Australians at War Film Archive

Kenneth McRae (Cob) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:30 **Ken, I was wondering if you could start by telling us a bit about your early life. Where you grew up?**

Yes, I was, actually I was born in jail. My Dad was the constable in charge of Murrumburrah, and of course, being in charge of Murrumburrah, the lockup was attached to the house, and our address was

01:00 Lockup, Murrumburrah. And people would say, 'You're a criminal'. But I was born, the same as another sister, and two younger brothers. We were all born in Murrumburrah lockup, and I was born in 1910, in July, ruddy cold time down there. First three or four years, uneventful, spent most of the time trying to dodge measles and the like,

01:30 and when I was about six or seven, typhoid was killing a lot of people. Killed my grandfather up in Armidale, at the age of 35. Anyway, I went to the Catholic school there, but I was Presbyterian. Religion didn't matter much those days, in the country, the city I think were a bit Catholics against Protestants,

02:00 but not so much in the country. All around us, we had Catholics living, station master, bank manager, and across the railway line was the Presbytery and the school, and the nunnery, that's where we went until, all us kids went to the school there until sixth class, when we went to the local one half way to Harden. But I enjoyed my life in the Catholic school, except midday when the meals rang,

02:30 all the Catholic got down on their knees and said a prayer. And three Protestants would be left standing, and Mother, we used to call her Mother Tarantula, goodness knows what she was, but she would wander around and give us a smack across the behind with a stick she had. But she was only one, and all the other sisters and mothers, they were great people. And I had an injury to my knee once and Father O'Shea,

03:00 and later Father Griffin, never neglected popping in every couple of days, and because Dad had a piece of paddock attached to the catholic properties and he had a couple of cows so we used to keep the nunnery and the Presbytery in milk, so that was a daily trip each day, take the milk up.

What was the main farming in that area?

03:30 Wheat. Wheat. Some sheep, but wheat. You'd go out away from the town, as far as you could see would be wheat.

And was it quite a free and open childhood. Were you able to roam around in the fields?

Oh, yes. I tell my kids, things have changed. When we were eight we were allowed to have a rifle and go shooting rabbits. My brother had a Remington UMC repeater [rifle] and he would never lend it to me.

04:00 He said, 'No, you're too bloody young'. A friend of mine had a single bolster .22 and we used to use that and go and shoot rabbits. Nowadays I wouldn't let my boys have a rifle until they were 15. Now I don't know what age they get them. I don't know.

And was the Empire a very important thing at school?

Yes. Empire, it was one of the main things. Most of the songs we had those days were the Empire, and of course we used to salute the

04:30 Union Jack each morning. We didn't have our own flag then.

And was your father's job as a constable a difficult job?

Pretty difficult. He had to deal with everything. Harden was the manager, he had a constable up there, but he didn't have the lockup, and the lockup, prisoners used to come there, and they'd be waiting remand, because the court house was just next door

05:00 to the police station. If they were convicted they came back there until they were escorted to Goulburn jail, if not they were set free, once the case was heard, but Mum used to look after them, gave them the same meals as we had and they were all very grateful for that. When they left, whether they were going to the clink or going free.

And, obviously your father's position meant he couldn't go to the first war. Did he stay on in the constable's position

05:30 **instead of going to World War I?**

Yes. Yes.

Do you recall people from the town going, or coming back, and talking about their experiences?

Well, yes and no. The only time I wagged school ever, was when that team was marching from Mudgee or Hay, volunteers, to Sydney. They started off on a bit of a tank and about six blokes and they had hundreds by the time they got to Sydney. And we heard they were coming through Murrumburrah

06:00 at two o'clock in the afternoon. Well, I was down there with a heap of eggs, Mum gave me the eggs, she didn't know I was going to wag it but, I handed them in as they went past. But they camped up at Harden. That was the highlight for me as far as the war goes. I had a cousin over in Mildura. He put his age on, he was 16 when he went, and he came back OK,

06:30 he had for his feet he had the bloody works, but he only died in the last eight, nine years. But the people over there didn't talk much about it. There was no adventures there, really. Once they got stuck there they got stuck in the lines, and it rained, it was cold. Some of the locals returned, but they didn't say much about it.

Was the march that you wagged school to see,

07:00 **they were marching through various towns, picking up more volunteers?**

As they went to Sydney, yeah.

And they marched all the way to Sydney.

All the way to Sydney. There was an article in the paper not so long ago, I should have cut it out. But it often gets mentioned in the paper around about Anzac Day and they ended up with some hundreds and of course half of them were too unfit, they had flat feet, so they had to go back home again.

07:30 But it was a great thing for the country. Very patriotic, Aussies.

Was Murrumburrah on the train line?

Yep, there was Harden. Do you know Harden? Well, on the southern line, Harden had the Round House. That's the shed for running repairs, and Murrumburrah was the first stop after Harden before you went up the big hill to Demondrille. In fact, both towns run together

08:00 and there was always dispute where the boundary was and when the war finished, right in the centre of the town, the boundary, they put a soldier you see. Then the big argument started, 'Which way will he face?' Murrumburrah or Harden. I think Murrumburrah won it that time, but Harden's still winning. The Ross church at the time when I was a kid was Harden/Murrumburrah. Now it's just Harden,

08:30 no Murrumburrah. So the rivalry is still there.

What was the approximate population in Murrumburrah at that time?

Oh, Murrumburrah, they didn't have too many people. I suppose three or four hundred. Then they went out on the farms, I suppose. But they had some famous people. Out Garangula. You might have heard of them. The Ross Brothers. They were pretty good at polo. Used to play nationally.

09:00 **Did you enjoy sports at school when you were a young lad?**

Yes, yes. In fact, whilst I was at Murrumburrah, all we played there was dangerous games, really. I don't know if you played at school, kit kat. You had a kitten about six inches long, sharpened at both ends, a round thing. And you had a stick and you'd hit the end of it and of course the think would scoot into the air, and then you belted it.

09:30 Well after a couple of people lost their eyes, not only at Murrumburrah, they cut it out, wasn't allowed. But tennis wasn't in then, and a little bit of soccer. Later when I went to Newcastle and went to Central School there, it was either you had to take swimming, soccer, and they started Australian Rules. Now Australian Rules was unknown to New South Wales then,

10:00 but one of the teachers had been teaching at Broken Hill, and of course they came under Victorian/South Australian influence, because it was a five day trip from Broken Hill to Newcastle, say four days to Sydney, and it wasn't so far across, but they didn't have a coach running then, and later they put a Cobb & Co coach on, as far as from Cobar on. But the trains weren't around, and they did all their shopping in Melbourne and Adelaide, they didn't come to Sydney at all.

10:30 **Did you have a particular aptitude for any subjects at school?**

No. I liked woodwork and I liked metal work and drawing, but apart from that, I didn't like English very much, Maths I tolerated, History I liked and Geography.

So when did you have to leave school?

I left school I was 16.

11:00 Intermediate time. I went to the Railways straight after and joined up. Now that's, you were speaking about Catholics and Protestants. When you made your application out for the railway, you had to get the Local Member, who was a Protestant to sign it, otherwise the application wouldn't be accepted, and that goes as far as Sydney, not so much the locals where we lived,

11:30 and so when I was selected for the railway, I went to Honeysuckle Point, that's near Civic Station, near Newcastle, if you know Newcastle, and then when they closed that down we went out to Cardiff, a new place, all new ideas. Some worked some didn't, and they were overhauling engines and tenders, and when you're following an engine crew, you're a bit lucky, you could go,

12:00 you strip it down, you work with fitters, and you strip down all the fittings, some you do yourself, others went into the brass shops and places like that, where they renewed all the valves and come back to you, and you pet them all on the engine. When the thing was ready for testing you used to start up and go up to Fassifern for a run, the fitter and a couple of his apprentices, and come back and try the brakes and all this, and it's very good, exciting. Until they brought in new ideas to save time,

12:30 they greased the rails and put the engine on the rails and it was flat out on these greasy rails, it didn't work out.

So there was quite a spirit of experimentation and innovation at that time with engines?

No, but I was a bit fortunate than most blokes. They used to give you six months in the brass section, that's overhauling cages and things like that, and they'd put you with a team, and work on the engines. Even to timing the valves

13:00 and that was about a twelve month job, and six months on tenders, and that was good, but I was a bit lucky. I got nine months in the drawing office which very few got and after I'd been there six months they said, well, you can go and handle this new job we've got, taking the, you know the engines have a

13:30 cross head, and it used to run on a rail, top and bottom, but the new ones, Notting LEMs and 36s, they only had one slipper, the bottom one was done away with, so they said you can go down there and convert a TF, one of the Traffic Engines, so I had a great time there designing that and watching the blokes go an do it, worked very well.

14:00 They were still converting when I left the place. But you didn't get much opportunity for innovations those days. Even in the air force. Most of the things you touched you had to refer it to Victoria Barracks, where Support Command was, and they had to approve it and nine times out of ten it wasn't approved. But when you're away you're the boss, you can do anything you like, because you had no communication with Australia.

14:30 It was good.

In 1929 was it, you had to do compulsory training. Is that right?

1929. I'm trying to work out the year, when I was 18, 1928, 1929, the government said the day you turn 16 you register, and they kept a tab of all the birthdays and you'd get a card in the mail, report to Military Centre so and so, but I was lucky.

15:00 A friend of mine was in the Navy, he joined the year before, under this scheme, and he said go up and register with the Navy instead of the military because we had a Naval base in Newcastle. So I went up the Naval base the same day as the others went to the Military and he warned me also, he said, 'Don't think because you're an apprentice fitter you're going to get Engine Room Artificer'. He said, 'The only ones who are going to get that are the ones working on the dock yard'.

15:30 So when I got there I did what he what and told them I was a fitter etc and then at the general meeting they were looking for sick berth attendants, ambulance blokes, and of course I have a St Johns' and the commander asked, 'Anyone here with ambulance experience, First Aid?', and I put up my hand, so two of us were selected and taken out of the group, and we used to go to lectures by doctors and still did the normal training, tying knots, sailing, gunnery

16:00 but we specialised in and we ended up with a square rig, like officers uniform. But I used to be sitting in a room inside, doctor talking to us, and outside were my poor mates from the railway, they were all stokers, they made them stokers, and they'd shovel a ton of blue metal through a hole round about two foot square, and when they'd finish they'd get in and shovel it back again.

16:30 I suppose the idea was much the same as refuelling, shovelling coal into a boiler on a train, into the fire box, it's quite an art, you know, direct it here or direct it there, the fireman he'd hold the shovel in and

direct the draft to go to various places, and he could tell you exactly where the next shovel full would be put, so I guess the same thing applied to the Navy.

17:00 **Did you enjoy the naval lifestyle?**

It was good, but we entered in a competition, in the whole of Australia. We came second by, missed by one or two points. That was for general gunnery, the whole lot, sailing, rowing, tying knots, and it came as a surprise. Labor got in and they chopped it. It had been going for ding dong years. We were all in the Naval Reserve and suddenly nothing.

17:30 So we'd do, one Saturday a month, and once a month, maybe twice a month we'd go in, in the railway time, say Tuesday, the lunch time, so it was too far to go to work then so you had the rest of the time off. I felt it so much that I was ruddy keen on it, so I went and joined the Garrison artillery.

18:00 Citizen Force, what were they called then?

CMF [Citizen's Militia Force]?

Yes, CMF. It was fantastic. (UNCLEAR) was there and firing the guns, the big six-inch guns. I enjoyed, I was about six years there before I joined to go to the air force. But that was great. A great crowd of young blokes and Anzac Day, after all the soldiers marched,

18:30 all the various units under the CMF, they marched. We always took the bloody prize. Bloody good uniform. Pith helmet and a red stripe down the pants. Had their own band.

And what was your social life there in Newcastle at that time?

Newcastle was fantastic until the Depression came, but we had, young people wouldn't realise it, that

19:00 we had to make our own fun really. The churches did very well for the young people. Had Fellowships. We used to go hiking and beach parties, and visit other Fellowships and I was in the surf club, I joined when I was about 18 and I was there for about five years. Night school. Now, after I finished my apprenticeship, the day I finished, we all got the sack.

19:30 Because they were sacking married men with two kids in the railway then, so how could an apprentice expect to keep his job. He couldn't, he was tossed out. And I went over the surf club, we used to row out to sea, and fish, and later I took on a job, the parson asked me, through the Fellowship, would I go out and take the Cardiff church on Sunday mornings

20:00 and Charlestown at night, for three months. Well, it ended up being three years. They were quite happy with me.

What was your position? What did you have to do?

A lay preacher.

As a lay preacher.

I had been keen on it. I was thinking of going into the Ministry, but before it told the parson, I told everybody else, I couldn't pray. I had to write it down and read it, and it thought well, "That's not good". So I gave it away.

20:30 **What do you mean? It didn't come naturally to you?**

Pardon?

What do you mean? It didn't come naturally to you?

No, no. the praying, no. And it thought if it doesn't come naturally, praying, that's the main part of all the whole game. I could give good children's services. I could spend all week on the sermon and the kids, the place would be packed. They had about thirty kids at church every morning, Sunday mornings. Charlestown was down to about eight people on average. No Sunday school.

21:00 **And so you did have a very strong belief in God?**

Oh, yes. I still do. I had such a strong belief that it never entered my mind while I was away that I'd be killed. I was sure quite I was coming back, despite the fact that bombs come in close sometimes. But we had such a fantastic time as youths, with girlfriends, we used to go to parties galore,

21:30 and we'd have dancing. We got that way we joined the 200 Club, our gang. We had about 45 of us and the 200 Club in Newcastle was a pretty select crowd of people. You had to go to one of their dances, for three meetings, before they would say well, you're accepted. OK, you're either accepted or they'd knock you back. So we went there, once a month to the 200 Club and it was a good dance.

What does 200 stand for?

22:00 200 members.

So you had to wait for someone to leave to be allowed in?

That's right. But we were striking a good time in the Depression. A lot of people were moving to Newcastle, because being an industrial town, the Depression was harder there than it was in Sydney.

So was it your, could you give me a bit more explanation about your trouble with prayer. What you found difficult about prayer?

22:30 Well, it didn't come. I'd start off. I could remember some of the phrases that the parson used but I just couldn't come out of the blue and pray on.

To speak it, to preach it?

Yeah.

So you prayed by yourself, on your own.

I could pray by myself. I could put anything in I liked, but when you get before people and they're all listening, it's a different matter and it didn't come naturally, despite the fact my grandfather was a minister, I thought I've got it made,

23:00 but no, it didn't come.

He was a Presbyterian minister as well?

He would have been Presbyterian, in the Presbyterian, but he was Church of Christ in Broken Hill. He used to drive around in a little trap. Everybody knew Father Tuck.

And so, what inspired your decision to enlist in the Air Force in 1936.

Ever since I was a kid, I, the Air Force was unknown.

23:30 But when we were eight, it had to be eight because we moved to Maitland when I was nine. When I was eight we heard that, or read in the paper, well Dad and Mum said, 'Do you want to go up on the railway bridge? There's a plane coming through today. The first one seen in Australia'. And course, we went up there and in those days they couldn't navigate much, they used to follow the train lines. They flew right overhead, or it flew right overhead and landed in Harden at about 3 0'clock,

24:00 so everybody in Murrumburrah went up to Harden to see this aircraft. And I went up again next morning to see it go off again. It was about a three mile walk for a young bloke, eight, and when the fitter took the plugs out of the bottom all this oil ran out, and he puts his hand under it and he starts to drink it. I thought, 'Bloody hell, what's he doing?' I heard afterwards it was castor oil it used to run on in those days in the engine for oiling,

24:30 and of course it was quite good, but when he started up and the oil came out in the exhaust, I thought, 'Boy, would I like to do that'. Before that it was steam, we used to go down to the trains, and steam would come up, oh, I loved the smell of it, and of course I liked the small of that. But the air force was nothing. It had, well, I guess in the cities, they might have had some connection with them.

25:00 Because a couple of the squadrons stayed together. One was the only one went right through with the Royal Flying Corps without being terminated. And it was down Point Cook, initially. That's where the early Air Force was, Point Cook.

So, even at the age of eight you knew you wanted to be involved with steam initially?

That was it.

And when you saw this amazing plane . . .

Well, it was unheard of really. Only one plane but

25:30 steam was lovely. The railway were very good with your apprenticeship, because I told you, they'd give you months here, nine months there. The last twelve or eighteen months were spent at the running sheds, in Broadmeadow or Eveleigh had them. Where you'd get the live engines come in, steaming and stop, and you'd have to work on them, and that was a great life.

So you'd already had experience both with the Navy and the CMF.

26:00 **How did you find the air force in terms of the training?**

No trouble. The drill side of it, slightly different which was amazing, They stood at ease a different way to we did in the army, the air force. The saluting was different. It took a while to get used to that.

When did you enlist. Was there an advertisement, or did you go somewhere to sign up?

No, there was an advertisement in the paper that they were enlarging the air force.

26:30 Applications had been accepted. So I told my, by then I was a journeyman and I was a fitter, and I wanted to join the air force, so some six months after I got an answer to them, 'Well, we'll check your medical records and if they're OK we'll accept you. But first you've got to pass a Trades test', down in Victoria Barracks in Sydney so a lot of apprentices

27:00 were going to the railway, I think they gave railway a little bit of preference, because outside industries might send their blokes to Tech for a couple of nights, then they didn't go, but it was compulsory for us, and three times a year we'd go down to Sydney, down to Leckie Street, where they built the Entertainment Centre, I think. They had a workshop there for all their apprentices, and you'd spend your time there, for two weeks three times a year,

27:30 doing your turning, machining, everything, which was much better than the poor blokes going through Tech College. Sometimes you'd have a job half finished when his time was to knock off. Next time he started, next week he went in, half his time setting up the bloody lathe again. We could go right through, finish the job. We even had to go to Tech, drawing and mathematics down there, heat treatment of metals, so it was pretty good

28:00 and one funny instance. I was about the only one going to tech doing heat treatment of metals, and I'd get, they gave you a little form to be signed, and the last day down in Leckie Street, the boss there, Ashton, called everybody up, and he said, 'Something queer going on here'. He said, 'McLean's got a signature doesn't agree with all the rest of you'. The fact that all the rest left me for ruddy dead, his wasn't a good copy.

28:30 So I didn't say a thing, but he must have checked up because I never heard any more about it. Because I was the only bloke that went on this particular job.

So you passed your Trade Test quite successfully?

Oh, yes, it was a pretty hard one. A tricky one. They gave you a piece of doubled up plate, and they gave you a figure, kind of rectangular, but the figures weren't, they were 75 degrees and 86 degrees

29:00 and the first job you had to do was flatten it, get it nice and true and then file it one edge so you could work off things and mark it out, and each time you finished one side, go and check it and make sure it was right, and they were watching you all the time. And a lot of blokes would measure, for instance when you had to drill some holes in it, they would measure with a rule, but I used, I put mine on the table,

29:30 what the devil did they call the table? Marking off table, I think it was. And I'd use a proper gauge and measure, put it on the height like that. Well, that's what they wanted you to do. Things were available there, you were supposed to use all the tools. And when it was finished, they put it into a master gauge and two pins had to drop right through. So that went all right. That was good.

30:00 **So amongst those first lot of lads that doing the test, were most of them from the railways, or what sort of industries were they from?**

Oh, they came from everywhere, but a lot of dockyards boys, too, but most of the mates I had, I didn't know it at the time that they were all railway lads, but I'd say 50 percent came from the railway. In our group, anyway.

30:30 **And how did you hear of your successful application?**

Oh, they sent us a letter to say I had it, and then of course after I got through the Trades Test they said, 'Well, you've got a partial denture, make sure that's OK before you come in'. So I had to go and have a tooth filled up. I sent that back, and they said, 'Right', so they sent a railway pass and about 29 of us met at Victoria Barracks, where we were all sworn in.

Victoria Barracks in Melbourne?

31:00 Yep.

So you caught the train from your home town?

Newcastle, yes.

Newcastle. Where were you parents at that stage?

In Newcastle.

They were there as well. Were they proud to see you heading off?

Oh, yes. Good. Dad was quite proud. He'd been a policeman and I had a brother next to me, just older. He'd been mad on the artillery, he was a Warrant Officer in the CMF, and he was a turner, Fitter and Turner,

31:30 and of course when the war came he was working at Rylands and he expected to be called up. Wouldn't even look at him. 'You're in a protected industry'. Shook him up a bit, and I had an elder brother, he was in another industry, and a younger brother in industry, they were all in industry, Goninan's and places like that. All doing necessary work for the military.

So tell me about you first impressions of Victoria Barracks in Melbourne?

32:00 A ruddy big place, I mean, security too. I happened to see these young blokes, must have been Victorians, wandering over a certain place, I just followed them. But those days I think as I told you

before, Victoria Barracks was the only administrative place. Nothing in Sydney, nothing in other towns, so everybody who joined in '36 or up to the time war started, all had Victorian numbers.

32:30 **And what did you early training involve?**

The day we joined up we went out to Laverton, we got out there about two o'clock they had a meal ready for us, but as we walked to the mess house, I think there were about 29 of us, 30, all these voices doing PT [physical training], 'You'll be sorry. You'll be sorry'. A couple of months after we're doing the same thing when they came in,

33:00 'You'll be sorry'. But I was never sorry, because it was such a new thing and it was going to be so exciting. Everybody was so keen to be in it, it wasn't another job like it is today, and after we got settled in for a couple of days, we all started courses. They picked out what you'd be. I mean, some of my mates were airframe fitters. They worked on airframes only. I was on engines.

33:30 And I said to the engine bloke, 'How come I got engines'. I wanted engines and he said, 'Oh, you were too tall to get stuck into an airframe. You'd get lost.' So I became an engine fitter.

What were the major types of airplane they were flying at Laverton?

Laverton was flying, I was posted to one squadron, funny thing, at the end of the course. I was attached to 2AD [Aircraft Depot], so instead of going to 1 Squadron,

34:00 they were still my bosses, I went up to 2AD where they were working on Wapiti engines and Wapiti aircraft are big lumbering two-seater things, gunner on the back. They used to do a lot of photography work, photographing Australia, they'd be away for weeks on end with one fitter and one pilot. Hawker Demon had been in for a couple of years, four years, they were a war-like plane, Kestrel engine.

34:30 They put big exhibitions on for civilians once a year around places and a favourite thing was to get to about 25, 35 000 feet and put the nose down, scream like bloody mad and pull out just above the crowd. It was ruddy deafening but it was spectacular.

So would you go on these flights with the Wapitis? You said there was a fitter and a pilot. Would you go?

35:00 Yes, that was in a squadron. I was in 1AD, overhauling engines. Which suited me. Quite good. Then I started to scream about, I wanted to get back to Richmond. Because I was going to be married in '36 and I got my call up and I got my call up and, of course, I couldn't get married down in ruddy Melbourne, so we put it off for twelve months. And all the young blokes coming off courses after us, were all getting to Sydney, wherever they wanted to go.

35:30 and we were a bit older than them, and some of the blokes were married with kids. However, I went back to one squadron and I had a Gypsy Moth to look after, and on the Saturday, I'd take my turn in servicing a Bristol Bulldog, very aggressive little bi-plane in the First World War and it used to do a weather flight every morning. Of course, it did Saturday morning too. He'd go up, a big

36:00 big thermometer on the struts of his main plane, and he'd come in and ring into town to tell them what the temperature was, so the meteorological people could work out what we were going to do for the next couple of days.

What did you thing of the Gypsy Moth engines? Were they good to work on?

Yes. Easy. Simple. Very good.

And the Bulldogs? Those engines?

The Bulldogs were a radial engine. And radial engines, they were always a bit of a trap because being radial

36:30 means when they're not running the oil tends to congregate in the bottom of the engine which is where all the cylinders are. So you'd usually, those days, you'd take a plug out and pull the, make sure the oil came out before they started them up. And they were right, and unfortunately, the temperature was taken off number one cylinder, which was the hottest one.

37:00 If number one was OK, all the rest had to be OK. So of course, it was vertical. Got less oil going up to it. I'll tell you a story about that after. Remind me. And Hawker Demons were an in-line engine, Vee, Rolls Royce, very popular. They were there for years. In fact, when Germany made the 109 [Messerschmitt 109 fighter], in '36,

37:30 they put the most powerful engine of its time into it, and it was a Kestrel. Later they did their own Benzley engines and made them a bit advanced to ours. They were all fuel injected. But the Kestrel had a great name.

Were you still under quite close instruction at that time from you senior . . .?

No, we'd finished then.

Were you given quite a lot of guidance from the senior NCOs [non commissioned officers] or

the senior mechanics?

38:00 Yes, yeah. They would explain and come over and watch what you did. Once you had done it once, you were right, but you also had an airframe fitter. And I had to go to a lecture or something, and I was about to put the prop on the engine, and he put the prop on and when I came back I said, 'Have you checked the prop for the valve cutting in, for starting up'. He said 'No'. So I showed him. You were supposed to pull the prop over. When it got to about one o'clock, you gave it

38:30 a full, and stepped back, and just after you gave a full push it released, in the carby, beg pardon, in the magneto, it released a little thing and it spun quickly and made a good spark and she'd start. Well, he had it over this way, you see (points to ten o'clock) which means he'd get bloody chopped to pieces. That was one of the main things when putting a prop on, so that you got it so

39:00 the impulse starter came in just after you finished pulling it down.

So was it quite dangerous work, in the late '30s, working on those sort of engines?

Yep. But no one got hurt, amazingly. With Wapiti, of course, they were big and high up. They used to put a rope around the engine. And for the Merlin, the Kestrel engine on the Hawker Demons, they had what they called the Huck starter. They'd back a truck in with a starter on it, rev it up,

39:30 and this thing used to turn the engine over. And of course, when the engine turned over, it over-rid this sort of thing, and they just drove it away. A bit like a car in the old days with a starting handle. Once it started and kicked away, your handle was pushed out of the road.

Tape 2

00:30 **Ken, I wanted to ask you a bit about the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] at that stage. Before the war broke out it was a very small organisation, wasn't it?**

I suppose there would be about 1800, 1900, just before the war. My number was 2089, and that included going back to World War I. In fact we took one bloke away with us when we went to the Middle East,

01:00 old Bofor Bill, he was 56. His number was 158, I think.

And a lot of the equipment was obsolete, wasn't it, or certainly very old that you were using?

They were getting new aircraft, well, I joined up '36. Yes. They were flat out maintaining what they had, but they had Hawker Demons, not enough to give everybody twelve. I think the

01:30 3 Squadron and 1 Squadron each had six, with more coming all the time, then they started to lose the Wapitis a bit but they had to rejuvenate them, and they sent a crowd away to America to find an aircraft that would be suitable as a trainer and use in the war, you see. And they came back with the NA33. Which was the forerunner of the Wirraway.

02:00 The Wirraway was almost an exact copy of it. And we always thought the Wirraway was too ruddy slow for a fighter. Yet, when we first started the war we had Wirraway Fighters, but they soon got over that. But 5 Squadron had Seagulls, five. It was a flying boat with a pusher prop. Much the same as the Walrus in the RAF [Royal Air Force].

