TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	(417223) O'Connor, Peter Joseph (Flying Officer)
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Description	Peter Joseph O'Connor, navigator, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Bomber Command, interviewed by Daniel Connell for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45. Discusses education; employment; enlistment; training; Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS), airforce training; RAAF; discipline; embarkation; RAAF Royal Air Force (RAF) relations; casualties; aircraft Lancaster; aerial operations; weather; stress; relations to women; Pathfinders. Mentions Western Australia; UK; Munich, Germany.

Transcript methodology

Please note that the printed word can never fully convey all the meaning of speech, and may lead to misinterpretation. Readers concerned with the expressive elements of speech should refer to the audio record. It is strongly recommended that readers listen to the sound recording whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. 'world war two' (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to 'second world war' (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [ ] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. Three dots (…) or a double dash (– –) indicate an unfinished sentence.

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: This is an interview with ... your first name's ...?

Peter O'Connor

... Mr Peter O'Connor. End of identification.

Right well, if we could start off, Mr O'Connor, talking about your background a little bit, where did you grow up, perhaps describe your family?

Born 1921, at Loxton, in the Murray Valley. My father was a farmer, and we, my brothers and sisters and I, lived in the Mallee country in our young lives. We all were fortunate enough to go to school here in Adelaide, which I think was probably the first good thing that our parents were able to do for us in those hard time days. They gave us a very good education. Then, at the age ...

Where did you go to school?

Sacred Heart College. That's secondary school. Good Catholic school of course. Then, when the war broke out, I begged the pleaded with my father and mother, could I enlist and save the nation, and of course steadfastly they refused, until finally I wore them down and I was allowed to enlist in 1941 in the RAAF.

Right well ... right well, what were your ideas about the RAAF before you enlisted? I mean what sort of service did you think it was?

Well, I think like many young fellows of my era at that time, the Japanese hadn't come into the war, I think we thought we were going to be Biggles. And it was a great adventure. You

know, we were ... we were going to go 'over there', like the chaps did in world war one, and ... and save the world for democracy. I'm quite sure that that was the way a number of us thought about it. We were very young and we had this rather romantic idea bout the whole business. And I think a lot of us too, who'd ...

You had had the Battle of Britain, hadn't you, that ... that had ...?

Yes, but I think even so, you know, we looked at that through rather rose-coloured eyes. I suppose we thought we were going to be Wing Commander Bader, or perhaps, whatshisname, the chap that chased up Princess Margaret? (laughs) Group Captain Townsend. It was all very romantic. Because we didn't know anybody who'd ... who was dead, or anything like ... well obviously we wouldn't know anybody who was dead, but we didn't know anybody who'd been killed. We knew nothing really about the horrors of things. And so this was a big romantic adventure, and we could hardly wait to be in it and go 'over there'. And we used to read poetry, you know, Rupert Brooke's stuff and all this sort of thing, and I'm quite sure that a number of us felt that way about it.

Did you have dealings with other people before you joined, who were about to join or who had joined?

In my case, no, I hadn't had much to do with chaps in that position. We knew that the AIF had been formed and they'd gone off to the Middle East, and apparently they were having a bit of tough trot, you know, it was a pretty sandy, rough old place and that sort of thing. But I personally wasn't directly affected by any of those things. I'd lived a very quiet life. I was working in the country up at Murray Bridge and ...

What sort of work?

I was working in the railways in those days. And so, as I said, I had this rather glamorous idea about being a gallant young airman.

Right. And where did you join up?

In Murray Bridge. I enlisted there.

What happened. Did a ...

Well I ...

... group of people come to town or ...?

At long last I wore my mother and father down. And the exact process of enlisting I ...

Sorry, when the trains go past, could we actually just stop to ...?

Sorry?

When the trains go past?

Oh, yes, I'd forgotten about those. Yes. Yes.

So we'll just stop and let them go past.

Good. Well you'd better keep an ear out, because we're so used to them that we forget about them. I don't really remember the procedure of enlistment, except that about July of 1941 I

know I had signed up in the air force, I'd actually taken an oath I think at that time, and I was entitled to wear a little badge to show that I was on the Aircrew Reserve. I think this must have been done at Murray Bridge. Or perhaps I came down to Adelaide, I'm not too sure.

