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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description Edwin John Holden, Lancaster bomber radio operator No. 463 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), interviewed by Daniel Connell for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

Discusses prewar education; WW1; employment; recruitment and enlistment; American troopship West Point; Australia American relations; embarkation; officer enlisted men relations; No. 27 Operational Training Unit (OTU); No. 463 Sqn RAAF; No. 617 Sqn Royal Air Force (RAF); Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS); tour of duty; casualties; aircraft Lancaster; aerial operations; prisoners of war (POWs); tallboy bombs; ship Tirpitz; stress; rations, leisure; discipline; war graves; demobilisation. Mentions Somers, VIC; Parkes, NSW; Tromso, Norway; Yagodnik, Archangel, USSR; Berlin, Leipzig, Germany; London, Waddington, Britain.

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TAPE IDENTIFICATION: THIS IS THE FIRST SIDE OF THE FIRST TAPE OF THE INTERVIEW WITH MR JOHN HOLDEN. THE ADDRESS IS 28 INVERNESS AVENUE, ST GEORGES, SA 5064. THE DATE IS SUNDAY, 15TH JANUARY 1989. END OF IDENTIFICATION.

Right. Mr Holden, if we could start by talking about your... say, your family, before the war. Could you describe your family, please?

Well, I'm Melbourne born and bred. And I was educated in Melbourne. My father was an Englishman, from Lancashire. He migrated to Australia in 1908, he served in the First AIF. My mother came from the Western District of Victoria, Mortlake, but served as a nurse in Geelong during World War I.

So,... Sorry, you were saying that your mother had served in the First World War.

As a nursing sister, in Geelong. And that's where she met my father. I'm the eldest of three. I was born in 1922. A sister was born in 1925, and another sister in 1930.

What sort of work did your father do?

He worked for the Commonwealth government, in the Department of Commerce, as a meat inspector. Also he did inspection of fruits for export overseas.

Where did you go to school?

In Victoria. I went to a State primary school, Central School, and Scotch College.

So you were born.... I think you said in 1922, did you say?

In 1922, yes.

So you would have been fairly young at the beginning of the war. What was going through your mind, in terms of the role that you would play? As a young boy of seventeen, you must have been thinking about this a bit.

Well, the talk of the town, so to speak, in those days was the atrocities that were brought to our notice, by the Italians in Abyssinia, followed by the atrocities of the civil war in Spain, and later on there was mention of the atrocities of the Nazis when they came into power during the late 1930s, for example the atrocities against the Jewish tradespeople or tradespersons in various towns in Germany and then the annexation of Austria. It sort of drew attention, to many of us, through the media of the day –which was radio and newspapers, of course.

And were you thinking of yourself –I know you went into the Air Force later – but at the beginning of the war, what were you thinking? You were thinking of yourself as army? navy? Or air force.

I was thinking air force all along. As a young lad I was inspired by the book Flying Doctor, by Dr Fenton. What an inspiration he was for young people to carry on to do work for other people less fortunate than themselves. Probably the media brought out the exploits of Sir Robert, Kingsford-Smith, Ulm, and to a lesser degree other aviators, in their attempts to create world records on behalf of Australia, such as Bert Hinkler and... a name I just can't remember for the moment, he was a South Australian. (a pause) No, I can't remember the name, for the

moment. But I had inspirations to fly, and to be a pilot, right from the time of... the age of fifteen, perhaps, when aviation and the exploits of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith were become known to the public. And I think it's just one of those things that, as a teenager, you fix your sights on somebody, and you're sort of trying to wish that you could emulate his features [sic] or attempts to draw attention to the public that what a wonderful thing air transport was in its infancy, and would have been a highlight of the coming out of the depression of Australia.

(5.00) You went to Scotch College. Were you still there at 1939?

No, 1938 is when I completed at Scotch College. And then in 1939 I went to a coaching school in Melbourne called Taylor's Coaching School. One of my faults in not getting Matriculation was my English, which is.... Really, I can't understand why, because I was good at Maths, I was good at Sciences – and of course when you write out your examination papers you had to have good English to do it, in most of those subjects – but, unfortunately, in basic English I was all right but improved English had become a bit of hard yacker.

Right. So you were there in 1939. What happened for the next two years? – because I know you didn't join up until 1941.

Well, unfortunately I went down with pneumonia in June 1940, which – er, June 1939, I beg your pardon – which set me back, because in those days it took fully twelve months to recuperate from. And I knew that the exacting medical examination for air crew in the air force would bowl me out as far as x-rays on lungs were concerned, pneumonia does leave a scar on the lungs. But, fortunately for me, it wasn't a bad scar. And I resolved to get myself physically fit by playing a sport. I played in the winter months rugby union, and cricket and tennis in the summer months. Of course I was under the age of twenty-one; you had to have your parents' consent before you could put your application papers in, and this was a hard task for me because my father insisted I should join the AIF. And I insisted on joining the air force, because at that time they were looking for recruits with good educational standards, high educational standards, which was a requirement of enlisting in the air crew in those days.

Why did your father want the AIF?

Well, tradition. You should be 'like father, like son', I suppose. But I won my day in arguing the point with him that he was good enough to give me a good education and that it warranted me going into air crew. So he finally consented, in 1941.

How did your mother feel?

My mother supported me, because she'd had three brothers in World War I. Unfortunately she'd lost one brother in France. But she had two brothers who... who were military-minded even though they were farmers. That may sound strange; but the farmer is a bit more conservative, I think, he's a man that loves to work the land and likes to retain the land, at the same time perhaps he is a bit jealous of that... situation and would defend it with all his strength, and to have a bit of military backing behind you would support him in that way. It was eventually the turning point that I stressed to my father that the good education he gave me was what was required in the air crew in those days. And I think he must have checked up with a few people, and he finally consented.

(10.00) Right. So you got parental approval. Could you describe your first brush with the bureaucracy? I mean, when did you first go into an office and say 'I want to join the RAAF!'

May 1941. And I was asked to fill in heaps of papers by the recruiting sergeant of the Royal Australian Air Force. He was very helpful in some of the questions that were asked that were a bit tricky to answer. But the main thing, it went along quite smoothly because they possibly realised they had somebody who had good educational qualifications and they wouldn't let him go. I've got that feeling. At the time I don't think the other services were looking for that type of person that had maths and physics and chemistry behind him.

So, OK, you filled in all those papers. What happened next?

Because of the problems associated with establishing the Empire Training Scheme in Australia, and the position in Canada and Rhodesia being completely overtaxed, I was put on a reserve for approximately six months but had to attend night-school at an area selected in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, to update and bring up-to-date my knowledge of mathematics and physics. And this was done by voluntary schoolteachers. And it so happened that this was done at Scotch College, which was close to where I lived.

What sort of things were you learning, at that stage?

The higher mathematics, and higher physics and chemistry. I think they were developing towards the lines of the use eventually of radar, and naturally the mathematics comes into it as well. You had to be quick at sums, and to assess a position by your knowledge of chemistry as well.

Right. So you went through that course. And when did you join the air force on a full-time basis?

On 8th November 1941, one day after Pearl Harbour which was 7th November. We were collected in Melbourne, and marched off down to a train at Flinders Street, and after about an hour's journey, we ended up down at Mornington and were taken by truck to the initial training school at Somers, which is about six miles away from the Flinders Naval Depot at... (a pause)

Well, the Flinders Naval Depot.

...at Western Port bay.

Right. And what did you learn on this course?

We became accustomed to discipline. We learned to physically strengthen our bodies, by physical exercise and route marching with packs weighing about forty pounds. We learned rifle drill. And, above all, we learned to tolerate one another's presence. We were in huts of forty-five and we got to know one another, because we came from all walks of life. And I think that part there, at that initial training school, sorted out the chaff from the wheat in the end.

So, at the end of that course, how were you tested?

By various examinations of reaction to various occasions; such as somebody suddenly throwing a knife at you, or somebody coming up behind you – your reaction to all that was part of the assessment, whether you were fit to be a pilot, a navigator, or wireless operator.

Tell me a bit more about the bit... people throwing knives at you.