02:30 **And I think you mentioned earlier, you didn't even have a uniform for quite a while, is that right?**

No, I was too long and skinny, I think, and they used to wear leggings. In town for the Parliament House opening, they'd wear their solid leather leggings, a little cap and a tight uniform. They looked pretty good, you know. The pants were kind of belled out, you'd see the old photos, of the old days,

03:00 that was what the air force uniform was. So I was always by special measurement. Some day you'd get a set made, but they were talking about then of cutting that one out, so I knew I'd have no uniform till a new one came out. So it was good one way because you didn't go on any of these parades in town, and when the Chief of the aircraft came round on his yearly visit, he'd inspect the kit of every airman on the place.

03:30 You had to lay you kit out in a certain way and he could look down and spot, 'What's wrong with that? Something's missing". And 'Oh, yes, Sir, so and so'. 'Get it!' and of course when he came to me he said, 'I suppose you're special regiment?' 'Yes, sir'. 'You were a special regiment last year'. 'Yes, sir'. But one of the old hands there, Milgate, he was a corporal. He'd been in for years. He came round this particular time,

04:00 The Chief of the Air staff said, 'Milgate, where's your jumper?', they issued blue jumpers. He said, 'Sir, this is what's left of it'. He gave him a bottle with a couple of silverfish in it, and a wee piece of wool. He said, 'You get your jumper by the morning. I want to see it'. There's some funny people in the air force.

In those early days when you signed up, ’36, ’37, what was the relationship like with the army and the navy?

04:30 Yep, whenever we met up, the only big competition we had were the combined sports once a year. And each station would have, each, like Richmond had its own sports meetings and from that they’d pick their best to compete in the inter-service sports. That was quite a good thing. Kept everybody going,

05:00 and I suppose, I can’t remember it being on after the war, maybe not. I don’t know. Lots of funny things happened.

Of course, later, once you joined the war you were, the air force was working in support of the navy and, particularly, the army when you were in the desert. Did you train under those sort of conditions with that

05:30 **communication between the services?**

That was on all the time, but things took a bit of a change when [Neville] Chamberlain [Prime Minister of Britain] came back [from Munich, a 1938 meeting with Adolph Hitler intended to stop German aggression] waving that little piece of paper, ‘Peace in Our Time’. The next day we started twelve hour shifts, seven days a week, with four days a month off. And that went right through till the day war was declared. And the next day we started eight till five. All that eight, or ten or twelve months beforehand, we were doing

06:00 a bloody lot of overtime. Got nothing for it.

Tell me about the announcement of war. Where were you? How did you respond?

Well, we all had a pretty good idea it was coming, you know, the last six months. And I think the services thought, well, we’ve got a lot of engines backlog. And we were working on engines all the time, getting them turned out. And they said on the air that there would be a special announcement by

06:30 the [Australian] Prime Minister [Robert Menzies] that evening, and of course, he was sorry to announce but Great Britain were now at war with Germany, and we were at war also. That was it. Bingo.

So you weren’t surprised to hear the news?

No, we all expected it. Yes. We didn’t know what form it would take. Just how much they had, nobody knew.

07:00 **Were you concerned about having to become involved yourself in the war?**

No, I expected it, thought after all, we’re a defence force, and that’s what we’re supposed to be doing, looking after Australia, the shores of Australia, etc. Same with the Garrison Artillery, you’d man the guns and that’s where you’d be during the war.

You had a new wife at that stage. You’d just got married.

’37 we got married.

Was she concerned?

07:30 No, I think she had pretty much faith in things, too, she was concerned when I was posted away because we mucked around a bit. Most stations made their own hours in which to fly. For instance, I started off going to, after two years at Richmond, after the war was declared, I was posted down to No 1 Engineering School Ascot Vale

08:00 Race Course, Showground, and I was a sergeant when I went there. I wasn’t there long, I was made a Flight Sergeant. And all the instructors, there must have been thirty, were all pre-war boys, you know, and I enjoyed it. They took about a month for a class, six weeks, you’d have them for a month or six weeks, going right through the engine, pulling it to pieces and then they’d move onto,

08:30 a most important thing, before they could be passed out from the course, they had to swing a prop. So even a bloke going to be WOD [Warrant Officer Discipline], a Disciplinary bloke, he had to swing a prop too. Clerk, he had to swing a prop [propeller], which was a good thing. So the air force sort of said, all airmen, irrespective, must learn to swing an airscrew.

09:00 And that happened. Remind me later, I’ll tell you what happened that saved us a lot of trouble. And, I’ve lost my train of thought. What question did you ask me again?

Well, whether your wife was concerned, I think, was where we started.

09:30 **But you were down at Ascot Vale where you were working as an instructor.**

Yes, she was living down there. We got a house down there eventually, and she came down, but she was an air force wife, and air force wives, like army wives, they up-anchored every time their husbands would move, kids and the ruddy lot, and they became a part of the air force really.

Did you have any children at that stage?

No, not when I was at Ascot Vale and Melbourne.

10:00 I'd been at Ascot Vale I suppose, fourteen months, fifteen months, and I was posted to Parkes with No 2 WAGS [Wireless Air Gunner School]. That's where they were operating from. They were three DC2s the forerunner to the Dakota, DC3 [types of aircraft]. And they were fitted up as classrooms, and they had wireless air gunners doing a course there. But mostly radio people and,

10:30 being so hot at Parkes we used to start work at 4:30, get the engines serviced and at 6 o'clock they'd start off before it got too hot and they'd return around about 2:30 and we'd service them again, and by 2:30 or 3:00 we'd be in the swimming pool at Parkes. But sometimes the pilot would, when they were away, would land at a place and get back at 4.30.

11:00 Kind of screwed things up a bit, but we had all our air crew, pilots and co-pilots, had been selected from civilians. They seconded them, brought them in. But they soon got into the way of air force procedure, but they were a little bit happy being civilians, I think. And one bloke, Irish Moss they used to call him,

11:30 he never failed. These air craft had been with Eastern Airlines, I don't know what the air frames had up, but the engines had ten thousand hours up. Been overhauled that many times, you know, once it's overhauled its brand new again, really. All the worn parts are replaced, new cylinders, etc, and some engines get a bit tight, they haven't been run enough. And as I told you,

12:00 the thermocouples, the temperature is taken off the vertical one which is the hottest cylinder. And he'd taxi out there and he'd shut down, and a great moan would go up. The other bloke would take off. He might be shut off for ten or fifteen minutes, then he'd go off. Come back, he was only two degrees over his temperature, but he wouldn't go. So this went on for a couple of months, and everybody was getting fed up. So I had a look at the drawing and I saw it had,

12:30 I think it had four scraper rings, so we took, after flying for the day the station was closed down practically, there was a sergeant and a corporal and myself, and we pulled off number one cylinder, turned one of the oil rings upside down, so instead of scraping the oil out of the cylinder which is more essential than it was to scrap it away, and we put it back together again, ran it, it was good. But we didn't know how it would go by the time he'd taxied out with his load, you see.

13:00 We didn't tell anybody. He taxied out and went straight off. And everybody went, 'What happened!', you know. Hadn't a clue. When he landed he was furious. 'I know you did something! You've changed the thermocouple to a lower one!' I said to Les, put a gantry up so he can have a look. They took the cowling off and he was amazed to find it on number one cylinder, but it made just enough difference for him to take off.

13:30 So, three months after, we turned it back again. Nobody ever knew. We never told anybody.

What was the relationship like with the pilots?

Excellent. The war changed them completely. I was looking at a picture of some of the pilots we had in 1 Squadron. There's some ruddy great blokes there, mixed with them. And others were prima donnas, oh dear oh dear.

14:00 They thought they were the ruddy world, and they were pilot officers.

And what changed with the war?

So many pilots coming in. All walks of life, you know. They were two bob a dozen.

Prior to the war, was it more upper class, better educated person?

Oh, they were pretty well educated, but apart from that they stuck very much to themselves. There weren't that many of them.

14:30 I think 1 Squadron only had about eight or ten.

So there was a prestige or a status before the war, and then as more pilots came in, there wasn't such a privilege or such a status.

Oh, no. It must have been the greatest thing that ever happened to these blokes. They probably thought the good days have gone. They had batmen, they had every ruddy thing. That all went by the board.

And did the pilots take much of an interest in the work that you were doing on their engines?

A lot did, especially in the desert.

15:00 The pilots there were sergeants and flight sergeants and warrant officers and a couple of commissioned people, but, they'd be there when the aircraft was being stripped down, or doing an inspection, they'd be there watching it. They loved their aircraft and the boys that serviced their aircraft would taxi, usually they took it in turns to taxi over. Sitting on the main plane, right on the end so he could guide him, till he got the runway,

15:30 and they'd both sit underneath, usually with a blanket handy, because a sandstorm would usually just

come out of the ruddy blue. The pilot would close his cockpit, they'd be sitting there ready to go off, the blokes'd be huddled like wogs, under the main frame with a blanket over them. And they'd get a job, and as soon as they'd get a bit of a break in the weather, twelve would take off in line. The first one to move off, by the time the last one got off, was like an echelon then,

16:00 and all the dirt was coming back over the troops. But, no, the feeling was great, and if you lost a pilot, well, you'd swear you'd lost his brother, or something. Everybody mourned. Of course, some pilots were better than others. Some mixed and some didn't mix. Of course, the ones that didn't mix, well, they were a different kettle of fish. One happened to be a permanent airman, permanent pilot, he was in before the war, and but he was the only one,

16:30 he just didn't mix at all.

You said that some of the pilots took an interest in the work of the ground crew. Did you similarly take an interest in the other areas that went into the flying. Whether that be the work of the pilots or the work of the air gunners. Did you take pick up things along the way, did you have an interest in the other fields?

Oh, yes, yeah. Actually the armourers all came, anything under the aircraft came under me.

17:00 Bobby Gibbes had the theory, 'I'll look after the pilots, you look after the ground staff'. As long as you give me aircraft, that's all he wanted. Give him aircraft.

That was once you were an Engineer Officer.

Yes.

We were back at, just to jump back into the chronological order of the story, at the WAGS school, out at Parkes, where did you move from there?

From WAGS . . .

Did you receive your posting?

Yes, actually WAGS was interesting.

17:30 I think we lost one of the first aircraft of the war from WAGS. One weekend, my weekend off in the month. (UNCLEAR) came and looked me up and he said, 'We've got to fly two air craft out in two days' time, fully camouflaged'. So I rounded up the boys and we started to camouflage the aircraft. Took all the seats out, and they choofed off somewhere to get a load of wireless gear and electronic stuff to take up, somewhere in Indonesia, Waingapu, I think, where the RAF were using it.

18:00 But the Japs were all around them, and one got shot down. You might have known, Ben Fragg, the motorbike rider, he was a second dicky. Noel Webster was the first pilot. Both had been seconded. Mason was a fitter and Pickering was the wireless operator. Well, they all got out of the plane,

18:30 and good old Mason, he was trying to keep his kit of tools up. They told him, 'Let it go. We'll be lucky to survive'. Yes, they were in the water twenty four hours before they were picked up. A couple of times they fired a revolved under the water to scare a shark away. But they came back, and it wasn't long after that that I was posted away.

Sorry, how did you camouflage the aircraft?

Well, browny and green colours.

19:00 Ours were just plain aluminium before.

These are the DC2s?

Yes, they looked good, but no matter how we polished them up, you could still see Eastern Airways on the top. It was funny that the posting, we didn't have any family, we moved our furniture to Parkes. It was a good station. They used to call it the Country Club.

19:30 But, there was navigation school there. It was good flying there, but all very early. And then we took our holidays, annual holidays, just after Christmas, and I was a Warrant Officer then, and two days off we were, got a ruddy telegram, 'Report to base at once'. Ruddy hell, ruddy posting. And my wife and I said we'd have ten years freedom before we started a family.

20:00 Well, we'd started a family. Eve was two months pregnant and now I get a ruddy overseas posting. So I rang him up and he said, 'I'm not supposed to tell you, but you're going to 3 Squadron'. Fair enough. So I went down there and got cleared and went down to embarkation depot, which was Melbourne, the one that we went to, where the Engineering School is, a part of that, and we waited there for a month

20:30 and the CO [commanding officer] said that he just had word from the Middle East and it said that air craft crew were a bit slow getting along, walking along in the desert and they were getting captured. And I thought, 'That's bloody funny, I've never heard this before'. So he said, 'toughen them up a bit. Take them for a hike. Route march'. So on with steel huts, bloody masks, the ruddy works. I took them for about seven miles. Coming back, some caught the tram back, others hailed a taxi,

21:00 actually only six of us arrived back, marched. Some dropped off for a pub. So I though all right. So the CO was waiting to meet me. He said, 'What happened?' I said, 'I took them for a route march'. 'The bloody hospital's full of them'. I said, 'Well, that's what you wanted'. Blisters galore. However, the thing was that when we got over to the Middle East, all the Aussie squadrons in that particular wing,

21:30 they all had double the number of trucks they should have had. They pinched them. They pulled a swifty [trick], they'd be left beside the way and they tow them back and fix them up. We'd have a normal size squadron. It was when the Poms [English] sent their big round to count our ruddy transport. Half of them would take off into the blue you know, come back at the end of the day. But no one walked anywhere. You didn't need to.

22:00 Anyway the camp was too far away from the planes.

So you were in Melbourne for a month. You knew you were on your way to 3 Squadron.

We had a couple of months there. There was no boats available. So they sent us all directions. I came to Richmond with a couple of blokes. And they said, 'Oh, good. We'll have you digging slit trenches'. I said, 'No you ruddy won't'. We just dug them down near Victoria Barracks. All our blokes every ruddy day digging slit trenches.

22:30 So I went and the engineer Officer, who had been in Parkes. He'd been stationed in Engineering. We got on very well. And he was there, and I went over to see him and I said, 'How are you down with people at Bradfield Park?' Bradfield Park had planes coming in, Kittyhawks. They had Kittyhawks, so he said, 'OK'. So he rang up his mate down there, so I used to take these blokes in every morning,

23:00 we'd have a good look over the planes. The boys were interested in the maintenance of them. But we didn't get much, I only had it a week. Eve had come down. She was living in a friend's house at Richmond, just got a lot of groceries in. And I used to go from Richmond, I didn't report to the base. I went straight down into Frankston, Bradfield Park and then down to Bankstown, but what happened was we got down there and the boys hadn't turned up.

23:30 And I thought, 'Oh, gosh. Come into ruddy town and they're all out there'. So I went back to the camp and I struck one of them and he said, 'We're getting our clearances. We're leaving Sydney tonight'. So I had to rush around and get mine, and tell Eve, ring her up. She didn't mind me leaving fast, but leaving there – she was in tears that time. So I got into town and all the boys were there and we choofed off and we went to Adelaide. And we're there, must have been there three weeks or a month,

24:00 and we're on a boat that only had one engine in it. We knew it couldn't go anywhere, and I think it was Easter eve, and it was about the 28th March or somewhere there and one of them said, 'Can we go up town?' and I said, 'Yes, I might go up myself, Easter eve.' Went up there, up town, and about ten o'clock at night we ran into some of the crew of the Eastern Prince, one we were on.

24:30 'Oh,' he said, 'All your blokes are transferred to the Dilwarra'. The army had just come in that day, or the day before, returning from the Middle East, 7th Divvy on them, so they had plenty of boats, and this one they turned around quickly, and our blokes had gone onto it. So we went to Eastern Prince first, make sure nothing left, and we were on board by midnight. But it didn't sail until eight in the morning anyway. But bloody hell, could have missed the war.

25:00 **A lot of waiting around in those two times.**

Yes, and I was a Warrant Officer, and a commission came through the day before I went, but being on the boat it was chasing me around and didn't get to me. But I was glad I went across as an airman, because I knew who the good blokes were, and who the bad drunks were, who the villains were and the rogues, you know, and they were pretty tough bunch, especially the transport drivers.

25:30 They were big husky fellows, lots of them were, but they knew their own mind, but they'd do anything for you. The two worst blokes I had as far as drunks, one a sergeant and the other an airman. But, however, they didn't get drunk that often, but when they did they were ruddy lousy.

Did you apply for a commission or were you nominated? Were you aware that that was in motion?

Yes, when you got to Warrant Officer

26:00 they brought in special duties, you applied for that and do a course. And all these blokes had come in, adjutant sitting outside, they'd do six weeks and they'd be pilot officers and running the air force. Six weeks! So I got on very well, we had a lot going with us, but the commission didn't come through until I got to Tewfik, and there all the hierarchy were there, welcoming us there, and they come over to me with my ruddy epaulets

26:30 and hat badge and said, 'You're a Flying Officer. The branch I was in, the Warrant Officers, miss, jump Pos [pilot officers]. and the POs came over and said, 'You're our boss now!" But it was good.

I just want to get it clear about your trip across. It was Easter of '43, or '42?

'42. March '42, and we were the first troop ship to leave without escort.

27:00 They all had escorts before. And we went down towards the South Pole for three days, a howling gale. Only three of us surfaced all of the time. They were lying over the place, sick as dogs.

You must have been very concerned about leaving Australia, given the events of February '42.

Well, that was a bit dicey, because they knew there was the old type Q ship, armoured freighter, the Germans getting around

27:30 because some had been sunk and I can't remember if it was before or after the Sydney was sunk, but anyway . . .

It was after.

Being a gunner, I was in charge of the gunners. I had a four inch gun on the back of the boat. Spotters. See we had spotters, four each side of the boat with binoculars, and they'd be looking at the horizon, looking, if they found an upturned box or something, had to notify the ruddy captain.

28:00 Anything like this. But we didn't, we had a couple of scares, it was raining, thought they saw something. Everybody would go to bed in his clothes, ready to get off. Nothing happened, and a couple of days after we heard there was somebody over near the South Africa coast. So we were headed for Mombassa, we thought we'd head towards Darwin.

28:30 Before we got to Darwin, we changed direction again. It took us thirty odd days to go from Perth, from Adelaide to Colombo. About a seven day trip, wandering all over the bloody ocean. Once we were, middle of the day, we were stuck in the ocean when an engine broke down. Sitting bloody ducks.

How many men did you have on board?

We had about 199, I think. About a squadron. A couple of clerks, whatnot. But mostly maintenance.

29:00 **Was it quite a challenge to keep them occupied and keep morale up on board?**

No, they were fantastic. We used to have sports in the afternoon, and boxing, and things like that. Keep them happy. A lot of Crown and Anchor. Especially the transport boys, they knew that.

And as a Senior Officer, sorry, as a Warrant Officer, you must have been an important link between the officers and the airmen.

Yes, and being a permo too, made a difference.

29:30 They had Warrant Officers in since me, but I was always the senior one, because I had been in since 1936. and they'd come and ask my advice. In fact, right through, all but one CO used to ask my advice on things before they did them. I'll tell you about that later when we get up to Italy. But these blokes were nice blokes. One was from Windsor here. And when they knew

30:00 I got my commission they were so ruddy happy. Then I became OC Troops on the train ride, and we'd get various reports from the Poms coming up and saying, 'Your people are throwing bottles out the window.' I said, 'I'll see to it.' Ha, see to it nothing, ruddy hell!

You stopped in Bombay, was your first stop?

Yes, we stopped at, got off at Tewfik. The funny thing. We got on at Tewfik. The train choofed up and got up as far as Alexandria, and we stopped, ruddy stopped and we waited ages and ages, Alexandria had been raided and we were sitting in a train, and I said, 'This is bloody crook. If they come and bomb the ruddy train, there's nowhere to go'. Way up in the, couldn't see what was outside. Well, the boys went for a walk and said, 'We've got no engine!' They took the engine away and hid it somewhere. Didn't want the engine bombed. Didn't matter about the troops in the ruddy train.

31:00 Any way, it came at first light and we choofed off and we stopped for breakfast along the line, and we got to the city of Nice around about eleven or twelve o'clock. That was where the base party were. The stores, main stores, were there. We always had stores with us, but that was where the main stores were. The Adjutant, sometimes the doctor, but there'd always be a base. Sometimes the Engineer Officer was there. And I thought, 'This is bloody silly, where are the aircraft'.

31:30 And they said 'Eighty, ninety miles up'. And I said, 'Well, that's where I want to be'. So my bloke I was taking over Buca Aveca. He had a glass house. A glass house used to be a car with all glass. Humber or some ruddy thing. And he said, 'I'll tell you a few things. He said if we stop on the way up, never park near the NAAFI [Navy, Army, Air Force Institute], saw every ruddy thing. Park a couple of hundred yards away.

32:00 He said, you'll find they get, during the night and on the job they disperse., but they come the ruddy NAAFI [Navy Army Air Force Institute], they all get into a big circle. They could wipe the bloody lot off with a couple of bombs. So he was good that way, and he was even better when I got up to Gambut, where all the planes were and all the bods. He had his tent up the ruddy boony,

32:30 that far away from the ruddy others, that I had to pick up the telephone wire to find my way up and back at night.

What was the position that you were filling, and was it different to what you expected to go to with receiving your commission?

I expected something, I guess, a few blokes had gone across with Number 3 Squadron initially. It was pretty hard living but it was good, and they said it's a good place for war,

33:00 despite the fact there's bloody sand, and you eat sand. No one can get hurt really, apart from them. Very few wogs were injured.

What was the position that you came into at Number 3 Squadron?

Engineer Officer.

Did you know that, though, before you received your commission?

No, I thought I was going to be Warrant Officer Engineer. But they all knew I was coming in as and Engineer Officer, because I'd been commissioned, and all the bods were going back home.

33:30 He'd been there nine months, but most of them had done their twelve months. We came here, and they were going to stay with us for a fortnight and teach us things, you know, little things to watch out, and then they were choofing off.

Did you feel quite capable of taking on that role? Did you feel confident?

Yes, yes. Warrant Officer Engineer at Parkes. He didn't have enough engineer officers to go around. He was really the Engineer Officer. But I couldn't drive, and they said that's your vehicle over there.

34:00 And they had a Ford, kind of a pickup, a nice car. So is said, I had a driver there, 'Come and teach me to drive', and so driving up to the camp. And he said, 'All you've got to do is keep your foot off the clutch when you're running'. He said, 'Most people keep putting the clutch on'. He said, 'It's no good. You'll wear it out'. I learnt on the way up and that was it,

34:30 so I got up there and the Adjutant was up there, and met the CO and the pilots. They were pretty busy, all the erks [ground crew] were up servicing the aircraft. So as soon as we ate and got a tent, I was in with Buck, way up in the boony [the bush] and we had one clerk, there, and a slit trench. I made sure there was a slit trench there and, blow me down, that night, they'd never been done over properly. But the bloody stoogies [enemy] came over,

35:00 a new moon, and they did the ruddy camp over. Well we all ran for the thing. I was last one there. I was right on top of the ruddy slit trench, my backside stuck up in the air. Next day I dug another two feet. But suddenly all these blokes were going home. They clamoured to go home. After one day they all choofed [ran away] off, down to catch the boat home. So I thought, 'Well this is better than having them all hanging around',

35:30 and Buck, they'd all gone. So we settled down and did the job and we did OK.

So, were your squadron, you sailed over with, was a direct replacement. There was no personnel left?

Oh, a couple there, one or two had been sick and came over later and, like guards, they didn't have guards, but they still sent guards from Australia, and we used to ask them, 'Do you want remusters [given a different job], or something.' Some would be clerks, I got Flight Mechanics out of them

36:00 seeing as they weren't sent away.

Were you impressed with the way things were operating and the way they were set up at Gambut?

No, what I didn't like, the first thing that hit me, was the base party was sixty or seventy mile away and you've got all these aircraft shut up. The coppersmith and all his big cronies were back at base.

36:30 The workshop was back at base. Sixty mile away. And to send the ruddy aircraft out, used to sometimes spend a ruddy day on it to get it fixed, well, if you had all your bods there, it could have been repaired on site. And I was bitching to my CO, Bobby Gibbes on the way, this is bloody silly, and he could see that too a bit, and all the other Engineer Officers are all screaming, so it didn't come any surprise really that after being at

37:00 Amariya for a while, the base there, we got chased back there in June, October, we left again when Alamein went. They cut the base party out, because the base party, they weren't very happy, all coming up to the front line. When we got down, the base had gone on again somewhere. So we had all our personnel up at the front all the time, and . .

37:30 **Had they been kept separately, originally, before you got there, had they been kept separately originally so if they were attacked they weren't . . .**

Oh, no. That had noting to do with it. It was more, well there was not aircraft bombing. You never knew when you were going to cut one of the lines over or something. But down there they didn't seem to see aircraft. It was novel.

So your CO Bobby Gibbes, introduced the base camp being moved up . .

No, I think he was only one.

38:00 They all did it, and they changed their policy. They allowed us to bring all our stuff up and then they formed a new flight, well away from the base altogether. Miles away. Where pilots, if they looked a bit slack or something, they'd send them there for a flying course again. Rejuvenate them in Kitties [Kittyhawks]. That worked out very well. Certainly worked out better for the maintenance,

38:30 because whatever was packed out could be done in leisure. I only ever went back to base squadron once, and that was when they were down at Nina [Benina]. And I went down there, only because I was going to a Combined Operations course. And there they were playing ruddy cricket. Good on them. Nothing there to do. And our blokes up the top, flat out, working half the night by torchlight, sometimes.

39:00 You couldn't have much of a light because Gerry was always around. On the ball all the time, so when we got to Orloff there, we already had D flight and C Flight, they also had a mobile party. Well, I kept that going and I picked the pick of the tradesmen and I called that Mobile Workshop and I had it stay close to me all the time. And as soon as Alamein started, and we had them on the retreat,

39:30 the army moved back and with that all the squadrons had almost half their maintenance people waiting to service the air craft. And say, a hundred and fifty miles away when a 'drome was uncovered, the aircraft would fly up and our blokes would be there to meet them and service them straight away. They were on the job all the time. Now, the party that stayed behind to see them off, plus the workshop party, as soon as the planes went

40:00 my workshop party would go up too, through the boondy, not the main road, then the other party, left behind, would go up to the army, miss the other bods. And that's how it went all the way through. We leap frogged right up. Very seldom, even Christmas day we weren't together. We had a crowd of seventy eight, something, ahead sixty miles

And you found that that system was quite efficient?

Oh, it was fantastic.

40:30 The aircraft didn't have to wait for the convoys to get up. People were already there, and I hadn't had much leave and he said, the CO said to me when we got up to Tripoli, past Tripoli, he said, 'Why don't you take a few of your cobbers down and have a couple of days in the hotel down there?' So I took the Armament Officer and the Intelligence Officer. We drove down at ruddy night, and all you have is a slit light pointing at the ground.

41:00 Just a dim one on the back because Jerry is looking for you all the time. So we got down there and the hotel was lovely, but at night time you couldn't go to sleep. They were bombing the bloody harbour all the time, and this was on the harbour. So we went back to camp the next day. It was safer. No good.