(5.00) Had you ever flown before?

No, had never flown, no.

And you don't know whether you walked into an Adelaide office or a Murray Bridge ...?

Not at that time, no, I can't remember. I do know that when we were finally called up, a whole group of us, about a hundred or more of us were called up, we had to come down to Adelaide and we were officially sworn into the air force and that was our last contact with civil life. And I think that was in December of 1941. The Japanese had already entered the war. And we ... from that day on we were a part of the RAAF, and off we ... off we had to go to camp.

What did you think you were going to become? A pilot?

Oh yes. Oh yes. Everybody was going to be a pilot. There was never any suggestion that you might be a guard, or a cook, or a steward, or a mechanic, or anything like that. Oh no, no, we were all going to be pilots.

Not even navigators, or bomb-aimers?

No. No. Perish the thought. No, all going to be pilots, and we were all going to come home with a DFC and a Bar and a DSO.

Right. Well just perhaps to give us an idea, a pen picture, of what's going to happen in the next four years, could you just very briefly describe your service record? I mean were you a pilot, or were you ...?

(Laughs). Right. Well, as I said, I enlisted in 1941, called then up into camp to begin training at the end of 1941. Completed the first part of the training at Victor Harbor, was categorised as a pilot, went to Western Australia to start pilot training, and that was absolute heaven. It was marvellous. Flew the lovely little Tiger Moths out in the Western Australian wheat country, and I lasted exactly twenty hours. And then they broke the sad news – 'We just can't hang on to you as a pilot. You'll bend all our aeroplanes.' And I was scrubbed off as a pilot, and recategorised as a navigator. And of course I was broken-hearted. I had to write home and tell my fiancee and my family – 'I've been recategorised.' Went to Mount Gambier, trained as a navigator. Then went to Port Pirie, where we did bombing and gunnery training. Then to Nhill, which was an astral navigation school. And by January of 1943, beginning of '43, I was ready to take on the world. We were put on a draft to go abroad, we had no idea where. We went to Melbourne ...

Perhaps ... you see, some of these things ...

My ... are not really important, I get you.

No, no, they are important, I want to go into them in more detail later. But I'm just wondering whether you can give me in a telegram form, say in one minute flat, a description of your total RAAF experience?

Oh. Right. Okay then. Training in Australia, 1942. Sent to England at the beginning of 1943, travelling through America, Canada. Arrived in England, and immediately began further training as a navigator. Fairly extensive training that lasted right through until the end of 1943. Then posted to an operational squadron, and 1944 was spent ...

Which one?

Two squadrons. The first one was 44 Squadron, the ... a Rhodesian squadron, sponsored by the government of Rhodesia. A couple of operations on that, and then the crew was drafted into the Pathfinders, and we completed our operational tour on the Pathfinders, with 83 Squadron. A very, very famous squadron, in fact it was one of the original Pathfinder squadrons. So we spent our ... 1944 on operational flying. Then, tour completed, 1945 I was drafted into training command, as a ... as a navigation instructor. Then the war folded up and we waited in England somewhere around about – I think it was about six months. Then we sailed for Australia. Came home. Got married. And completed my service, I think, in January of 1946. So I had, counting the time I was waiting on the Reserve, four and a half years. Of which nearly three years were spent overseas.

Right. Well let's go back to that training experience. What sort of people were your peers? The other recruits. I mean what sort of people were you dealing with?