Well, all of a sudden you could be sitting quite casually talking, as you and I are, and you all of a sudden let fly with your left wrist and out comes a knife. And what's your reaction to do, then? – Well, mine would be to cup my hand towards your wrist holding the knife so that you eventually drop it before you even throw it. Some could react quite quickly, be quite pugnacious, so to speak, and let fly with a fist. But it was just the various ways that they tackled you on that sort of approach.

(15.00) Mmm! (a little laugh) So, at the end of that course, you passed it?

We were assessed that we were physically fit to be air crew, from that course. I'm not sure whether there was any who didn't make the grade. We were then sent to our various areas for our trainings; I ended up in Parkes in New South Wales, which was known as No.2 Wireless Op/Airgunners School. But the training there was mainly on radio and radio equipment, and learning morse code and sending of morse code by morse code keys – approximately nine months. The first eight months were all practical, coupled with drill, marching drills, and guard duties, and physical training, and the final month was practical flying in the Wackett aircraft, where we learned to use wireless equipment and make contact with our ground stations.

A good course, again?

A very good course, as far as I was concerned. It was a well-run camp, with very experienced instructors, mainly drawn from the PMG Departments where they did a lot of telegraphy and sending telegrams of course. And they were very patient instructors too, because the wireless course and the learning of the morse code and sending it by the morse code key is a pretty exacting training course.

What did you do in your time off?

When we did get leave, we used to go into Parkes. And there were, naturally, the picture-house, and if there wasn't a picture on the picture-house at Parkes was converted into a dance hall and we were doing a lot of dancing in the winter months. And towards the summer months the town had a very good swimming pool, I think it was a fifty-metre swimming pool which gave plenty of room for exercise in swimming if you so desired. Unfortunately, tennis and cricket wasn't always available because of lack of equipment, and naturally a tennis ball or a cricket ball would be a hard thing to come by because they weren't manufactured during the war.

There were no serious accidents while you were there?

I believe there was, before I went flying practical, at Parkes there were two aircraft crashed, where unfortunately the pilot and the trainee were killed. They somehow or other made contact over a particular area towards Bogan Gate, out of Parkes, and crashed in the fields with a loss of four lives. I was a member of the firing party at the burial of those unfortunate airmen. And I've since visited Parkes and been back to look for their graves, but I haven't found them, I don't know where they are now.

They could have sent them home, after the war.

I suppose they could have been taken home after the end of the war, which would have been an option granted to the surviving members of the family by the War Graves Commission.

The Empire Air Training Scheme – what was that, from your perspective?
What did you see of that?

Well, I did all my training in Australia, and I didn't see anything of it overseas. But eventually, when we arrived in England, we found various Australians coming through who did their training in Canada under the Empire Training Scheme. And I know very little about it, so all I can say is that they were well-received in Canada, I can't speak about Rhodesia because I don't know of anybody being trained in Rhodesia. But I understand the hospitality of the two countries was excellent, and the training in Canada was just as good as what we were experiencing in Australia.

(20.00) How did you get to Britain?

Well, that was marvellous. After completing my training by doing a gunnery course at Port Pirie, we were sent back to Victoria on leave and held at the No.1 Embarkation Depot at the Melbourne showgrounds, and held there until such time as we were informed we were embarking for overseas. And we left Melbourne by an American troopship called the *West Point*, which was originally launched as America and only did one cruise to the Caribbean before Pearl Harbour. And we left Melbourne on a very hot day in January, and arrived in San Francisco fourteen days later. And we travelled... embarked on a train, and travelled across the States of America for five days and...

You weren't one of the ones who dashed off to Hollywood and turned up weeks later, were you?

No, we were the first lot to go through, and – I was just trying to remember – one half of the party went through to Canada and our half went across to America. Now, we had no show of going anywhere. As soon as we came off the *West Point*, we were under surveillance and we just couldn't run anywhere but went straight off the ship into the troop train.

How did the Americans react to you?

They were quite surprised to see us there. But they realised that we were there for the war, but they couldn't understand why we were leaving Australia while they were sending their troops out to Australia. It was 'Where're you going?' And we said 'We think we're going to United Kingdom.' 'What for? Why aren't you staying in Australia? We're sending our boys out to Australia!' – So it's just one of those things that you got caught up with that you couldn't really find an answer for when you got asked questions.

So you were there – I think you said – five days, crossing the United States.

We crossed America by train in five days, to a place called Taunton, in Massachusetts, which is about forty miles west of Boston. And we were at an American army camp called Myles Standish; you could call it a staging-camp where you were held until the next point of your travel was completed. Eventually we were taken by train to New York, and we embarked on the *Queen Elizabeth*, and in four days time we were disembarking at Port Grennoch on the Clyde, in Scotland.

How did you find Scotland?

Well, we didn't have much chance to find Scotland, because we went straight off the ship into a paddle-steamer called the *Queen of the Clyde*, which took us straight to the Port Grennoch.

And as soon as we got off the *Queen of the Clyde* we went straight into a train and off we went down to... twenty-four hours later we arrived in Bournemouth, in England.

So... and then you went to what? – more training schools?

Well, we were held there until we were assessed where to go. And during that period of time we moved from Bournemouth to Brighton, and then from Brighton the wireless op/airgunners that I've got to talk about were moved up to a place called West Frew in Scotland, which is near Stranraer, to take a course on familiarisation of new wireless equipment. At the same time the station also had familiarisation courses for navigators and bomb-aimers. This is the training we did in Avro-Ansons, and most of the training was conducted over the Irish Sea, at the same time we were patrolling the area, in that capacity of training.

Right. How long did that take? Roughly.

About six weeks. As wireless op/airgunners, we soon learned our wireless equipment, it was quite easy and simple to operate and not as tedious as the old equipment we had in Australia. The bomb-aimer found with his equipment that it was easy for him to convert from the old-type bombsight to the new-type bombsight that was used. But the task for the navigators became more exacting, various problems came into true navigation, and navigation with new equipment, and it took a little bit longer for a navigator to acquire the knowledge of operating this equipment efficiently.

(25.00) So you were at that training school for a while. When did you first get posted to a squadron?

Well, after we went from Stranraer we were sent to Lichfield, which was No.27 Operational Training Unit,...

In Lancashire?

In Staffordshire. It was basically an Australian station and personnel, from the commanding officer down to ground staff, and we operated on Wellington bombers. And after arriving there and going through the various procedures of arrival – medicals and dentals, etcetera – the whole crewing-up, with a pilot, took place in the afternoon.

Could you describe crewing-up?

Well, I'd have to go back to Stranraer. When I arrived at Stranraer, I was allocated a hut. And I walked into this hut, and a good Australian voice said to me 'There's a bunk here, mate!' And so I took advantage of being the top bunk – it was two-bunk bedding – and discovered that the chap who spoke to me was a bomb-aimer who came through Canada on the Empire Training Scheme and was from New South Wales. He was a bomb-aimer. We then decided that, where we could, we would stick together with our various training flights and that, if we ever got posted to an operational training unit together, we'd stick together and try and crew up together. And this was accomplished. We were NCOs, sergeants, and we were waiting for our dental inspection, and a flying officer, an Australian flying officer pilot came along with a flying officer airgunner, and they both said in one voice 'Are you two crewed up yet?', and we said 'No.' 'Would you like to join us?' And we said 'Yes, providing you take us together.' And it was assessed that they already had the navigator lined up, and the pilot was delighted to meet us. But I was a bit dubious because he and I found we'd got two more members of the

Australian Air Force from New South Wales, and then after discussion found that the navigator was from New South Wales, and I was the only Vicky-ike amongst the other four – so you can imagine the trials and tribulations of `Melbourne-versus-Sydney'.

So, I mean, what did happen? What happened to the spare navigator?

Our navigator eventually caught up with us, and we learnt that he was an officer too, so we had three officers and two NCOs, and a crew for the Wellington which was all that was required for training. We then established that we were to be posted to the satellite aerodrome of Lichfield, which was called Uttoxeter, in Derbyshire. And we soon moved off down there and got settled in there for our training.

