chocolate or something from you, I've seen a guard grab the kid by the back of his shirt and hit his head against a wall. They were very cruel people. That all disappeared. They all became very nice people all of a sudden and so we were able to swap

16:00 items from Red Cross parcels for soap, and onions, and eggs. By the time we got to Hamburg on the march east, we were just sleeping in paddocks, sleeping anywhere because it was Spring, we were starting to pick up. It looked pretty good. We slept in a paddock outside Hamburg when there was a "1000" bomber raid over it one night, which is most spectacular, with the

16:30 flares and then the searchlights, and the bombers in the searchlights, and parachutes, and tracers from night fighters. It was an incredible display and some of the bomber pilots went quite wacky. They were screaming, "Jump! Jump!" It was quite a sight. It brought back some memories for them because you see, in those bombers, we were having "1000" bomber raids, we had seven to a crew. We were putting

17:00 six and seven thousand men over Germany every night. That's why huge numbers were coming into the prison camp. Anyway, we crossed the Elbe and marched on towards Lubeck, and we heard that there was a typhus outbreak in Lubeck. The senior British officer at this time was an Australian, Wing Commander Norman, gave parole that we would not attempt to

17:30 escape if they would keep us all together and keep us out of Lubeck. This parole was given. We could have walked away quite easily at this stage. The only real danger was the attacks from our own aircraft on the moving troops, seeing a column of people marching. These 'Typhoons' with rockets were very dangerous.

18:00 A navy lieutenant who didn't understand the air force business, how hard it is to recognise people, he jumped up and was waving, waving, from the top of the bread truck that we had with us, this old cart with bread on, and they just blew his legs off. He died immediately but the rest of us were all in the ditches. There's no way that they could recognise you. We finished up on a big

18:30 farm at a place called Trenthorst just out of Lubeck. By this time it was the last week, in April 1945 and at night we could hear our tanks on the autobahns rolling. On May the 2nd a Spitfire

19:00 came over the camp and did a slow roll. We had, in white rocks and cloth and everything, 'POW' [Prisoner of War] in letters in a place where they could see it, so that they knew where we were. The guards all handed their weapons over to us, so we used their grenades for throwing in the

19:30 lakes and catching the stunned fish, so we were starting to eat well, and life was looking pretty good. The Germans were extremely perturbed. They said, "What will the British be like when they come through. Will they be killing us?" "No, no, no, no! They're just like us. You don't have to worry about them. They're not like your Nazi Party." On May the 2nd a light armoured vehicle came in

20:00 with a Seaforth Highlander sitting on it. We all went mad, you know? No smiles just [indicates tipping his hat brim] we said, "We've got a lot of prisoners here. The guards are all ready to be taken prisoner." He said, "The whole of Germany is prisoner. Have you got any SS?" We said, "Yes, we've got two." "Any of them given

20:30 you any trouble?" "One of our chaps got shot by one of them back near Bremen." "We'll take him." "Bang!" I think probably the best troops ever were the British Commandos that came through, tough! I was quite scared! They were absolutely? they'd had the war. They'd

21:00 been shot at all the way from France. They'd been sniped at out of the crowds and all that sort of thing, and their discipline was absolutely incredible. Montgomery imposed what he called a "Non-fraternisation Policy" and in that, it was that unless they had to, they didn't even recognise the German people as people. Walking down the street, they just walked through them.

21:30 They'd get out of the way if Germans spoke to them or they just kept going, just absolutely dehumanised them I suppose, to sort of show the contempt that they were held in. So that was a bit of a shock! I must say they were tough, absolutely marvellous troops. Of course they were the commandos!

22:00 We scribbled on a bit of paper for this chap in the light armoured vehicle, the name and address to send, to say that we were safe, and I've got the little bit of brown paper when I finally got home. Two or three of us and in particular a couple of mates, Australian mates, we, against orders, snuck out of the camp, and got off into Lubeck with the commandos.

22:30 One commando came up to a large house, knocked on the door and a German guy opened it, and he said, "We are going to make your house our headquarters. You have an hour to get all your things out to one of your neighbours." The German said, "[makes jabbering sound]". "You've got 15 minutes to get out or you're dead."

23:00 His neighbours all came rushing in to help him but the thing that they didn't have time to get out was the wine cellar, so we had a wonderful party that night with the commandos! But we were supposed to stay together and we went back to the camp, and the old Army type orders were being given, what's going to happen, "You'll do this."

23:30 Really we'd past all that, so we liberated a Mercedes Benz with a gas producer on it and set off for Paris, just the three of us, three Australians. Unfortunately the little tank that started up with petrol only held about two gallons and we didn't have the materials for the gas producer but we got to the Elbe, and of course we were amongst? everywhere we went had 'POW' on the side of it, and

24:00 we got royal treatment. Trying to cross the Elbe, there's only a pontoon bridge. The bridges had been knocked out and there was a rail track on the pontoons to take rail trucks, and we didn't have enough clearance in the bottom of the Mercedes, so we were dragging the car across against the clutch. We got about half way and the sappers said, "Look, you get that thing off and tip it in the river." We tried very hard but only at the expense of

24:30 burning out the clutch, so we had to abandon our Mercedes and we got a lift to Luneburg, where we caught lifts with Dakotas, freighters, into Brussels. We got into Brussels on May the 7th, into a big army camp there, met up with all our Australian friends there and a lot of the POWs, and

25:00 that was the night that they declared "VE [Victory in Europe] Night" in Brussels. It wasn't held in London until the next night, May the 8th. So that was one big party. We were all out in the town. Everybody was? you can picture the scenes. In this camp they had a strict rule, regardless of rank or whoever you were, first in was first out, as far as being repatriated.

25:30 I'm afraid we had a party in the Officer's Mess which wasn't a credit to our crowd and some of them, under the influence of the grog [alcohol] because they were not in practice with drinking after the years in prison camp, smashed the place up a bit. So that was very unfortunate and a chap leading our group, a very nice Australian,

26:00 Squadron Leader Simpson, he went to the senior officer in the camp to apologise for the damage they'd done, and was violently ill while he was talking to the senior officer! So we were first on the aircraft the next morning! Now the aircraft were Lancaster Bombers and some of them

26:30 were going back with their own squadron. It was a strange feeling because some of them wanted to fly and some of them were so desperate to get back after all this time, they didn't want any accidents. I know one chap who had a German Luger. We'd all confiscated various items from Germany. I remember in our crowd he said, "If any other than the present crew, touches it,

27:00 I'm going to shoot." He was so fed up with the fact that somebody might have an accident or crash, or do something like that, after his years in camp. One aeroplane did crash on the way back, which is pretty hard going when you think of the time the chaps were in camp. Some of them were in there for five years. We landed at a place called "Wing". The other thing of course with the danger, it was formatting because

27:30 some of the ex-pilots wanted to show how good they were and of course we could just picture the aeroplanes touching wings, and both crashing. We were very pleased to see the white cliffs of Dover and we landed at a place called Wing, just north of London, about 40 miles north. As we got off the aircraft, the English

28:00 WRENs [Women's Royal Naval Service]? I can remember one saying to me, "Can I?" I had a kit bag with a Red Cross parcel in it, which I wasn't going to let that go? "Can I help you with your bag sir?" I very, very nearly burst into tears because I think it was the first kind word I'd heard for two years and three months. Anyway, they deloused us thoroughly and then we set off

28:30 to London for "VE Night" in London. Life was pretty hectic then for a few days, a bit of a haze there. Our Headquarters by this stage had moved to Brighton, so we all moved down there. One of the first things that happened to me was that I had to get an air force officer's uniform made because I didn't have one. By this time

29:00 I was a flight lieutenant. That's one of the things I keep mentioning, just how ridiculous the system was. After being gazetted as a pilot officer for six months, I became a flying officer and then 18 months later, I was a flight lieutenant. It was a great joke in prison camp to talk about 'Barbed Wire

29:30 Promotion' or a 'Red Cross Promotion', a 'Barbed Wire Flight Lieutenant'. That's what we used to call it. That's how stupid the system was. Whereas the chap who hadn't been fortunate enough to be on a squadron like 3 Squadron, where you were automatically gazetted, finished the war as a warrant officer, a lot less money and a lot less comfort but doing exactly the same job, and exactly the same responsibilities.