Tape 3

00:30 **Ken, I was wondering if you could explain how 3 Squadron fitted into the flight, into your particular flight. Were there other squadrons from other countries or other Australian squadrons that No 3 was working with?**

No, 3 Squadron worked with 450 Squadron which was a composite squadron. They had odd bods, Poms and whatnot there. Same with the aircrew, a bit mixed up but it had been formed in Australia. But 3 Squadron RAAF

01:00 were totally Australian, everybody was, well, might have been Poms, but they had been here all their lives, so they were considered Australian. They were in the air force as Australians. Couple of them around,

And was there a South African Squadron?

Yes, 5 SAF were there, they were fighter squadrons. And two Pommy squadrons. And one Yank squadron at Amariya. They were on loan, well, not on loan.

01:30 They were there for experience. They certainly needed it because, their Engineer Officer came and said, 'Would you come and talk to our pilots?' And at that time we were getting fifty hours out of an engine then the sand had worn it out, had to toss it out. The bearings would go. And he said,

02:00 'We've used up all out spare engines, we've only been here four or five months'. So I went down and all the pilots were in a room, in a tent, and I introduced myself and I said, 'What do you do when you get in the cockpit and you're about ready to go off?' They all said, 'We put our foot on the throttle and push it as far as it will go'. Well, all our aircraft, about quarter of an inch away from the end of its treadle,

02:30 was a wire. And that was the maximum boost you could use. You could get more boost but you'd muck the engine up. So they were mucking their engines up practically every time they took off. And they were getting 26 and 27 hours and out the engine came. But we were staying under it, you see. A couple of times in operations, the blokes used it. You see, the Kittyhawk was a lumbering old aircraft compared to a 109.

03:00 The 109 was a bit like a Spitfire, dainty. A Spitfire was dainty compared to a 109. It was a bit, Bobby Gibbes flew it and said it was lovely to handle. They could, a Kittyhawk, the only thing it could do, it could out-dive a 109. It couldn't out-climb it, couldn't out-manoeuvre it. It would just run rings around it. If they get caught up with a couple on their tail,

03:30 one bloke went through the gate first and he would crash-land at 375 mile an hour. But he was OK. It was made with a good frame, and he lived to tell the story. If he'd tried, if he hadn't gone through it, he might have been shot down. The thing is on two occasions when people go through the gate, and because then they, Avocare made it cleaner, it had just been introduced and the hours went up to,

04:00 in the desert, to 132 hours. I had one 132 hours, and I put it in the logbook, and it went down, it had performed very well.

I think what you were explaining was that you introduced air filters or air cleaners into the engines and that boosted considerably the number of hours you were getting out of them. How were they developed and what did you use to filter the air?

04:30 Well, we used all kind of stuff, but you couldn't keep sand out. My predecessor and a team of bods had developed an air cleaner suitable for a Kittyhawk, and it was being built in and incorporated in the Kittys when they came across from the States. So once we got them, our hours shot up, well, I had the record at the time. I didn't know. They invited me

05:00 down to the Delta area in the caves there, where they were overhauling them, and I went down for three days, because what made them happy was, ours did 127 hours with one they had overhauled. So I was the curly haired boy. Went down had a look through the place. Nearly all wogs working there, but they churned the engines out.

Did you say Delta caves?

Yes, there was a cave down in the Delta area.

05:30 **And they were being used as hangars were they?**

Yes, all the workshops were inside the caves.

Did you say Italians were working on them?

No, Gyppos.

Egyptians? OK.

Yes, they did a good job, too.

They were just citizens that were being employed.

Yes, and the RAF were supervising them.

Would they have had any previous mechanical experience?

06:00 I think most countries have got sections of bods that can do any ruddy thing. Once they're shown, you know. They specialise. One bloke would be probably just doing cylinders. Another bloke would be just doing crankshafts, or a couple on each. And once the work was finished it would be checked.

What were the air cleaners you were talking about. What physically were they?

06:30 They just wrapped around the air intake, so that any air that went in past the front had been cleaned.

Sand was small enough to get through?

No, it wouldn't.

Sand wouldn't get through?

No, what got through was very minute.

And when you referred to breaking the gate, was that that last quarter inch you spoke about on the Australian planes, held their throttles back, but the Americans were pushing that through every time they took off?

Yes, Put their foot on and pushed right through to the end. I don't think they had a gate on it.

07:00 It needed it though. But everybody else observed it. You could over-boost your engine but if it saved your live, well, fair enough.

So what was you opinion of the American air force?

Well, they certainly ate well. The day I went over there, we even had ice cream. But they were nice blokes,

07:30 well, the Engineering side were, very nice.

And what about the Poms. How was it working with them in the Flight?

Quite good. A bit of rivalry sometimes, but the blokes I met, mostly the Engineering side, were good. A couple of hard COs. One bloke, after we were well up on the job,

08:00 Mustangs started to make their appearance. And who gets them? The ruddy Poms. And they, we needed some Kittyhawks badly. We could never get enough serviceable aircraft to say, 'I've got sixty or eighty aircraft'. Always stuck. You would just about get them, and boom boom, you lost some. And we actually dwelt on it. The Wing Engineer rang up and said

08:30 "There are five new aircraft coming in today. Yours will be the fourth." Well, we were at Marble Arch at the time, we'd had a doing. And the Poms got the first couple, and I think 450 got the next one, and one more came in and, one of the boys said, 'That's our clean skin'. So they got this clean skin and towed it over. It had no markings on, just camouflage.

09:00 The logbooks were there, so, they had just put it, it was for Rex Bailey's aircraft, F, they had just put CDF on it and they wanted someone to go and tee up Rex to come and fly it, because it was essential that he did fly, because he had been shot down a couple days before and rescued by Bobby. I'll tell you that story after. And he came down, and they said,

09:30 'One more job to do'. They had to reverse the pitch control, prop, because the Yanks when they come they have it pulling back and we push it forward, vice versa. He said, 'Oh, there's a job coming up. I want to go on it'. He wanted to get another job over quick as he could, you see, so they could make sure he was OK. And he said, 'I'll take it as it is'. All right. He took off and finished the job OK, he was happy as Larry.

10:00 But before the blokes could fix up the ruddy pitch control, there was another job on. Despite the fact they told the bloke what to do, he took off. And I was over at RSU [Repair and Service Unit] because the area, the CO's aircraft had been damaged when he brought this particular Rex Bailey back. And I could hear this ruddy aircraft making a funny noise. He said, 'What was that?' I said,

10:30 'That's one of our aircraft in coarse pitch, trying to get off. He's got Buckley's chance.' He came across and knocked the tail off a ruddy Dakota and pranged it in the ruddy RSU yard. Two flights, or one flight only. But that was only the beginning of it. About a fortnight after the CO of the Wing was over. He said, 'Hello, Clifty.' Clifty means thief, you see. You Clifty this, you Clifty that.

11:00 I said, 'What's that about'. He said, 'We had a visitor come over. Lieutenant Colonel for the Yank air force, and he parked over there, and when he went to get his aircraft it was gone. So you'll have to give it back to him'. I said, 'Sir, it's on the Queen Mary [a troop transporter] over in RSU. Only did one flight before it was pranged'. Oh, dear.

Can you explain to me how the Flight worked in terms of the five different squadrons.

11:30 **Were you all based around the one aerodrome?**

All based around one aerodrome.

And you'd be camped separately all around the perimeter of the one aerodrome?

Camped separately. They were allocated a position, so that no matter where you went, what you did, when you got to an aerodrome you took the same positions. We were always on the dirty side. All the sand would come across us. Thousands of yards back would be the Ops Centre, and another five hundred yards would be the Officers' Mess.

12:00 And five or six hundred yards would be the Airmen's Mess, and the others would be scattered around. We were all well dispersed, so if a bomb landed somewhere, it would be lucky to knock out one tent, maybe not a tent even. And mine was way in the ruddy boondy over there, all on its own.

Was there a challenge of communication between the various squadrons. Were there liaison officers, or people who kept those lines of communication open between the squadrons?

12:30 Yes, everything worked through the Wing itself, and all the squadrons were separate, all self-contained. Sometimes they all did a job together. Five squadrons would all go off, sometimes just one, but mostly just one, and an hour after another one would go off.

And was there a central management hub for use of the aerodrome?

Oh, no.

Was there a unit that managed?

No, we were the only ones on it. And they used,

13:00 they had soldiers there. In fact I went up once, before there, and they had Kiwis clearing the rocks of the area that was going to be the 'drome. Our blokes were helping, you know, and but, no, I think they just had this air force maintenance. And created a new one, if there wasn't one there when the time came..

Created a new 'drome?

We never saw them. They would always move on.

13:30 **And sorry, was it the army, the 8th Army that you were supporting, would build the 'drome?**

Well, I don't know if it was the 8th Army, or whether it was the ACS, Aerodrome Construction Squadron. We had one, I guess the Poms had one too, but I never run into them.

And there were quite a few 'dromes across the desert, were there, that might have required repair or maintenance as you moved into them?

Oh, sure. Well, over the years they had gone up past Marble Arch, and then they'd retreat.

14:00 And then they'd push again, push the other way. Backwards and forwards. We were there for the last retreat.

Would you sabotage 'dromes if you were retreating. Would you cause damage to it so that it couldn't be used by the enemy?

No. No. We had to retreat once. We'd been there a month, I think, and we were pretty ruddy busy. The Kiwis were caught up with somebody and, Lillehammer and we were flying. We did sixty nine sorties in a day. That's a lot for about, most pilots had a flight three times, yeah, keeping the Kiwis out of trouble, and I think it was next day, or the day after, we had sent our first party back, we'd been there that long at Gambut, all together,

15:00 they had gone back and we only had enough to service the aircraft when they landed, we had an aircraft and the boys were working on jacks. So when the CO, the Acting CO, Bobby Gibbes had been shot down, he said, 'Well, you better move'. I said, 'What about the aircraft and jacks. Will I burn it?' 'Oh, no. We'll be back in four days'. Six bloody months after before we got back to it, and it was still there. But apparently Jerry didn't bother going around the satellites.

15:30 He operated from Gambut main. The main had a couple of top squadrons on it. Our satellite just had all our Kittyhawks on it, Fighter Bombers.

Can you tell me a bit about your CO Bobby Gibbes, and your relationship with him?

Fantastic. I met him at Amariya of course, and he was a funny bloke. He had a great sense of humour.

16:00 And, of course, he wanted to fly all the time but as long as he got his aircraft he was happy, never bothered us. We had some girls over from the hospital, Heliopolis. They were stationed down the valley somewhere, any way they came out for the day and the boys were doing flying stunts for them. And Bobby asked me at morning tea would I, one of the girls had a promotion,

16:30 and he wanted me to put her name, the information, on a little port that came with them. Well, I gave it to the boys up at the workshop and said, 'Can you have that fixed by the night'. Yes, OK. And coming back, I was sitting next to him at lunchtime, and I said, 'You know, Bob, that ruddy thing you gave me to do?' He said, 'Yes'. I said, 'Well, the bloody truck backed over it.' 'A truck backed over it? You'll pay for it. You'll pay for it'.

17:00 So I was only joking. Then he hammers down the bloody arm. Anyway, when I went back after lunch to collect it the blokes said, 'A truck backed over it. Look at it'. I thought, 'Oh, God'. So I went back to Bobby at afternoon tea, and I said, 'You know that job you gave me', 'Oh, don't tell me it got backed over'. I showed him, Oh God, 'You'll pay for it!". But he had a good sense of humour, the same Bob.

17:30 **And he was a good pilot?**

Well, he was a good pilot, he could fly anything straight off. He could fly 109s, various makes he hadn't even seen before. But his depression wasn't so hot. Like, when he shot down the 200th aircraft, he aimed at the bloke straight ahead, and he hit a bloke further ahead. And he admitted it himself. He said, 'The aircraft I shot down wasn't the one I aimed at'.

18:00 **So he wasn't a great marksman?**

He wasn't a good marksman. A good pilot. And a good leader.

What made him a good leader? What were those attributes?

I think he was so devoted to flying, I think, and he had done so much of it.

And he led by example, did he?

Yep, Yep. If there were three different gaggles a day, he'd be on two of them. Five, he'd be on sometimes four, sometimes three, but at least three.

18:30 So he wasn't sitting back, you know, just twiddling his thumbs

How many tours did he do?

He did three. Three straight off. He did have break of a couple of weeks, when he got shot down he hurt his leg. Broke it. That was at Amariya. And he had it in plaster. He came back after three weeks, and he said, 'I'm ready to fly'. And I looked at his leg, I said, 'When?' He said, 'Tomorrow". So we had to fix up the, build the pedals up so he could fly.

19:00 And he flew like . . .

So he did three straight tours.

Three straight tours. Only break he had was when he was shot down.

Were they thirty-flight tours in the desert, or were they twenty five?

I think it was thirty.

He did ninety straight?

Yes, I think it was more than that, I would have liked to have seen him and found out.

19:30 I had his book here somewhere, but I loaned it. Yes, well, whether I find it. Anyway he wrote a book. But everything's gone, bloody air force.

And did you enjoy your new leadership position, Engineer Officer. Did you find that you fell into that quite comfortably?

Oh, yes. It was great. The boys worked well, plenty of transport to get things done. Get stuck for spares sometimes and you had no place to cannibalise. So you could go around the squadron, if they had it you could take it. They were good that way.

20:00 **You didn't have to cannibalise?**

To pinch pieces off. One might be shot up waiting for repair. Well, waiting for repair. It's more important to get ships flying next morning, on the job. Always seemed to be scratching for aircraft.

What were your losses like in that initial campaign?

I think we had quite a few shot down by 109s, but we also

20:30 lost a lot with ack ack [anti aircraft guns]. But in the desert it was mostly 109s.

Do you know what your losses were, while you with 3 Squadron?

I don't think it would be as much, with actual air warfare, I don't think it was as great as our bods shooting Germans down. But as far as losses went,

21:00 counting all those lost in Italy, we lost a hell of a lot of aircraft, but that was ack ack fire. We didn't see much of 109s in Italy, except if you had a straggler they'd pick him off. Nothing like the desert. Every time we went up practically, they struck 109s.

Can you tell me a bit about the repair and salvage unit. And what sort of important role they played in terms of getting spares, or recovering equipment from downed planes?

21:30 Yes, a very important job. We weren't used to them actually and the Poms were and they used them up. With an engine change, sometimes, but certainly main plane changes or fuselage or power failures, they all went to RSU and it was always some. The Kittyhawk when we went there, the first one, the E, was a very heavy aircraft.

22:00 You could get a 40 mm for the main plane, and all you'd do was put a patch around it. Well, grant you though, that with the (UNCLEAR) they were taking it out of the main plane, so that half way through the campaign, you got a 40 mm through the main plane, it would spring the rivets from one end to the other, so there was a main plane change. Probably better for the pilots, lighter to handle, but for the maintenance wise it was never any good.

And what about the salvage work?

22:30 The salvage work, well, if we had some aircraft that was shot up needed big repairs or something on them, or maybe a main plane change, before we did it ourselves, we'd go across to RSU and they would do it and maybe you'd get your own aircraft back when it was ready, or you got another one. If you got a replacement in the meantime, it would go to somebody else. Also, picking up all the aircraft shot around the bloody desert, picking them up.

23:00 **How would they pick them up?**

The Queen Mary and the crane.

What's the Queen Mary?

Well, the Queen Mary was, you've seen these things that cart tanks around, a bit like that, only not as heavy because the weight was not as heavy. But just as long, and looked just as cumbersome but you could load probably, a couple of aircraft on to it, broken down. They'd have to strip them down, main planes off them etc.

What was you assessment of the Kittyhawks in comparison with the other aircraft you'd worked on up to that point?

23:30 It was the warhorse of the ruddy air force, amongst Fighter Bombers. Like the Dakota was with transport. It was a fantastic aircraft back then, it's still flying around the place. But the Kitty, as a Fighter Bomber it was good. But as a fighter, the 109 was much better and the Macchi was the same thing.

24:00 But I think our pilots were better pilots than the other people. To survive. Wouldn't have survived otherwise, and a couple of the aircraft I got to check over with Bobby, everything in the 109 was marked. 'Clock', all in German, of course, as much as to say, well, these blokes had a few hours, but when they get up there, they have to read what it is. Some of them became ruddy great, they were good pilots. But there was a lot that didn't make it.

24:30 **Did you have a respect for the enemy pilots?**

Well, we had respect for the German period. Especially [Erwin] Rommel [German Field Marshall]. Everybody thought they knew Rommel, we had heard so much about him. Even [Winston] Churchill [British Prime Minister]. When Monty [General Bernard Montgomery [commander of the 8th Army] went out he said, 'You'll find Rommel is a very honourable and formidable opponent'. He was held in great respect everywhere, Rommel.

25:00 **And you found that in your experience?**

Well, we had in RSU, next door to my sister-in-law. Had a full on family. One of the boys was in RSU, been in the desert and he was there, and I struck him after, before we got to Tripoli, and I asked him how he was going and he said, 'Oh, we had a close call recently. Picking up some Kittyhawks and we were out of water, just dying for someone to come along,

25:30 and he said we saw these truck's coming. Oh, they're ours. Fords. When they got there, Rommel was in one of them. And he said, 'I'm sorry we can't give you water. I can give you enough to get you back, but we're going to confiscate all your gear except one truck to go back in'. And they came back to tell the tale.

Amazing.

Yes, there's lots of stories you never hear.

26:00 You don't mind if I tell you about a modern one now? Well, we had a bloke over at the RSL in Penrith and I knew him well, but I didn't know he'd been a POW [Prisoner of War]. Not only been a POW. His crew, all his crew, were pranged nicely, he go out of it, were in the camp that were due for destruction. And I could understand, maybe

26:30 he was a ruddy enemy type, because he had a bit of a hook now, but anyway he still had the Australian battle dress on, and they were due for destruction next day. I said, 'Just you?' He said, 'No. 140'. Americans and all, they had quite a mixture of people and they were in one of the camps where they were gassing them, and Rommel came through.

27:00 And he spotted all this airmen and he said, 'What are those airmen doing here?' 'They're due for extermination tomorrow, Sir'. 'Get them back to Stalag 15 or Stalag 5 or something, immediately'. So he saved their lives. But you don't hear these things, you see. He was still an air force man and he was sticking up for the air force.

I guess while we're seeking opinions on the other nationalities, how did you find the South African air force?

27:30 Yarpies? Pretty good. Oh, poor old Yarpies. They got a bad time, when the retreat started. Because the rest of Tobruk had held it for a long time, they couldn't take it from them. Then after, when the retreat started, they had changed the Aussies over, give them a spell, and the Poms, and they put the SAAFs [South African Air Force] in there, of course, when the retreat started, they lasted 24 hours.

28:00 And there used to be a song going around the desert, 'There are fifty thousand Yarpies in the old Transvaal, but not a bastard in Tobruk'. And they didn't like it, of course.

Was there a camaraderie between the South Africans and the Australians, a sort of colonial dominion?

Yes, we got to know them a bit more than the English, but the English blokes were pretty ruddy good.

28:30 Especially the Engineers. I used to meet the Engineer Officers. They'd come around and they knew what was happening.

Were things less formal in the desert in terms of rank structure, uniform, that sort of thing?

No uniforms, no.

What would you wear?

Shorts, stockings and your cap. That was me.

29:00 The airmen would have boots on with their stockings rolled over their boots, pair of shorts on, nothing else. Sometimes they had their hat on. They'd be black as the ace of spades. And I've been reading through some of Rommel's books, with pictures in, their blokes were just exactly the same as our blokes.

Were the Poms similarly dressed?

Yep. Same way in the desert. Yet when we went to Malta, we went there as offensive, not defensive, we were operating in Sicily,

29:30 the CO there put a notice on his board at Halfa, for his troops not to mix with the desert rabble. Oh. Our blokes were pretty hostile because they were working there beside the others, and the other blokes were pretty well done up, you know, better attired than ours, and the CO mentioned it to Air Chief Parks, Air Vice-Marshal Park was a Kiwi, he was in charge of the whole area there, and he dressed this bloody CO down,

30:00 and he said, 'I thought it would an honour for you to have some of the desert air force here.' And he said, 'You lose sight of the fact, that these people are the only people to have a victory in the war to date, and you call them desert rabble'. So he said, 'I'll take them across to Luqa and they can stay there'. And the CO over there was a hundred percent. He used to wander around, talk to the boys.

Did that lack of formality extend to

30:30 **the relationships between officers and the troops?**

No.

Were things more relaxed than they were, say, in Sydney or in Europe?

Well, you seldom saw an officer in shorts and no shirt. Usually if they were waiting for a job, some had battle dress on, and scarf around their neck. I suppose they thought, if we're going to get shot down, we're going to be shot down in style.

You were an officer?

Yes.

But the Pilot Officers were dressing . . ?

31:00 Well, they were dressing up, but they were all pilots. I've got a photo there. Occasionally I didn't put my shirt on and you can see how they dressed there in this photo. Where I come in, bare hair, and they're all sitting around waiting for a job, and I've just broken the news to them that two more aircraft are serviceable. Yeah.

31:30 **Could you tell me about Steely Greys. What were they?**

Oh, Steely Greys, I don't know whether the other squadrons had them, but any job that was a bit dirty, they used to call them Steely Greys. You know, it could be a bit tight, you might lose half your bods or something on them. Well, we seemed to get a lot of those jobs. So they had a tune,

32:00 'Shaton Dray'. Da da da da dada da da. As soon as they got a Steely Grey job they'd play this ruddy thing. Everybody would be waiting to see what came up. On one particularly day, this job on Hun cropped up. Bobby was CO and the long range desert patrol had found a secret aerodrome, which they knew nothing about, with 109s on, well into the desert, not near the coast.

32:30 So the four aircraft were to go, 3 Squadron were doing the job, and Bobby flew and another CO who was replacing him was there, and he took charge of the flight, and a Sergeant Pilot and, two Sergeant Pilots, so they choofed off and kept down fellow fifty feet and surprised these ruddy people, did a run cross them and set aircraft on fire

33:00 and a lot of damage and they formed up a mile or so away and this other bloke said, 'I won't miss them today', and he wanted Bobby to do another run. And Bobby said, 'You never do two runs over the same target'. First time surprise, the next time is still a surprise, for you! 'Oh, I'll take them down anyway', And Bobby said, 'Well, I'm not going'. So he sat and watched it all. He went down, bang bang.

33:30 Two shot down, the other bloke got out of it alive. One bloke was killed and Rex Bailey pranged a couple

of mile away, and Bobby was watching all this, so he dived down, landed beside Rex, threw his parachute out, got Rex in, sat on his knee and flew his Kittyhawk back with two in it. But taking off, he'd hit a hillock, he knew he'd done damage to his wheel, or his undercart.

34:00 So when he landed there, they had all the things waiting there for him, and he'd blown a tyre and knocked half the wheel off and he held it up as long as he could, on the port one, and just let it go down at the end. So he damaged his wing tip and the prop, that was the only damage. And a new wheel was put on, they fixed it. He was the bloke I was telling you, Rex, he was the passenger, he was a bit shaken up. He wanted to get into the Flight as soon as possible, that's why he flew the aircraft before it was ready.

34:30 **And did Bobby receive any official recognition for that?**

Oh, yes. He had the AFC [Air Force Cross], DSO [Distinguished Service Order], Could be AFC and bar, AFC and bar [repeat award]. He was pretty well decorated, Bobby. He deserved it, too. Anyway that bloke disappeared later. He went on a gaggle, and they chased aircraft into a cloud and he went in and we didn't see him after that.

So that was Bobby's CO replacement.

35:00 Yes, so Bobby had it again. He was happy about the outcome, but not so much the bloke being killed, but then he stayed on.

Could you tell me a little bit about your living conditions day to day in terms of your sleeping accommodation and food?

Well, it surprised me, the food was good. The Mess people kept the place turned upside down.

35:30 You turned them over and you had morning and afternoon tea always. It might be toast, but we certainly ate well and, never any meat. We had bully beef all the time. We had cooks, he reckoned he could cook bully beef ninety nine different ways. Sometimes it would be in batter and what not, but it was still bully. But the Yanks used to come over and trade bully beef [canned meat] for Spam. They said you don't get sick of bully beef, but he said, you have a week on Spam,

36:00 it'll be running out your ruddy ears. No good. It was too greasy, it was hammy, so, on the whole, of course, we had to have a couple of cook houses, leap frogging. They took a couple of cook houses with them. And the ones staying behind had a cook house. So it worked out well. All the food was, the army ran a DID they called it. They kept all the supplies up.

36:30 Your guns, all your rations, truckfull of rations for a day. Bread. Bread would be, well, I was going back up to Tobruk once, it was miles away, and I went down to the mess to draw some rations, because I was taking three blokes to see Tobruk with me and I said, 'I want some bread', and he's walking over to this ruddy heap of dirt and he digs down and he brings up some bread. One of those Cobb loaves, you know, roundish. And he brushes it off, and funny thing, it was quite fresh inside.

37:00 They buried it as soon as they got it to keep it fresh.

Was supply ever a problem in the desert?

No, no. They only kept it up. It got a bit of a problem on retreat, because so many people wanted things moved. Like the NAAFI expected the air force to supply trucks to move them. And what they didn't lift, they burnt. They had all kinds of things. Mugs and tinned fruit and beer.

What was NAAFI?

37:30 NAAFI was a private company, worked in with the air force and supplied extra things for their messes. If you could afford it you could buy it. Like the Australians there, we had the Australian canteens running ours, not the food side, but when it got to the beer side, and of course, when they left to go back to Australia the Poms took it over and of course up went the bloody prices. NAAFI took it over, which wasn't good.

Did you ever buy anything from there that was a great treat?

38:00 I didn't buy it. I paid for it. I didn't drink, and my ration was half a bottle, by ration, gin, was half a bottle a month. I'd buy it and they'd compensate me back but, it gave them more rations. The more non-drinkers they had the better it was. They still drew their rations,

38:30 and they paid the NAAFI for it.

It would have been worth quite a bit out there, wouldn't it, your half bottle of gin?

The NAAFI, yeah, I think it would be. But they used to try and get me to drink it, like we were in the desert, we were at Amariya at the time, and word came through that I had a son. A cable said, the cable system was good, it was done by numbers,

39:00 you had a sheet and you picked up three numbers and sent them, it was reasonable and this one was, 'Son born. Both well. Good luck' or something. And then, 'Love. Your wife'. And that covered all things. You'd get all types of phrases and just numbers would be sent. Of course, we had the everyday mail

going, but that would take months to get home, same thing coming back,

39:30 until late in the piece, the padres got together, I think Fred McKay, he was from Australia, the mission, Presbyterian, they devised an air letter where you could type your letter and they'd take it away and photograph it and send microfilm home and they had hundreds of letter going home every day just on ruddy microfilm, and of course, going home, they'd blow it up and send it. It was good.

40:00 Of course, then when food parcels came, well that was a red letter day. The people at home would go without chocolate to be able to send it to us.

Tape 4

00:30 **Ken, I just wanted to ask you about how the relationship worked with the 8th Army, who you were there in support of. What lines of communication were open between you?**

I think everything worked through headquarters. And Tedder was out there and Coningham, he was Aussie, he was next to Tedder. But they all had the same idea, if anything was happening, they'd come around and inform you.