Now, this is an unusual crew, isn't it, with three officers. Quite often you have no officers.

Yes, it is. The navigator and the pilot were commissioned off course, which does take place...

But they could have been sergeants, couldn't they.

They could have been sergeants. But they were commissioned off course. The airgunner had been an earlier course and was actually flying to the Middle East in a Wellington and they had to ditch in the Bay of Biscay, they were rescued and sent back to England. And after he did a period of instruction as an airgunner, training airgunners, he came to Lichfield...

END TAPE 1 SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B

IDENTIFICATION: SIDE 2, MR JOHN HOLDEN. END OF IDENTIFICATION.

I'd just like to just go back a little bit. You were just filling me in on that man... you were just describing him, I think, the navigator – oh no, sorry, no, the gunner, the commissioned officer who was a gunner – and the tape came to an end.

Our gunner was from Training Command, where he'd been in Wales training airgunners. But prior to that he actually was in an air crew flying from England to the Middle East in a Wellington bomber which unfortunately ditched in the Bay of Biscay. They were rescued and sent back to England. And he ended up in this training post in Wales prior to coming to Lichfield. So I'm not sure whether he was commissioned off course or not. But during that period of time he gained his commission. So that was the reason why we had three commissioned officers and two NCOs.

When you say `off course'... or `on course'... what's that phrase you were using there? Just explain it.

`Off course' is an expression that, when you complete your course, your results are assessed, whether you can be recommended for a commission or granted immediate commission. And the expression `off course', you got a commission off course. It's not good English, I know, but it's the air force slang.

Right. I just wanted to get the meaning, that's all.

Mmm.

Air force slang is fine, by the way. It gives us.... Use it when, you know, it comes to mind, because we like to get the language as well.

Yes.

So, in this particular air crew... I mean, what's the relationship between commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers?

Very informal. The captain of the aircraft was the pilot. We'd been trained to obey his command. Now, regardless of whether you were a commissioned officer as a navigator or a wireless op/airgunner, and you only had a sergeant pilot, the sergeant pilot had control over those commissioned officers as far as the well-being of flying his aircraft.

Did you all go to the same mess? I mean, would officers go to the same mess as non-officers?

No, the officers went to the officers mess, and the sergeants went to the sergeants mess...

So your...

...and similarly with accommodation.

Right. So your crew would be split up in a way that other crews wouldn't be?

Most crews were split up, in that, if they had an officer in their crew, the officer would go to the officers mess for accommodation and meals, and the NCOs would go to the NCOs mess and NCOs accommodation. It didn't create any hassles, it...

Did it reduce the amount of time you spent together, away from the aircraft?

Yes, that would be natural. Sometimes we would gain leave, to go off the camp, to go into the nearest village or township, it might be to the local hotel, just have a few drinks and play... oh, anything from darts to dominoes to billiards or snooker – most of the inns were of that size that they did have that form of recreation, but most of them it was certainly dominoes and darts. The occasions did lend itself for the officers to join us together in that atmosphere. But not always, because if you got inclement weather, such as snow or sleet or something like that, well you didn't feel like walking say a mile and a half to the nearest village, you'd stop in your billets, as we call them, or your accommodation.

Right. Perhaps... could you describe.... Oh, before we do that, what was the ages of the people involved, on your crew?

Well, that's interesting, because our rear-gunner was the oldest member of the crew. And I think that I was the youngest. And at the time I was... when I arrived in the United Kingdom I'd just turned twenty-one. And I think the rear-gunner was twenty-eight or twenty-nine. The pilot and navigator were in the range of twenty-five, and the bomber was about twenty-three. But age didn't really matter, it was the companionships, and whether you could get on well together was the... the answer to that type of question that many people ask – 'How did you get on?' – 'We got on well.'

(5.00) Could you describe your first operation?

Well,...

Well, first of all, what squadron were you in?

Yes. Well, the first squadron operation was from 463 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, stationed at Waddington in Lincolnshire, that was an aerodrome six miles south of Lincoln. We found ourselves briefed for a raid on Berlin, and it was, to the navigator's calculations, a trip of about eight hours. And that sort of impressed us quite a bit; the longest stint in training was about six hours. We were allocated to an aircraft in B-Flight, which... upon your normal going about your drills of testing equipment. For a wireless operator he had the testing of wireless and the intercom communication within the aircraft, the navigator tested his navigational aids, the gunners tested their gun turrets and guns – not by firing them, but elevating and depressing them and rotating their turrets – the bomb-aimer had means of testing his bomb sight without actually dropping bombs on the dispersal, whilst the aircraft was being put through its drill of running up the engines and testing the engines.

Could you describe the briefing that you would get before you'd go?

The briefing was given by the station commander, when you went into an assembly room. You were told 'The target for tonight is Berlin', and he then handed over the briefing of the raid to the commanding officer of the squadron – which was Wing-Commander Rollo Kingsford-Smith, a nephew of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith. Rollo Kingsford-Smith gave the details of the route to the target. It was followed by an intelligence officer regarding known dispersals of enemy night fighters and enemy anti-aircraft stations or equipment around the target and also on the route to the target. And the last but not least was the weather briefing that a person from the Met Department would give, a briefing on the weather we would expect to have on the route.

How did you feel when you heard 'Berlin'? I mean, it's a big name.

Well, at the time it was, I think, the thirteenth or fourteenth raid on Berlin. And we didn't realise that was the last of them. We felt that 'Well, it's a target. We've been briefed for it. Well, here goes, and see what happens!' The worst part of the whole procedure was, as I explained, in the drill format before take-off with the aircraft we had problems with one of the engines. First of all it wouldn't start. And then finally the ground staff worked on it and got it starting. And then it started to misbehave and we had to shut down again. And they finally corrected the gremlin in the motor, and we were rather late in taking off. And we actually took off behind the deadline time of taking off. Once we got airborne the pilot said 'Well, we're airborne. We hope that we'll make up the time and catch up with the main stream.' But all the way there we had problems with the engine – I think it was finally shut down, and so we ended up flying on three engines, which a Lancaster bomber can do quite comfortably under reasonable bomb loads.

(10.00) So, do you remember, as the radio operator, could you see much of where you were? I mean, it was at night, I know.

No, the whole procedure of the wireless op/airgunner was to assist the navigator with his navigation, and taking radio messages which would give an indication of the winds – winds play a big part in navigation, in air navigation. As it transpired, there was a very high tail-wind which put a lot of people ahead of the ETA over the target area, in fact it blew a lot of them off course. But we had a very alert navigator, and he's assessing the position, and I was assisting him most of the time taking radio bearings to prove what he was getting with his

equipment. And it was very rarely that I had the opportunity of putting my head in at what we call the astrodome to see what was going on outside. Naturally, if the pilot wanted further eyes to look around the sky when there's a preponderance of night fighters floating around, well, that's where I stood, in the astrodome, and tried to use my night vision on picking up anything suspicious and telling the gunners about it, the mid-upper gunner and the rear gunner.

So, you're heading over to Berlin. Was it an uneventful trip?

Well, in one way, yes. Because we were so late, and we were trying to catch up with the main stream of Bomber Command, we could see that a lot of the aircraft were being blown off course and they ended up over Leipzig instead of Berlin. But we had a few dices with searchlights which the pilot was able to evade with his evasion tactics, and they didn't unduly trouble us. By the time we got to the target area, the flak was fairly quiet, and we felt that the night fighters had had their stint and probably run out of fuel and couldn't be bothered coming up after a straggler. And on our return to England we lost another motor, it just stopped for no apparent reason at all; and it was very good to see the Dutch coast and the English coast looming up. When we got back to base we found that we were approximately three-quarters of an hour late over the target area and an hour and a half late getting back to base, and everybody had thought we were gone. But we hadn't, we landed on one and a half motors. If you can imagine an engine which was coughing and spluttering, the pilot wasn't going to completely shut it down because of the unevenness in flying on one motor, which a Lanc can do; he kept it going for the purpose of assisting him to land, and after eight hours he did a wonderful job of bringing it down without much hassle. And as soon as we got on the ground the motor picked up. Now, that may sound strange to you, but when you've got your tail down on the ground running, the motor's sort of elevated in the air; but when you're flying on the level, the engine's level and there could be some complaint in the float chamber of the carburettor, so that probably when you had your engine up in the air it ran perfectly but when it was on the level it was not performing well.