30:00 I was very grateful for that. Just before leaving the prison camp one or two of the personalities there, Bader was just shifted out before I got there through one of his escape attempts. He used to treat the Germans with contempt, because he was Bader, he could get away with it. They'd have shot us. The closest I saw to anybody getting shot

30:30 was one of our chaps, we'd be called on appel [roll call] and some of the guards were fairly gentle, Austrian guards rather than Prussian types, softer language. He was calling us to go on appel and this Australian was acting the goat, and pretending "Oh I'm not well enough to go today", and he had to be quite firm.

31:00 It got to the stage of pointing a rifle at him you see and it got very nasty. When the Australian realised that it was serious he put up his hands and said, "Nicht sheisen! Nicht sheisen!" Well he meant to say 'Nicht shussen', which is 'Don't shoot'. 'Sheisen' is what you do when you go to the toilet!

31:30 So the guard burst out laughing! His lack of German saved the day there for him. One other guy when he was first taken prisoner was shot down over Essen and he stuck strictly to the rules of only giving his name, rank and number. When they said to him, "Essen?". "Nicht Essen", [he said]. Just gave his name and rank.

32:00 They asked him again and again. "Nicht Essen!", [he'd say]. Well of course 'essen' also means food, so the guard was saying "Food?" and he was saying, "No food! I don't want any food!" A lot of funny things like that happened. Stanford Tuck, he was one of the early air aces there with a DSO [Distinguished Service Order] and bar but when the troops were rolling in, the prisoners towards the end of the

32:30 time in Germany, the medals that they had through surviving perhaps 30 trips on bomber command, they were covered with medals. It was a very different scene towards the end of the war. The march, the worst features undoubtedly were the dysentery but the chaos in Germany with

33:00 the displaced personnel, people lying dead in the roads in the snow drifts and dairy cows slaughtered just for a big chunk of meat out of it, those things were terrible. Actual physical hardship didn't compare with the Japanese, Australians at Japan hands but it was a terrible scene, the whole of Germany at the end of the war.

33:30 We, when we got back to England, were too much out of date to be wanted to fly against the Japanese. The aeroplanes we were flying were not being used much, a later aircraft and there were plenty of pilots, so the great rush was to get on troop ships home. I was 28 and single, and 11 000 miles from home with a good bank account that had built up whilst I was a prisoner.

34:00 I didn't want to go back on a troop ship all the way, so we could stay for educational or compassionate grounds and I didn't have any compassionate grounds but I said, "I'm half way through a university course in Agricultural Science. I'm a wool expert and I'd like to go to Bradford, and have a look at the wool industry there, and

34:30 I'd like to go to Leeds University and do a short course in textiles there." So the RAAF said, "OK!" So I went up there and first of all I bought a little car, and went around England and Scotland and Wales with a mate of mine, and then sold the car, and went up there. England was marvellous after the war. Everybody was so happy. They were

35:00 pretty hungry but very sympathetic about the prison thing, but we looked better than they did because our last few months we'd been living like kings. I had a pregnant mother's card issued in my name and that entitled me to an egg a day, so I gave that away to somebody after a while. The short course at Leeds University and experience in

35:30 Bradford was wonderful. I found that we were very much faster and more accurate in handling wool than the people who'd spent their whole lives in wool. Our technical course in wool training was much better in Australia. Leeds University in textiles on the contrary was brilliant. It was run by Professor Speakman, who said to me, "Now look Alan when you get back to Australia, what you've got to

36:00 push there, you've got to stop this nonsense of 100% wool, there's no substitute for wool." He said,

"You've got to push fabrics that are blended and particularly suited for an end use, cheaper, stronger, better than 100% wool." He sent me to Cambridge to do some wool experiments. I spent some time in

36:30 research laboratories and after about six months, I was ready to come home. So I got on the Queen Elizabeth at Southampton and I suppose there were about another 20 or 30 Australians at the most but there were 14000

37:00 troops on that ship, mostly Canadians, a lot of Americans. The cabins were 13 to a cabin, not unlike our prison camp. We had one meal a day sitting down. The others we were given sandwiches. So off we went and that was the biggest ship in the world, 96 000 tons, and it got tossed around in the Atlantic just like a cork. We struck the biggest storm

37:30 that the captain had ever experienced. Winston Churchill [former Prime Minister of England] was on board. He'd just been tossed out in the elections in England and was going over on a lecture tour to America. The chap that looked after us for our one meal, the crew steward chap, claimed that he was serving Churchill's breakfast in the mornings, which was red wine and grouse.

38:00 He said that Churchill had dropped his false teeth and trodden on them, and they were being repaired, and that we wouldn't see him on the trip because he didn't want to be seen without his teeth. That was true. He didn't appear but he agreed to speak to us over the Tannoy System [speaker system]. The Americans were "take it or leave it". Everybody else was a bit keen to hear him. Within ten

38:30 seconds of him coming on the Tannoy System you could have heard a pin drop in the whole ship. We were crammed inside the ship so we could hear well on the Tannoy System with the outside noise of the storm and I can't pretend to say what Churchill said, with a voice like Churchill's but the gist of

39:00 what he said I've never forgotten. I don't think anybody else has who was on the ship and I don't think it has been recorded anywhere. I've not heard it and I've got a lot of his speeches. He said, "Young men and women of the Allied Forces, I've just come down from the deck, from the bridge of this mighty ship after standing there with the captain and

39:30 watching the relentless seas crash over the bows, smashing companion ways, and doing a lot of damage to a ship of this size. I said to myself, "How is it the ship doesn't succumb to the relentless force of this sea?" It must be something about the ship that is stronger and I realised what it is. It's that the

40:00 ship has a goal. It has something that it's aiming at, a port to go to. The waves are endless, with no purpose and in life, young men and women, never forget this. Get yourselves a goal, aim at it, keep going", you can imagine with his voice, "? and never let it go!" It

40:30 was really one of the most stirring experiences to hear that. He was brilliant. We used to listen to all his wartime speeches of course, which kept us going but some of them? I mean we were sitting in tents while we still occupied Tobruk and heard him say we were going to give Tobruk away, so he wasn't always popular but he could certainly put over a public speech. It was brilliant.

# Tape 8

00:33 Professor Speakman had arranged through the Department of Agriculture in the States a tour through sheep and wool and textile centres across America. When the Queen Elizabeth pulled into New York City, tremendous excitement, enormous crowds there to see Churchill of course,

01:00 I had a little bit of a program already worked out as to what I was going to do. One thing I do remember, standing at the rail of the ship as we pulled in, an American behind me said to his mate, "Well this is the moment of my life, coming home to the world's biggest city, in America's biggest ship!"