01:00 Like before I think it was the 25th October, that the big blast was going off, I think a thousand guns were going off at Alamein, he said we're not going to stop you going on leave, but just don't talk about anything. If we stop you going on leave before they go in, they'll suddenly hatch something, be suspicious so just go off the same, in Alexandria, we went swimming just the same,

01:30 and the night of the 25th we were all outside our tents, watching the clocks, and Voom! Off it went, and from then on we moved up. But each day we were briefed about how things were going. The Aussies were more than holding their own on the coast, the soldiers. They used to talk about how the people broke through and what not, but twice we had Lord Tedder there, he was the father of the RAF, he started it up,

02:00 Lord Tedder, and Tedder came a few nights, once I went to an evening where he was, with the CO, Bobby Gibbes at the time was the CO. We had to do a course down at the Bitter Lakes, and I picked six blokes to take with me. And he said, 'It's a combined operation'. That's as much as I could get out of him.

02:30 We arrived down in Alexandria without long pants and what not. Strange, we came down. So the MPs [military police], 'Oh, ruddy Aussies, no long pants. Try to book them up. Put them into jail'. Soon shot them down. I said, 'If you want to see anything, go and see Monty'. So we went down and we had a course down on, mostly water proofing vehicles. So it looked like we were going to be there for an amphibious landing, or something or other.

03:00 We waterproofed a couple down there. Bloody amazing where they drove, you know. The water would be on top of the bonnet – they still drove them through. Only thing you had to watch when you got to the other side was to apply your brakes pretty sternly, ready to get them dry, otherwise in an emergency you'd be up the tarbuck if they didn't work.

And so there was a good working relationship between the air force and the army?

Army, yes. Good. Some of our pilots would go up and have a morning with them or an afternoon.

03:30 **Exactly how far would the drome be from the front? Would there be an average sort of distance that was maintained?**

It varied. As soon as they uncovered an aerodrome, of course our blokes would go straight on to it and into their right position, and set up their own tents, and dig slit trenches if they weren't already dug. But if you went back to the old position, the trenches were already dug, you knew where it was.

04:00 And, I've lost my thought.

Oh, distance between . . .

Oh, distance, yeah. Well, I told you the distance between the messes, didn't I? Probably four mile, five mile, back from the front, and one time in Italy, we were only a mile and a half from the front, but we paid for it, by god. Maleny,

04:30 the whole Wing had had an op, and we were just getting refuelled. And we were right on the coast, good spot. And out of the blue came four Thunderbolts, American aircraft, and they shot us up. I'm saying to the ack ack post near me, 'Shoot them down!' 'Not ruddy likely', he said, 'We can't shoot them down. They're allies'.

05:00 I said, 'Strike a ruddy light', and here we are, there's fires galore, I've got a photo there. I think they destroyed over twenty aircraft. Best hunting they ever had. And the only aircraft on there, were Kittyhawks and Mustangs, all American aircraft. And one Walrus, which was the air/sea rescue pilot,

and he was the bloke was killed. No one else was killed fortunately. No one was hurt.

05:30 Anyway we all screamed out like bloody mad and they rang up the wing where they came from and the officers came up and of course, they were so bloody low, they could see the blokes grinning. All American numbers, 46, 47. They were cashiered that day, sent back home and they were a negro [African American] squadron. And I can't confirm this, but our padre said that he was told in good faith that the CO of the squadron,

06:00 he flew out and ditched himself in the sea. So had humiliated with them. I don't whether he was black, probably black anyway.

So it was an intentional attack?

No! they just, they were the worst bloody navigators in the world. They couldn't identify, well they didn't know a Kittyhawk from a Mustang, and German aircraft. Besides that, they all had the roundels on.

Roundels on?

06:30 Round, the bullseyes, they were all marked with those.

You mentioned the padres, given your past experience, what were your impressions of their roles in the desert.

We had three padres. They were the salt of the ruddy earth. First one came to us just when I got over there. They must have found, with so many Aussies over there,

07:00 the churches back home, they should have Australian padres, and Bob was over there, Bob Davies, he was in Jerusalem running the Comforts Fund Hotel, in conjunction with the Took, for the Church of England and he was seconded into the air force, and then Fred McKay, the Presbyterian, he came from the Inland Mission here,

07:30 and Johnny McNamara, he was the Catholic padre, father, when we were in the desert. But they were the greatest of friends, and you were lucky if you got them all together at one time, because as you moved up, their charge went say from say North Africa right up to Jerusalem. Wherever there were Australians, they visited, went around, separately, and occasionally they'd all get together.

08:00 But they were great blokes. Fred McKay of course, he ended up still head of the Presbyterian church, the Flying Doctor Service. He buried Menzies and whatnot, he only died a couple of years ago. He was down here in the Village living. Johnny Mac, he didn't last so long, Johnny. He was in Kew, and I think he only lasted about seven or eight years. Bob Davies died six months ago,

08:30 Bishop of Tasmania. I got a picture of them there. Greatest blokes under the sun. They took anybody's church service, I mean. We went to church service every Sunday if we had a padre, well, if the Presbyterians wanted to go to church, it was not good waiting for Fred, he could be down in Cairo, Amariya, anywhere so we'd have a combined church service and it was more of a talk. But then

09:00 if you wanted to have communion you went off and had communion in a tent, or somewhere. It worked out very well, and I remember Fred saying, we wanted to have a church service when we got to the other side of Rome, the only place I could see where there was a crowd of blokes is the 2 Up's place over there. Here there all playing two up on the canvas. So I went over and I told them, 'Break for half an hour while we have a church service'. No one minded. Had the church service, and we finish, and up she goes again.

09:30 But they didn't run one another down, they just gave a church service that was applicable to everybody. It was fantastic. And, all the pilots decided, they said, we don't care what padre buries us, as long as he's an Australian. So that was good. Of course, the RAF said, You can't do this, you can't do that', and they said, 'Oh, yes we can'. And they did it. And I think that was the first, really,

10:00 what's that word they have now for Catholics an all combining, just been recently, ecumenical. They started that off because they worked in like brothers, didn't make any difference what the religion was. And of course, it was taken over later, when they got home. They all seemed to be doing it. Now, the hymn books are the same, applicable to both people. It's a good thing to see really.

10:30 **Would there always be a service or ceremony for lost pilots or . . .?**

No, only if we got them within finding distance. So many were shot down in the sea and they never found them.

Would there be some sort of ritual or ceremony for those lost people?

Yes, just an ordinary burial service.

If you didn't have the body, would you still have some sort of recognition of ritual of their passing?

11:00 No, it would only be mentioned in a church service. But there were a lot being shot down in the desert.

Some got back. Brian Eaton was shot down, and three days later he came in, riding a camel. They brought him back. Quite a few were brought back by the Bedouins. They would keep them covered up. Bobby Gibbes, he was shot down, not very far from the front, and he buried himself in the sand

11:30 for a couple days until the enemy moved back. And he came back. When the Arabs brought them back they gave them a piece of paper which said, 'Be nice or be good to these people. They have brought a pilot back in safety;'. Well, these blokes would be on the road, they'd be picked up, flash that, they'd be treated like bloody lords. It was a great passport for them, I guess they paid them money, too. But . .

They were referred to as Bedouins?

12:00 Yes, Bedouins, Arabs.

Did you have any direct contact with them?

No, as we moved forward we met different ones. Some were pretty ruddy lousy, but I guess it's like all types of things, depending on what tribe you struck. But the ones we struck on the whole were pretty good. The ones we couldn't take to were the Arabs that used to come out and try to rob the camp at night from Alexandria. But that stopped when we got Ghurka guards.

12:30 **Did you ever take leave back in Cairo or Jerusalem?**

No such think as leave over there, but whenever we could grab a day or two we'd go into Blenheim House, it was only fifteen miles away in Alexandria and that was an officer's place, Blenheim House, and you could sleep there and go down to the beach, Stanley Bay, but we didn't have one for the boys, except the Cheero Club, which looked after them, a good club.

13:00 But I guess it was better than nothing. There wasn't much to see around Cairo, bar shops. Alexandria, nice beach. That's were I saw my first people changing on the beach. There was a couple there, they put a couple of towels around them, and slide the bottoms on first, and put the tops on, and off goes the blanket. Save them having to dry themselves. You could look all day and you couldn't take offence at it.

13:30 Not that anyone would.

Did you ever visit Jerusalem during your time in the Middle East?

Yes, when the African campaign finished and we got chased back to Alex, they said while the army's regrouping, you can have ten days off. Well, we whole ruddy Wing went choof! We all headed for Jerusalem. And we got done over the night before we left, a couple of Kaisers burning around the place, so we didn't care.

14:00 We were all going on leave the next day, and we went across the Sinai, that was an experience. And a couple of places we saw where the First World War Diggers had been and you could still see rusty bits of barbed wire around the place. And I picked up an Arab boy. I had five on the vehicle and we stuck a couple more on.

14:30 One was an Arab and one was a Jew and they both belongs to one of the Corps there, same corps, wouldn't speak to each other, just glared the whole bloody time, so we got to Alex, sorry to Jerusalem, and we had our guns then, because they'd bring a lot of money there, and we met the communes. They were fantastic.

What do you recall of the communes?

It's Jewish commune.

The Kibbutz?

Yes.

What do you recall of them?

15:00 Oh, we had a couple of days there. We went out there, in fact the Jewish people couldn't do enough to help us out. They fixed up our accommodation in town, and you could wander around the city during the day. And of course, one of the first thing we wanted to see was, where was all the Marmalade jam made. That's all we got, Marmalade jam. Sometimes as a treat, you'd get pear. So the bloke said that's only a couple of miles away,

15:30 so we drove out, fair enough, bees by the million and all these Israel people, the Israelites, making Marmalade jam. Great tubs. And then we went to another place making razor blades.

Was it the first time you'd been exposed to that sort of communal living?

Yes, yes. That didn't start until you got up into Jerusalem, actually Palestine. The Arabs hadn't planted the thing,

16:00 they just lived off the land. But the Jews, of course, had put all these plantations in, there were oranges, citrus fruit, and you'd hear the kids singing, boys and girls, coming back for lunch, happy as bloody Larry. They could get asked to come in at night, but they had married families there. I had pictures on

my movies, but they all went black. Little kid with big clogs on wandering around, but it was a happy time.

16:30 **Was it spiritually significant to you? Spiritually or religiously significant to you, given the many sacred sites?**

Yes, but we didn't interfere with their religion or anything.

I'm talking about your religion, as a Christian in Jerusalem.

Yes, but we stuck to the Christian side, we did go into some of the Arabs. But it makes you feel that what was in the Bible was quite true you see.

17:00 You go to a, I know it's a bit of a ruddy fake. Supposed to be where the Cross was, and you could buy a piece of it. Must have built thousands of crosses. But you take that with a grain of salt, everybody did. Tourists. But we went to Bethlehem, you see, and underneath the Church of the Nativity, it was built in 666, there was a cavern down below and all smoky, this they reckoned was the manger down there, accepted as being the manger,

17:30 and we went through Abraham's Temple, went out to where Elijah was going to kill his son for sacrifice. All those sites were well looked after. Where the water was turned into wine. That was there. It's just common place.

That must have been a special time for you, given your interest in the ministry?

18:00 It was. Looking around, and when you, most blokes had a fair inkling of what Jerusalem looked like, and they must have heard the same stories, and I always thought I'd go back, but I just didn't get back. Fred McKay went back, took his wife, I think, and he went to the Dead Sea and he picked up a lot of stones, smooth stones, that he was going to lecture the kids on, Aborigines and that when he got back. Well, he got to the airport

18:30 three hours before the plane went, and he was the last on board, he and his wife, because they thought he was an Arab, slightly hook nose, dark as the ace of spades, and they couldn't understand why he would take stones away. They thought they must have had explosives in them. They sent them away to be checked and whatnot. Very suspicious people.

There must have been a very reflective period for you given that the desert campaign was over, and you were a long way from home, and you hadn't seen your son, and you were around

19:00 **all these sites of spiritual significance to you.**

I think everyone thought the same. Our whole wing was there. We neve went anywhere else besides Palestine. We went a bit further up. We went to Tel Aviv, and it was much the same, but people were very friendly.

Did it deepen your faith, seeing it brought to life like that?

19:30 Yes, well, it did deeply confirm what I'd always heard about, and you got the feeling where the Last Supper was, you could feel that the ruddy thing was right, was true.

And was that the sense of tradition, given the First World War veterans and seeing those areas in Palestine, was that a boost to your morale or did that . . .

Yes, that was a boost.

20:00 Our Aussies were still held in great faith by the people, been handed down by their fathers, I suppose, because they never resented us anywhere.

And was that important to you? Did you feel part of that tradition?

Yes. Everybody, half the troops wanted to do what the Aussies did the first time, taking over the trams in Cairo and things like that. They did take a train over in Italy, but, oh dear.

20:30 **Was there a problem with the lads relaxing a too much, taking that bit of freedom and wanting to get away?**

Well, a little, not very much. They all knew they could get into trouble or even shot, if they didn't watch the way they took liquor, they had to careful where they went, really, so they seemed to get around in batches.

21:00 **From that ten days leave, did you then return to Alex?**

Yes, back to Alex, yes.

And what was the situation there?

Well, the army settled in and we started ops straight away, operating against Rommel's supply lines coming down.

Where was the 'drome in relation to Alex?

Amariya, there was quite a few on the road down to Cairo,

21:30 but the one we were on was Amariya, and there were quite a few ruddy Wings there, and we were only about thirty mile from the front.

And the main task of the Kittyhawks was to be hitting that supply line of Rommel, behind the front?

Fighter Bombers.

What sort of range did the Kittyhawks have?

I think at a pinch you could get

22:00 two and a half, three hours out of them. You see, that's what happened later, when we made history. We'd just finished conquering Sicily, and we had been operating against Italy, and suddenly all flying ceased and everybody got ready to make an amphibious landing.

22:30 That's where our waterproofing came in. we didn't know where it was going to be on, or what, but Anzio landing had just taken place about this time, and that was right near Salerno, and they couldn't get off the beach. They grabbed the Germans from everywhere. Monty had landed right down the toe, didn't have any air force with him. We used to look after him,

23:00 but he didn't have that many Germans down there, but from half way up they struck a lot of Germans, and tons of Germans opposing the landing, and they couldn't get off the beach, there was that many Germans there. I think it was only one or two days and they screamed for Fighter Bombers. The desert air force could have gone and bombed hell out of them, but they were only about thirty yards apart, and that's no good for bombers, they wanted pin-point bombing. Well, the nearest Fighter Bombers was way over in Agnone, Sicily,

23:30 so Brian Eaton came to me and he said, 'Pick enough troops to service twelve air craft'. And petrol. (UNCLEAR) Petrol had to go out in 44 gallon drums, cooks and bottle washers, few ambulance people. Others that would be able to operate. In case they got hurt and had to be taken care of. We choofed off about ten o'clock in the morning, flying to Italy.

24:00 We got over Italy and looking down at the lovely green fields there, and vineyards, and that morning they'd put a half an airborne division in to secure the area, and they'd sent half the night before, and they had to secure the area outside Taranto, and outside Taranto, five or six miles out, was Grottaglie air field. So we landed on Grottaglie airfield, didn't see any Germans, but

24:30 our air force was flying around us the whole way, top and bottom and side cover. We landed and some of the blokes started to refuel the air craft and the others had a feed as soon as it was ready, changed over, and they took a bloody long time to hand pump from 44 gallon drums for all these air craft. We got every bit we could into them. Then came the bombing up, what a ruddy job. Lifting 500 pound without a cradle,

25:00 you know. God. Anyway we got the job done, and they choofed off fairly late in the afternoon, must have been three o'clock maybe later, and they choofed off and, oh, they must have been gone two and a half or three hours, and they came back. Night time. And we were on a strange strip, there was no lights or anything, no tanker there. So we had to put tins of kerosene out on the strip to mark it,

25:30 and Brian Eaton came in and he made a perfect landing, no trouble, he was a pre-war bloke, and the next bloke to come in was right, and the third bloke didn't seem to be moving, he pranged. We had three prangs out of the aircraft. I forget whether we had twelve or fifteen, but we had at least a dozen, we had three prangs, but that was a cheap thing to have to what they did. They didn't see any German aircraft, and they just bombed and strafed, and used every bit of ammo in this area

26:00 where they were held up, and I forget the exact words, but next morning we had a signal from the Commander in Chief, it said something like, 'Thank you 3 Squadron. We're inland'. They were able to get off the beach and, of course, that started the big push up. Monty soon caught up and there was a big, Germans used to hold us up a lot. Yes, Nails Line and everything like that, everything would stop, they'd have everything stuck there. Yes, you'd have to blast your way through by air. The whole of the air force would get on to some job and they'd just blast

26:30 five or six mile out of the enemy, bombs, you name it, rockets.

What was the linking period between flying out of Amariya and the beginning of your time in Malta? Was there a long period spent at Amariya?

Well, the desert campaign finished in May, and it started in October. And we did get a bit of leave, I took the same bods I had before. The CO said buzz off, and we went up to Bizerta, and inland to Bone on the coast, then we went inland to a town I'd never heard of called Constantine,

27:30 and you went up, round and round this ruddy mountain till you got to the top and there was a ruddy

great chasm with a bridge on it, and you went across that, I suppose in the old days they pushed the bridge away, nobody could get into it and all around were storks camped, and we came across a bloody city, trolley buses, way out in the middle of the ruddy desert. So we had two or three days there. It was great. They got the radio operating and we all went along there.

28:00 The first night was open and they were singing all these Pommy songs. One finger, one thumb, keep moving. Ever heard that? We'll all be merry and bright, and so it goes on until, one log at the end. Everybody's doing this, it was great. Great opening night. And then we headed back. And we had George Barton, Intelligence Officer, brought a bottle of whiskey with him, Canadian whiskey, and we stopped at a place to pick up some rations, a Yankee base,

28:30 and we drew the K-rations, and they gave us sugar and whatnot, and George opened this bottle of (interruption, phone ringing).

We were just talking about the leave you were taking between the desert and making it to Malta. Can you tell us, I think you were discussing Constantine?

Yes, well we got to Constantine, that right? And coming back we went to the camp, army camp where they had the provisions,

29:00 you could get army camp, Yanks all over the place, and we got the ordinary rations done up in packet, and when he handed this bottle of beer, George Barton, bottle of whiskey, 'Oh, would you like some cigarettes?' they gave us carton of cigarettes, you name it we got it, all for one bottle of whiskey. So we left the Yanks. They were happy, we were happy. I think those places seemed to be dry,

29:30 whereas the Poms, even on board boat, they had their grog. Anyway, that's by the way. I guess it will change. But we got back, we got back to Zuara and we find that everybody has moved, they gone back a bit. So whatever camp they had, they were all waiting transportation, so I got crook then. God was I bloody sick. I used to bury myself in the sand and sleep most of the time.

30:00 I knew if I went up and reported to Sick Quarters, I'd miss out on going into Malta. I got better and I went across on the boat, and it was lovely. It was so ruddy hot and you'd go in and have a shower on the boat and it was like ruddy ice. It'd burn you, I was that ill. So, I survived OK and . . .

What was your illness?

I don't know. Kind of a fever. Never had a recurrence of it.

30:30 So when we got over there, overlooking Malta, I remember sleeping on ruddy rocks almost, I guess, with a tent. Then we went down to Hal Far, and of course, Hal Far I think I've told you about Hal Far, didn't I, tell you about him. Down in Hal Far the CO didn't want to mix with the desert rabble, yep. And Luqa was totally different. Well, we operated there.

Can you explain a little bit about the significance of Malta.

31:00 **It really was a crucial position, wasn't it, a crucial island during the war.**

Well, he did a great job. If they could have taken Malta, it might have been a different story with the Germans, but they wanted that really, but they couldn't get it. They seemed to keep them battled off.

And it was vital to the lines of communication through the Mediterranean?

Yes, most vital. They had a harbour there and they could change personnel over and the like in Malta. Yes, Malta.

And was there just the one 'drome?

31:30 No, it had Hal Far, at least three, and we operated from the main one, Luqa. It was a good spot. But the town was really knocked to pieces.

Could you describe it?

Well, the churches seemed to be about the only really intact place, and people seemed to be living in shelters, like leaning up against a wall.

32:00 They hadn't had any chance to rebuild for a start, because we were there, and we didn't give them much chance.

And the local population. Can you tell me a bit about them?

They were very friendly people. They had a few dances on for us we went to.

What language did they speak?

English. Any place Britain had any connection with, they spoke English.

32:30 And good English, you know. They had their own language, Maltese, but English was mostly spoken. Go anywhere. And I had a relative there. She was a nursing sister in one of the English units there. I had been trying to contact her, because her brother was married to my sister, but they all came from

England. And she was still in England,

33:00 and I'd write, and I wrote once there and she was only a couple of miles away. When we got to Malta, I used to drive, Malta was so ruddy hot, we'd get on a vehicle, and it was only about six mile around, we'd drive around trying to get cool, and we used to go past this ruddy hospital. Blow me down, when we get into Sicily, I get a letter from her, she's at his ruddy hospital I could have gone to. Oh, well. But the Maltese though were good.

33:30 **Were you under constant air raids, when you were in Malta, or had that threat largely . . .**

That threat had gone with getting Sicily bombed. They'd moved back a bit. We did have a couple of air raids, but didn't come to anything.

And your major operations were of what nature?

We were offensive. We took the offensive.

Attacking Sicily?

Yes, they were looking after Malta, but we were trying to take Sicily,

34:00 and when we got part of it clear we went over in landing ships, and got out, we didn't have to go through the water fortunately. We got off onto dry land and hurried all our blokes up and they'd just finished carving a strip for us, up amongst the olive trees and I don't suppose the Italians liked that much, because they loved their olive trees.

How did they do it? Using bulldozers?

Bulldozers, yes.

34:30 Didn't take them long. PS depth. Bulldoze and put PSP down, Perforated Steel Plate, they had a different name for it here, but we used to call it PSP, Perforated Steel Plate, same type the thing, used to lock in. So we used to operate from there and . . .

Can I ask you how the flying conditions differed from the desert?

The desert was always sand. The Yanks could afford it I suppose, around their area they'd soak all the perimeter around, the perimeter around the 'drome, with diesel.

35:00 There's no dust. Our people didn't. I don't known if they couldn't afford it, but that's about the only difference between the Yanks and us.

So there was the sand. Was there environmental differences? I don't know, fog or . . .

No. no.

Any major climatic difference between Malta?

As soon as you got up into the green country in the desert,

35:30 Algeria, it wasn't bad. The fields would come out in poppies and whatnot, away from the sand.

What then were the major mechanical challenges you faced then in Malta and Sicily?

Well, there were changes all the time. Every now and again you'd get a new type Kittyhawk. We started off with the Alison, then they brought one out with a Packard Merlin engine, and a couple of feet longer.

36:00 Then the left field graduated again back on Alison engines and a lighter one. So we were flying three types of aircraft at some stages.

For you, was it quite natural to be picking up and learning the differences between them, or was that quite a challenge?

It was a challenge but it didn't take long. Soon as we got one everybody wanted to see it. Every pilot wanted to fly it. They were much the same. Funny thing, most engines are the same,

36:30 irrespective of where you go, who's got it. It's the little things that go wrong. If you've had it a while, you know just where to look.

Did your entire Wing move from the desert up to Malta?

Yes, we stayed, our Wing stayed together all the time, right to the end of the war in Italy.

Once you hit Sicily, what was your work rate like, in terms of the number of sorties and operations that were being flown, in comparison to the desert?

It was a totally different war in Sicily, I think. We were gradually getting aerial control.

37:30 And I can't recall any more than one night of bombing in Sicily. Near the end we had one very good one. They came over one night when we were at Agnone. And it had been built on a swamp, and the Jerry's had used it, and they knew we'd be using it. And so what happened was they, two planes came over and

dropped flares all around the strip, two green ones,

38:00 and then the bombers came in and of course, all they did was fly up the channel and drop bombs. Fortunately a week before we'd been moved from down there because the malaria rate was too high. Millions of mosquitos, Sicily leads the world in malaria. So they moved all our bods, left our tents down there, and we had other tents up the side of the hill, oh, a mile and a half, two mile away, up high.

38:30 the Royal Regiment looked after, the Royal Regiment of guards belonging to the air force, they stayed down and guarded the place and everyone else could stay down. We had quite a few sergeants stay down there. They had their tent, they were quite happy. Anyway this night, ruddy hell was let loose down there and when we could we sent a dullard [bloke] down there to see if all our blokes were OK. They were, but quite a few of the RAF regiment

39:00 had been scheduled and lots of planes. The next morning when you went down, they had dropped these great big, probably thousand pounders and they'd gone into the soft earth, way down underneath, and delayed action, hadn't gone off. I had my tent down there, so I said you'd better remove the tent. So they removed the tent, I don't know where it went up, but it went up and there'd be a crater, forty feet across and thirty feet deep,

39:30 so the 'drome was speckled with them. The first job was to explode the unexploded ones, which made these big craters, get the bulldozers in and fill them all up. I think only half a day we lost. They had the whole strip finished, operating again.

Who took care of the Ordinance Disposal?

RSU was there. We didn't have too many aircraft. I think only two was lost.

I'm sorry, who destroyed the unexploded ordinance?

40:00 Oh, the Wing Armament officer, used to drop stuff down. Everybody would take cover. Whoof! You'd feel it go up before you'd see it. It was like a blancmange, the way it used to shape.

And as you were gradually increasing you air superiority, their were more raids coming in on you, were you operating more frequently, were you running more sorties?

No. We only flew when they wanted us to fly.

40:30 **How did that compare with frequencies of sorties [operational flights] in the desert?**

Well, the desert, at times, as I said we created a record. There was fifty in one ruddy day, we had the bods flying. When there was a push on and they were trying to taka a place, we'd be very busy. Lots of stuff and it would ease off when they took the place and,

41:00 the desert much the same. If our blokes got into trouble, the Kiwis, they'd be around every, up and down, until they got them free.

And did you have a sense then that the enemy was very much on the back foot in terms of the war overall?

Yes,

Was there a momentum behind you?

Especially when we heard Hitler was talking about giving the game away, and the night they gave the game away was a couple of nights after this bombing,

41:30 and we thought, you know, the pilots would get an easy time but it didn't make much difference to them. It meant the population seemed to ease up a bit but, and the army gave it away, but the air force, a lot of the mojo were flying 109s with the Germans, practically right through until the end of the war.

Tape 5

Ken, could we start off by, can you tell me the story about the foreign aircraft that you caught in the western desert?

Yes, we seemed to be getting foreign aircraft by the ton. Other squadrons, just didn't bother, might have one, but we had half a dozen at one stage, especially after we started the push.

01:00 We had 109s, Es and Fs, CR42s, Predelphio, Ghibli Protonia, the Ghibli Protonia, was probably the most used. It was a flare dropper for the Italians. We took the flare shoots out and we found it could carry four, five or six bods which meant the car would pick up the new pilots, whether Cairo or Alex, Christmas time it could go and get good cheer. It did a lot of work.