How did you go, over the target? The first time you'd been over a hostile target?

Well, I was... you know, (a self-conscious laugh)... I don't mind admitting that. I think most of the troops associated with fear. The target was a military target, a big steelworks. We felt that we put our bombs in the steelworks, and our photographs afterwards confirmed that. And we had sort of a joy of relief when we got to the Dutch coast on our way back to England.

(15.00) I can understand that. Just on that flight, could you describe what you had in the way of provisions, food, and drink, and things like that?

Uhm, we had a small tin of orange juice which would be about three mouthfuls, a small piece of chocolate – it was a dark chocolate, and I think if you can imagine yourself looking at chocolate as used in cooking, that was the type of chocolate it was, it was dark and hard – and a packet of chewing-gum which had two pieces of chewing-gum in. And that was the only thing we had. Now, when we landed, and after we were debriefed by the intelligence officer, we were entitled to have one egg and one small rasher of bacon. Of course we were on wartime rations in United Kingdom. Our group, flight group, retained the same rations to all its air crew and ground staff as those that were enjoyed by the civilians. The only special privilege for air crew was that they had an egg and a... well, half a rasher of bacon.

Right. And what about moving around the aircraft when you're flying along?

Most of the targets that we went to were up above twelve thousand feet, which meant you were on oxygen. Freedom of movement in the aircraft was in a particular area, you could move from out of your seat and stand up in the astrodome. Well, in my case I could sit alongside the navigator. The navigator could get up and move and stand behind the pilot, which he did, and he'd come out of his curtain, because we were in a blacked-out area and if we had a light on we didn't want to have that showing out in the darkness. The pilot was fixed there all the time; he could stand up, with difficulty, but that was about the only movement he had. The rear gunner was fixed in his turret, he had no chance of moving about. The mid-upper gunner could get out of his turret and walk around, in a limited circle, according to the length of his oxygen tube. The same with the bomb-aimer. There wasn't much freedom of movement, but there was some.

So, the pilot – there was only one pilot?

Only one pilot, yes. That's probably been brought about by the system of the Empire Training Scheme. They had no surplus of any personnel such as pilots, or flight engineers for that matter.

Did the crew find any problems in getting used to each other?

Not that I know of. I can't recall it. I think you have initial snatches at one another over various forms of sport that existed in pre-war days between New South Wales and Victoria. We had a Scotch engineer, so we used to chat him about his game of soccer, with a round ball as against our Australian Rules. But the people from New South Wales didn't take much notice of that, but they used to say 'Well, you should have been Rugby League, or Rugby Union.' Well, as a matter of fact, I played Rugby Union before I joined the air force, to get fit, I played for Melbourne. And I found one or two cobblers who played Rugby Union didn't think much of Rugby League. So it was a general good-hearted chacking that went on, that really binded us together as a crew. And that sort of thing went on with our ground staff. We had two Australians and two English... well, one Englishman and one Welshman, as ground staff. And it was always good humour that can be distributed only as Australians can do.

There was never any problems wishing that all the ground staff were Australian?

No, not really. That thought never really came into it. We were in that war for... to do a job, and we did that job, and there was never any question or quibbles about the fact that we had an Englishman and a Welshman in the ground staff, or the fact that in our air crew we had a Scotchman, in amongst six Australians. But our Lancaster crew was seven. But not all crews were Australians, there were on the station Canadians and New Zealanders as well. And towards the latter end of the war there were Indians, from the Royal Indian Air Force, flying in air crew as well.

(20.00) What about technical improvements in the radio? What sort of radios did you have? And did they change over the time you were working there?

Not from the start, no. We had quite a strong transmitter, which was high frequency on one band, medium frequency another band, and low frequency on another band. The low-frequency band was normally on the national SOS frequency – I think 500mgs [actually 500khz]... er... yeah, I think that's what it was called. We generally operated on medium

frequency. It wasn't until the latter stages on the Tirpitz raid that I used high frequency. The receiver was a ten-valve superhead receiver. The equipment ran on 24 volts DC. And the aircraft... er... I'm not quite... I'm wrong there...

Oh, let's go back. Just c...

Er, the wireless equipment ran on 220 volts DC, or 210 volts DC. It had a generator under the table, operated from the aircraft voltage of 24 volts DC, and the generator was a motor made by Hoover, from the Hoover vacuum firm. By reversing wires, they took in 24 volts, but in its operation it created 210 volts for the operation of the wireless equipment and also the navigation equipment.

What, everybody had the same sort of radio on the other aircraft as well?

On Lancasters, on our squadron, yes.

Mmm, right. And on these particular trips.... How many missions did you fly?

Forty-nine altogether, two tours. After we completed our first tour of thirty operations, we were given the option if we wanted to go to Training Command or continue on, on a second tour, either with Pathfinders. And we were given the option of being a film unit crew attached to 463 Squadron. This option became vacant, we took that option. As a film unit aircraft, the Lancaster had two extra crew members, a cameraman was in the front turret, and a cameraman at the rear of the aircraft near the rear door. The purpose of the unit was to operate cameras of 35mm standard, and we were to arrive early over the target area with the first of the Pathfinders to photograph the flares going down, do our bombing run, and we would stay around after the raid was over and get assessment of what the bombing raid had done. The resulting film was despatched to the hierarchy in the headquarters of Bomber Command, where they assessed the effectiveness of the raid. And, after being satisfied with that, anything that was useful for the Ministry of Information was then sent down to the Ministry of Information who would put it out as newsreel items which you often saw at cinemas or picture-theatres during the war.

Mmm, right. So you flew two tours...

Yes.

Just talking about tension, for the moment. In the first tour you could expect a bit of anxiety when you begin. Were there other peaks of anxiety?

Well, that came about with the type of target you were over, in that the worst period of the time was probably the shortest time we were over enemy territory, when we were bombing the rocket sites in Pas-de-Calais, in atrocious weather conditions.

(25.00) Were you sick?

Very close to it. In fact, a couple of the crew were airsick. That's possibly stress coming into it. And we were fortunate in that we achieved our target objective, the photographs afterwards proved that. And we were more pleased to get back to base after that particular occasion. But later raids became one of intense concentration, of doing your job properly and doing it well. And I think that with your mind occupied that way you had little time to worry about stress or anything else. And with that sort of occupation time soon flies.

You didn't worry, as you were coming to the end of, say, that first tour – or the second tour, for that matter – the end of the tour didn't make you jumpy as you were nearly there but not quite?

No. But we had that put out of our minds with our training and the operational drills we went through, operating our equipment. I think the persons less likely to survive that type of situation probably would have been the gunners. But they then would have their occupational drill – I call it 'occupational drill' – to keep their minds off that particular problem.

It must have been... I mean, as you're heading over, you've got a four-hour wait – say you're heading for Berlin – and in one sense it's good to have no action, in terms of, you know, attack or flak or anything like that, but on the other hand it does give you something to do. Was it a problem on these really long flights, just sitting in these cramped conditions and waiting for something to happen?

Well, once or twice, yes. Over enemy-occupied territory the defences weren't so strong as they were over Germany. That's probably stretching the German armament supply to the limit, over occupied territory they wouldn't be able to supply the intensity of their air defences as they would over their own country. There did become occasions where possibly you relaxed to a certain degree. But I had a continual radio watch, because messages could come through advising changes in the weather which you passed on to your navigator, it would help him, as the further away you got from England the less effective your navigational aids became, and he would be purely dependent on what we call direct reckoning in navigation, and assistance from the United Kingdom having weather reports sent to us would keep us on the alert for any eventual changes that may or may not put us on target or off target.

What about the rear gunner? I mean, he's got a pretty boring job, lonely job.