01:30 The name "Queen Elizabeth" didn't mean to him that it was English. Leaving England and coming to America to see the contrast in availability in food stuffs was quite an eye opener because I'd sort of forgotten over the years that English people particularly had been on such rations, and the lack of

02:00 bomb damage. I was so used to seeing in England and of course in Germany, all the bomb damage, and how people were making do, sleeping in the underground as well as air raid shelters. Although I missed the Blitz proper there were plenty of bombing raids and blackouts, so it was quite an eye opener to see New York with the lights

02:30 on. I was met at the ship by a chap who was really based in Washington, the Australian Supply Centre there, where he was buying parts for American aircraft in Australia and shipping them out, so he wasn't a flying chap himself but he had an Oldsmobile 8 Cylinder Club Coupe as it was called,

03:00 and we got to be pretty good mates. He said, "Alan I know you've got plenty of money in your RAAF account but you can't convert it to dollars." At this stage they were not converting English currency. England suffered terribly through those sort of impositions. When I was in Coventry looking at

03:30 big textile mills there, the director of one them told me just how Britain had suffered through having to finance weapons and ships that they bought from America before America came into the war. He was Managing Director

04:00 of Courtaulds, which was a huge textile mill. His name was Pedder, Mr Pedder and he said, "The only notice that we got was from the British Government", I think the cheque was for something like 100,000.000 pounds, "?saying we have sold your assets in America to help pay for the

04:30 Lend Lease ships or 'Lease Lend ships' they were called. So he said, "Probably our business there was worth ten times that much really." He said that this happened with every asset. Every English asset in America was sold to try to finance the early stages of the war, buying these "Liberty" ships particularly. So it wasn't an easy business.

05:00 Whilst there I went to America Viscose Corporation and they showed me their wonderful textile display, a painting of a deep sea scene with all sorts of colours, bolts of cloth, which would be the season's colours exactly matching the colours of the fish. They were so proud of it and I said to them, "Excuse me, wasn't this Courtaulds? The English company?" "Oh God damn

05:30 man! I don't remember that. I don't remember that at all but yes, I think you're right." So I found quite a lot of that happened. England suffered dreadfully from the war and really the American money that was poured into Germany and Japan, rebuilding it, set England back even further, particularly in the textile business where they [the Germans and Japanese] were able to build with the latest equipment and so on.

06:00 Bradford and Leeds were using old equipment that had worn out. It was pretty hard to take. Anyway I had a whale of a time of course in New York and Ben Vincent was the name of this West Australian chap. His family had a big hardware place in Perth. He was going back to Australia within a week or two. So

06:30 he said, "Alan you can have the car because you're not going to be able to get this trip that's planned out for you done by train and bus. Now when you get to the West Coast, San Francisco, where you'll be taking off from probably, I want you to sell the car and I want nine hundred dollars for it,

07:00 and if you get more, that's your good luck. If you get less, you can make it up to me in Australia." "Right! Bargain!" So I went down to Washington with him. It was very cold in Washington. I wasn't used to driving with no chains on the wheels and the roads were so icy but the pedestrians would push you back onto the road, and the traffic wasn't heavy because the rationing of petrol had been fairly solid.

07:30 After I'd been in Washington a week or two, the senior Australian there was getting a bit? he thought I was having too good a time I think. He said, "What about this bloke, getting rid of him, getting him on his way?" So they said, "Well he's got this beaut trip." And he said, "Well he's not going to do it on air force pay. He'll have to take leave." OK, three months leave without pay!

08:00 But the girls in the office, Australians and Canadians, they fixed it so that I got quite a bit of the trip done from Washington, coming backwards and forwards, still on the payroll. Then when I set off for my 10 000 mile trip across the States, they managed to make it that I missed a ship and had quite a lot of time between ships, so I wasn't off the payroll for too long! The trip across the

08:30 States was fantastic but first I had to go up to Windsor Ontario to take George Wiley's photographs and things back to his mother and sister. That was a very hard thing to do. They'd switched off thinking he was safe in prison camp, so relieved to hear that he was safe in prison camp, only then to have the news that he was murdered. So I did that and then I

09:00 gave lectures in fat lamb raising and all sorts of things, to universities and colleges, agricultural places. I visited farms and textile mills in Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. I got down into Texas and I was going through San Antonio in Texas. I was going to stay overnight

09:30 there and I was looking for the name of an American who had been in my room for a while in camp, and looking through the phone book for his number, I saw a name "Righetti", "Colonel E. G. Righetti". Now Righetti was an extremely uncommon name in Australia in the 1930s and we knew most of them, and I just wondered whether?

10:00 I'd not seen the name in phone books, even in London and New York. I just thought, "I might just ring him." So I dialled and a lady answered the phone, and I said, "May I speak to the Colonel please?" She said, "Oh I'm sorry but the Colonel was a fighter pilot and he was shot down in the last week of the war in Germany, and we haven't heard

10:30 news of him. The American Air Force are very worried because they've no trace of him. They think he could have been murdered when he crash landed but we know he was alive because he waved and also said over the wireless to other members of his squadron, "I'm OK. I think I've broken my nose but tell Katie I'll be back.""

11:00 Katie was his wife. "So we are waiting desperately, particularly because the Red Cross tell us that there definitely was a fighter pilot in prison camp in Germany but they're saying that he was an Australian but it is an unusual name in the Air Force and we're praying that it is the Colonel."

11:30 She said, "Who is calling?" and I said, "Well I don't know how to tell you this but I'm the Australian they're talking about." She said, "Well how on earth did they put you on to us?" I said, "They didn't. I just happened to see the Colonel's name in the phone book." She said, "That's incredible. Will you come around and meet us?" So I went around.

12:00 I met Katie and Katie's mother, and a little child that Katie had, and I told them the story. Of course they were devastated because they knew that was the end of their chances of Colonel Elwyn, "Eager El" they used to call him, being alive. So

12:30 they said, "It's strange that you should call because it was an uncommon name to you but on the West Coast of America there are hundreds and hundreds of them there, even in the little place San Louis Obispo, where Elwyn's family come from. When you finish up on that side of America you must go and see them, and just tell them what has happened because they'll be devastated too. Now that we've got the news, we'll ring them and tell them that they can forget about the Righetti who was in

13:00 prison camp." So I had to do it. It was a pretty embarrassing and hurtful thing to have to do to them but anyway, it was the least I could do. I went about my travels, up and down Wyoming, and down to Arizona, and back up through to Washington State, and down to San Francisco. I managed to just miss a ship again, as the girls had arranged, so I got back on?

13:30 Oh no! This time of course it was the other way. They booked me onto the ship, back onto the payroll but managed to make it so that I couldn't catch the ship. I had to wait for the next one. I then finished the trip and drive to the "Righetti Ranch", as they called it, a large farm we'd call it, at San Louis Obispo, and met Elwyn Righetti's family. A very nice couple,

14:00 shocked that Elwyn was definitely gone and made me very welcome, asked me many questions about where we came from originally. All I could tell them was Someo in Switzerland. They said, "Yes we came from there but so did hundreds of others but really it's not likely that we'd be related because we don't have any relatives at all here and there are hundreds, as you can see in the phone book."