01:30 That much work in fact that our engines started to pack up. We were in Tripoli at the time, and I sent to

lads into town, and I said, 'Nose around the wharf and see if you can find a warehouse with engines in'. And they back later, 'We found some'. Gypsy Major engines, it was just what we wanted. Still in the case. So I said, 'They wouldn't give you any?' and they said, 'No an officer had to sign for them'. So I said, 'Oh well, we'll go in tomorrow.'

02:00 So, Danny Boardman had just finished his tour, so we took a Predelphio, it was a mono plane, a bi-plane, just like a Tiger Moth, and we flew in there, and the truck picked me up, took me around and I forget what I signed, Ned Kelly or what, but I did sign for two engines, and we got them. And they brought me back to fly back with Danny and halfway up the strip the ruddy wind changed, and he didn't notice, and he was trying to pull it off,

02:30 and was trying to pull it off, goes back, trying to pull it off, and I could see the markers at the end of the 'drome. We had four on the boundaries, we did them in the desert the same. The boundary was two 44 gallon drums full of stones, and I could see this looming up, looming up, and I tucked my feet up and the next thing, clobbered it, wiped down the Karloff, the aircraft wasn't badly damaged, we weren't hurt, so instead of taking a ruddy engine back, we had two engines and a plane hanging on the back.

03:00 But they were useful, but the best one I had was on the push at Gambut. Sera was tired of flying clapped out ones, we were tired of servicing them, so I thought there's sure to be some at the satellite, Nothing there, bar the one we left there, still on jacks, so I went to Gambut main, and there was one ruddy new one, stood out. It's not the colours, they said, they howled me down. Well, I found it the ruddy thing, I know what colour it was.

03:30 It was like a silver and an apple colour, you know the colour they have, bit like a duck one, lightish bluey.

What kind of plane was it?

109, BF109 G2. We hadn't seen one. I didn't know it was a G2 until we got it. I just slapped CV [squadron number] in big letters on the side, and I said to my mate, my co-driver,

04:00 Palmer, Rex Palmer, I said "Go back to Gambut satellite, tell the CO I haven't been blown up", or he hasn't been blown up and then tee up the ground staff boys to bring a truck back in the morning and we'll tow it back to our place. He'd only been gone five, ten minutes and two army cars came up with blokes and they were red all over, staff bloody people, Intelligence, and they said, 'What are you doing with that aircraft?' And I said,

04:30 'Taking it back to my squadron to fly it'. 'You can't have it, we want it'. I said, 'You ruddy can't have it, I've got it', so they argued the toss for a while, and they said, 'oh, we'll get it anyway. Do you mind if we have a look at the tags on it?' I said, 'Take what you want from it'. So they worked around for half an hour and suddenly one bloke sang out, 'It's a G2!' I didn't know there were any G2s there,

05:00 so I said, 'All the more reason for me to take it, so the pilots, the Sera can fly it and evaluate it'. 'All right'. So the last thing they said was, 'We'll get it'. And I said to them, 'Not before we fly it, you won't'. So, I thought these barmaids might come back with a lot of troops, so when Rex came back we parked the thing right against the fuselage so if they tried to take it when we were asleep, they wouldn't be able to move it.

05:30 And we slept under the main planes. He was under one, and I was on the ground. Morning came, the boys came early, and we towed it back and Booby was thrilled to see a brand new aircraft, but it didn't have a canopy so I had to go back to (UNCLEAR) and pick up a brand new canopy on, and the boys were checking it over and running it up. Bobby flew it. No different to him, Zoom, down he goes, and up, and does all sorts of things with it. Came back and landed and he said, 'Well, we should get some good flying out of this.

06:00 I'd like to take it home for the RAAF'. Anyway after flying for a week, various bods, but mostly him, a signal came, 'This aircraft had to go back to the Delta for evaluation'. He said, 'We take no notice of that'. After a week, 'We do not request, we direct'. So he said, 'I've got to prang the ruddy thing on the way back'. And he nearly did.

06:30 He got half way down there, he was escorted by a couple of Kittys so the ack ack didn't shoot him down, and he landed on the Yankee place to refuel and have a feed, and the Yanks had never seen one. They were all over the aircraft. They thought it was fantastic. He said, 'Wait till you see me take off and do a role on the climb'. So when he takes off, zoom down the hill, and up she went like a ruddy rocket, zoomed on the climb and the canopy came off.

07:00 He said, 'I nearly pranged it. The ruddy dust came up into my face. But I got straightened OK.' And I thought, 'What did I do wrong that a brand new canopy came off?' Anyway, he got it down there, and we heard that three months after, they pranged it when they lost a canopy. So that was a 109G2.

Tell me, why did the army want it?

They were Intelligence people. They wanted to see where the various parts were manufactured from.

07:30 They weren't worried about how it flew, upside down or backside. They wanted the pieces off it. But once they got that, they didn't need it really. Anyway, we had ideas of taking it home. And then of

course, we got to taking off for Malta. “You’ve got to leave your foreign aircraft behind’. So we gave them all to the Air Ambulance, the Australian Air Ambulance there, they had a unit.

08:00 I had meant to tell you about the beards. We had such a ruddy hard time with lack of water, going over, and a lot of the water holes were contaminated with oil. The Germans were blaming us and we were all blaming the Germans. So water was pretty scarce. I think we had a pint, or half a half for washing and drinking, cooking, the ruddy lot, a day. So, I don’t know who decided, the CO or not,

08:30 anyone who wanted to wear beards could wear beards. So we all had beards. And most of them were cut off about Tripoli. I cut mine off a little bit before and left a goatee. But we had some beaut beards, way down to here, by the time we got up to Tripoli.

What was your beard like?

Mine was starting to get a bit of grey in it. Itchy, oh God, was it itchy. You know, the sand would get in, you’d scratch it, oh. I didn’t recommend it.

Must have been hot in the desert?

09:00 It was hot, yes, although the desert by this stage, was getting cool at night. Ruddy cold at night, and later on when we were in Sicily, no foreign aircraft, our CO Brian Eaton had gone off to have an operation on his arm, left arm, and we knew he wouldn’t get back until we got into Italy. So I said to the blokes to chase around to see if they could find in the RAQ and a few other places to see if there were any aircraft we could use.

09:30 And they came back and there was nothing down but in the harbour there’s a flying boat and a sea plane, a float plane, you know. So we got down, slapped our CV on it, we’ve got a picture of it there. We worked for a ruddy two or three weeks, just got it to taxiing stage, the big flying boat, and we got orders we had to hand them over to the Free French. So I went crook at the CO we had who was standing in. He’d gone from sergeant up to squadron leader

10:00 in one swipe because he had been in the desert, he knew the ropes, But I don’t think he’d argued with them. I said to him the first thing Brian says when he comes back in, ‘What foreign air craft have you got for me to fly’. He arrives two days later, after we’d handed them over. First thing he said, ‘Where are the foreign aircraft?’ I said, ‘You should have been here a couple of days ago’. So he lamented that. He said, ‘oh, God. That’s bad. I was hoping you’d have some different ones for the log book.’

10:30 So, whilst we were there talking the Adjutant sung out, and Catania had just fallen. He said, ‘That’s for us. Hop in the car’. He had a glass and four of us went up to Catania and there was a lovely looking Macchi 402, or was it a 204, I couldn’t tell the difference because I’d never been up close to one. But I assumed it could have been a 204, anyhow we checked it over, and ran it half up, that was OK. So Brian hops in and half way down the runway,

11:00 he was going to land back up Agnone, and he slaps the ruddy brakes on, gets out, and he says, ‘She’s on fire’. And that’s the worst thing can happen to a pilot, a fire. So he got in and chocks it. He took it right up to revs, and one of the lads drove me up said, ‘It’s OK, it’s not fire. It’s mist’. I had a glycol leak and it was coming out as mist. So we fixed that up and Brian choofed off,

11:30 he went off. We wended our way back home. Well, he flew it a couple of times and the Flight Commander flew it, the Flight Commander who flew it, he had one to his credit, shot down a 202, and at dinner that night, after he’d flown it, ‘I don’t know how I shot that down’. And I said, ‘I know’. And he said, ‘How?’ I said, ‘The pilot was reading Ginger Meggs [cartoon]’. He’d go, ‘Oh’. Ginger Meggs was syndicated in the Italian papers. Same as we had, only of course in Italian. So he thought that was a ruddy insult,

12:00 he didn’t speak to me any more.

I’ve got a question about foreign aircraft. Tell me how did it help the war effort, the things you learnt about foreign aircraft, how did that help?

Well, they had the same problems we had. Sand, and it was more the flying side of it.

12:30 Bobby used to form up besides our fellows coming back, and suddenly someone would look out and see a 109. They’d go all directions. He’d crept on them, hadn’t seen him. But he was pretty good on them.

But what were the advantages you got by examining enemy aircraft?

Nothing much, except to see their progress, instead of having carburettors like we had, they had fuel injection. And they had way back in the desert, long before cars and that went to it.

13:00 **Was there anything about the foreign aircraft that surprised you?**

Oh, no. Same as ours. Same type. Ours were better in the undercart. That 109 used to get red hot taxiing it through the sand. Better to tow it to the runway and then it was right. That’s where I noticed all the names in the thing. Our pilots on the whole could hold their own.

13:30 And of course, all the beards came off and after we’d had our beards off and Tripoli had fallen,

everybody goes in to town for a haircut, and I thought it seems to be taking a ruddy age, and when they got back I could see the reason. They were having their hair cut and their head washed and the two women barbers were putting their head on their bosom and drying their hair. Very motherly it was.

And there was a long queue for that was there?

Yeah, long queue for that.

14:00 We were pretty short of water in the desert, but when you have these people doing it, it was much better. And so bloody reasonable. About a shilling. We didn't get any more foreign air craft. That was the end of it. Because we couldn't take any to Italy. We had to leave the Macchi 202 there. And of course, Brian got back as soon as we got to Italy. Arm in plaster. Another ruddy job. Had to rig up the ruddy throttle

14:30 to suit his arm in plaster and he took up his flying duties again. Still ruddy good, he was. And he was always harping, 'Get me a 109 two seater'. In other words, get a 109, oh, beg pardon, Kittyhawk two seater, so I can fly down and pick up some of the (UNCLEAR) girls and bring them up for a concert and the like. Well, I had other uses for it, I didn't tell him. But aircraft were so ruddy scarce,

15:00 you couldn't pull one off the line, depriving ruddy Ops of one. I said, 'We'll get a chance one day', and we were half way up Italy one day, and friendly fire again. We were at a place called Mileni. One mile and a half from the front, we were. And the only air craft on the decks were Kittyhawks and Mustangs, and one Walrus. The air/sea rescue plane, flown by a Pom. He was killed in the raid.

15:30 Then comes a raid, about morning tea time, four Thunderbolts come down, strafed us, tried to knock us off. And of course the ack ack guys, 'Oh, you can't shoot them. They're allies'. I think they destroyed something like 20, 22 air craft, but it was a Godsend for me because next day I went over and Cappy saw me coming and he said, 'I know what you want. You can have fuselage, you can have that main plane,

16:00 and you can have the power plant there', so we got our two seater, left the, took the, not the long range tanks, the main tank out over the fuselage, that was the fuselage tank. I think we could get a couple of hundred gallons, and we took that out and put the next seat in for the passenger to sit on. And the pilot we put his on a swivel so he could push it back, so he could step over it and get into it, pushing it forward, and then he locked his.

16:30 Well, we had that for hours and ruddy hours. But the use I had with it, I could always be with the aircraft. When the aircraft moved, I moved because I was in on the back seat. And I had the best of cover. My mates, Flight Commanders and that, we had top cover, side cover, bottom cover. They were determined they weren't going to lose their Engineer Officer. Just all that difference.

So how long did this Kittyhawk stay with the squadron?

About half way up we started to convert. Round about (UNCLEAR) I think we got six, and they gave us a nice soft job. Escort a plane, Lysander, you know the high wing mono plane? They had to take a couple of spies up and drop them behind the lines, up near where [Benito] Mussolini [Italian Prime Minister] was in the mountains. So they went off and God, they were back in no ruddy time. I said, 'That was a quick trip'. And he didn't like speaking, this CO,

17:30 Murray Nash at the time. And he said, 'The bastards shot him down.' I said, 'Who?' 'The Yanks'. Returning from Germany or something, where they'd been bombing, spotted the Lysander, us flying round him, went right through us. We knew we should shoot them down, but you can't, they're allies. They shot the poor bugger was down. So there was hell to pay over that. But it's just the insolence of Yanks. Friendly fire. God, they caused some trouble.

18:00 **Tell me the push into Italy then?**

Into Italy. We had been expecting it and had been waterproofing the vessels. Although it became unnecessary because when the vessels left Sicily they were able to get hard standing when they landed in Italy. But everybody was getting ready for it. We didn't have an exact date, it was about two days away I think.

18:30 And the Anzio people made a landing, but they couldn't get off the beach. And the trenches were only twenty of thirty yards apart, couldn't call on bombers, because they'd wipe both of them out. So they wanted Fighter Bombers. Well we were over in Sicily. No way could a Fighter Bomber fly from Sicily, right across the other side of Italy and get back again. So they said right, be ready to go in the morning and you'll land at Grottaglie in Italy,

19:00 so they brought the division in, half at night, half in the morning, took the place and secured it. But they only saw a couple of Germans, which they grabbed. Everybody had gone across to fight the landing. So it didn't take much to secure it at all. We landed no trouble, no one firing at us anywhere. And I think I told you about getting stuck into refuelling, a hell of a job. Took a long time. But it was most successful.

19:30 They got inland.

Where were you first based in Italy?

Grottaglie, just outside Taranto.

Tell me what daily life was like for you there?

It was quite good. We weren't doing anything. Waiting for the crane to come to move the three prangs, apart from that nothing, except go over and get a cold shower. This icy bloody water, burnt you. The Italian boys, three of them in the barracks used to invite us over,

20:00 said the place is yours, take over. I was lucky, I think I only went into quarters twice the whole time I was in Italy, two years on. Most of the blokes were like that, but the cooks and bottle washers used to like getting under cover, for a good night's sleep, but I preferred a tent, nice and cosy and when the snow falls on you, I'd get up and give it a couple of pokes and it all goes off.

20:30 Living conditions were good, the rations were good, but still no fresh meat. We never had fresh meat. Just before, or just after Marble Arch, the CO said to me, 'You haven't been up front at any time?' I said, 'No'. He said, 'Well, you better go up. Things aren't too busy here'. So I went up the front with my mate, we pitched our tent, dug our slit trench, got into bed,

21:00 and the next morning I said to some of the erks there, 'Would you like to come and get some fresh meat'. They said, 'Oh, yes'. So I loaded up the ute and away we went. And we were shooting, bang, bang, bang, bang. We'd drop a bloke off. Bang, bang, bang, bang. Another bloke off. So when the truck was empty I thought, 'Bloody hell, I've got to find all these blokes now'. So the only way I could see them was to get down on ground level, and their shimmy would show. So I'd head for the shimmy and it would be the bloke.

21:30 So we got about a dozen or so gazelles, hanging all over them when we got back. But just before we got back to our base, 109s were strafing it, three of them. And or course everyone's taking cover and in the middle of being strafed, this Kittyhawk comes flying around the 'drome. He was keeping them off the 'drome where they were strafing. I don't know whether they saw him or not, but of course the ruddy Kiwis [New Zealanders], they were yelling at the poor pilot, 'Get up and shoot 'em down!'

22:00 So he took no notice of them, just kept going around. Once they went away he landed. And we were back there by then. And I said, 'What are you doing here?' He said, 'The CO wants you back. We've got no serviceable aircraft'. He said, 'We haven't got a serviceable aircraft. We can't put anything up until tomorrow'. So I put all my gear back in the truck and got back about nine,

22:30 but no bugger would tell me what happened. And I didn't hear until recently that they had a severe thunder, sandstorm, one of the worst they'd ever had, came at night. They'd been warned about it and everything had to be covered, usually we just covered the cockpit, made it airtight. And exhausts, we had plugs to be put in soon as they landed, and the speedo tube, measured the speed, had a cover over it, and the intake,

23:00 we put a big plug on it. So I can't see where the sand got in, but I have a feeling it may have been the Warrant Officer kind of jumped the gun, and thought nothing could survive that and he USd (unserviceable) them. Because the CO was up in arms, so I went back and we made them by midday, they were all on the line, but I think they were quite OK actually.

Which base did this happen on?

23:30 This happened on Agheila. That's the farthest point the previous pushes had got, Agheila. But we got one 'drome further, and we ended up going right through of course. But we had one 'drome, Marble Arch. It was a sad time for our blokes really. We couldn't keep up, we were so far back, the flight went off

24:00 on the aerodrome, the aircraft got there, eight stappers had been killed taking mines off the field. And they were trapped, you know. They'd find a mine here and lift it out, and they'd explode one over there amongst their own bods. Well, they said it was fairly clear but our people borrowed a truck from the army and were going around to service the aircraft. One bloke jumped out and he landed on an S Mine. He didn't know. They used to bury them about six to eight inches. When you land on them, they compressed,

24:30 and as soon as you took your foot off, it would shoot up about six feet and it was full of ball bearings. Well, he didn't know. He jumped off, it exploded and it holed about six aircraft with ball bearings, about thirty or forty yards away. But it killed five blokes. They were all maintenance people of mine and it was just before Christmas. So we had our Christmas do and it wasn't a very happy one. And the blokes sixty mile up,

25:00 we sent all their stuff up in the Gibley and they had their Christmas do, but they were sorry they weren't there to see their mates. So, Christmas Day was not a good day.

That would be Christmas '43, would it?

Christmas '42. Yeah, '43, we were in Italy then.

25:30 **Ken, I would like to ask you more about Italy. Did you get into the town, Taranto was it, much?**

Not much into Taranto because they hated our guts. When you flew into Taranto, looked at the harbour,

it was full of warships. The Poms Fairey Swordfish had wrecked the ruddy place. All over the harbour was battleships and cruisers, and I suppose they were all had bloody, full of troops, and so they hardly spoke to us. And you were warned not to go in on your own,

26:00 so we didn't do any shop or anything there, and when all the crowd arrived and we all had our full complement in Italy, we went to Bari and that was a different kettle of fish. Jerry had missed it, all the shops had goodies in, and we went in and I think we were getting 200 lira to the pound and they were working on the pre-war,

26:30 eighty lira, so we were on a good ruddy thing. I bought a portable typewriter, five pounds. So I said, 'I'll have half a dozen'. He said, 'No more, only have one'. Fortunately, I managed to get a dressing gown. It was great shopping. And the people, really good. But the kids in Bari, must have seen the propaganda film because as soon as they spotted the Aussies, with the upturned felt,

27:00 they screamed out, 'Australianos, grande capelli' and took off. I asked some of the shopkeepers, 'What's this about?' Oh, they had a propaganda film here, the Germans, showing Australians cutting wrists off to get watches off their prisoners. I don't know who they were but they were certainly weren't Aussies. We soon got the kids around, though. Showed them flashlights. They'd never seen a flashlight torch.

27:30 They had this one with a little dyno in and you pressed the thing. And the further we went north, the more friendly they got. Because they found that their husbands and that, as the army was overtaken, some were still held up by the Germans, they freed them and they came home again. So it was a queer war. Front not much good, behind very friendly. And so many Aussies were asked to send messages home in their letters to people in Australia,

28:00 because they had no postage. The boys would write, they'd get no sense, they'd get an Italian to make sense of it, and write it in, but it must have been a great comfort for the people in Australia to know their folk were OK. And there must have been a hell of a lot of Italians here in Australia at the time.

How were you keeping in touch with your family?

I used to write every day but I think post it probably twice a week. I think I told you about the airmail. Used to go

28:30 and you'd get 20 or 30 letters at a time. Might be two or three months. And everybody would number them, same at home so you knew which one to open first. Until we got the air letters and they used to go daily. They were fantastic. If you sent it off daily, a sheet was just right.

Were you thinking much about the family at home at this point?

Oh, yes, a lot. The padres got together and said seeing we're all here doing the same job we should get a prayer that's common to all the boys,

29:00 which they did. It went like this, no matter whether you were Catholic or what, 'Almighty God, O Heavenly Father, bless all those we love whilst we're separated. Help us to be true to each other and to Thee, and keep us by the Holy Spirit. Amen.' Well, that covered all religions. It was good. It covered family at home, and it wasn't hard to remember all of it.

29:30 Yeah, they were great.

You found that a comfort?

Yes, but I could pray for my family all right. It was when you stand up in front of a lot of people, praying for the world in general, different matter.

So you found Italy was a land of contradictions for you?

Italy was a holiday after the desert. The desert was an ideal place for war. I mean, they could kill each other off and there was nothing there to damage very much.

30:00 But Italy was, the only damage done around the place seemed to be the bridges, into the town or out of the town. And we destroyed a lot of those ourselves. That's number one target, I think, was destroying bridges, road blocks. Didn't see many aerial battles going on. We lost a few. We still had a job, we got a lot of Mustangs over in Yugoslavia

30:30 and they'd been having such a great time in sweeps against the Germans that the CO suddenly realised that he didn't have enough petrol to get home on, so he announced to his troops, 'All those with 40 gallons and less, go back home, make your own way home'. Some had more, some had 60. But I was talking to a bloke, Shorty Ferris, he's from Armidale. We met him the other day at a function.

31:00 He said, 'I had 30'. He said, 'I got in. We ran into a fog going home. We didn't know who was near us, but I made it, I got through', but two of the boys, we don't know whether they collided, whether they didn't know what height they were, but they just flew into the water. And never found them. Anyway, Ron Tarrant was one. Only a new lad, nice boy. But we never knew what a Kitty or Mustang would do,

31:30 and after we'd had them a few months they gave our CO and his Flight Commander, I think one of his Flight Commanders, a job to go and sweep the whole of Yugoslavia. Put long range tanks on and we

reckoned round about four and a quarter, four and a half hours they should be back. Well, we waited for them to come back, five hours, five and a quarter, five hours and twenty minutes, they flew. Staggered in with nothing. Long range tanks were used up and they dropped them.

32:00 But it's amazing what you can do when you've got to.

Were your bases in Italy ever under attack?

No, no. I can't ever recall air raid on us after Agnone, when you know, they dropped the flares down and just bombed in between them. That's the last big raid we had. They did raid Bari after, but not us,

32:30 we weren't there, we'd moved on. They sank a couple of ammunition ships and it'd been totally passed by the Germans, but a couple of ammunition ships blown up in the harbour can make a bit of a mess around it. But that's the only time I heard of an air raid on them.

So you had more troubles with the American friendly fire?

Oh, friendly fire. Ruddy cruel. That bombing Cassino, we were all bombing Cassino, too. And to scare the Germans in a dive,

33:00 when we were diving on them in our planes, we had taken some screamers about a foot long, off their thousand pound bombs, there'd been a few of them, and as they came down there was a hell of a wail going. And all our aircraft had them on the wing tips, so we could here this screaming coming long before you could see the aircraft. If they boys were having a cup of tea somewhere, they had time to get off the strip before they landed.

33:30 And one of my mates was shot down there and he landed just off an Auster strip where they were based, I suppose, fifteen miles from Casino. I'll tell you about the trip going over. Hairy goaty trip. And I went and inspected it, it was a good prang. It wouldn't take much to fix it. So I took the clock and I took the screamers, we were running short of screamers. We weren't seeing many German bombers around the place.

34:00 And we got that and fitted those on our aircraft, and we had a couple left right till the war finished. But this ruddy business of going in a foreign country, not knowing where the aerodromes were. But they decided to go. The CO who was a South African Wing, loaned us the aircraft and he said, 'Don't prang it. I've only just got it'.

34:30 And he was a lieutenant ruddy colonel. So we took it, assuming it had never flown. He'd just finished his ops, clapped out. And the Intelligence Office said to me, he said, 'Watch when you're flying down that he doesn't stray near the bomb lines. Keep down this way'. Well he was flying the ruddy thing, I wasn't flying it. And after he'd been going a quarter of an hour, pop, pop. And I said to him 'The black stuff!' He said, 'Oh, no. Only smoke'.

35:00 And I thought, 'Gee, George. You were ruddy right'. So he followed the train line along, and we came to a mountain, and Vanafro was a little town there, and we went over the top of the mountain, we didn't go through the thing, and when we got half way over it, it opened up into a big gully, instead of going to the left he went to the right over to the bomb line. He was sitting there admiring the snow underneath the trees,

35:30 and thud, thud, thud, thud. 'What's that, the engine backfiring?' I said, 'No, get into the smoke, Forty mil probably'. Before we got there, thud, thud, thud, thud, missed us again. So we had to fly around this ruddy great valley in the smoke. Soon as they would spot us, thud, thud, thud, thud. So we went over the top in the smoke. Didn't become visible then, and we came out in the clearing and there were our tanks down below with the rondels on them, so I thought 'If we got a prang at least we're in friendly territory'.

36:00 And I'd been telling him before to watch out for a 'drome so we could get some petrol, it was showing empty. So we spotted an Auster going, and we followed him in. Well, Milt had never flown an Auster before so the first time he went to land, he overshot it. He had to put the emergency flaps down, throttle back, and we just made it, and I think the bloke who filled it up said we had a gallon left. And an army bod came out and he said, 'Where did you blokes come from?'

36:30 I said, 'Up there'. 'What were you doing up there?' I said, 'Getting shot at'. He said, 'They must have known you were joy riding'. He said, 'He said we go up there trying to invite shots all day so we can tell the army where they are'. So we were very lucky. And I thought gee, wait until I get back to the ruddy camp and the pilots start whinging at me about the engines backfiring at twenty thousand feet. They've got armour behind them, they sit on armour, and here we were in a little flimsy air craft, no armour. In fact, I don't think I had a parachute. I forget now. So.

37:00 **Was the leap frogging technique used through Italy?**

Yes, about the same. And sometimes Jerry would make a big stand, we'd all come together. A few lines, they'd battle each other for a couple of weeks before it moved. Then the desert air force, they'd put the desert air force on and they'd blast a hole probably half a mile through, then they'd get through. The Germans would retreat.

37:30 But, we could never understand. The River Parra. They blew a bridge up across the Parra, a big river.

And the trucks, they said, they'll be right for the morning, we'll go and bomb them, they were all lined up to go across the river. And when they got there, they were gone. They'd built a road under the water, about two feet under, and of course, didn't want the allies to see it. And as soon as it got dark, they all went across. So it was good when we got there. We could go across.

38:00 Although they'd just put a new pontoon bridge down, and they said, 'Now, take bloody care of this bridge. It took a bloody lot of building'. But it was a good bridge. And that was the end of the war nearly then. A couple of weeks to go, and the writing was on the wall. It was about that time that Tedder had all the Wing Commanders, Sergeant Wigg, Brian Wigg was and Wilmot, Colonel Wilmot,

38:30 and he was an ex-pilot of ours, CO, he went down there and I'd met Tedder before when he picked these fellows to do the Combined Operations course. He said to Brian during the evening. He said, 'Mark my words'. He said, 'I know you and McRae have got a two seater Kittyhawk not on charge (emphasised that) but God help you if anyone's killed in it. You'll both go for the chop'.