Well, there again the rear gunner could assist if he could see the land, and, using his turret, he could assist the drift of the aircraft by taking readings on the scales. And the same with the bomb-aimer up for'ard, using his bomb sight. And that was...

END TAPE 1 SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2 SIDE A

TAPE IDENTIFICATION: THIS IS SIDE 3 OF THE INTERVIEW WITH MR JOHN HOLDEN. END OF IDENTIFICATION.

Right. Perhaps if we could start off talking about significant operations.
Perhaps if we could start off with your mission to cover the raid of the Tirpitz.

The Tirpitz was a huge German battleship that created a menace to the convoys between England and Russia through the Arctic Circle. And many attempts had been made to sink this battleship without success. Finally it was decided that special units of Bomber Command were to attempt to sink this battleship, after the invention of the Tallboy which was a 12000-lb bomb. This task was allotted to the 'Dambuster' Squadron 617, assisted by members of 9 Squadron. As a film-unit aircraft attached to 463, we were allocated to this raid, to film the

results on behalf of the Bomber Command hierarchy. We left United Kingdom on 11th September and flew direct to Yagodnik, which is an aerodrome near Archangel.

Can you spell it?

Yagodnik is Y-a-g-o-d-n-i-k. This aerodrome had very primitive runways made out of logs. And it was quite an experience landing our aircraft on it, fortunately not heavily loaded because of the consumption of fuel on the way over. After several attempts to obtain weather reports, we finally had a good weather report to attack the Tirpitz in the Kaa Fjord – K-a-a Fjord – which is right up at the top of Norway near North Cape. This fjord was a particularly good fjord for the protection of such a huge battleship because of the narrowness and being steep-sided. The Tallboy, the 12000-lb bomb, wasn't to be used on this occasion, but they had a Barnes Wallis invention of the Bouncing Mine bomb, it was supposed to hit the bottom of the fjord and bounce upwards, thereby hitting the keel of the Tirpitz and supposedly weakening it and, hopefully, to sink it. The defences of the Germans employed were not only anti-aircraft but fog machines; and as soon as we approached the target area, these fog machines came into operation. From fifteen thousand feet, which was the effective penetrative power of the projectiles that we were using as bombs, the Tirpitz was only a small dimension of about an inch long, and the bombing had to be absolutely accurate from such a height. And this was soon discovered by the Germans with their fogging machines which effectively blocked out the ship from the view of our bomb-aimers.

So this was a daylight raid?

This was a daylight raid. Our task was to fly around and get down as low as we could to film the results. And after the raid the bombers returned to Yagodnik, near Archangel in Russia, but our task was to fly back to England with the films. This became a very long journey for the aircraft, which was supplied with auxiliary petrol tanks contained in the fuselage and in the bomb bay. And after a fourteen-and-a-half-hour flight, we landed at Waddington aerodrome, our base, very tired but very happy to set feet on terra firma again. I'm f...

(5.00) Now, perhaps if you could just describe the raid. I mean, you haven't... I mean, you described what had to be done, you described the problems, but do you remember the actual process of, you know, the planes taking off? Do you remember the day, the morning?

Er, not very well. Indeed...

Can you remember the Russians?

We can remember the Russians standing there and watching us run up our motors, we were going through drill procedures and warming up motors and getting as far back as possible for making full use of the limited runway for such a heavily loaded aircraft. And once they got into the way of things, assisted by our ground staff who were sent up there who always stood at the head of the runway and cheered us off, the Russians soon joined in with that. And, as we bounced down the runway on take-off, we could see from our various positions the Russians turning and waving to us as they stopped in their daily work routines to wish us well. The morning was bright and clear, with little cloud base, and we were flying almost due west with the sun behind us. And it was quite an awery [sic. – It may mean `eerie', overlaid with the word `awe'] sort of experience in that we were taking off on a raid inside the Arctic Circle, a new experience to many of us.

Right. And so... Could you describe the fjord? What did it look like? – You described it as a narrow deep fjord. But, I mean, visually,...

Well, we couldn't see it that well from the height of fifteen thousand feet. But it was snow-covered tops everywhere, over the land we flew. And it was hard to really pinpoint the Tirpitz in the fjord because of the camouflage painting. But the shadows on the water gave us a clue, which became visual to our bomb-aimer through his bomb sight.

How long were you over the target?

Approximately thirty-five minutes, before we turned and headed back to England.

Was there much flak?

No, not that much of flak, at all. It wasn't intensive.

Right. So, what then happened? I mean, if you could describe the sort of ways in which the Dambusters went in. How did they approach the target?

Well, they were all briefed to bomb from fifteen thousand feet, and they flew on a direct route. And I don't think you could say much more than that. We flew alongside a number of the aircraft, to photograph them dropping their bombs. And then after the raid was over, we went down to see what damage had been done, to a lower height, about eight thousand feet. But the fog that had been spread by the German fog machines was very effective and we couldn't see anything.

Right. So was this the raid on which the Tirpitz did get damaged?

It was damaged, sufficiently for the Germans to eventually move her from Kaa Fjord down to Tromso in Norway. Tromso is spelt... the spelling of Tromso is T-r-o-m-s-o, Fjord.

Did you say `m' or `n'?

M for mother.

Right. OK. So this was a very long flight, wasn't it.

Yes. The total time was fourteen hours, thirty-three minutes – which was a record for a Lancaster – ably assisted by the auxiliary tanks carried in the fuselage and in the bomb bay.

What was your feeling when you first found out that you'd been selected for this trip?

Well, we were quite proud to be associated with 617 Squadron, their fame had gone before them, and to be specially selected for this particular raid we knew that we would be doing it not only on behalf of the war effort but on behalf of the Royal Australian Air Force.

(10.00) Right. And so, were there any other raids – perhaps of a different type – that you remember particularly, where you had a different type of experience, for example dealing with fighters or dealing with other problems such as that?

No, not really. I think the last trip we did was over Germany, over an oil plant, a manufacturing plant, called Gelsenkirchen, with 4_Group which were equipped with Halifax bombers. The period was January 1945, and soon after the New Year the countryside was covered with a blanket of snow, and we took off a laden aircraft on a snow-covered runway

which we were a bit dubious about because the tyres on all aircraft didn't have any tread on them, they were smooth, and we weren't certain how the aircraft would go until it gained its initial airspeed required for take-off, whether it would slew around on the runway. The snow was compacted by members of our various ground staff driving every available form of transport up and down the runway to compact the snow – trucks, utilities, big petrol bowsers laden with petrol for weight, were the final ones to charge up and down and compact the snow. Fortunately this did the trick. Had there been a frost which created a hoarfrost, or an icing, I think that there would have been some excitement on take_off of aircrafts getting around the place. The highlight of that particular trip was a clear moonlight night, where the visibility was over fifty miles; yet in the daytime when the sun came out – if we ever saw the sun – a fog or a mist was around the countryside and the visibility would be down to two thousand yards. This was considered during wartime to be good flying weather. But on this particular night, with the lifting of the mist and the clear night, the visibility increased to forty-five miles. The highlight of the trip was the intense cold. My pilot has recorded in his log book that the outside temperature was minus 48 degrees – I don't know whether he's talking Fahrenheit or Centigrade, but it certainly was very cold indeed.

Well, both of them... they'd be rather similar, actually.

Mmm. The only persons who enjoyed heated seats were the mid-upper and rear gunners. Naturally, in their isolated positions of the aircraft, they had heated seats. There was some form of heating for the for'ard cabin and near the wireless op/airgunner, which was a hose that extended up into the cabin and lay loose on the floor, for the purpose of heating various sections of the cabin. But despite it blowing hot air in, it was not really effective at the temperatures at that scale. And we were very glad, after that raid was over, to get back into some warmth...

The radio operator, though... you didn't have any warmth?