14:30 As I noticed, there was even an 'Alan Righetti' on one of the letterboxes. There was a Righetti Road with numbers up to 2000 in it. An old aunt of theirs came over to meet me and she bought a family snapshot album, and opened it up, and said, "Would that be your father and mother visiting Someo in 1922?" And that was Mum and Dad! They were absolutely

15:00 astounded. They said, "Well your Dad and Guido Righetti" (that's Elwyn's father) "? are first cousins. So you and Elwyn are second cousins really." They said, "You've picked the only Righettis here that you're related to!" I stayed with them for a day or two, had a wonderful time with the family. I got to meet them all and then I

15:30 went off to San Francisco, and set about selling the car. Well I got three or four hundred dollars more for the car than was wanted, so I paid half the profit plus the nine hundred dollars into Ben Vincent's bank account over there and I left a bank account for myself, and presented myself on to the

16:00 old Monterey. The Mont, the last trip she had from San Francisco to Australia as a troop ship. Of course it was under American control and American ships were dry, and it was still as a troop ship. I was flight lieutenant but as I was flying personnel, I was the senior

16:30 officer and in charge onboard the ship. I had about 17 Australians returning, some wing commanders but they were not flying personnel, so they had to answer to me! I'd come a long way since sergeant pilot. There were about 40 or 50 distressed Australian war brides whose marriages hadn't worked out, coming back to Australia. There were quite a few Canadian girls

17:00 and a few Americans, engaged to Australians, who were coming out. Although it was set up as a troop ship it was very comfortably done. The food was very good, as it always is with Americans. So apart from the fact that the parties were going to be dry, it looked like a pretty good trip. At the last moment, onboard came

17:30 quite a few dozen personnel, technical people, to start up General Motors Holden in Australia, engineers, mechanics, all sorts. They seemed to be carrying their trunks of tools with them. They all had these big trunks they were carrying. Anyway, that all turned out to be alcohol! The trip back from? certainly as far as

18:00 Hawaii where they replenished, was a party all the way. We had an absolute ball. The only trouble was that the ship never called in anywhere. It was a wonderful way to finish the war. We called in to Auckland and had a great welcome there, then got to Sydney. That was about the middle of 1946.

18:30 I then rang my folks, who were living in Melbourne and finally after five years and six months, I was back in Australia, and on the way by train. Dad met me at Spencer Street railway station. He was still in uniform. After his family had all joined up, Dad joined the Volunteer Defence Corps

19:00 impressing rifles that had to be handed in and becoming a major in the army, in the Volunteer Defence Corps. That's like the "Home Army" and he offered to take a group of riflemen of his own age, all crack shots, to England during the war, as 'parashots', to shoot at parachutes

19:30 because everybody expected paratroop raids over England but the army knocked it back. They said, "You're a bit old and you don't quite really fit into the army picture." So Dad did everything else that he could. He was captain of the Australian Rifle Team that went to Bisley and won the World Championships in

20:00 1948. The Australian Team cleaned up everything, the individual trophy won by our most famous shot Perce Pavey and Dad, at Bisley, at the Rifle Range? I have a photo of him talking to Field Marshall Montgomery. Montgomery is a mass of medals and Dad's got one!

20:30 But it's a family photograph we're very proud of. The other members of the family, the younger brother Syd, I had seen him during the war. He arrived in London whilst I got leave, while I was doing that Operational Training Course up at Usworth. I got leave and got down to London, so I had seen Syd. He dropped out of an Officer's

21:00 Course to come home on the [HMAS] Shropshire because he wanted to get back home to fight against the Japanese. He finished the war as an able seaman. He wasn't worried about the rank. He just wanted to get back and fight in Australian waters. My brother Ivo had finished as a captain of a Catalina. The only time I'd heard from him really was when I was coming across

21:30 America, I got a cable to say that he was ferrying a Catalina from San Diego across the Pacific to Australia and going up to Japan. I didn't know at that stage but when the war did finish, in August he went up to pick up prisoners of war from Shanghai. I think he was the first Catalina into Shanghai after the war but I didn't interrupt my trip across the States to

22:00 go and join him in San Diego because I had the obligation to finish the trip for the Professor's sake, and also to see the Righettis. So I met up with him again and of course we all knew by this time that my eldest brother Lloyd was definitely not coming back. My sister was out of Civil Aviation by this time but it was quite a homecoming.

22:30 I had to go into Heidelberg [Repatriation] Hospital for a couple of minor bits of shrapnel to be taken out and the treatment that we got was fantastic. They really looked after us very well because of course we were not ill compared with the Japanese prisoners. I went then to Melbourne University, back to the University to Professor Sir Samuel Wadham

23:00 and he arranged for me to do an immediate exam in organic chemistry, which I sailed through. Once again, I suppose they were a bit easy but we did have time to learn things properly in prison camp. So then I completed my course at Melbourne University. In 1949

23:30 I got engaged to the Professor's secretary, Janet. We got married in 1950, the year I graduated, and on Valentine's Day 1950. Her grandfather, with whom she and her mother

24:00 (her parents had been separated) were living with their grandfather, who was Sir George Pearce. Now Sir George Pearce was a Minister in the Federation Parliament in 1901 and was Minister for Defence as early as 1908, about there but he was certainly Minister for Defence in 1911 when he formed the Australian Navy by getting two ships from England.

24:30 Then he started the Australian Flying Corps and he started Point Cook and Richmond, and Duntroon in Canberra. In 1921 he formed the RAAF and you can say, "Well he was just the Minister who brought the legislation down" but he was much more than that. He was very aviation-minded and used to fly whenever he

25:00 could, around his electorate in Western Australia, which was a vast electorate. We've got photos of him hanging on to the sides of the little biplanes that he flew in and a book written by the number one airman in Australia, These Are Facts by?

25:30 can't get that one [meant Sir Richard Williams]. I'll think of the name in a moment, the most famous name in the RAAF really. It says, "In my opinion without Sir George Pearce, the RAAF would never have been formed." By that he meant that we would have been under the British RAF and there are

26:00 many references to the service that he gave to the air force as Minister for Defence, both with that government and when Billie Hughes' [former Prime Minister of Australia] government changed. They formed the UAP [United Australia Party]. He was later with the government when Bruce was Prime Minister. Then he was out while the Labor Government under Scullin, was in and during the Depression

26:30 it was proposed that they merged the air force under the army and the navy but the Lyons Government came in. Sir George was made Minister of Defence again, still a senator and he immediately formed the "Air Board", and made it a separate service forever. He was responsible for that too. He was 37 years in Parliament and 25 years in Cabinet, and his

27:00 contribution to the air force is sort of largely unknown, except by historians. So Janet and I since we've been up here, went across to Pearce Air Base in Western Australia on holiday, and when they knew that Janet was coming, they presented her with a photograph with a little plate on it, a photograph

27:30 of her grandfather. That's the one up there on the wall. So that was a very happy moment indeed. I

brought back with me, because of Professor Speakman, 40 swatches of fabrics made with wool and synthetics for particular end uses ideally suited; light summer suiting that was very, very strong, which had a terylene content as well as wool

28:00 but still fairly soft to handle, wash-wear fabrics, fabrics with enough synthetics in them to get permanent pleating built in, every one suited for an end use. And the idea that we should have a label 'Australian Wool Board Approved for Wool Content' and

28:30 all the information about that fabric should be assessed with the textile mill before they could get the brand put on, the Wool Board brand. So I went off to the Wool Board very full of myself with these fabrics and the moment I mentioned the word 'synthetics', and man-made fibres, they said, "We'll never have enough wool. The whole world is short