39:00 Well, I was a bit worried, and Brian was a bit worried. He only let certain people fly it, and what happens? About two weeks before the war finishes, this Wing Commander next to him in the Wing wanted to take the Wing Adjutant up, and he did a tour in a Kittyhawk so he said yes, and they did a bit of strafing. And coming back he runs out of petrol. So he crashes it. Ruddy caught on fire.

39:30 You've got no idea. I had a picture of it, I've been looking for it. It was a hell of a mess. How they lived I don't know. For a fortnight, they were like this. We wondered if we would get the chop. Who was the chopper. But they made it. In fact, he was such a good friend of Brian Wigg, this bloke, that he was Godfather to some of his kids. But I'd have shot him myself. Ruddy good two seater. The only one in the world.

40:00 And why I know it's the only one in the world. You've probably struck this bloke, Watson, Geoff Watson? Channel Nine?

Yeah.

He does a lot of work for them. And he said to me one day, now I'm just about to start a story on a two-seater Kittyhawk. The only one in the world that had ever been. Up in Scone. A bloke up there had all foreign aircraft and British aircraft. And I said, 'Sorry to disappoint you, Geoff. We had one half way through Italy. We had hundreds of hours up on ours'. Never heard another thing, he wiped it off, in fact they pranged it two days later.

Tape 6

00:30 **We've just got the tape rolling, Ken, if you would like to continue.**

We had some bad accidents in the desert, but that can happen anywhere. Just bringing to mind, even here at Richmond, as you drive past the 'drome there's a big mound. Did you see that? Well, they didn't have that there for years, and the citizens, the air force, 22 Squadron, were doing their gunnery practice

01:00 and they'd go back up the hangar and clean their guns out, and one day someone fired off a cannon. We don't know where the shell went, but it was pointed down to the main road. We never heard of anyone being blasted. But in future they said, down below, right down, any checking that's got to be done, in case they had a runaway gun, or something, that mound was to stop the shell from going anywhere. That's the only reason that's there.

01:30 But we had people working, as soon as the kite came down, they get in a clean the guns, packing them up, all doing their checks together. And twice, two occasions, blokes in front, doing the guns would be shot. Things would be put on accidentally. A .5 through him. He'd had it. Another one was an aircraft starting up, a little Predelphio. You had to swing the prop like a Tiger Moth. And we were flat out. We'd just got a job coming up.

02:00 And Rex Bailey, my offsider, used to help me with the driving, he was a Sergent, also an electrician. He said, 'I'll start it up. I've started it up half a dozen times'. So he went away to start it. Then there was a great hoy and a howl, and I look over and he's on the ruddy ground. Fire. I took my shirt off as I ran, but it was too ruddy late, his shirt had burnt off.

02:30 Because he always kept his shirt on, like me, but the only think I could put on him, apart from my shirt, was his own flag he was getting autographed. He was going around getting autographs on a German swastika. I wrapped that around him. Now how it happened was, the only way we could get this ruddy Predelphio started, we'd been starting it for ages like that, 30 or 40 times. Was half a cup of petrol down the air intake. Then switch things on, Boom! She'd go.

03:00 Well, they went through the normal procedure, and Boom! Turn it on. It didn't start up, kicked a bit, so Rex threw the rest, a quarter of a cup into the thing and it must have been burning inside, because it blew back on him. And he had these 100 Octane burns on him. I think that's part of the trouble. They

rushed him down to the Advanced Army Unit there, worked in with the air force, doctors and nurses there, but he died a couple of days later.

03:30 We went down to see him, he was already dead. Ruddy terrible. Of course, there was a great stink about that after. By then we were in Italy. Before the paperwork caught up, and Brian Eaton said, 'Look at this. It's been dealt with. I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'The RAF are holding a Court of Enquiry and they wanted to know how a Sergeant Electrician was starting up an aircraft. What authority did he have?'

04:00 and I said, 'Well, that's easy enough to answer.' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Before any bloke can pass out of his rookies [initial training], he's got to swing a prop. It's endorsed on his papers'. I said, 'There's an air force order telling you what it was'. He said, 'Well, I'll go through the amendments you find it in the air force thing'. Now, I did the amendments, he did the IFO. And he found the IFO and I said, 'Now, here's a change to it'. And his face dropped.

04:30 I said, 'Now it's more our way'. It said, 'In addition to all air craftsmen learning to swing the prop, all aircraft women have to do the same thing'. So, RAF didn't practice that. That shut things up, nothing ever said. It was just an accident. Unlucky. Then we had, in Sicily we had a tanker caught alight. It could have been started by enemy fire because they were all under cover at the time, and the tanker driver drove it up part of the way. He was killed.

05:00 And then in Pascino, to make a mess, they cleaned out a house there, quite a big house, and washed the floor with petrol. Well, before all the boys could get after scrubbing it and whatnot, putting petrol on, somebody struck a match to it over here, and Whoof! He was burnt. Died a couple of days after. But apart from that, things were good.

05:30 **So how far into Italy were you when the war ended?**

Twenty five miles to the Austrian border. Right at the top. Yugoslavia had been cleaned up, but that's about fifteen mile that way. Yeah, about twenty, twenty five mile.

And what was the base you were at, at that point?

Oh, I can't think of the name, but the town, the big town nearby was Udine,

06:00 U-D-I-N-E, Udine. People were nice but we were down a little further than that, just out of town and that's where we finished up the war, on that particular 'drome. When they had the big victory fly pass of the desert air force, they all flew along there, not far above the ground there, and 3 Squadron came along, and Figure 3 (draws '3' with his finger). Looked good.

So how did you hear the news that the war had ended?

06:30 As soon as it ended, we knew. It was like, Intelligence Units were good and they kept all the units informed, seems Italy had tossed it in during the war. Our blokes knew and they, some had been shot down, Tail End Charlies, and they'd been kept in wineries and places like that before they'd been captured. Italians were good that way. But no, if anything happened we knew almost immediately.

07:00 In fact, after they landed, D-Day [allied invasion of Europe in 1944], from England, across the EP and that, we had a Canadian Colonel come out, and took the Wing, squadron by squadron, and told them about the landing, how it went, who couldn't get ashore and things like that. On time. It was very good. Made you feel like you were there.

07:30 **So were you ready to go all the way into Austria and Germany?**

No, we knew it would be over. We were getting ready to go to Japan. We were going to be equipped with Hornets, and go to Japan. It didn't come to that. And a funny thing, six weeks, two months before the war finished, they took nearly all our single men away from us, flew them to England, scattered them all over the units in England, across to Germany and all that.

08:00 They had a ball. Because they hadn't got into the way of things, and it finished. That left us pretty bare, but as I said, the maintenance was getting less, less flights, because not many Germans left.

So, how was your time filled in with less work? If you had less work to do, how were you filling in your time?

Oh, there was plenty to do, with towns nearby.

08:30 All the blokes getting ready, getting the best tools they had, and sorting them out, because tools had to be handed in and some of these blokes had nice tools, which they'd captured and whatnot. So I gave authority, I said, 'These tools are the personal property of so and so'. I gave them that in case customs queried it. Got over it that way.

So were these preparations for coming home happening before the war had ended?

09:00 No, not quite. Going to England, converting onto, not Mosquitos, Hornets, seemed to be the main thing in the air at the time. And when the war did finish, we only had a little time before we handed all the trucks in, etc. and we went down by train, down to Taranto again, and they were no friendlier than they

were when we arrived. Just the ruddy same. Can't blame them I don't suppose.

09:30 All those dead there in the harbour.

How do you account for the varying reactions of Italians, some of them very friendly, others not?

Ninety percent were friendly. We couldn't growl, they were good. Oh, we had parties there. The padre officers, when we were in the desert, they had thought of it but there were no towns nearby to have it. You couldn't have girls.

10:00 So by the time we got to Fano, they decided they'd call, we had Koala Casa, Koala home, and once a week we'd have a dance there, and we had cooks and bottle washers there working, Italians, and you'd go down there of a night and have a drink. Take any girls in, supper, and then we had a dance, and it was a good one. About a hundred people attend, and there'd be mamma and a daughter, mamma and a daughter,

10:30 but only once and then the daughters would come along with the boys. It was quite good. When we got to Cervia. Cervia was a funny place. It was a holiday centre where all the rich people went, they had their homes there. Normally they were empty and they were empty now of course, but they had these lovely homes right along the Cervia waterfront, and a ruddy big club, a whopping one, and it must have been 100 yards long, the main floor in it, smooth cement,

11:00 which we turned into a dance floor. And Fred was away and Johnny McNamara was away and it was myself and Padre, Bob Davies, he did most of the work because I had to keep my eye on the air craft, but when I wasn't doing anything there I'd be with him and he's going around interviewing the Mayoress, trying to get girls, and he met a Marquise, I don't know if she was the mayoress and she said,

11:30 'Oh, I'll bring six lovely girls, just finished university'. Some were a bit longer than a couple of years. So we were looking forward to that, but some of the boys, most of them brought a girl. And mamma a girl, mamma a girl, mamma a girl. Mamma didn't come the next time. The first time, yes, then they saw how ruddy well behaved the boys were, they choofed off, and things were going well. We had our own orchestra, the boys could play, we had to knock them back.

12:00 We had cornet players, violin players, squeeze box, piano, no trouble to get an orchestra. I suppose almost heading up towards supper time. I hadn't had but two dances and I danced with the girl Bob had. I thought, he's got her speaking English, I'd cut in on him, you see, and have a dance with a strawberry blonde. Anyway after supper, no it wasn't, just before supper, the Marquise had spoken to Bob about something,

12:30 and Bob came over to me red faced, and he said, 'Crikey, Ken, we've got trouble'. I said, 'What trouble have we got' 'Well, the Marquise said there were two undesirable girls here, and if we don't get rid of them, she'll take her six away'. I said, 'How the ruddy hell can we send the girls away. The boys have brought them. As long as they behave here, that's all that matters to us'. 'Well, she said they had to go'. I said, 'Well, you go back and tell her, I'm not going to tell her, that they've been invited by the boys. It's no business of ours,

13:00 as long as they behave here'. He went back and told her, and she stormed off, but the girls wouldn't go. They stayed and they were lovely girls. I had so many barbecues down at their homes. Yes, it was fantastic.

Why were those two girls undesirable?

Oh, well, instead of saying they were easy girls, the Italians used to say, 'She's multa generous, generoso'. So anyway when the show was over, they'd all gone home and Bob and I were there tidying up a bit, and I said, 'Who were the two girls who were undesirable?' He said, 'Well, the strawberry blonde was one'. The only girl I danced with in the early part of the night, yeah. But those other girls, they were lovely girls. Our blokes appreciated them. A couple of them in the early piece, tried to get them into bed,

14:00 but not ruddy likely. No good. They said, 'Ring on finger first!' Ha ha. But they hated Yanks.

Did they?

Oh, the Yanks would drive along the street, you see, and they'd sing out, 'Signorina, come to me, come dorme with me, come sleep with me'. They'd just turn their ruddy head. They hated their guts. The English weren't much better, because the Tommies would blow their ruddy nose, walking along,

14:30 you know the Pommys. And we were popular because so many had families in Australia and 450 and 3 Squadron had a lone run mostly with the girls. We had no trouble getting a dance with a couple of hundred girls in some of these places. Yeah, lovely, Italy. Holiday.

Did you come across any Australian POWs in Italy?

15:00 Yes, near the end we had a lot come down who were living up, they had been POWs and they were living on farms and a lot of them had married girls on the farms. And when they came down they said, 'Make

sure there's no Military Police around because we're not going home'. So they came down and took some goodies back with them. Could've been half a dozen.

15:30 The boys knew all about them, looked after them. But they were quite happily married and everything.

How did they manage to get married when they were prisoners?

Oh, I think you can do anything if you've got the right . . . The families apparently had them working on the farm. Some went to POW camps but not many. The early ones, we had a couple with the Governor-General's flight

16:00 and they said, oh, lost my train.

The Governor-Generals like, the ex POWs.

Oh, POWs, and one bloke said, from the time he was shot down in France, he went straight to this farm, and he was there for two years. On the farm, working. He enjoyed it, open life. Others go to POW camps, like I told you about the mob due for execution, and they, no rhyme nor reason in it.

16:30 I think it depended where you pranged.

Did you know much about the war in the Pacific?

We used to hear the news, yes. Got a bit worried when the lost Singapore, but they kept us up to date with things, but we couldn't see the Japs causing Australia much harm with all those Americans coming in on our side. That's why we had to back them here and now. Britain's too far away,

17:00 they are no assistance to us now, but the Yanks being very friendly with us, I think that's what's keeping the ruddy Indonesians out of the ruddy way. Because they've got a million men under arms there, they'll eat us up overnight. But having the Yanks to deal with is a different matter.

Did you ever feel that you wanted to fight in the Pacific?

Pardon?

Did you want to fight in the Pacific yourself?

No, we thought at the time we would be going to Japan.

17:30 **So you expected to be going there?**

Yes, they told us over in the piece, that our next mission would be Japan. Whether, where we'd be based, they didn't say, but we'd be going to England first. But of course, all that fell by the wayside.

Were you ever frustrated while you were over there, knowing Australia was under threat?

No. I realised from all the ruddy lectures we had that the Middle East was, they reckoned,

18:00 the crux of the whole thing. If they could get to the Middle East and get the oil, there'd be no holding them. That partly was the same thing in the First World War.

Tell me, when you said you made history by the landing in Italy. Tell me about that.

Yes, when they landed near Salerno, and couldn't get off the beach.

18:30 They sent across to 239 Wing, send a squadron over, it will be safe by the time they get there. So, we were picked, good old Steely Grey, but they were all looking forward to this. We took about an eighth of our crowd, enough to service the aircraft, bombs and petrol, hand pumps, the works, you know, and we landed there. We had them off about half past two, three o'clock in the afternoon,

19:00 and the mere fact that we landed in Italy, an operational squadron, and operated the same day, we became the first allied air craft to land in mainland Europe after Dunkirk. A couple of days later, we had the Poms and we had SAAFies [South Africans], they all came in together, but we were the first there by a day or two. That was quite an honour.

19:30 **Were you aware of that at the time?**

No, but very few people are aware of it now. It should be on the ruddy calendars, where they give the honorary days of so and so, you see all types of things, but that one should have been the first. However. We survived. We had some good times in Italy.

Another thing I wanted to ask you about Italy, you said this morning that you had the CO listening to your advice.

Yes, well, if anything came up,

20:00 like this particular, it was just unfortunate, he'd been a sergeant two weeks before, and he was now a CO until Brian got back, he went straight to squadron leader, went to his head I think, called all the troops together. Now Brian Eaton and Bobby Gibbes would never have done this without having a yarn about the best way to put it over, the RAF sent a very nasty letter around

20:30 to all the squadrons, get a full gathering and tell them they are not to fraternise with the Italians, they are not to give any food to the children who hang around the camps. All this ruddy thing, you see, and I thought, 'You silly clot'. And all the blokes were stamping on different ruddy feet, 'Who the ruddy hell is he to tell us what to do with our food?' That's the way they looked at it. Besides that,

21:00 they'd finished the Desert Campaign and they were winners, and they were gong to stay winners. So when he finished, all the blokes turned around, it was meal time for the erks, we had it down under the trees and whatnot, and all the kids were standing around with their plates, and all the erks turned around and emptied all their plates, not half of it, the whole ruddy lot, onto these other things. So, 'Bugger you'. The CO didn't know what to do. I said to him after,

21:30 'What made you do that?' He said, 'The instructions said so and so'. I said, 'All you had to do was tell the blokes we've received this letter from the RAF that you're not to fraternise, and you're not to give your food' And you feed us just a ruddy memo, but he was, you mustn't do this. He learnt. Yeah.

Tell me then about your homecoming. How did you get home from Italy?

22:00 Oh, some got on one boat and we hung around for a month in Taranto. Long enough for some of us to go up to Alexandria and see some of the places up there. One particular place I wanted to see was the American Long Bar in Alexandria. All our troops used to make it their home when they went into town. Give all their money to Penney, the bloke who owned it, and eat with him and drink, and then go around the concerts

22:30 and whatnot that were going. He held the money until they went back home. He loaned some of them some money, and I said. 'Did you get caught with any of the blokes?' 'Only two, of all the people who dealt with me, and left all their money, only two diddled me for a little bit. I didn't mind that. That was pretty good going'. But they had all kind of things going, like Madam Bardia,

23:00 she owned a big place called Bardia House, and there was a big concert there. And she could belly dance. It was fantastic watching that ruddy belly go round in circles, you know. We had a bloke from (UNCLEAR), he got a bit drunk, next thing he's up, with his shirt pulled up, next thing he's up with Madam Bardia, doing this ruddy dance. But on the whole though, it was a good spell, waiting to go home.

Who was Madam Bardia?

Madam Bardia owned the joint. But she could dance. She was a belly dancer.

23:30 Made a lot of money out of grog and food.

So how did you get home from there?

We went on a boat. I forget which one it was now. Sterling Castle? Some ruddy ship. We had that many false alarms, you know. Boat would come there, it could only take a hundred. Eventually we got one, squeezed us on. We got home.

24:00 It was quite a good run, because some of the boys were having some fun with about eighty WRENs were coming out on the boat. They were going to Ceylon, and some of the islands. And then when we got to Perth, everybody went up town to ring home. And a lot of our people had been in 3 Squadron and they were over fifty they sent them home, half way through Italy, and of course they were there waiting to pick us up and take us to their homes, you know. We had a great night.

24:30 I had relatives took me up to Greenmount, but I said, I've got to get back to those homes to go back to the boat. Actually, I didn't know what time we had to get back to the boat, we had a great reunion, meeting all their families. And only one night there. I think it was midnight or one o'clock when we sailed. And we didn't go to Adelaide, went to Melbourne, and half the squadron got off there, they went up town,

25:00 they had a march through the town. And a bloke joined us, same bars as I was, and he was from air force headquarters, he came down, and he said 'Come up to headquarters and we'll see if we can find out where you're posted to'. So, we went up there and I was posted to ruddy Melbourne again. This ruddy Victorian number business. And we talked the bloke into posting me to Richmond, which he agreed to, and of course I was right, I got to Sydney and had my leave, my disembarkation leave,

25:30 and posted to Richmond which, great.

Where was you wife living?

She was living in Parkes. And then, before I got back she had moved to Richmond when it looked like the war was finishing. She knew that there would be a big panic, everyone couldn't move at once, so she got permission to move down, she was in Richmond when I got back. I built a house in Richmond and we moved into it the week war was declared. Didn't look too good.

26:00 **Tell me about meeting your wife again and all that time?**

Oh, yes. I started, I didn't tell you, I started courting eight years before we were married. Only been

courting a couple of years, and out of work. Ruddy Depression. And then when I got onto a job at Lysaght's, and I was there, quite happy, and saving up to get married.

26:30 Those days you didn't, unless you saved all your own money you couldn't buy anything. There was no TP [credit programs] or anything in those days. You saved up when you wanted something and then you bought it. You might own half a dining room suite or something, save up for twelve months and buy the other half. That's what we were doing, but we were going to be married in 1936, but lo and behold in March '36 I joined the Air Force,

27:00 and I couldn't get back se we put it off twelve months to 1937 and I had leave coming from the year before, so I had around about a month's leave to take. Got married and went to Kosciusko for our honeymoon. It was fantastic. And started to make plans while we were in Newcastle for building a house. Had a mate who was a builder, he and his father were always building.

27:30 I drew the house up and they went through it and so we had a couple of contractors at Richmond and they built the house, and we moved in the week war was declared, which was a pity. We got twelve months out of it before I was posted away to the Showgrounds, and didn't see the house for seven years. And same thing in there, you find a house, you just get in, and you get posted again. So we ended up,

28:00 I was posted to Parkes and we moved to Parkes, which was a good thing really because just after we left the midget subs shelled Sydney and Newcastle and the suburbs and they all had young kids. Eve didn't have any at the time, but they all had young kids, no we did have, Malcolm was born in September. They all went to live in Parkes, and rents were so cheap you could have got a house

28:30 down on the waterfront, for nix almost. Because people just took off. And of course as the war progressed and there were less chances of things happening in Sydney Harbour, they all came back. People were already there paying rent, they couldn't increase their rent. It was very good. So Eve came back when things looked like they were going to change, and I was posted to Richmond and I was there for two years, and I went from there to the

29:00 Governor-General's flight, which was good. Billy McKell, he was a great bloke, and his family.

Before we get to that, just when you came back from the war, I wonder if you could just describe to me, what happened when you arrived back in Sydney?

Well, we got on to buses and they took us out to Bradfield Park and we went through the town. And they gave us a bit of a ticker tape. I think there were about twenty busloads of troops.

29:30 And all the families had been notified and they were all seated in various places. And the Parson who had sent me to the churches to fill in once, he was the padre there, and he found me and I was looking for the group. He took me right to where they were. And there was my son, and three years old before I saw him. In fact, he was so funny at times, he'd seen pictures of me with a cap on,

30:00 and on the bus or a tram he'd see the conductor with a cap on and he'd say, 'Is that my daddy?' Ha. But Mum was there, and the whole, the whole family was there, and from there we went to relatives places for lunch and we were given our report, come back in two weeks. So we went back in two weeks and set off on embarkation leave. Disembarkation.

30:30 **What was it like seeing, you saw your son for the first time that day?**

A bit strange. A bit strange. Eve had done a good job, I mean, but he used to suck his finger. That drove me up the ruddy wall. I must have been a hard bloke to get with. Because I remember once, going crook at him, but he went outside the fence and I went over and I could hear what he was saying, 'I wish he would go back overseas'. That rocked me a bit. So I had to change my tactics.

31:00 **Was it an emotional reunion?**

Yes, yes. After three and a half years, a long time. It's a long time, especially when they said twelve months. The other two lots had been changed over twelve months, the African Campaign had finished, would have been twelve months. But no, we go on. Maybe just as well, because the bulk of the people that came back, ended up in New Guinea. And that's a hell of a place, New Guinea. Fevers and whatnot all the time. I think we had the best end of the stick.

31:30 **How was your health overseas?**

Good. I was only sick once with a fever when we were going to go to Malta. Some of them got Gyppo gut [explained below] and were sick the whole time.

Was illness a big problem with the squadron?

32:00 **A bit like having bad meals, you know, upset you stomach. Some could get really bad and be put into hospital. I haven't heard of anyone dying with it. But some would get it recurring, every couple of years it comes back. A bit like malaria.**

Had you seen any pictures of your son while you were away?

Oh, yes. Regularly. Yes. Mail came through very well. Oh, the kids did all right out of it.

32:30 The Italians were very advanced in plastics. We get over there and the kids are running around in plastic raincoats with a hood on them. Fantastic. And I sent back two or three, and all the orders came back, dozens. All the relatives wanted them. But lovely fine plastic. Yeah, they were well ahead of us in plastic.

33:00 **How did your wife react? She was expecting you to go for twelve months, was she?**

Yes, and when I told her we were going to Malta, there was not much we could do about it. Ruddy war.

How did she react?

Oh, I think she was pretty upset, but fortunately, she had all her family around her. And I suppose there 199 other families felt the same way.

Was it difficult to settle down to family life?

33:30 No, no. I looked forward so much to it, I fell right into it again, I was right. Great to just be a help to Eve.

And suddenly you're a father of a three year old

Yeah, terrible isn't it.

How did you respond to that?

34:00 I responded very well, I thought. But I was a bit scared he might be becoming a sissy, just having Eve all the time. I think that's why I was a little bit hard on him at times, but after a couple of years, it all sorted itself out.

In what ways were you hard on him?

I think I was trying to make sure he acted more like a boy. Like, every time he came to a dog, he'd walk around the dog and say, 'Excuse me, doggy'. Yeh.

34:30 **And what did you tell him to do?**

Walk over the ruddy dog. No, he was a very good boy. And of course, then when Graeme came along, he was the second boy, and Graeme, I was building a garage at the time, and he used to sit in the pram while I was putting the walls on, or the ceiling one, and then we had a daughter but,

35:00 a bit of a strife there. At three weeks of age she got the croup. You know the croup. What's the one where they gasp for breath? Whooping cough. It was pretty ruddy dicey, and I'd been with the Governor-Generals Flight for two and a half years, so I put in for compassionate leave, and got it. Went home, and after three weeks in hospital, I went and brought them home.

35:30 She never looked back. And then we had Kim, he was the last one. He's a solicitor in at AMP. And fifteen grandchildren. All the girls are overseas. Kim and his wife had four boys. Four ruddy boys.

Who was the Governor-General that you were flying around?

Sir William McKell, and I thought

36:00 when he first got it, I said, 'You can't do that'. He went from being Premier of NSW [New South Wales], straight into Governor-General. I said, 'He'll be biased'. He ruddy wasn't. He's one of the best they had. Every place he went into, and he went into a lot, you'd read all about it, what was happening. In fact, the people didn't know themselves what they were doing. We went to Katharine, he gave the people a talk on this new type lucerne that didn't need much water. And they had fields of it there in Katharine,

36:30 and they didn't know much about it. But the only ones disappointed with Bill was the New Guinea people. When the big boss gets there they expect to see him in uniform, not civilians. They were a bit disappointed. But he had one job I would have liked to do. The Girl Guides, big girl guides in Port Moresby and their uniforms didn't turn up, so they all went bare breasted and skirts on, and Billy had to inspect them.

37:00 They were a lovely looking lot. But the singsings we went to, all around ruddy New Guinea.

Just tell me a bit about your duties on the Governor-General's Flight.

Well, they were much the same as maintenance. I had a maintenance party away from everybody in Canberra. And we had a Dakota which was tizzied up [done up] inside, and we had an Anson 12 which had an automatic undercart, and we had a Gull, a personal Gull,

37:30 they were the three aircraft we had. Mostly the Dakota was the one used. But occasionally they flew in the Anson, the girls did. If we'd go away he didn't go in the Gull. We used to use the Gull mostly. And Billy did every big town in Australia, and he toured New Guinea and New Britain, he wanted to see everything, and he ruddy did.

38:00 **And you travelled with him?**

Oh, yes. One of my duties was to travel with the Governor-General.

So it was different from your previous?

Previous, yes. I was in charge of an aircraft depot before. And I was the OC a bit, but that was just overhauling electric starters and generators, and things like that. Part of it.

What was your relationship with the Governor-General like?

38:30 Very good, he knew them all. Now if we landed back on the weekend, on Saturday, we were all invited back to Government House. He knew he'd mucked the weekend up, so we'd go out there at night. Be entertained by them. He was good. A very nice bloke.

Was it a formal relationship you had with him?

Oh, well. Formal while you were on the plane. He never bothered much. He'd come down and sit and talk with us. We were down the back with a nice setup.

39:00 We used to go to dances. Billy didn't come along, but his daughters did.

And how many of you were there on this flight?

The extra one, there was only myself and one of my fitters, who acted as a steward. He prepared all the meals and that that were necessary on the plane.