None at all, because the hose had to be directed up for the other working members of the crew, and I missed out on the hot air that might have drifted back. But it was part of our drill to be fully equipped, and I had three layers of clothing on. And despite that, wearing the correct flying gear, the intense cold still penetrated. The raid, I think, took about six and a half hours, and we were never more pleased than to get back to base and try to thaw out. On the following morning we were told that we were grounded. That came as a bit of a shock to us, because we thought we had a couple more trips to do to complete our second tour of operations. And actually, for most of the crew it was their forty-ninth – for our pilot it was his fiftieth trip. And when we were told by our commanding officer, Wing-Commander Bill Forbes, it took a long time to penetrate; until he said, at that early hour of the morning, 'Now, finish your breakfast, boys, and I'll buy you a round of drink!' – Well, that's 7 a.m. in the morning! You don't normally start drinking until everything is over, (a little laugh) but on this occasion we were grounded, by that command to go to the bar to have a drink with him at 7 a.m. in the morning.

(15.00) Why were you grounded?

We'd completed two tours of operations.

Now, forty-nine – I thought it was thirty operations.

The first tour was thirty operations. And the second tour was twenty operations. But it's counted on what your pilot did. If the pilot had completed fifty ops, and we as a crew – we

stuck together, we only did forty-nine. The pilot does a trip on his own, with an experienced crew, over a target area to gain knowledge of flying conditions. And that started prior to our raid on Berlin, our first trip out of the Wellington.

Right. Well, how did you feel, having completed two tours?

Well, it took a long time to sink in. We were sort of lost. We'd drilled ourselves into a routine every time we got up. We knew the aircraft we were flying in, which was fairly regular, we were allocated to a particular aircraft, we'd go out to the aircraft after breakfast together with the crew to do our daily routine drills. And these were, of course, running up the engines, assessing the behaviour of engines, testing your equipment. And all of a sudden it wasn't necessary for us to go through that routine. Well, we were... you might as well say, little boys lost, for a while, until it sunk in that we were finished. We were given the opportunity to go to Training Command. Our pilot had the opportunity of returning home. And I elected to remain in the station and to be assistant intelligence officer, which I did until the end of the war in Europe.

Right. Tell me about your aircraft.

The Lancaster airc...

Your individual aircraft, your 'F for Freddie' or whatever it was.

The aircraft we were allocated to at Waddington was 'F-Freddie' to us... it was allocated to us it was 'F-Freddie' from A-Flight 463. It was serviced by two Australians and one Englishman and a Welshman, as far as ground staff was concerned. The aircraft was a Lancaster Mach I, with Rolls Royce Merlin engines, and proved a very effective aircraft to us until such time as she was grounded because her wings were warped – not through our fault, but through a training accident when a new crew came on the station and used the aircraft for an exercise known as 'fighter affiliation', and that is, you fly with a fully laden aircraft with bombs and petrol load and you took an exercise up in the air with a fighter chasing you over the skies, and you learned your drills of evasive action to beat the fighter. During the process of this exercise, unfortunately the evasive action must have been intense and the wings were warped. The aircraft was taken to a hangar where they were to straighten out the mainspar or put a new mainspar in, and unfortunately during that process an accident occurred and she caught fire and there was no chance of salvaging the aircraft at all. What was left of the aircraft, of course, was used in salvage. Aircraft accidents all round England, there wasn't a scrap of metal left behind after an accident, it was all picked up and used for salvage.

How did you feel? I mean, did you feel personally attached to that aircraft?

More so to the ground staff than the aircraft. Because it meant that, after that, we had to fly another aircraft with a different ground staff. And you do, naturally, become attached to an aircraft, like you do become attached to your motor car – some people like their particular motor car and treat it as a member of the family. You do get attached to your aircraft, there's no doubt about it.

(20.00) What about new members of crew? You must have had some turnover of crew. How did people adjust to them? – because they're, you know, strangers in a sense.

Yes. Our pilot was very good, in introducing new members of a crew. We had an occasion when our rear gunner wasn't able to fly with us for the first few trips because of an accident in training with a heated seat that malfunctioned and he had a touch of frostbite. When we had to replace him, we had a Welshman as an airgunner, and our pilot was very good in introducing him to the crew and putting him at ease that he was in amongst a batch of Aussies and... you know, he was treated as one of the family, so to speak. And we were dependent on the pilot for... well, naturally, any replacement of crew, the person responsible for finding a replacement would always consult the pilot. And it didn't create any problems. We had a navigator once replace our navigator, because the navigator had a head cold and the doctor grounded him in case he ruptured his eardrums. The same thing happened to our Scotch engineer; our Scotch engineer was grounded for one trip because he had the same problem. Fortunately we didn't have much problems with our health at all, in that respect. Our mid-upper gunner, who came to us for our first tour was on his second tour; and when he completed that second tour, we had a new gunner, another Australian, from Sydney, who replaced him. And there was no problem with their assimilation amongst... well, experienced crew, because he had had some operational experience and learnt that the best way to get on with anybody was to mix in with them, not to ward off any feelings that he had against them.

You were on... it was supposed to be an Australian base, wasn't it. But obviously there were Scotsmen and Welshmen that you've mentioned on your own aircraft.

The station was mainly Australian personnel. But there was a good admixture...

This was at what station?

Waddington aerodrome. There were two Australian squadrons there, 463 and 467, RAAF Lancaster Squadrons. There was a good admixture of English, Welsh, Scotch and even Irish personnel on that station, not only on the ground staff but in the air crew. There was a number of Canadians and New Zealanders in air crew, as well. And towards the end of the war in '45, there became a number of Indians from the Royal Indian Air Force flying. In fact, at one stage on the second raid on the Tirpitz, in the film unit, we had a Canadian cameraman in the front turret for all three raids on the Tirpitz, on the first raid we had an Englishman, the second raid and third raids we had an Indian cameraman from the Royal Indian Air Force at the rear of the aircraft.

There were three raids on the Tirpitz?

Yes.

You took part in three?

We took part on the three raids on the Tirpitz. After she was damaged at Kaa Fjord, at the top of Norway, the Germans moved her down to Tromso. And at Tromso she was undergoing repairs. And unfortunately the second raid – which was for the aircraft flying direct from England, because she was closer to the range of the Lancaster, where we took off from Lossiemouth in Scotland and flew the round trip, the aircraft carrying the Tallboy 12000-pounder on this occasion landed back at Lossiemouth – the second raid was fraught with weather coming in from the North Sea in the shape of clouds which covered the aircraft right to the vital time of the bombing raid. That just...

Covered the ship, you mean?

It covered over the top of the ship, yes. You must remember at fifteen thousand feet the Tirpitz was only about an inch long, and it only had to be a wisp of cloud to blot it out from fifteen thousand feet. And the cloud could only be at three thousand feet.

(25.00) Right. So that was the second one, that had the weather trouble, wasn't it.

That's right. This part of the world, the weather could give you clear skies perhaps only one day a week. So that, taking off from England, and after a journey of about almost eight hours, it was catch-as-catch-can as to whether you could see your target when you got there. And on the second occasion we did see the target, but by the time you got over the target area this wisp of cloud came in and blotted the ship out. So on the third attempt we had the winds in our favour, which blew the cloud mass off... the winds that were coming off the land would blow the clouds out to sea. And it was an occasion that we saw three direct hits with the Tallboy bomb, but the Tirpitz was still sitting upright. And after everybody had finished bombing and were heading back for home, we spent our time dodging the flak, because in this area of Tromso she was heavily defended with anti-aircraft, and at one stage she was firing at us with her sixteen-inch guns which she could only do at a certain angle of our guns, but that would be a fair way off and the sixteen-inch guns would have a range of about thirty miles. So they burst all around us and bounced us around a bit, but weren't terribly effective. I don't recall any aircraft being damaged by the sixteen-inch guns of the Tirpitz. However, the opportunity came for a clear run. And we saw three bombs hit and three overshoot. And it wasn't until we finally decided that it wasn't much use for us playing around with the flak over the target area, by which time we were down to about five thousand feet to get effective filming of the Tirpitz, that suddenly our rear gunner yelled out 'Turn around, Buck, she's tipped over!' And what had happened: apparently the damage had been done on the port side of the battleship, she took in water, and that toppled her over. But she didn't sink, because of her high superstructure and the shallow depth of the fjord prevented her from sinking. But she was certainly down in such a position that we could see the red paint on her keel.