29:00 of it. We're not going to waste money thinking about synthetics." So they said, "We don't wish to talk to you." I got busy then finishing my degree and the family had a little farm at Heidelberg on the Yarra River, a dairy farm, so Dad was taking the Bisley Team away and the Olympic Team. He was also captain of shooting for the Olympic Team,

29:30 and I was looking after the farm, and finishing my course at the same time. So I didn't have much time to worry about the wool business but when I finished my degree in 1950, I went back to the Wool Board because by this time we were spending just billions of wool growers' money on nothing but: 'Use Wool. There's no substitute for wool.' Sir William Gunn gave me the shortest hearing I think I've ever had. He said,

30:00 "Out! Not going to talk about synthetics." Wool was a pound a pound and my two brothers, surviving brothers, were each farming up in the north east of Victoria, just out of Wangaratta in the 'Kelly Country' [Bushranger Ned Kelly], so I got a cheap loan through the Rehabilitation Scheme. That's the capital at 3% and 2% of that

30:30 you pay off as capital, only 1% interest, which is very, very good. We bought a few thousand acres of rabbits but it was well fenced around it, so my first proper married home on our own, was a tent. We put up a tent there. A nearby neighbour had a little saw mill, so we milled the timber off our own place and

31:00 he took two tree for every one he gave me milled, and we set about building a hut. We built a 12 by 24 hut, which was going to be a shearer's hut some day. Within 15 months the price of wool had dropped two thirds and I had to pay seven guineas for my ewes, which was a lot of money then, and suddenly it began to look as though

31:30 the area I had was not going to be big enough. Now this was the case after the First World War when they settled people on farms. They thought they were giving them large enough areas but that was OK when wool was a pound a pound. When it got down to well under a third of that I thought that we were going to be battling. However we built our little 12 by 24 hut and then we got the worst

32:00 bushfire that has ever been in the area. The first started near the aerodrome at Benalla and burned all the country all the way up to Moyhu outside Wangaratta. I think there was something like 22 homesteads burnt and four people lost their lives. I sent Janet off with the dogs and we didn't have anything of any particular value.

32:30 I told her to keep going to Wangaratta because if she turned around, she'd be in trouble and I got myself pretty well set. I'd ploughed up quite an area around our hut with a tractor and I didn't really know quite what to expect but it was infinitely worse than you could have expected. The very worst thing was that just before the fire hit, Janet came back through the front gate with

33:00 onboard a chap who was working for me, who left his car at our place and had gone out to fight the fire with the local fire truck. So he said, "I've got to get my car and go out the other way, and pick up my family." Of course you couldn't say no to that. So we all set off, tractor, leading a horse and Janet

33:30 on the tractor, and this guy in his car, and we let the horse go at the cross roads, and raced up to my brother's property, which was a brick home with a green lawn. This shows what panic can do. I often thought that I never really made a mistake in the air force as bad as this one. I took his family out of the house and set off for Wangaratta,

34:00 three kiddies and the dogs, and away we went. We were actually driving through the fire on both sides of the road but the car didn't stall and we got through, and got to Wangaratta. Halfway there I was pulled up by a chap I knew and I said, "Any news of the fire?" He said, "I've got bad news for you. Your brothers were on the truck, the fire truck which has been trapped in the fire."

34:30 I had to believe that they were probably dead. Anyway, we got to Wangaratta and I left the family there, and went around to Glenrowan down the highway, and came in at the back of the fire where it had been burnt. As I got closer to where we lived, it was incredible to see the things that had burned completely away,

35:00 that had only just been set alight to by the fire. I had pictured that as the fire came through it would

destroy everything in its path but it doesn't do that at all. What happens is that it comes through like an express train and it only sets alight to things, so if you can find somewhere safe whilst the fire goes through, even in your own house, you can then rush out, and even though you might be smoke affected, you can put out

35:30 so many things. I'd done all the wrong things but strange to say, the hut didn't burn. Everything else did, all our stock, lost seven miles of fencing and all that. Then I set off towards the brother's home, the one we'd left and he was there. He'd got back. The truck had been caught in the fire but they jumped into a dam and kept the hoses going

36:00 over themselves, and escaped. We both then went over to the other brother's place and his homestead was OK but he'd lost just about everything else. That was a heck of a blow but we set about building the place up again. I was well insured but the difference that people don't understand when they talk about horrific fires as they had in Canberra just last year,

36:30 so many homes lost, the difference in the country is that you're out of business. You've not just lost your home but you've lost your business and although, as we were insured, you can't buy stock because you haven't got any grass to feed them on or fences to keep them in. So really we were three years trying to get back on our feet. We started dairying and it wasn't really suitable there. So

37:00 I started working at Bruck Mills in Wangaratta, looking for a Quality Control Officer and it was 18 miles away, so leaving Janet to look after the farm and our two little girls. We put a beef bull over the dairy cows to rear cattle and I started earning a regular income at Bruck Mills, so the farm started to improve but we were battling.

37:30 The wool was nothing like the price that it had been. I applied for a job that was in the papers. They wanted somebody to be State Supervisor and head of the School of Sheep and Wool, for the Department of Technical Education in New South Wales, the whole of New South Wales. Now it wasn't

38:00 that the qualifications were difficult. It was that they were unusual. They wanted somebody with a knowledge of farming, somebody that had to have wool qualifications and a degree, I had Agricultural Science, and a knowledge of textiles an advantage. Giving the reference of the Principal of Hawkesbury Agricultural College who'd been in prison camp with me,

38:30 I got the job, so we leased our farm and set off for Sydney. We didn't know whether we'd like Sydney or not but we loved it. We shifted from the school in the old Darlinghurst Gaol. Our numbers got too big for there so we built a big new Wool School in Ultimo, which was undoubtedly the best Wool School in the world. I got the wool quotas on trading account, so I was buying and

39:00 selling like a commercial company, so we made money, even though it had to go into consolidated revenue. We bought sheep in the wool sale yards in Flemington [meant Homebush], live and brought them into the school and shore [sheared] them there, and put them back in the yards off shears. I had 107 centres all over New South Wales and 94 teachers. It was wonderful.

39:30 Then a gentleman came to see me to say that he manufactured stock feed pellets and prepared stock feed for stud animals, stud sheep and stud cattle. Would I like to go and work for them because I knew so many of the stud sheep people through my school, and the various country areas that I used to go to, to do the examining.

40:00 I said, "No, I'm very happy here and I'm very busy here." He said, "We know you're a public servant. We know what you get paid. We'll give you three times the money." With two little girls and so on, that was the end of my dreams of being the most knowledgeable person on wool. So I went to work for Allied Feed Mills as a Director and General Sales Manager but no sooner had I

40:30 got to them, and we were really building the business? they sent me on a world trip to look at stock feed centres all over the world, treated me very well. Sir John Cadwallader was the head. He was head of the Bank of New South Wales. No sooner had I really got going for them, the chicken industry took off and of course in the chicken industry the Ingham Brothers were the big users.