39:30 But later, when I was selected for the Queen's Flight, there were quite a few people with their names put up, but I was a bit lucky because I had been on the Governor-General's Flight. And I just got back from Malaya where I'd had DC3s for eighteen months, and the AOC picked me to do the job. But we flew in a separate plane. We had the Queen's plane and a standby one. And it flew off with the Queen's plane all the time,

40:00 and when she landed, we landed. If they couldn't get the other one started, all she had to do was walk into the next one. It was identical.

Tape 7

00:30 **Ken, I'd like to start this tape off by asking you for a bit more detail on your duties as a Flight Engineer on a base when you were in action? Just tell me, to start off, how many people you were supervising.**

01:00 In a squadron? Full squadron, I suppose 180.

You were responsible for 180 ground crew?

Yes. At least. I was a CPO in depot, and I worked in with a CO, he was away a lot. In a squadron, or a Wing actually, I was in the Wing. The CPO was responsible for all the maintenance.

01:30 But each squadron has its own Engineer Officer. He's responsible to you. But I think the good idea we had there, usually the CPO used to get around, used to talk to the erks, find out what was going on. So if anything cropped up he could get on to it straight away, in case the CO wasn't there. Their OC [officer commanding]. But engineering duties were just the same everywhere, and you're watching out for the maintenance,

02:00 but the main thing, of course, was spacing the hours which air craft flew, so your inspections didn't all come together. If they came together, you'd have some on the ground, so you'd watch that you didn't have them, say one come up a week.

So how would you go about doing that roster?

Well, we picked they aircraft which would fly and we'd say so and so, like in the Neppys [Neptunes], we'd give them each day

02:30 a list of the aircraft that were serviceable. They just accepted that. If it was their own aircraft, good. If it wasn't, too bad.

How would you estimate then how long it would take to service an aeroplane?

Well, we had a certain amount of hours to fly. That governed how much flying your could do. Bit it didn't work out that way. RAF Headquarters, Support Command, would say, 'You're exceeding your ruddy flying'. And you're mucking up

03:00 the total end hours, complete overhaul, we can't judge it'. And I wrote back and told them, 'I have

nothing to do with the hours flown. The CO and the Flight Commanders get their hours from Ops Command. Take it up with Ops Command.' Of course, they didn't wan to take it up with Ops Command, but we had to fly 300 hours extra time. They wanted to do some mission or something and it didn't make any difference.

03:30 We got there. We worked a bit harder to help them with the inspections. The depot, we'd give them a hand.

What would an inspection entail?

Complete overhaul, we'd take the wing tanks out, and that's a hell of a job. Undoing all the screws in the main plane. The engines we'd take out and run up. If necessary, change them.

04:00 But that didn't seem to come to us very much, because you could do an engine change overnight, no trouble. Watching tyres, the Neptune had a peculiarity. It had smooth tyres, but yet if it had been raining, the smooth tyre on the front would send a shudder up. And the bloke came back and said, 'The ruddy aircraft's all haywire, it's shuddering'. So we knew what it was and said, 'Try it again when it's not raining'. Once they knew what it was, they thought it was falling to pieces.

04:30 But things like that cropped up all the time.

So, when a plane comes in after a flight, I'm not talking about a total overhaul, when it comes in after a daily flight, what does the ground crew do?

Well, that depends on the pilot.

05:00 They refuel and get ready to fly again. But he puts in, we have a form, which he signs before it goes off, and which the ground staff will sign to say it's serviceable. They put all what they think's wrong with them. Twenty thousand feet, shuddering, or things like that, or misfiring on number two. They had four engines, the Neppy. And of course, there's always a ton of ruddy radio stuff. It's full of electronics. Used to go bung.

05:30 And that was the main part of servicing, was electronics. But everybody worked in together, and then if a job was going to go into the night, you'd say to the blokes, 'Will you work on it?' No trouble. They couldn't get any official money for it, but we used to keep a book and give them time in lieu so that when things were a bit slack, take a week off. They didn't interfere, the higher ups.

06:00 **Were fuel supplies ever a concern?**

Fuel? The only time we were concerned was when it came from rusty tanks. And we found that the rust was that fine that it went through our filters, and we were finding quite a bit accumulated around the aperture where the fuel went into the lines.

06:30 So we had to clean them out and start from scratch. Got better filters on the whatsaname, and handed over the filters to whoever was handling the fuel on their side, check their tankers and check their tanks, because most important to have good fuel.

That's quality, what about quantity. Did you ever run short of fuel?

Only certain jobs we got short of fuel.

07:00 Like the Neptune can fly, it held the world record at one time. It flew from Perth to halfway across to the USA [United States of America], one of the early ones, then they put a lot of armaments in it and that shortened down their range a bit, but we were flying them from San Francisco to Honolulu, and sometimes you couldn't make it, they had to return, if they struck stormy weather.

07:30 Didn't have enough fuel, even having long range tanks, big tanks underneath them. They were fairly much at the end of their tether going there. And then of course, we had jets put on them. We had Operation Westbound. Ghana was getting its Independence, and the Queen couldn't go so she sent Princess Margaret to represent her,

08:00 the Minister for Air was representing the Prime Minister, and they all came. Yanks were there, Nixon was there, and it was a great thing. What amazes me was that Ghana, ninety percent of the people there, ninety five percent are black. They all spoke English, beautiful English, and sang wonderful songs for the Princess when she arrived along the streets.

08:30 Of course, they were unfortunate. They just had a new Prime Minister, President, whatever they called him. Nkrumah. He had only been in power six or eight months and he was building monuments to himself. As soon as a bloke starts that, building monuments to himself, he becomes a dictator. So I don't know how he finished up. I think they gave him the chop. But you can't do much after they get their Independence, you see. Before that, you had Buckley's chance of doing anything.

09:00 **So going back to the bases, operational bases, tell me what are some of the other functions of the crew that you were supervising. You've mentioned the refuelling, the pilots give you a maintenance report that you act on. What other concerns, what about cleaning the aircraft. Was that a . . .**

Oh, the fitters do that.

09:30 And the air frame people. They have the cowls and they do what's required and then they wash them down with petrol, so no sparks are needed round about. And they are usually pretty spotless. In the cockpits with vacuum cleaners and the like. Aircraft were good. Sometimes you'd get an engine blowing a bit of oil, makes a bit of a mess down on it.

10:00 **What about the windows of the plane?**

Yeah, we'd clean them. The windows were Perspex. That cleaned fairly easily and stayed clean. Windscreen of course. You've always got to polish them. It's very important to a pilot to have a clean windscreen. That's why it became hard in the desert. We had Merlin engines, Packard Merlins fitted, and we noted the ruddy difference.

10:30 The oil was leaking around the front between the crank case and the reduction gear, right at the front where the prop was, and it was like a spring, this particular, I can't think of the name of it now, but it had a name, and you couldn't get them, and the result was that the oil would gradually get down and as soon as it got down it would get onto the windscreen and the windscreen would pick up sand

11:00 so that you couldn't see out of the ruddy thing. And pilots would land with the canopy open and things like that. So I, we, that's the first time we'd had Packard engines and I said to my shoofty boys, 'Go over to the Yanks squadron and see what they do'. They'd had Packard engines for six months and I reckoned they'd had to have had the same ruddy trouble. So they went across and said, 'Yes, they have the same trouble, but we know just what to do'.

11:30 I said, 'Good'. 'You put a pipe on the bottom where the seal is, and it leaks out, and they take it down and they bring it up the side of the air craft, and they made a venturi with one inch shells, so you plugged on to that and the wind shooting through would drag any oil out. No more worries, so simple. Of course, not long after that they came out with a new seal and it was all right.

That's an example of having to adapt to local . . .

12:00 That's right. Of course, you didn't tell RAF Headquarters, or anybody, you kept it to yourself.

Why?

Well, they wouldn't approve. It would have to go through all the ruddy books and be checked out and tested. And then, you can't use it. That's what I say when the war's on and you get away from Australia, you can decide what you like to do, as long as you don't tell anybody, and get the job done. That was the main thing. We got the job done.

So was bureaucracy an obstacle?

12:30 Well, they had dozens of blokes on different jobs, inspecting things, and if you wanted to make any alterations, you put things in, you might get it back in your lifetime there, maybe not. Just do it. Like they'd never sanction the two-seater Kittyhawk. That was kept hush hush.

What was your favourite type of plane?

That's a hard one.

13:00 I think maybe the Neppy [Neptune]and the Dakota. The Vampire wasn't bad, I did a bit of flying in those when they got two seaters, but the Neppy was a ruddy great plane. And the Dakota, of course, they'd fly all over the world. Still got them.

What did you like about them?

Well, they're easy to maintain. And they're a bit like the Kittyhawk. A good war horse. They did all types of jobs and they could do it.

13:30 **Tell me a bit about the Kittyhawk then?**

The Kittyhawk. Well, poor old Kitty was, I suppose, the best of its kind when we went across to the Middle East, they had Tomahawks, and then the Kittyhawk evolved from that. But they improved as they went. The Tomahawk had kind of a

14:00 governing unit operated by oil to fire the guns flying through the propeller. Now if one of those went bung it means you couldn't fire the gun, and they were scarce as hen's teeth, any spares, and that's when you went around your mates, Engineer Officers, and scrounged them off pranged air craft to keep them going. Then when the Kitty came, totally different set up. Everything was electrical

14:30 and a bit more work for people, but the old Kitty she was a pretty great bus. She'd take some terrific ruddy knocks and come up looking well. Of course, the odd pilot you got, he could fly a Kittyhawk but he couldn't fly it. He'd probably done thirty or forty ops and the CO would be looking at him and thinking of bringing him up as a Flight commander, and next ruddy flight he'd flops over on his back.

15:00 So everybody's looking at the aircraft. We'd get a crane and tip it up off its right path, and while it's in there, off the ground, spin the wheels like made and sing out 'On!'. And the boy in the cockpit would put

the brakes on, ‘Lock!’ So he must have locked his feet on the brakes because they locked on, if they weren’t locked on they would have spun. And this particular bloke, he said to me,

15:30 ‘See if you can save him’. Because the Poms hated, you could do what you liked to each other, ram each other, blow ‘em up but on the ground, ‘Oh, you can’t do that’. Courts of Enquiry. Ruddy ridiculous. Anyhow I said I’ll do what I can, and I flipped through the manual, and if found that, we never looked at it, but up in the guts of the air craft, there was kind of a tuning fork, and I said that

16:00 the clearance on the tuning fork was a bit tight, and the Wing Engineer said, ‘What are you checking the tuning fork for?’. ‘Looking to see what’s making these brakes lock on’. So he was a bit of a wake up, I think. So he got off. But blow me down, next ruddy flight he did the same thing, Boom! Over on his back again. So I knew I couldn’t pull that stunt again, and Brian said, ‘Oh, well. He’ll have to go back to flying training’. And he was a great guy, but he had feet like that,

16:30 and on the Kittyhawk, you’ve got your rudder pedals, and on the rudder pedals are the brakes, mounted on the thing. And I think with his big ruddy feet, he got self-conscious after of them, I think about forty times, he’d do the same thing. Anyway he went away to flying school which was down there at Mt Vesuvius, and he came back after about six week. I said, ‘Oh, great to see you again, Dick’. He said, ‘Yes, I’ve been posted.’ I said, ‘Where to?’ ‘To a Spitfire squadron’.

17:00 I said, ‘Why?’ After pranging two aircraft they thought he was no good for Kittys, so they put him on Spits. And the Spits brake is on the control column, so he was right as rain. Did a good tour, he did. But you couldn’t always work it. Sometimes you could, and another time, his name was Bob. He turned out after the war to be a service policeman. Great guy. Nice guy. He did the same ruddy thing.

17:30 And I looked around and we find a bit of oil and I thought maybe they had been hit by a bit of flak. A bit of flak had pierced one of the pipes, you see. Got him off. Saved his bacon. But you couldn’t always do it, and it was a ruddy shame to see these blokes, quite capable of flying a plane, and because of some ground error, go back and do six weeks again. No good.

Did some pilots, the sort of damages, the sort of repairs you had to do,

18:00 **could you tell that some pilots would do certain things that would damage a plane in a certain way?**

Not normally. The only way they could damage it would be a bad landing or a bad takeoff. Once they got airborne they seemed to be pretty good. We had one bloke, he was scared as ruddy hell, and he had about twenty hours up, and three times he brought an air craft back and said it was running rough. Well, our blokes stripped it down, had new plugs in, and they said,

18:30 ‘We can’t find anything wrong with this ruddy plane’, and I said to him afterwards, ‘You bring that air craft back once more, ruddy rough’, he didn’t even go on the op. He’d be back in a quarter hour, I said, ‘We won’t touch it. I’ll get the CO to fly it. Not the Flight Commander, the CO’. He went off next time and they got caught in a dog fight, and someone cut his tail off. He got back with no rudder.

19:00 And never had any more trouble. Maybe he had an intuition he was going to get hit, or something about his air craft made him scared, but after that he probably thought, ‘Well, that’s over now. Got cut up’. He flew on and did a good tour.

Did you ever see any cases of LMF [Lack of Moral Fibre]?

I was just going to tell you about that. Blokes had done nearly a tour, and he might do something silly, and the first thing, he’s up LMF. And I said to the CO, ‘I don’t know how you can say that for a bloke who’s done ten, twenty, thirty hours.

19:30 One flight would be enough for me’. It’s a hell of a bloody thing. They all have a nervous pee before they go, and they don’t know if they’re coming back or not. And then to have LMF after all those ruddy flights, he was a ruddy hero. Of course, it didn’t do any good, but anyhow I was only able to do a bloke some good once. He didn’t come back from a flight

20:00 and he pranged over, well some miles from our base, up in Italy, amongst the Germans. He was coming up as LMF. And I said, ‘How do you know it’s LMF?’ He said, ‘Well, what bloke would land here on the beach and plant his goods and whatnot? And come back, he was a maniac to come back’. And I said, ‘Well, just hang fire until we get up there’. We were advancing all the time, and as soon as we got up around the spot, and we were in friendly hands,

20:30 the CO said to me, ‘Take him up and get him to find these things’. And up I took him, and he went looking, clock there, his wrist watch there, his map and his stuff there, identity things there. He was OK, but he looked like going LMF, but they didn’t let him fly so much after that.

Why did he land?

Well, he did have something definitely wrong with him. He put it down in the drink. And they thought he should have been home.

21:00 But it’s a terrible indictment to have in your log book LMF, Lack of Moral Fibre. God, any bloke has one

flight, he's all right.

But then you saw cases of men whose nerves went?

Oh, yes. You could tell them, they were a different case. Oh, well.

But you thought for that to be called LMF was wrong?

21:30 Well, in this particular bloke, I'm quite sure it was, because things were where he planted them. And they reckoned he was a bit nutty, but he wasn't nutty, but they didn't have the same confidence in his flying as they did before.

So what do you think he did? I'm just not quite sure.

What do I think he did? Well, obviously he did get trouble, but he didn't nurse it back. Sometimes they could nurse it back.

22:00 Other times, if it backfired at altitude, I've had some pilots come and tell me they get out the main plane to ditch it, bail out, and they look down at the ruddy ground, and get back in the cockpit and nurse it home. They eventually got back, some of them, some had to jump out. Because it's a fair strain on them, especially in the desert with sand and that getting into them. The bearings could go any time. You wouldn't know until he came back, and the engines clapped out and you pulled the filters out, and they'd be full of white metal from bearings.

22:30 **Had you ever any ambition to be a pilot?**

When I first joined up they had airmen pilots, and I joined at 25, 25 yeah, 1926, and you had to have eighteen months service before you could apply. I'm getting my eighteen months service up and then they had a new rule. You had to be twenty five or under.

23:00 Missed out. A couple of my mates got it. Ron Laver joined the same day as me, but they didn't get it while they were in combat. They were kept in Australia. Ran units, trainers, Ron Laver was a ruddy good pilot.

Did you ever regret not being a pilot?

No. I was quite happy engineering. Loved the smell. And when the jets came,

23:30 the kerosene smell in the back. That was fantastic.

What was it like, after the planes had taken off for an operation, and then you were on the base waiting for them to come back, what was that like?

In war time, it's ruddy annoying, especially if he runs late or something. These two we were waiting on to come back from long range, well, we were frantic. The CO and his offsider,

24:00 they made it, but at Williamtown we had Vampires. And of course, time getting off was a great feature. We had lots of exercises where the bombers from Queensland would come down and try to bomb the steelworks. And there was always competitions on how quick it took you to get a kite off. In a piston engine, of course, you've got to go out and warm up. You can warm it up but when you get out to take off,

24:30 you've got to make sure the temperature's up, but a Vampire, you just plug in, Zoom! Away she goes. They're gone. You'd have half the squadron off in sixty second, eighty seconds. They'd be gone. Away in twos. No warming up necessary. They were a great aircraft to work on. I'd left before the Sabre came.

When the pilots are on their sorties,

25:00 **none of you, would you wonder who was coming back?**

Before? We had no inkling if someone had been shot down. Had we been up near the Operations area we would, because they were in contact the whole time with the Wing blokes who were talking to them. But we always had blokes up the strip, which was some way away from it. And they would just wait until they came and when the last bloke came in,

25:30 'Did you see my bloke?' And they'd say, 'Yes, he was shot down, but he's safe. We saw him get out'.

How did losses affect the mood or the morale of the ground crew?

I think it happened so much, they all got used to it. They'd all be very sad for a couple of days, and the crew that worked on the plane, put him in and tied him in, cleaned his windscreen, took all the blanks and plugs off, let him fly, sitting under his aircraft in a dust storm,

26:00 they became pretty much attached to them. Wasn't a nice feeling, counting them coming back.

Were there any superstitions, lucky charms or anything?

Well, most of the aircraft were named after blokes wives, whatnot. Bobby Gibbes, his mother brought his insignia. It was a dachshund with the face of Hitler, being kicked up the backside

26:30 and rolled up by a kangaroo with an Aussie hat on. Obviously the Germans didn't like it because Bobby Gibbes got shot down and he said, 'I made a perfect landing', and the army had moved back in the meantime and we went up to see it and it was a heap of ashes. He said, 'Now, why would they burn that?' I said, 'Well, I would too if I was a German'. Yeah.

27:00 **What did you all think of Hitler?**

Oh, he wasn't much chop. Reading Mein Kampf [Hilter's publication], or some of those things, what put everything against him was the chambers, and I found out later that Seventh Day Adventists had been put through his chambers, oh, way since 1936. Nearly as many Seventh Day Adventists went through as Jews.

27:30 And out here we thought they were working with ruddy Germany. The only way they were working in with Germany was if they were ruddy gun fodder, oven fodder.

At the time the war was on, did you know about that?

No, some time in the American papers, must have had someone reporting on there, they reported it. And gradually, getting more and more about it. The world was horrified, just shows what a ruddy type he was.

28:00 **When the war was on, Rommel had some respect amongst the Australians?**

Rommel had a lot of respect. As it told you about letting those blokes go that time. Even that, blokes would be shot down, they got good treatment from the Germans. Bad treatment from the Italians. Like Nicky Barr. He dropped the first five hundred pounder. And blow me down, he was shot down very near where he dropped it. Of course, it was Italians.

28:30 They were going to shoot him there and then, and some Germans came across and rescued him. Got his own back in the end on the Ities, he escaped when he was going from Italy to Germany, and roved around Italy for eighteen months, organising escape routes, etc. He was a bit blonde, he could pass for Northern Italian, and he spoke Italian, he was a school teacher, so he did very well, but when it came for him to come out he got caught by the young Fascists. He got away from them. They were going to shoot him.

29:00 In fact, the young Fascists, the Italians, were the last ones to surrender in the desert. Everybody else had surrendered (UNCLEAR) and they were still standing out, and Monty said if you want to do that OK, we'll put the desert air force onto you and wipe you out in one ruddy go. So they surrendered. They didn't want to surrender to the Free French. They hated their guts. They were taking their boots, and taking their watches and things like that. But to the Brits,

29:30 anyone else but those French, they wouldn't be in it.

Did your squadron fight the Vichy French [French who sympathised with their German occupiers]?

Vichy? Oh, they, ha. When the war finished they said, 'Go where you like', of course we all headed for France. Most of us had already been up in Austria, chasing up planes and whatnot. Got our crossing to France. The Italians were good. Get across to ruddy France,

30:00 don't want to know you. Couldn't get accommodation. We had a landing in France, up through Cannes and that, you see. Of course, Cannes was the only place to go. Nice and Cannes were the only places worth going to. So we couldn't get accommodation. Peewee and I, we slept beside the wharf in a bit of a park at Monaco. Packed up next day, As soon as we got into Italy.

30:30 Rah Rah, Aussies. Just like coming home. We went up to Lago de Como, we had a fantastic time. Shouldn't have worried about the French. Couldn't trust them.

So the French you encountered they were pro German?

Oh, the Vichy. They were happy under the Vichy. They wouldn't have cared, they couldn't care less about us winning the war, and then freeing France, because look at Paris. Nothing done to it.

31:00 They asked the Germans to lay off. And Britain was pounded into a ruddy ash heap. But by gee, the rest of Germany was pounded too. About a month before the war ended, they sent quite a few of the blokes from the desert, Poms that had been there for a long time, home for two weeks. And they came back and they said, 'Oh, we thought covenance here and that was written off'. He said, 'The cities in Germany are just walls standing, everything's gone'. So that made them a bit happy.

31:30 That England wasn't the only one blasted out of the air, the ground.

And how did you feel about the tactic of carpet bombing of German cities?

Well, they didn't bomb all cities, and then harassed the side. They were all having a great time bombing ours, no respect. They bombed the palace. Bombed the big church there,

32:00 Westminster Abbey, so he turned them on, the place where all the art is, not Florence, the other one.

Oh, dear. I might remember it after. They bombed that. And, of course, the question has always been asked, 'Why did he bomb so and so?' But why did he bomb the palace. Why did he bomb Westminster Abbey. They were places sacred to the British.

32:30 You can't have it both ways. Well, I suppose it all works itself out in the wash. There's good and bad decisions made at times. Funny thing, you're fighting one week. The next week, you're friendly with them. Who'd have thought that we'd have a lot of German migrants come out here after the First World War.

33:00 Well, we had such a ruddy lot of them that they joined up, fighting with Australia. Fighting their own country people. But they considered, well, we're out here, we're Australians. That's the way. Immigrants we're getting now, good to ruddy have them. But they're Aussies, not ruddy Gyppos or whatever country. You can't have it.

33:30 You can only be one. You can sympathise with them, you can send them money. But if it's against Australia, you've got to forget them.

How did you feel about the Germans after the war?

We met some nice ones. When the war was finished we went up to Enfidable, and there were thousands and thousands of Germans there. And we stopped and talked to some of the Austrian ones. Of course, they were trying to tell us that they weren't Germans. They were Austrians. I remember the time when Hitler invaded Austria,

34:00 and all the people there waving and the ruddy tears running down their faces, No, the heart wasn't it. Not much you could do about it. Very ruthless people at the time. Yet the other blokes, I was looking at some pictures here. You could swear it was our blokes working on planes in the desert. Just the ruddy same. They think the same thing.

34:30 They're Christians, we must be on the winning side. They're Christians, we must be on the winning side. Not much to pick between them is there. Both got the same beliefs, that they were fighting for their rights.

Did you ever feel in the war, hatred towards Germany?

No. The only I felt hatred to was the higher ups, they had some brutal people there. Like, if you talk to any

35:00 POWs from Japan, the Japanese weren't too bad, but the Koreans, they hated their guts. They were brutal. And I think that applied to Germany. They had lots of brutal people in those places. Goodness knows where they came from. But there were lots of good people too, because you only to have to hear these people talking about when they escaped. How the people put their lives at risk, passing them from place to place. In Germany.

35:30 **Tell me then what the difference was to, when you were in the war, what was the difference you felt was between Hitler and Rommel?**

Well, Rommel was a gentleman. I mean, anybody would trust Rommel. I don't know how they work it out. For instance, who they decided was a war criminal. The only way I reckon

36:00 you can become a war criminal is if you're treacherous to the people you're working with, and also the people you capture. If Germany won the war, would Monty be a ruddy war criminal. He didn't touch any of the prisoners. Churchill. He'd be considered a war criminal. It's all wrong. The other blokes were only doing their job. Poor old Goering [Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe – German Air Force], you see. He had nothing to do with killing people. But he saved a few of ours,

36:30 but you never hear of that. No, it's a hard thing. It's more the political blokes I don't like, like Goebbels [German propaganda Minister]. They're bad people. The bloke that was head of the Gestapo [German Secret Police]. Forget his name now. He was a treacherous bloke. Let's hope we don't have any more.

Do you think there is a threat from . . .?

37:00 No, I don't think so. I think things are starting to come good for the first time. If they can get this alliance between the Jews and Palestinians. It goes back a long way. Like in the war, these two blokes wouldn't speak, just glare at each other. Got a few ruddy years to overcome.

Tell me about the Ghurkhas [Regiment of Nepalese fighting under British Army] you got put on, using as guards?

They were good. Ghurkhas were good fighters. They were great ruddy guards.

37:30 Some of the boys said they were going back to the tents at night, and a hand would come over their face and feel them. 'All right, Aussie, go home' The Germans, the Italians used to go around and if a German was held up by them, and a hand would go over the ruddy face, 'Ah, Tedeski' and Whittt!, and the German said, 'Missed!' and the Ghurkha is supposed to have said, 'Try turning your head!'

38:00 **How would they know that someone was Australian?**

I think it was the big Adam's apple and the long face usually.

Seems a bit . . .

Yeah, well, I didn't strike any, only in the day time, and they all seemed to be nice blokes. Only tiny, and when I was in Malaya, the uprising there, we had six Dakotas there. And we used to go out and

38:30 bring back the wild men of Borneo. Little blokes, they had greasy, they'd come over and do six months, think it was six months, might be twelve. And they'd bring over a kerosene tin with their luggage in. and when they went back, God strike me lucky. Of course, we had to hose the aircraft out just to disinfect it. They stank. But once they'd gone and done their training they'd come back in a uniform, spick and span with a double-barrelled shotgun and a new port,

39:00 money in his pocket, I suppose, and go back and they were doing all the scouting in Malaya.

Tape 8

00:30 **Ken, I just wanted to ask how it came about that you went to Malaya.**

Well, I'd just settled down, I was posted back from the Governor-General's Flight on compassionate posting, only home six months when this Malayan crisis comes up. And I was on duty that night as a Duty Officer,

01:00 and they wanted to take some pictures of a Dakota and crew, who would be going up in a week's time. So we had some of the boys working, I was in 38 Squadron at the time, and 38 Squadron was picked to go up. So the CO said, 'Will you come with them'. I said, 'Look, I've just got home on compassionate posting for six months.' He said, 'It's only for six months'. So, I said, 'All right, if it's only for six months'. Well, Mum wasn't very happy,

01:30 but she said, 'It's your job, take it'. I went up for six months, and six months came, and twelve months came, and eighteen months. The CO got home in about twelve months, I got home in eighteen months. But I enjoyed it apart from worrying about home. We were next to a Kiwi squadron and we operated from Kuala Lumpur. Every six months for three months

02:00 and then we were back at Changi for the other six month period. And we got to know a lot of the boys, and of course, in Changi all you need to do at night for entertainment, is go down to the village. And we used to beat them down in the price. Before I came home I wanted some Chinese silk, tapestry type of stuff they put in dressing gowns.