I think we were a rather exceptional group. We were all very young, very, very few – you had to be – to be in aircrew. None of us would have been over thirty I don't think. We had some outstanding men, as I remember, on my particular course, when I went through in those training days. The first one who comes to mind was the one and only Keith Miller, who was the famous ... you know, an international cricketer. Another fellow was a fellow called Alan Gunson, who was a member of a very, very well-known family here in Adelaide. And such men as those, they were striking fellows. Keith Miller, for example, was a magnificent-looking fellow. Six foot two, a superb athlete. He used to walk like a king that fellow, he was a marvellous bloke. And we were all pretty bright. I'm not saying this with the idea of glamourising us or anything like that, but we were. We were pretty bright people, we were all pretty well-educated. As fit – gosh we were fit fellows. And mad keen of course to do our bit, and all that sort of thing. And I think we were a rather exceptional group of people. And I'll back that up further by saying that nearly all of my comrades who've made it, who came back, darn near every one of them did something with themselves in civilian life. University graduates. Half the group that I went through with finished up as lawyers, doctors, engineers. One of my colleagues finished up as Lord Mayor of Adelaide, which isn't bad. And they went into ... they did well in business. I knew very, very few of my old comrades who've been failures in life. If they have been it's because of health or something or other like that. But they were, they were in pretty exceptional group of people. And the sad part of all that of course is that so many of them never came back, which was sad.

(10.00) Private school, high schools, what was the balance?

That would be hard to say. I support fifty-fifty. But that's only a rough guess. But a remarkable number of them were fellows that went to, you know, Saint's, Prince's, Sacred Heart, Christian Brothers, that sort of thing. There were very few fellows in aircrew who had only gone as far as, shall be say, primary school. You simply had to have some education to cope with the ... the technicalities. And particularly in navigation. Most of the navigators were

pretty well-educated fellows. You had to be, because of the nature of the work, and there we are.

The training schools you went to, what sort of facilities did you find?

Well, in retrospect, I thought they were very good. Remember, Australia wasn't exactly a rich country in those days, and we were very well looked after. The food – of course young men needed plenty of ... of good food, and we were, we were fed very well. Our quarters were okay. They certainly weren't the Hilton or anything like that, but, you know, it was – I don't think we thought very much about that sort of thing. Perhaps the soldiers in the AIF did. They had a bit of a rougher deal, I think. But I can never remember grizzling or complaining about the quarters. I thought they were ... they were pretty good.

Where did you spend most of your time in Australia? What was the most important training school?

I don't think there was one that was more important than another as far as I was concerned. A couple of months at Victor Harbour, a couple of months at Cunderdin in Western Australia, a couple of months at Mount Gambier, a couple of months at Port Pirie. Again at Nhill, where we did our astral navigation. No one place, I think, was more important than another. Conditions were much the same everywhere, except that it was deadly cold at Mount Gambier in the middle of 1942. No, I ... I think we were treated pretty well. We were paid adequately, we were given reasonable leave, we were ... we were allowed to go down to the local town now and again and, you know, have a cup of tea at the Prize Store and so on. (Laughs).

Well let's just talk for the moment about the pilot training that you did in Western Australia?

Oh that was wonderful, yes. I ... I still do a little weep over that to think that I didn't make the grade. You know, that was the realisation of a boy's dream. There I was flying around Western Australia in Tiger Moths, and I thought, 'This is it', you know, 'stand to one side', you know, the old wartime heroes. Because they were lovely little aeroplanes, beautiful little things. And I ... I went solo. I actually flew the darn thing all by myself. But I was rather bad at ... at landing them. I had a tendency to land them from about twenty feet up and they ... they ... the instructors reckoned that I would bend far too many aeroplanes if I went on doing that. But it was – it was an absolute delight that, because it was the summer, I was young and fit, and this was the beginning of it all. And it was all rather romantic and that sort of thing, and it was a terrible blow to be said ... to be told, 'This is it, fella'. She [Beth] was my fiancee, you see, and I had to write home and tell her, 'I've failed'. Terrible, tragic. (Laughs).

How did they tell you?

Well, went up on a flight, the flight instructor got out and he said, 'Well that's the bloody end of you', he said, 'you're finished'. That was it. (Laughs) You know, they didn't muck around, you know, they didn't try and pat you on the shoulder, or take you into a confessional, or something like that. Sit down and have a little counselling talk. 'You've had it cobber'. (Laughs). So there we are.

And ...

Ruthless world.

Right. And within the group this would have been a fairly major division between you and your colleagues? The ones who made it and the ones who didn't?

Oh well, yes. You were a failure. You were ... for a start off they couldn't bung you off somewhere straight away, so they had to do something with you. And we were ... used to be ... a handful of us, we were stuck down in the barrack store somewhere or another, playing cards and smoking, and supposed to be sweeping the aerodrome or something or other like that, until they could get rid of us. And off you go elsewhere, you see. Whereas the successful ones, were ... they were already, you know, forty, fifty hours up, and already they ... the vision of their wings was right there in front of their eyes. But we were ... were were failures, it was terrible.