41:00 This was where prepared stock feed was going to end up, not so much with sheep and cattle. My job became one of trying to get the business from Jack and Bob Ingham. I got a third of it, then got two-thirds of it and finally with a finance deal, we got it all, so we supplied Inghams. We stayed on the feed side and they stayed on the chicken side. But Jack

41:30 and Bob Ingham said, "Well look Alan, now that you're selling feed to us, you won't sell it to anybody else, the competitors. We'd like you to come to us and sell chicken." I said, "I don't know anything about chicken. I don't even like them!" But for 14 years I was working for Jack and Bob on a very personal basis, first to get them business where they'd never had it. They

42:00 already had Woolworths and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

## Tape 9

00:38 With them I did all sorts of jobs, one stage looking after the factory, one stage we got ready to set a huge pig operation near Hay. My job was to arrange to irrigate up to 10 000

01:00 acres of land. We bought the properties. We got all set to go and we had to have a property on the rail siding for the feed factory and for the pigs to be railed from after slaughter. I was very heavily involved with that but the government changed

01:30 hands and Gough Whitlam [former Prime Minister of Australia], who was our member for that area, he? Jack and Bob rang him and said, "Gough this is not going to upset our plans?" He said, "Not in the slightest. We are encouraging the sort of thing you're doing." But when the legislation came down they lost the depreciation allowances and a lot of investment allowances, and taxation benefits, that cost the

02:00 project 11 million dollars on paper, so they didn't start. They were going to spend 30 million dollars there and build a little township of about 157 people. My job then, I already had 2000 head of cattle on the property, so I had to go down with an old mate, a navy chap called Ken Partridge, who will remember that very well, and we had to sell the cattle, get them in order for sales down there, and

02:30 then sell the properties, which we did. I came back to Sydney and then they put me on to Export, and I spent several years trying to build up Export markets for them, for chicken, which seemed successful on paper. But the boys, Jack and Bob, had so much to do with their money on the local scene where they were going into every state and we'd broken away from Allied Mills

03:00 at this stage, and they were building their own feed mills. So there was plenty to do back in Australia. Although I set up some great contacts our export business remained comparatively small but it meant projects I put on paper for Fiji, Indonesia, Taiwan, Philippines, was a very interesting few years.

03:30 Then my last job for them was to find them an aeroplane because they wanted an aeroplane to fly their important people in between the states and also for themselves to use, perhaps to go down to the Melbourne Cup, things like that. I set off looking for an ordinary prop aeroplane that wouldn't cost too much money

04:00 but we finished up with a Citation 2 jet aeroplane, which was a beauty and it cost us two million pounds? dollars I think. Yes by this time we had switched into decimal currency. I had to get that crewed and so on. That was a great job, thoroughly enjoyed that! Then I retired,

04:30 with one of my very best friends as the captain of the jet and since I left, they've replaced it with an 18 million dollar Citation 7, which we see when it comes over here occasionally to the Sunshine Coast airport at Maroochydore. So that was the end of my

05:00 working life in 1983 and we were living at Balmoral with a wonderful place looking out the heads of Sydney but it was a big place, and we'd let part of it. The stairs were pretty steep up to it and when Janet slipped on them, and broke her ankle, we decided to retire, and find something more suitable for elderly people. We

05:30 went over to Perth. That's when Janet went to the air base at Pearce and they presented her with a photo that I mentioned, of her grandfather. We went up to Cairns but we liked Noosa very much and with one daughter in Brisbane, she's a Brisbane councillor, Councillor Jane Prentice, Noosa seemed to be the ideal. The only snag was

06:00 that Noosa itself was very, very crowded, so we much preferred getting out to Sunshine Beach about a mile away and not nearly so crowded. Now that's about all I have to say. Looking back over the whole of my life, especially in the air force, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was very, very exciting.

06:30 In London during the times of the bombing raids, the people you met, the friends you made; I would never have missed any of that. Because it was total war, because the thought of Hitler and Japanese winning the war, which nobody ever talks about, nobody even writes about it, you don't read it in books, what the world would have been like today had they won.

07:00 Although you never win a war you just can't afford to lose them against people like that. The whole world would have been back in the Dark Ages, back in slavery in my opinion. I had not the slightest misgivings about the destruction that we caused because they were certainly doing it to

07:30 us and what they had in mind would have been worse, what the Japs would have done here. The atomic bombs were horrific. They saved millions of lives. If we'd had more, we should have dropped more. It kept war away from us for a long time but it was,

08:00 I think, a war of "them or us", totally. There was no political thing. Should we be there? Should we be sending troops? There was no question. It was total war. I don't have one little regret about any part of that. The thing that I do regret of course is the friends that I lost. We all do that but that's what war is about and

08:30 I think of them a great deal. My particular little band of brothers; they were all commissioned on the west coast of Africa and as promised. They went back to England to fly. Geoff Waugh, "Woggy" and Jim Watchorn, "Jimmy" or "Watchy" we used to call him,

09:00 both flew Typhoons, and they each, within a short time of each other, brought a bomb back that they hadn't dropped, which came off when they touched down in landing, and blew them up, so they both never made it back at all. Kyle Sellick, I was really looking forward to seeing Kyle because I knew that he'd got through

09:30 and won a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross], done a great job but before I'd got back to Australia, he'd joined Connellan Airways up in the north of Australia, and killed himself in a flying accident, so I didn't see him again. Dave Borthwick who was invalided home, the one that crawled across the desert, he became a farmer after spending a few years

10:00 as a pilot for Ansett, it might have been ANA [Australian National Airways] in those days? I kept in touch with David. He had flown after he got back to Australia and got mentioned in despatches for the second time but he suffered a stroke and died some years ago, not very long ago, four or five years ago. He used to visit us here.

10:30 The most successful of our little group was John Hooke, and iron man of extreme will and determination. I've never seen stronger. If we were all tired and saying, "Let's have a rest." That's when John would go for a five mile walk. He would say, "That's mental. I'll go for a walk." He was farming

11:00 also in the western district of Victoria and he also had a Harbour Master job at Port Phillip. He used to drive up there every day. I was really looking forward to seeing John quite a bit but we were in Sydney and then John suffered a stroke, and he died about four years ago. He was the most highly decorated of any of

11:30 the chaps that I knew, of our group particularly. Of the 40 of us that went on to fighters in Rhodesia, 11 got right through. Of that 11, five were prisoners of war, four were invalided home, one dropped by the wayside and John Hooke was the only one that got

12:00 right through. He was shot down three times and walked back. So your chances were not very good. On the other hand, flying a fighter in daylight where you could see your enemy, in my view was vastly more pleasant than sitting in a Lancaster bomber

12:30 for eight and ten hours over Germany. I think the fellas who did that and who had to try to make 30 ops before they retired, before they got a rest, were super people. I think what they did was unbelievable. I can vouch for that by the numbers who came in as prisoners and by the numbers that

13:00 we know didn't come in. The losses were horrific. What they did was terribly dangerous. Their chances were less than five percent of getting away with it. In that regard I think I was pretty lucky. I flew 59 operations. They were not terribly lengthy. I only had a total of

13:30 a few over 100 hours, so I wasn't much more than halfway through my tour but had I lasted just to that couple of days when we took Tripoli, life would have been a lot easier. It was really the last? concentrated air battles were finished in North Africa soon after I was shot down.

14:00 So you have to weigh it all up and say, "If only I'd lasted longer. I might have got places in the air force or done a better job for the air force." You've got to weigh up and say, "You're lucky to be here." My commanding officer, Bob Gibbes is 79. At least? I bet he wishes he were! He's 87. He's still pretty fit and I

14:30 look at him, and think, "Well there's a man who did two tours in a row as commanding officer, 400 hours of flying against the enemy, all of it action packed." So you measure your chances against that sort of thing, I think I'm pretty lucky to be here! And I think that's about my story.