That must have been a nice moment.

It certainly was. It had been a highlight of our tour, we felt, in chasing something that we missed twice and finally got it on the third time. But we suddenly remembered all the other attempts that had been made by various services. Going back on the history of trying to get these big battle cruisers out of the road of the Murmansk convoys, the Royal Navy made many attempts with their midget submarines, and then later on, with Bomber Command, with Halifax bombers. At that time they didn't have bombs of the most penetrative power to sink the Tirpitz, it was reported that the Tirpitz armour-plating on her main decks was two feet thick. And that's why Barnes Wallis got to work to develop the Tallboy with the fins offset so that the most penetrative power had to be from the bomb dropped at fifteen thousand feet, so that, as the bomb fell, it spun around, and it spun around and gained momentum in spinning to be effective in penetrating this armour-plating on the decks of the Tirpitz. It apparently...

If you could stop there, I'll just turn the tape back.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

TAPE IDENTIFICATION: THIS IS SIDE 4 OF THE INTERVIEW WITH MR JOHN HOLDEN. END OF IDENTIFICATION.

With the battleship listing seventy to eighty degrees to port, it was a highlight of our raid on this occasion, which really sticks in our minds that the objective was to destroy a menace to the Murmansk convoys then applying. The weather was on this occasion very good for the raid to be successful. The penetrative power of that 12000-lb Tallboy proved itself by the penetration of the midships and to the foredeck, where the explosion took place it caused the Tirpitz eventually to heel over with a listing of seventy to eighty degrees.

Yes, were you involved in a significant way with the photographic operation of the aircraft?

No. I believe that the size of the film being used was 35mm film. The equipment was in the charge of the Canadian camera operator, who did all his training in the Royal Canadian Air Force on film work and film equipment, basically to... in prewar days a lot of aerial mapping was going on in Canada. I never saw the equipment close up, other than handling it if somebody said 'Would you take this camera, please, while I get out of the aircraft', well, I was there, and that's about the closest I got to the cameras.

Right. Why would you have a special aircraft just devoted to the camera role?
– Presumably you could just put a photographer in one of the ordinary aircraft?

The aircraft would have to be specially adapted to take cameras, because of the extra electrical wiring required and the generative power required to operate the cameras. One of the engines would have an extra generator in the aircraft for that specific purpose. Where they could, they had a generator for the batteries of the aircraft which would also operate the equipment for the wireless and some navigational aids. But as the navigational aids improved and more of it came about, an extra generator would be put in the aircraft, run off one of the engines. And, with the cameras, not only the mountings but the electrical equipment required was over and above the capacity – the safety capacity – of those two extra... well, those two generators, the third one was put in for a safety measure.

Right. Right. Back on base – what was the life like? I mean, we've been talking about operations so far. But what sort of life did you lead? I'm thinking, for example, when you went on leave.

It was a very well-run base, where there was entertainment when it was run in the various messes. Now, I can't really recall the frequency of mess dances, for example, but they would be fitted in in between the requirements of air crew duties. There was a period of time where there was no flying, over Christmas '44, because a thick pea-soup fog came in from off the North Sea and grounded all aircraft in United Kingdom. And if you're researching your subject a bit further, you'll find that that was the time when Rundstedt's 'Bulge' took place in Europe, and no aircraft could be flown out of England to assist the Americans in their drive, their struggle against Rundstedt in that bulge.

(5.00) 'In that bulge' – what's a bulge?

Bulge, b-u-l-g-e, bulge. With that period, I think that fog lasted persistently for about three weeks. We certainly made opportunity of getting a leave pass to go into Lincoln to see the latest films or go to some of the dance-halls at Lincoln which were well-run. And the hospitality of the people in general in Lincoln was tremendous. The occasions where that you weren't allowed to go any further than the local village, say because a curfew might be put on you to return by midnight, you'd probably go to the local village which was Waddington village, and the famous 'Horse and Jockey' or 'The Three Horseshoes' would be a good night's

entertainment if there was a bit of beer about the place and you could always have a game of dominoes or cribbage or play darts with the locals. Bracebridge Heath, which is only about a couple of miles away from the aerodrome, quite often we used to walk down there. – In fact, we were near the old original Waddington aerodrome of World War I. And that's history in itself, I don't know much about it, except the old hangars are still there and they were being used as a factory complex during the war, manufacturing suitable munitions for the war effort. The entertainment on the camp, if you weren't allowed off the camp, was limited to entertainment in the messes, where you might have a party in the sergeants mess or you'd have a party in the officers mess. But they were about practically the only relaxations we had, that I can think of, that took place the whole time we were there.

Were there special rules in the mess? I mean, sometimes you hear about odd and peculiar rules existing in these military messes.

I don't think the Australians stood for that type of yacker. The only thing that you'd come across is the normal type of rules that you get around a billiard table, where you're playing snooker or billiards and a ball gets hit off the table and that'll cost you a beer, for carelessness. I think the same applied in the sergeants mess. But there was no shenanigans that went on for any misdemeanours, which were very rare indeed. I think the 'catch-as-catch-can' was often played around the place...

What's that?

On occasions somebody's got a birthday. And, all right, he's got to have a birthday; who's going to buy him the first beer? – and then he can buy the rest of the crew at theirs. But, generally speaking, I can't recall any other rules than the ordinary rules expected of you when you enter a dining-room – there was courtesy to the staff serving you, and no shenanigans at the table. Well, there wasn't much food there to be thrown around the place, anyhow. But I just can't recall any hard-and-fast military rules other than that you were expected to be a disciplined person, you don't walk in the mess with... naturally you don't walk in a house with your hat on, do you, you hang it up first... and those sort of rules are applied. Well, that's only natural for running a mess.

Did you have much dealings with the English?

We had a lot of dealings with the English, because a lot of the personnel and the – as I said before – and the ground staff were English, and basically the operational centre was a lot of RAF personnel and you got your pay from pay-clerks who invariably would be RAF personnel, not necessarily English, they could be English, Scotch, Irish or Welsh.

You met your wife on the base, didn't you? Could you describe that?

Well, my wife was a transport driver. And on this occasion we got out of the aircraft and there was the transport to take us back to our air crew hut to undress from flying gear and to be debriefed from the raid. And I heard a courteous voice saying 'Come in the cabin with me, John, I want to talk to you.' And that was I think the first occasion I really had a clearcut conversation with my wife in the cabin of the truck while the rest of the crew were in the back. So, (a little laugh) and then it blossomed from there.

She, by the sound of it, had her eyes on you before you did... you were making a move yourself.

Well, that's rather obvious; because you would be too busy with your own thoughts and preparing for a trip, and the only time you possibly would want to look around is when you say 'All right, I'm pretty safe now, I don't think I'll buy it' – as the expression was called...

You'd 'buy it' how?

Well, you could go missing on ops, or you could be killed in an accident, sort of business. But I really wasn't that keen until I was sure that I was grounded for good. And then...

(10.00) Right. So, could you describe... you know, a military courtship, how it would be conducted, how it was conducted, on that place?

Well, being an officer and dealing with another rank was a bit taboo, within the eyes of the Royal Air Force. But once you were off the station, and if you kept out of the eyes of prying people, well, it wasn't hard at all. Because the form of entertainment, if we went into Lincoln to even have a little light snack before going to a dance or a picture, you found in the picture-house there was ranks mixing with ranks, and the formality wasn't there, it was informal and wasn't strictly at all to the rules until you got back to your base.

Did you very often see, say, women who were officers with non-commissioned men?

Well, there weren't that many commissioned women officers about. But those that were invariably had an officer, a fellow-officer, as a companion, male companion.

Did you go to London at all?