02:30 So I beat him down for the first one, I said if I take two what will I get them for. When I got up to five, he said, 'Hey, hey'. He went and got his docket. I was down below what he paid for them. So I said all right, I thanked him for his work and gave him a couple of dollars extra. But, they love bargaining. But sometimes, you've got wait while they go and check on the docket. But they had everything down there. The Chinese wouldn't bargain. They made beautiful shoes,

03:00 and lovely handbags out of crocodile skin. No bargain. Take it or leave it. But the work was good. We had six aircraft and we were supply dropping to the police and the army. And the army were a blood thirsty lot. They invited us out to their place one night, one day actually, one Sunday, for a picnic, and God, every time you sat down the chair would blow up and things like this.

03:30 They enticed us in to look at some machine they had in a room about this size, and they locked the door, and they poked in these ruddy thunder stick in the ruddy top. I was black and ruddy blue where they exploded on me. Anyway, when we got home the CO said, 'I think we should stir them up. Round about one o'clock in the morning'. So two air craft went off round one o'clock in the morning and dropped all these simulators

04:00 all around the camp. And they were back on the ground by the time the simulators started to go off. Fire! Of course, the whole camp's up trying to find where the fire's coming from to oppose them, you know, and they did that twice. And the army sent back a thing, 'We get the message!'. Ha ha. They were good guys.

Tell me, what did you mean, the chairs were exploding - when you went to see the army, you'd sit down and a chair . . .?

Oh, right, have you ever seen a thunder stick?

Describe it for me.

Oh, it's about that long, and they just rub it, it fires, and then the whole thing explodes. Bang!!! Some call them thunder sticks but, if they get on to you, I had black weals on me where they exploded. Purely a kind of a means of terrorising the enemy.

05:00 They were enemy, ruddy sneaks, they were. But we dropped things too. In fact, we had a favourite police post. And the bloke at this particular police post, he was the most decorated army bloke in the

war. He had about seven ruddy things after his name. And he was there with them, and of course, they all loved to, if they got hurt or something, or they got killed,

05:30 'Don't pay my bill to the Coal Club, or something. They used to borrow their provisions from the Coal Club, or something else. They'd ship it out to us and we'd drop it to them. And they'd probably pay every six months. They all wanted to run a big bill up there and then not have to pay it. But they'd occasionally come into Changi and we'd have a good night at the mess. I went with him once to a hotel just out of Singapore and he stood up,

06:00 and half way through the meal, everybody's eating, and he said, 'You're a lousy lot of bastards. You're enjoying yourselves, and the people are over, fighting your battles up in Malaya'. He sat down. He wasn't very popular. But lots of people don't know what's going on it that war. Didn't want to know. But we had a lot of air force there,

06:30 and we couldn't take our family. The Poms could, because they were already there with family places. And . . .

Did you want to take your family?

No, no, but a couple of blokes, the single blokes, would have taken their families with them. And they did. Yes, but they had to pay the hotel. It was a bit expensive, to have their wives up there. No, not to have kids. Wasn't the place for kids. I did go back after the war to see it and, of course, they'd handed it over to the locals.

07:00 Totally different. Beautiful messes. Thirty foot high ceilings and that. Very good.

Did you know what you were getting into when you went up there?

Didn't have a clue what was happening. But we soon did. Then we started dropping, and I went on a couple of drops to find out how things were. I went on a drop of what they call free fall. They were doing a drop to the aborigines up on the border with Thailand.

07:30 They were all running around in the nude, in the raw, as we dived over them. Next time we went over, the despatchers were kicking all the bags of rice. If the sent a full back of rice, it would burst. Send it half full, they all stayed intact. Ruddy amazing. So these were half bags of rice being just tossed out, and they'd land, and stick together. But the others went down, and the only thing was, we had the new

08:00 CO from the Wing there, and they did a drop over Kampong Wall, right in the centre of Malaya. Raining like hell, wind blowing, and the landing zone where they had to put them, was a little Auster strip. Well, they weren't air force despatchers. We had army despatchers. And there was only four in the crew of the Dakota, and they dropped five loads out,

08:30 and when they drop a load out, the pilot's concentrating on where he's flying. The second dickie puts his hand up on the bail out button, just as if he had it full of troops that are going to jump out. He pressed the bail out button. That meant the despatchers kick out the ruddy things at the right place. Well, just as he pressed the sixth one, one motor feathered. It was ruddy obvious what he did. The feathering button was here, and the bail out button was here.

09:00 Easy to make a mistake and press the wrong one. One engine feathered. Well, they debated in the few seconds they had. They didn't know if they could get home or not. They didn't know if they could maintain the height on the plane. Windy and blowing. They put it down on the strip. Pranged it. It pranged well, but they used the full strip up. So in the afternoon we heard, 'Oh, we lost an aircraft'. The CO said, 'It'll be an operational loss'.

09:30 But the RAF had other words, they were a hard lot to bargain with, they were. They said, 'We want a Court of Enquiry. You'd better go up there now, in an Auster'. So I got an Auster pilot to take me up and we made it onto the strip, and I had all my undies and that, and I struck these other people going out, the Auster was going to pick them up, and I got the story from the CO, that's what happened, and he didn't say he'd pressed the wrong ruddy button. Despite everybody knew.

10:00 It was ruddy obvious. And no one hurt, thank goodness, so they went back and I stayed there for three weeks. Then I got a couple of fitters up and stripped all the bits and pieces off, and we floated them down on the sampan but when the rains came. Good trip for them. I went back on the Auster. Good trip for them going down on the sampan. And seeing all the parts. Checked all the gear there,

10:30 and they couldn't find a fault with the unit, the prop gear unit, so I said, there was a bit of a Court of Enquiry then, and before it started, I said, 'This is ruddy silly. You know and I know that he pressed the feathering button'. He said, 'You can't say that! You can't' say that!' 'Well, all right. See what you come up with'. So I gave the evidence. Never mentioned what my feelings were about the thing. So it went back to RAF Headquarters

11:00 to the Defence Flying ruddy Committee, and back it came, Accident to A78/79/30.3. 'The mystery of the self-feathering airscrew'. They'd let it go at that. I suppose. . .

What does the feathering button do?

It feathers the prop. The feathering button is used in an emergency. If something goes wrong with an

engine,

11:30 if you leave the prop not in the feathering position, it's still wind milling, you feather it and it points that way and there's no windmill. You don't do any damage to the engine, and apart from that, it's not making a drag against the other engine. But we moved them anyway, we put the button for the bail out down on the control column, so then the pilot himself could do it. He's looking there, and as soon as he reckons he's over the target, he presses the button. Bingo!! Much better.

12:00 And we did that without waiting for RAF Headquarters.

Seems to be a recurring theme, the RAF Headquarters . . .

The RAF Headquarters were, well, in peace time, they take a hell of a time. But fortunately, when you get away you come under the RAF and they like their own enquiries, and they can't take much action against you, because you're Australians and you don't belong to them. We were in between, you use them both up.

12:30 **Tell me, what was Changi like?**

Changi was a lovely spot. The Changi camp was beautiful, undulating hills, and the mess was right up the top. You looked right out over them, and there was another Changi mess near Changi village down below. But the Changi main mess was where we were. It was fantastic. Good food, despite the fact there was no meat. That's another thing. We were allotted a pound a day to buy meat,

13:00 you could go an buy a steak down in the village. Of course, most of the blokes didn't worry about that. More money to take home when they went, but we couldn't have meat because the RAF weren't getting it. You couldn't have half the ruddy people getting meat, and the other half not. So they paid an allowance instead, at least, the British Government did. And non-flying times they used to take off by half past seven,

13:30 and up at Kuala Lumpur they had to take off by midday because from midday up to five o'clock, six o'clock, they'd be working on the 'drome, bulldozers whatnot, and they couldn't land. So if they didn't land by twelve o'clock they had to land at some other place, so if they didn't intend to come back that night, and there was no air craft in, as soon as there was a service call, all of us, the Kiwis and the boys

14:00 would go there and play volley ball. It was usually pretty evenly matched, and of course, whilst we were having afternoon tea, I used to pitch ruddy stories to these blokes. I was a bit older than most of them. But they had brought a lot back from the retired list, on the Reserve. They'd been in during the war and this was the first time they'd flown since the war. They brought them back. All the supply dropping etc. Matt White and a few more of them. It worked out very well. They were good blokes.

14:30 **How much retraining did they have to do?**

I don't think very much, but they probably did a couple of weeks in the Wings before they went up. I think, once they'd dropped once they could drop all the time. They get that used to knowing when to press the ruddy button.

So, the people you were with in Malaya, had most of them been through the Second World War?

Ground staff, yes. A lot of them. Some of the younger ones coming in didn't.

15:00 But even the reservists called in, they'd all been in the war.

Were the younger ones interested in finding out, the Second World War, you experiences.

They always are. When I worked at Cranes, we had a free fall, we were extruding aluminium. I was on the remelt, and one was navy, foreman, and one was army and I was air force, and we used to talk in the lunch hour about various things.

15:30 And the other bloke was a civilian boy, and his ruddy mouth was open the whole time. He didn't have a clue what happened, and I learnt a lot about New Guinea, how they behaved, and that. I think we had the right end of the stick. Even Singapore was supposed to be hot. The Poms could tell the difference. I couldn't, between winter and summer. Winter was about two degrees, three degrees, cooler. And they'd come out in their sports clothes, you know, coat on.

16:00 I couldn't tell any ruddy difference, but they could. But a good lot of Poms, I struck up with them again, and Eve did, when we went on a trip called 'Westbound'. With Neptune aircraft, taking the Minister for Air to represent the Prime Minister at Ghana. And Accra, anyway, Ghana was the place,

16:30 a name like Accra was the capital. And everyone spoke English. Black people like the ace of spades, spoke English. Had a big dance there, and Nkrumah was dancing with Princess Marina, and in the background was myself and the CO, and I'm standing with a little girl about this high, I was going to ask her for a dance, but she was too ruddy small. I didn't like to. But that was good, that was a good turnout.

17:00 The army looked after us well. But Neptune aircraft, funnily, was in our air force here, not with the Yanks, they were in the navy. So whenever we flew overseas, Hawaii, Bermuda, all these places, we were with the navy. But they were air force blokes as far as we were concerned. It was good. And they'd come out and visit us. We used to have exercises twice a year.

17:30 You'd be up to Butterworth or Changi for three weeks, then you went across to Barbers Point, in the Philippines, for another three to six weeks. That was the first half of the year. Second half of the year, you flew out to Barbers Point with the Navy, and we were there for six to eight weeks, straight off, and invariably, every time we got there, there was no flying. The Yanks had used up all their flying money for that quarter,

18:00 and had to wait until new money came through, three or four days later, before flying started. So that was a great time to go and visit and have a good time. But the Yanks were very good to us. They'd come out here and we'd entertain them the same.

When you were in Malaya, were there any traces of the Second World War. Did you see any evidence?

Only out at the Changi camp. They showed us where the troops were bound up,

18:30 when the Japs were raping the nurses up on the balcony above. They were all kind of charred, like they tried to get out. Get away from it.

What was it like to see that spot?

Well, it came out of the blue. I didn't know it existed you see. Some of the blokes knew.

Did you have any personal feelings about the Japanese as an enemy?

I I think the Japanese people, not the women, the women were lovely.

19:00 My daughter lived there for seven years, and I've been up half a dozen times, up to Japan, and they couldn't be nicer. Especially the women. But the men, I'm always suspicious of men. Most countries the women are all right, but the men are no ruddy good. But I had, the President of our club, here at Colo, before he died, he hated the Japanese, he was a POW in Changi. His brother was on the railroad, and died. And he had a memorial put in the front of his house

19:30 where we all went on 11th November. And on one side of the thing it's got 'In loving memory of my brother, killed by the Japanese on the Burma Railway'. And on the opposite side it had, 'And damnation to all ye who support the Japanese'. He was bitter, right to the ruddy end. He said, 'I could never forgive, I could never forget'. But he said, 'But the Japanese guards weren't bad. It's the bloody Koreans, they're the ones'.

20:00 **How did you feel about the Japanese?**

Well, mere fact, I didn't like them for the mere fact that when they came down, little blokes and they stirred up Chinese, and I didn't have much time for them. I thought they were pretty ruddy lousy. But I didn't think they'd ever get as far they did. But they came down inland, and not out in the open, where they thought they'd come down by ship.

20:30 True little barmaids, and I was glad it was our CMF that had the first win against them.

Where were you when the Pacific war ended?

Still in Italy, I think. When did it open, a couple of months later, wasn't it? Yeah. Could've been down, I was in Italy when the atomic bomb went off. And the Italian students from the university was telling me all about them.

21:00 It was nice to know it was all over, when we were coming home.

Did you think that was the right thing to do, the atomic bomb?

Oh, definitely. Been a lot of people would have been killed otherwise. You speak to some Japanese people, the men, and they say we would have held on till the last ditch, the same as Churchill did to his people. But I think they got the shock of their ruddy lives,

21:30 when Doolittle took his planes over and bombed Tokyo and all that. Set some fires going there that almost destroyed part of them. Fierce fires. Burnt the people. Hundreds.

Tell me a bit more about Malaya then. How did that finish up for you?

Well, I think it just petered out. He finally surrendered, I think. I went there in the early stage, when we were dropping leaflets.

22:00 Free pardon for any of the people. They could bring this sheet of paper and give themselves up and they'd be moved elsewhere, but I don't know how many they got, but they certainly put the country in turmoil, until Harding came out and he had hit on the bright idea of moving the villagers from around the airport, because he reckoned the people were working in the village by day and by night, doing destruction.

22:30 Same weekend. They work as civilians in town, the weekend they go home, blow anything up. Worked wonders. They couldn't get into their villages. I remember, when we were up to KL [Kuala Lumpur] for a term and we had a crowd in from Australia, about fifteen or twenty new boys came up, and I was shooting in line down on the tarmac, and a Lincoln went along very low, and I said, 'He's going to do a bomb run then'.

23:00 'Oh, is he?' And I was going to say, 'Well, I'm only joking', when he did his second run. Boom! Boom! Just across the ruddy strip from us. Ruddy stuff blowing up. We found out that they'd had a report that some of the blokes were in the village, so they blew it up.

Your actual work in Malaya, was that different from your work . . .

No, exactly the same. Boys to supervise and keep their morale up.

23:30 We used to yarn a lot. I mixed with them a lot. If we went out, I used to go with the boys, not the pilots. Different kettle of fish.

The technology would have changed though, wouldn't it?

Oh, the Dakota was a little bit different. Bit like the Kittyhawk, a good old hard working horse. They didn't have many faults with them. Pretty good.

When did you first deal with jets?

Oh, I went to Williamtown,

24:00 after I came back from Malaya. I was posted to Williamtown, and we had Mustangs and Vampire aircraft. They were single engine, we didn't have the dual engine then, dual seater, then. It was a single seater, and they had a good engine, not many faults with them. But the beauty was getting off without warming up, in emergency. You start them up and away they go, they're gone.

24:30 So if you got a sudden attack on Newcastle, they could be airborne in about twenty or thirty seconds. All they'd do was just switch the thing on and they'd go. Wonderful. They had a few accidents there. One bloke didn't come back one day, if fact two of them didn't come back. They think they collided in the early morning mist. When I first went there, any time a bloke was killed,

25:00 you had to go to a Coroner's Inquest and the old bloke always ended up saying, 'If God meant the airplanes to fly like that, the pilots should have wings'. And I thought, 'Well, ruddy hell. That's not progress'. Progress is, you've got to go with them, even though some people are killed. But the trouble was they went from Mustangs into a single-seater jet.

25:30 Which was totally different to what they'd flown before. Once they got the two seaters, well, they'd do three or four weeks in that, and then the others, no trouble at all. So it was a big, totally different flying.

And what about your work, on the ground crew?

Ground crew, same work.. We had a different air frame which was a bit critical on the leading edge, and

26:00 they used to watch how many Gs they pulled. But there was a story going around at the time that they were losing a few aircraft by coming down from fifteen or twenty thousand feet, and the pilot pulling too hard back. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. Anyhow there was this story went around that De Havilland were so worried about the main frames coming off that they put a notice in their local magazine for all the people that worked with them

26:30 to see if they could come up with some ideas, and a bloke came up with an idea. He said drill holes all around the main plane at the roof, where it joins on to the fuselage. And they said, 'That's ruddy silly'. So they did one anyway, and the bloke did three or four Gs on it and everything was OK. They said, 'Before that, at four and five Gs we were losing the aeroplane, the mainframe coming off'. So they did all the planes like that, they never had any more go in, so they called for this bloke to reward him,

27:00 and he turned up at the meeting, and they said, 'Where did you get your degrees and experience and things on these air craft', and he said, 'I'm the sanitary janitor here. I look after all the toilets'. They said, 'Oh, yes, well how does that qualify for the wonderful idea you had'. He said, 'Ever try to tear a piece of toilet paper? It never goes near the holes, it's always half way up'. But they had all kind of trouble earlier,

27:30 but they came good.

Tell me, about Malaya, you mentioned about transporting people from Borneo.

Oh, Borneo?

Yes, what was that all about?

Well, the army wanted people who could scout and probably smell a bit like these Chinese. They were certainly stealth of foot, whereas most army people they seemed to have crunchy feet. Like the Yanks when they were in the war, you could here them coming from miles. They were chewing and smoking,

28:00 where the Brits wouldn't have any smoking and things like that. And these little blokes. They did a fantastic job, and plenty of them. They'd be there for twelve months and go home, and another batch would come over. Of course, it was good for them going home with a shotgun and a portmanteau, plus money.

And did you deal with them directly on the base, or were you . . .

28:30 No, they weren't there, we only flew them to and fro, but they used to go to some military camp there. I think they mixed with the Ghurkas there. The Ghurkas were there as fighting people.

Were you homesick in Malaya?

Homesick because it was so ruddy close and so expensive to ring. They were just starting to get cheaper fares when I came home.

29:00 They were getting various army and air force to ring home. They could have a free ring. Almost at the time I left. They gave them three minutes, which was a good thing.

How did you feel about serving overseas again?

Well, I didn't mind when they said it was six months, but after six months, I'm counting the ruddy days, you see.

29:30 And by the time it got to eighteen months, I'd given up hope. But I did get home once. We had to renew a couple of aircraft, they'd got up to overhaul time. We flew back to Richmond, and my mate down there, Freddy Dennis, he was CO of the maintenance down there, he said, 'Well, these won't be ready for a week, come back in a week's time', which I did, and we choofed off up to Darwin, and eventually up to Singapore, and across.

30:00 Coming down, you had to stop in Timor to refuel and we stopped there, at least, we didn't stop there. We were flying overhead and they said, 'Your clearance is not through'. Some days before you've got to file a clearance with Indonesia to get permission to land'. They said, 'It's not through, so if you land we've got to intern you'. And the captain said, 'Blast that'.

30:30 Checked up with his fuel and said, 'We should make it'. So, throttled back and everything and we stooged on and it was pretty ruddy low by the time we got to some of the islands around Darwin, but we had an air/sea rescue plane flying beside us, because they knew what the situation was, but we landed with a couple of gallons to spare. Made it. But it wouldn't be recommended for normal trips, but going back, the clearance was there, no trouble at all, just landed.

31:00 But all around the airfield, the blokes were wearing guns all over the place. A bit trigger happy, Timor.

With Malaya, you were still in the air force. Were you tempted to leave the air force after the Second World War had ended?

No, when we came back from the war, we didn't know whether they'd sack half of us, but I retained my commission,

32:00 Flight Lieutenant. Some got near the low mark, not because the war was finished, but they'd been in the air force for nine or ten years. They thought that was enough and got out.

Why did you want to stay?

Well, if I joined the air force, I was going t make it my life's work. Despite the fact I'd be lucky to make Warrant Officer after twenty five years, those days. But of course, when the war came, it's like everything else. Up it goes.

32:30 **What your wife's attitude to your going overseas again?**

Not very happy, but she said, 'Well, six months, it's fair enough, it's your career after all, and I'm living back now in Newcastle, all the family around me, so we'll be right'. So six months OK, but as I say, you can't trust the barmaids. You get eighteen months instead.

33:00 **Did you resent that?**

Oh, well, you get used to it. When six months didn't come up, you say, 'Well, I'm here until I get someone to replace me later'. But I don't know how the others got on. It was a good posting as far as the work went. We were operating out on the PSP and if you wanted to, you could go up to Hong Kong. The CO said to me one day, 'Goodness knows when you'll got back. You better go up to Hong Kong on the next courier,

33:30 and go up to Iwakuni, Japan'. So I went up with them, and we got to Hong Kong, and it was completely fogged in. And this pilot was down there every second week, and he spotted a hole about as big as your hand there. And over he goes, and down we go. The planes everywhere were going through, and he got in and others were still flying around for ruddy hours. Of course, when we came to leave the place it was fogged in completely, and we had to put it off for a day,

34:00 and the next day we went, it was still foggy, and it was a funny place to fly in. They had a short strip running on a bit of land, and the rest was out in the water. And you had to take off, and you couldn't see where the beacon was on account of the fog, and everybody's up in the cockpit watching the needle, and as soon as the needle turns 180 degrees, he pulled the throttle back, and the air craft up like a ruddy rocket, and veer to the left.

34:30 And you come out on top in sunlight, and there are all the cliffs nearby. You make it, you see. Only just before we went up a Japanese airliner had flown into the cliffs, so they were pretty wary. But coming back, it was closed in by fog again, nearly. Hong Kong was there, and all around was this ruddy fog starting to come in through the pass. But we got in before it got there, and it was all right. But I'd hate to be flying it every ruddy day.

35:00 **Tell me why you left the air force then.**

I left the air force because the ruddy air force had a stupid ruddy rule, that your last three years you spent in your home state. Well, my home state was New South Wales, I joined from there, but I wasn't sworn in here. I had to go to Melbourne to be sworn in. So they claimed all the pre-war blokes who all had Victorian numbers.

35:30 So back to Victoria. And they couldn't shake it. The CO was battling and the OC of the base, so I got out a bit early. Two and a half years early.

So were you disappointed that it ended that way?

Yes, because I was enjoying the life, done banks of good work, and I'd been in the squadron, Neptune squadron, for seven years. Bags of trips with the Neppys and around the world once with the, been to Ghana and then we continued on. Went to the

36:00 Azores, Casablanca. You name it. We went to all these places. America, went to Hollywood. They took us there, but it took us six weeks. It was a great trip.

Tell me how the war changed you.

I don't think it changed me at all, really. I don't think it affected many air force blokes, especially those in pre war because they, you joined knowing that some time you're sure to be away from home with them.

36:30 **Did the war, do you feel it provided any opportunities that you mightn't have otherwise had?**

I think the war provided great opportunities. If there'd been no war, it would have taken twenty five years to become a Warrant Officer. I was a Warrant Officer after the war had started, probably six years.

37:00 '42, joined in '36. so '42, I was commissioned in March. Had Buckley's chance of getting a commission otherwise, and that happened a lot, and it made more people aware of each other. Bridged that ruddy gap, oh, I'm a pilot, I'm better than you. That disappeared.

What was the worst things about the war?

I think innocent people being killed,

37:30 which was unavoidable, but no, you can imagine how many people were killed when these German cities were bombed. Same thing applied to Coventry and the like. I suppose with a bombing, you can't get it that accurate. Although they can now, you know, they sight them and get it straight down in a hole, if you want it. But before it was a bit of hit and miss.

38:00 **How did you deal with losing friends?**

No good. No. Lost a lot of good friends then and a lot after. A lot of them had a bad time. The pilots are funny blokes. They either liked going to outings, or they didn't. They'd probably stop over and grog because they had plenty of things to grog on about, losing their mates, but the Yanks used to put on shows where people were hypnotised,

38:30 and we had a bloke called John Hodgkinson, and he'd done a tour in Japan and he came over to us for a tour, and he was a great pilot and a great guy and Peewee Richards, who was half his size, and we used to knock around together and we'd go to this hypnotism place and the Yank bloke would hypnotise anybody. He'd have two or three hundred people, and he'd say put your hands together, count one, two, three, four, pull them apart. Well, I cheated. I could feel mine getting, well,

39:00 I sat on them. And here's all these people with their hands, can't get them apart. He'd say hold them up. They'd hold them up, he'd go 'click' (flicks fingers), and they'd come apart. But then he'd pick some of them and get them out on the stage. And he'd have them doing all kinds of things under the hypnosis scheme. Well, he must have been a wakeup this Yank, because we had one of our boys, he was drunk. And he said, 'Oh, I'll show them'. And he was out there, and he had him playing the violin. And everybody else had been pulled out of it, and he's still got a bow, playing the violin.

39:30 **What was the purpose of the hypnosis session?**

Oh, just some entertainment. And he said, a lot of nurses there, and he said, no matter how good the hypnotist is, he can't make you do what you don't him want to do. You keep saying 'no' and you're right.

Can I ask you, do you dream of your wartime experiences?

Not very often. Only when a mate dies.

40:00 I lost a great mate a few years ago.

What sort of dreams are they?

Oh, kind of help him get through. He had a stroke and he wasn't able to walk and his wife and the kids said he was as good as dead. His mind was fantastic and I said, 'No he's not. He'll walk again'. And of course, they laughed at me and I used to take pilots down there to Orange where he was,

40:30 and he used to be a dentist. And they'd shake their heads, 'He'll never walk again. You waste your time going down to see him'. So I used to ring him up, and he'd ring me, and he envied me going overseas every year to Canada, and the States and across to Scotland. He said, 'I'm coming with you one day'. I said, 'Well, as soon as you can walk, we'll go'. So I had a telephone call from him one day, and he said, 'I can walk around the block'.

41:00 I said, 'Ruddy hell, that's a rapid recovery'. He meant the block in the ruddy ward, when I went down, and I thought he meant the block in the ruddy street. It was up. He was dragging one foot, and he was walking OK with the other, and he said next year 'We'll go'. He always wanted to go back to Italy and visit the old air field. So when I come back the next year, he says, 'I'm going'. I said, 'When?' 'A couple of months' time'. 'Where are you going?' 'Where you went'. The States, he went across in the QE2 from the States to England. Said it was a lousy trip.

41:30 The wheelchair he was in would hardly fit up the corridor and he took two nurses with him. He said, 'It cost me a lot of money, but I did what I wanted to do'. And the family were right against it. One of his daughters changed her mind, and said, 'Well, have a great time Dad.' He said, 'I don't know why. They don't want for anything but they just didn't like me going away'. 'I said, 'Maybe they thought you were going to die when you were away'. Anyway,

42:00 he wasn't home long and he had another heart attack, and back to taws [the start]. He couldn't walk.

INTERVIEW ENDS