15:00 **How do you compare your war experience with your band of brothers and then as a POW? What did you learn from each of those two very different war experiences, about yourself and about other people?**

It's nearly impossible to describe the effects of being a prisoner of war because you don't really know how you would have been if you hadn't been a prisoner.

15:30 In my case it completely changed my sense of values. I put far more value on people. My friends have meant everything to me. I never had any desire whatsoever to accumulate money for money's sake. I naturally worked hard enough to be able to buy the things we wanted to buy

16:00 and send the kids to good schools, and normal things but I mean to accumulate assets, and items of value, I have no desire whatsoever. That was one thing that definitely came out of prison camp because you get very philosophical and you change your sense of values altogether. You become a lot more introspective

16:30 but you try to drop off the pace. Unfortunately you get caught up in the "rat race" and nobody can do that really these days but I did notice that all the ambitions that I had earlier, a lot of them were I'd like to be a wealthy man, that all completely

17:00 left me. I had no desire whatsoever. I was very disappointed about the wool trade. I spoke just recently to Gary Pemberton, who was head of the Wool Board at one stage. I told him my little story about my

synthetics and so on, and he said, "Unfortunately you were 45 years ahead of your time." I said, "It's not me. It was Professor Speakman at

17:30 Leeds University." He said, "Well in my opinion he couldn't have been more right." He said, "Our Wool Board still is only just waking up to what you're saying." It is the way the wool industry should have gone. The most satisfying job I had after getting out of the air force was undoubtedly as Head of the School for Sheep and Wool, for New South Wales. We were really creating

18:00 things there and many people have said, "Aren't you sorry you didn't stay with that instead of going off into the industrial commercial world of Allied Feeds and Inghams?" As far as the nature of the work, no doubt, I loved the wool business but the bottom dropped out of the wool industry within a few years. Most of my newly formed centres dissipated and

18:30 closed. The school itself is just a skeleton now. It serves a couple of country centres like Tamworth and Goulburn, Orange probably. The wonderful school that we built is just being wrecked at the moment, sold. So maybe things happened for the best. I wouldn't have been out of a job because at that

19:00 level in technical education, head of a school, I'd have stayed on but they would have probably wanted me to go away to the country to be head of a tech college like Tamworth or Orange, one of those. If I'd done that we would never have been able to have afforded to come back into Sydney because we bought into Sydney at the right time and sold out of it at the right time.

19:30 It's not good having regrets. I don't really have any regrets at all. I look back and think, "I was extremely lucky." I don't know anybody that had more luck than I did. I feel that my story is very much of the average. In all the records that you

20:00 keeping, if you were looking for the story of the average airman, mine would be very close to it. There were thousands who trained who had equally difficult stories or very few had easy passages, especially in the early days but I think you could put me down as an average airman.

**You say that you were lucky but**

20:30 **do you think you made your own luck as well?**

You do that in life. That's what Mr Churchill was trying to tell us onboard the Queen Elizabeth, get a goal and aim at it but as far as survival in the air force was concerned, it was 98% luck. Some of the very best peacetime pilots who

21:00 really could fly, like Guy Gibson, lost their lives. Now you couldn't get a better pilot than Guy Gibson. Some of the Australian peacetime pilots who survived, like Mickey Martin, Dave Shannon, they

21:30 were incredibly lucky when you read their stories, how many were lost in the squadron. Mickey Martin was probably the best bomber pilot of the world, of the war, whole war. After bombing they would go straight down to deck level and fly at deck level. That's because he was a so much better pilot. See, Americans that we flew with all had at least 400 hours on Kittyhawks before they came into the desert.

22:00 We had 15. We had 150 hours training. Our permanent air force chaps had probably a couple of thousand hours minimum before they went into action. They were very, very few Empire air-trained pilots that made it to

22:30 the top. The great exception of course was Clive Caldwell. He had done a bit of flying but he was a quite exceptional person and I didn't know him of course during the desert war but I got to know him well back in Sydney, and at the Royal Sydney Golf Club, where we are members, we used to meet in the Imperial Service Club.

23:00 I thought he was one of the most brilliant people I've met. He was impatient, couldn't stand fools, had quite a chip on his shoulder over the whole war, didn't really want to talk about it unless he'd had a few drinks but he was a man that got in there to get the job

23:30 done and then get out. He was very unpopular with the permanent air force because he was so much an individual and wanted to do things his way. When he returned to Australia, on his personal file the head of the air force, George Jones wrote, "This man is in the EATS [Empire Air Training Scheme], Empire air trained pilot, has received sufficient decorations and

24:00 should receive no further awards." Clive Caldwell found that out through another permanent air force officer, who was a friend but that was the sort of bitterness that was inclined to creep in. In civilian life people who flew in the air force were supermen. People who flying around in Wapitis and Ansons, 180 miles an hour,

24:30 you thought of them as being Supermen, strict course to get into the air force permanently. Then when the war broke out and the war needed a constant supply of airmen, the average guy on the footpath, only just out of school some of them, bank clerks, all sorts, within a couple of hundred

25:00 hours of training were flying a crew of eight over Germany in Lancaster bombers, and flying Spitfires, just after the Battle of Britain, a few during the Battle of Britain. None of us really knew how to fly

compared with the permanent people but there was a little bit of resentment from the permanent air force because the Officers' Mess was the holiest of holies, only super people allowed in there

25:30 and all these young people coming in, it upset the apple cart a bit. I still come back to my one big whinge about their system of officer. It is not my place to comment accurately on it because I wasn't in Bomber Command but you can imagine.

26:00 If you came back after a raid, you were a captain and you were a sergeant pilot, you went off to the Sergeant Pilots' Mess and you're a navigator, and perhaps bomb aimer, both officers, they go off to the Officers' Mess. It would be pretty tough to take. Against that they can say of course Bomber Command was so huge with numbers that

26:30 you couldn't have everybody in one Mess but the system is wrong somewhere. It's not correctly based, as you would get with the navy or the army, with proper training courses for officers and added responsibilities. That's something that probably won't arise again because now air forces will be small, very small

27:00 and they'll be fighting perhaps without even seeing each other in the air. That's a very different story now.

**Prior to that knowledge you spoke about where the German pilots were starting to shoot at pilots that had bailed, what was the code in regard to bailing pilots?**

There was no suggestion that you would ever do that until the first one happened and then

27:30 it originated really in Europe. I shouldn't make it as a statement but the Hurricanes that we flew, like 55 OTU, the old Mark 1 Hurricanes that were pretty bashed about from the Battle of Britain. Some of the ones like 55 OTU, there were screw marks along the leading edge of the wings or main

28:00 planes where blades had been screwed onto the front of the leading edge of the main plane. This had been done by a Polish squadron and their greatest delight was to attack an enemy aircraft, and have the chap bail out, and then try to fly through the shrouds of his parachute.

28:30 Now it sounds dreadful. It's probably no worse than bombing innocent families, women and kiddies but the Poles had really copped it from the Germans. Czechoslovakia had been annexed, so they were supposed to be on the German side. If a Czechoslovakian was picked up flying for the RAF,

29:00 he would be shot. The Poles were supposed to be treated under the same rules as we all had but there was not the slightest doubt that the Poles did do it. I know of nobody else but in the desert it happened. You'd like to think perhaps the first time was accidental but I'm afraid it wasn't.