Yes, we had reasonable air crew leave, as it was called. About every six weeks. It was supported by the Nuffield Scheme, and part of his appreciation of what was done, primarily in the Battle of Britain, that it was carried on for the rest of the war. It did give me an opportunity of going down to London now and again. And when I was down there I would take the opportunity of visiting places, historical, such as walking round Westminster Abbey, or St Paul's Cathedral. It wasn't much point going to the Art Gallery because most of them were safely stowed away from the bombing of London. The same would go with the Museum. But I found that the theatres were running, both the cinemas and the theatres. I remember seeing a stage play *Arsenic and Old Lace* and I saw it several times. On the theatre side of things, the only other place was vaudeville at the Windmill Theatre, which was very good, with the old artists in the main, there were some up-and-coming young ones – I can't recall their names, but I think Tommy Handley was pretty active at the Windmill, and to a lesser degree... er,... oh, I can't think of his name for the moment, but I'd pick him out straightaway, the two characters that often had a show on the BBC about an airforce aerodrome. But, apart from that, it was fairly restrictive on where you could go, around London. The transport wasn't all that good, because of limitations of when they ran transport, so you walked everywhere. As far as I was concerned it did me the world of good. And staying at hostels, the Union Jack Club just over the Waterloo Bridge was a very popular spot for NCOs, and the Strand Palace Hotel was very popular as a spot for officers of the Australian Air Force. Australia House was always open there, if we could get hold of newspapers from home they were there to be read, and then they developed in the basement the Boomerang Club. And I think the history of that Boomerang Club is a story in itself, because they did try to give us a bit of variety in the set type of meals we were getting at the station, even though it was limited.

What are the things that come to mind when you say that 'it was a history to itself'?

Well, I think the Boomerang Club was run by volunteers of the Australian people living in England, or caught there by the war, or serving their country in the capacity of the various Australian offices from the States – like Australia House itself had representation there from Australian government departments, I know the Department of Commerce, and I think the Agent-General from New South Wales and Victoria had separate offices in London, and they became embroiled with work in Australia House there.

(15.00) Right. Sometimes, though, there must have been times, occasions, – you said it didn't happen very often – but when offences were committed. What sort of offences would be committed when they did happen?

Well, I don't know whether you'd call it 'offences'. It's just the old expression 'Australia letting off steam'. I know one night in the officers mess there was a huge pyramid built out of all the seating arrang... of the chairs, in the lounge. And the highlight of that was, right up at the top was a bicycle. Now, bicycles for getting around the aerodrome were very few and far between, and on this particular occasion it belonged to an air force chaplain – I don't know which denomination it was, but he was very irate about it – and there was a search party going out for the culprit. But they never did find the culprit. And I haven't seen a photograph anywhere in any publication of that scene, but I have seen a photograph somewhere of the chairs being stacked up after a mess 'party', as we used to call them. And I can't recall whether that was in the officers mess or the sergeants mess, but it did happen in the officers mess as much as it did in the sergeants mess. I just don't recall any other incidents which could be called comparable, as far as that was concerned, in discipline.

What about casualties? That's something that... there were a lot of casualties. First of all talking about the people around you...

Mmm.

...did you have close friends who were killed?

Yes. We were particularly saddened by a crew that went missing one night over the Ruhr Valley. The occasion was.... When we were NCOs, the bomb-aimer, the Scotch engineer and myself, to wile away time after briefing before take-off we used to play crib with the NCOs of another crew. And there were four of them. And they belonged to a crew, the pilot was Webb – nicknamed, naturally, Spiderweb – and he came from Adelaide. And he was an officer. But the rest... the wireless op bomb-aimer and the two gunners were NCOs, and we used to play crib with one another. And I think invariably the prize was, who paid for the first round of beer after we got back, if we ever got to the drinking stage, if we had time to drink, before we went back to bed. On this occasion, we were like, the three of us, cats on a hot tin roof. We couldn't settle down to the fact that they hadn't come back. They were from B-Flight, and every time we heard an aircraft circle the aerodrome to land we'd rush out of our billet to see if it was Spiderweb's crew coming back. And I think that, when it finally sunk into us that they wouldn't be coming back, we retired and got up in the morning hoping to hear news that they'd been possibly diverted to another aerodrome because of... possibly damage to the aircraft, that once they got back over United Kingdom they'd get down as quickly as possible at the nearest safest aerodrome. And then we found out that they didn't come back, they were reported missing. And we used to get bulletins on missing crews in the officers mess and the

sergeants mess, put up on their noticeboard, and we'd be continually searching these lists to see if that crew's name was up, and that took us a fair while to get over that.

It didn't come up?

It didn't come up, no.

When someone got shot down, did you expect that they'd be killed? Or did you think that there was a good chance of being a prisoner-of-war?

Well, we always hoped there was a good chance that they were able to bail out and become prisoners-of-war, or even escape being prisoners-of-war. If the target area was over occupied country, we were hoping that they'd be picked up by the underground and brought back. And we know of quite a few of them that did walk back, and quite a few of them ended up as POWs. But when the war was over, and after the victory in Europe, I was still doing intelligence work prior to the disbandment of 463 Squadron, looking for these chaps that we knew. But I'm afraid that Spiderweb's crew never came up.

Right. What about the German casualties, on the ground?

We never heard about German casualties on the ground, at all. Because most of our raids that we were on, at our time of the war, apart from Berlin, were over military targets. And we never heard much about it. We were in the process of selecting targets for the build-up of the invasion in Normandy, which was to hit the Germans in their transport system of getting materials to the front, intermingled with attacking military targets such as aircraft-building targets and oil-producing plants, synthetic oil-producing plants such as Gelsenkirchen was.

(20.00) What did you think of the campaign against German cities?

Well, I had mixed feelings about that. I still do. I can recall walking around London and seeing the damage that was done there, with the blitz, and subsequently seeing what happened to Coventry. I don't know; it shouldn't be a feeling of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth', but, well, that's how you felt about it in wartime, that's the way you were brought up, you were given a job to do and you obeyed the command.

Did you ever hear of crews that didn't complete their missions in the proper way? I mean, they... you know, they dropped their bombs in the North Sea and circled round and came back, or they went to Switzerland, or something like that? – There were cases like this. I just wondered whether you'd come across any.

No, not from our squadrons, 463 and 467. I can't recall any crews had been suspected of lack of moral fibre. There were occasions when aircraft returned from aborted mission raids because of various faults of the aircraft; that's only to be expected. But I don't recall any incidents where Australians in particular were accused, or court-martialled, because of lack of moral fibre.

Right. When the end of the war came up, what was your feelings about what you'd gone through? And the end of the war – I mean, was it just simple joy? Or was it a more complicated feeling, because of what you were going to leave behind in terms of your mates?

Well, that's always there. It's a feeling of relief to hear that an armistice has been signed, and to know that the slaughter has come to an end. With the loss of your companions – that's war, to be expected. But you retain their memory, you can never obliterate that memory of their companionship and comradeship, you never will. And I can recall with feeling... (pause) ...many of my comrades who were left behind.

When the war ended, what happened next? You stayed in Britain for a while? You got married in Britain?

After the victory in Europe, Dorothy and I decided we'd get married in June, which we did. And we were separated, naturally, we couldn't live together on the station. And it was conveniently done for us by the fact that 467 Squadron was elected to be a main force of Tiger Force, which was being built up for the war against Japan. And it was elected that 463 be disbanded. Accordingly I moved with 463 from Waddington to Skellingthorpe aerodrome, and September 1945 the squadron was disbanded, and we had a bit of a ceremony on that, and we had a bit of a party in the officers mess. And it's a strange thing, that photograph taken of that party in September 1945 I was only given that in Melbourne in November, in Brisbane, in one of our biennial reunions, in 1981. And it was a bit unfortunate, because whilst I can remember the faces I've lost their names, not only of Australians in the photograph but English RAF types as well.

Mmm. And so did you get back to Australia before the war in the Pacific came to an end?

Er, no. The squadron wasn't disbanded until September 1945, and the war in Southwest Pacific ended in August 1945. Then it became the hassle of getting home. And I didn't leave England until 30th November '45, to get back to Melbourne in January '46.

(25.00) And were you demobbed when you got back?

After leave, yes. I toyed with the idea of staying in the Royal Australian Air Force, but elected to go back to my original civilian job, on 14th February 1946.

And what was the job?

I was a clerk with the Australian Wheat Board, in Melbourne, at the time.

Right. Thank you.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

END INTERVIEW