29:30 Not flying through shrouds, but shooting a chap in the parachute did happen definitely. Fortunately it did not happen in our squadron. I don't know of an individual single case that I can say, "It happened because of so and so." It is hearsay but it did actually happen.

**You said earlier how hard it was to fly the Harvards and the problems that the Harvards had,**

30:00 **did you ever experience your own personal problems flying the Harvards?**

No and of course in retrospect, when you think about flying a Kittyhawk in action, it's almost laughable to say that but they were very unstable on the stall. That's means to say, if you pulled the joystick back and just cut the throttle a bit, and let it get to the stage where the airflow

30:30 is not sufficient over the wings, and she drops a wing, a Hurricane will shudder and say, "Look I'm going to stall, I'm going to stall." A Harvard would flick violently into a spin. It wasn't hard to get out of the spin. You push the stick forward, opposite rudder, kept the nose down but if you pulled out a bit suddenly, she would spin the other way. That of course was very often fatal for young

31:00 people just learning to fly. Against that, I was very grateful because the Kittyhawk was extremely similar. You had to be very careful with the stall with the Kittyhawk. At one stage coming back from an operation, an operational flight, I was just coming into the circuit on the outside of our formation and as I was just turning in, a fairly steep turn,

31:30 over the boundary? well there were no boundaries, no fences but we had 44 gallon drums marked out, markers in, the upper most wing just dropped out of the sky into a stall. I was only a few hundred feet up. I crammed the stick and the throttle forward and she just picked up, and I almost hit the ops truck with the undercarriage

32:00 as I just went over the roof of it, frightened everybody there, and I landed well down in the desert. I taxied back very slowly and I couldn't have gone closer to killing myself than that. Our engineering officer found that there had been an accumulation of dust in the pitot head and what I was reading for about 100

32:30 miles an hour, which is about the right speed to come in over, landed about 95 with your tail up wheeling them in, no fancy landings? the Boss wouldn't allow that because you might have been hit, you're judgment mightn't have been too good. You hold off a bit and they were so unstable that they

could flick right onto the back. This dust accumulation in the pitot head was causing the pitot head to

33:00 register unrealistically. Now you'd think it should have been registering the other way but for some reason it was showing about 105 when I was really doing about 90. I was very lucky to get out of that but the experience on the Harvard and then finally finishing up on the Kittyhawks, was fortuitous. I think if

33:30 I'd had to fly in night operations I'd have been happier in a Hurricane than in a Kittyhawk but you see we weren't very experienced pilots. I'm speaking this like and if the Boss was here, he'd say, "What are you talking about? The Kittyhawk was wonderful." But he flew Spitfires too and there's no question about which of those he preferred. The Spitfire, we all wanted

34:00 to fly them. They flew beautifully. Going into dive bombing with the Kittyhawk, as I've said, they were so heavy that I wasn't strong enough to pull them out. I'd have to use the trimming tabs and wind them back out, and you'd black out as they crabbed across the sky, coming out from dive bombing, which was good because it made them hard to hit from ground batteries.

34:30 That operation if you were doing it in a Hurricane, you would be able to pull that out quite easily. It was not a good aerodynamic aircraft in my opinion, in my inexperienced opinion!

**When you were flying protection for bombers and a party of "MU 109s" comes in to attack, who exactly are they after in that situation?**

They're after the bomber, definitely.

35:00 They're definitely after the bomber and it's your job to see that they don't get through. It doesn't matter what it takes. You've got to break from close by, open up at the enemy and return to where you were. You can't put yourself in any sort of an advantageous position with relation to the 109s. You have got to keep your number one duty and that is

35:30 staying near the bombers, and trying to keep them away from the bombers. Your top cover on the other hand, who are not flying close escort to the bombers, their job is to see that the 109s don't get a clear go at the bombers. They are supposed to be doing the dog fighting up there but of course it didn't always happen like that. 3 Squadron did not lose a bomber in the time that I was there. We escorted many back that were badly damaged

36:00 but more often damaged by ground fire than 109s. The head-on attack that did so much damage in early January '43 in which Bob Gibbes? that was quite unprecedented, to have a mass of German 109s coming at you head-on but we still didn't lose any bombers in that.

**How important was the Australian humour, the black humour in dealing with the high pressure situations that you were in?**

36:30 What do you mean by that? Are you talking about in the Mess tent?

**Yes, after sorties, before sorties?**

Oh I see. You mean what was the atmosphere in the Mess? Well the first thing was, "Did anybody see him go? Anybody see a parachute?" I remember

37:00 just during the Battle of El Alamein, John Bullwinkle, the brother of the famous Sister Bullwinkle, Vivian Bullwinkle, who was the only survivor from the Bangka [Island] Massacre. Her brother John was flying with us and he disappeared on one of our operations during the Battle of El Alamein. This was only

37:30 about my fourth or fifth trip. When we got back, I'd been number two to the Boss and everybody said, "What happened to Bully? Anybody see him?" "Yes I saw him go. I saw him go right in Boss. He's got no chance." I said, "I saw a parachute." "You saw a parachute?" The expression was when you're brand new to the

38:00 job, you don't get your head out of the cockpit. You're so busy concentrating on following the Boss but I'd had a pretty hectic introduction and every trip I'd had I'd been firing. Anyway, I said, "Just before the aircraft hit I saw a parachute." I said, "It was khaki coloured." Most of them were white, so they got hold of the parachute packer and got him to check, and sure enough! So they reckoned he was OK.

38:30 I never met him again but he had a bullet through his leg and was invalided home. The atmosphere in the Mess on an occasion like that was usually, "Did anybody seem him go? Did anybody see a parachute? Where do you think he was? Do you think he was behind enemy lines? Is there any chance that we could get in touch with such and such a unit in the Army, and see if the Long Range Desert Group could look?" There were all the hopes that the chap was still OK.

39:00 If he wasn't, we didn't talk much about it. We just said what a beaut bloke he was and, "Bill will you pack his stuff up or will I do that?" That was always an unpleasant thing. You made an inventory of everything he had and packed up his stuff to be sent home. The Boss had the worst job and that was writing to the next of kin. He as I said, took a lot of trouble over that. But

39:30 a few drinks and singing a few squadron songs, you had to make it a happy atmosphere in the Mess.

Only at the very end of my time with the squadron when I was getting so very tired, there was a lot of this sitting in the aircraft waiting to take off, plus the fact that we had

40:00 so few experienced pilots, that's the only time really that I didn't feel very happy on the squadron. The rest of the time it was a very exciting life, very exciting and great blokes. You got to know the ground staff a little bit. I had one occasion in which I took off and I hadn't gone terribly far.

40:30 I didn't know whether I'd been hit or what had happened but the oil line that governs the [feathering of the] propeller, burst, and the whole aircraft just blacked out completely with oil, absolutely completely. I thought at first I'd been hit and I pulled my goggles down, wound the canopy back.

41:00 I couldn't see through the windscreen at all and I expected the engine to stall any moment because I was losing the oil. I called up and said, "Engine trouble Boss, number one Shabby Leader!" Now that was unforgivable because you don't break radio silence on the way out. It lets the Germans know you're coming but I was pretty

41:30 keyed up. Anyway I got back, looking out the side of the aircraft. To my amazement when I put my head out a bit, I expected the oil to be hot but it wasn't. It was dead cold by the time that it hit me and the goggles just covered over too. I had to take those off and I finally could see the aerodrome out the side of the aircraft. It was yawing a lot, so I could skid around.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**

See also: http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/AAWRighetti.htm