(15.00) They didn't socialise with you much?

Not really. (Laughs). No, no, no. There was one funny little escapade in that, I think we've got time to tell you. Eventually we were sent off down to Perth and we had to stay at a holding station there for a few days. A group of us, before we were sent East for further training. And it was a little place where there were some WAAAFs there that – that ran the, you know, telephone service and that sort of thing. And two of us were sent to sweep a path one day around a building, and we didn't realise it at the time, but that's where the little WAAAFs lived. And there was a sweet little girl who was sitting on the verandah in her dressing-gown, and we said, 'Hello, you are you getting on?' We were all about nineteen years of age or so. And we sat there chatting, and it started to rain, and she said, 'Ooh, you'd better come inside, I'll make you a cup of tea'. So we went inside the WAAAFery, and she took us into her room and made us a cup of tea. And we're all sitting there chatting away, you see, and all of a sudden there was a tremendous roaring sound. (Claps once). 'On your feet!' It was the commanding officer. He was inspecting the unit, you see. And this poor little WAAAF, she must have been all of eighteen, she stood there frozen. We three lads, I think ...

In her dressing-gown?

Yes. (Laughs). And we three lads in our old giggle-suits and that sort of thing. 'What on earth's going on here?' You see, it was ... oh it was a very traumatic scene, but apparently he was a very nice fellow, the CO, he realised it was all perfectly innocent and that sort of thing, but we got a terrible earwigging from – from the warrant officer, I think. The key of the thing was, we said, 'But sir, it's raining, and we came in to shelter, and this girl made us a cup of tea'. And the CO said, 'Well, for your information, the rain stopped half an hour ago'. (Laughs) So there we are.

How good was the training that you were getting in the pilot school?

I think it was very good. You know, it's forty-odd years ago now, but the standard of instruction was extremely high, and I think that it's quite fair to say that. The fellows that instructed us were, in the first place, good pilots. They'd made it. But, secondly, they'd received special training to be instructors. And, thirdly, the fact that so many highly successful airmen came from these training schools. It was, it was good instruction. And the same at navigating school, and the wireless-operating school too.

There was some suggestion that some of the pilots who came back from, say, Britain, you know, they'd been through the Battle of Britain, etcetera, were

> battle-fatigued, were browned off, weren't ... took a while to ... it's a bit of a comedown, or a bit of a change, if you've been part of the Battle of Britain, to ... training these neophytes in the wheat fields of Western Australia? (Laughs).

I can't really comment on that of course, because I don't – I don't even remember whether any of the instructors were ex-Battle of Britain types. They may have been, but I ... honestly I can't remember. I don't know that we would have had many such chaps. Their experience would have been far too valuable to have them just stuck out there doing that sort of thing. I would imagine that such men, be they Australian or Englishmen, would have been sent immediately to, you know, in an advisory capacity at least, to the squadrons that would have been in the North of Australia, I think. And a number of them did of course, as we know. There were some very ... Bluey Truscott was such a one. So I really can't comment on that one. I do remember that we had a gunnery instructor who was an ex-RAAF type. He had had a shocking time in the 1940's, you know, in the Battle of France and that sort of thing, and he was ... oh he was ...

> Can we just wait for that train?

Right. [Break in recording]. Well now we were talking, that's right, about the ... this ex-RAAF type, who was a gunnery instructor, and he was a bit of a mess, poor old fellow. His nerves were shot, and I think he regarded his tour of duty in Australia as an opportunity to ... to recover from his ... he had some pretty shocking experiences, apparently.

> In where?

Over France. In the very early part of the show, I think it was about 1940. In think they were flying Battles, Fairey Battles, as light bombers over France. And they were absolutely hopeless. They were hopelessly outclassed by the Germans, and the casualties were fearsome. And the rear-gunners in those aircraft took a battering. Yes.

> What sort of things were you hearing? Now that you'd joined the air force, what sort of things were you hearing, because obviously there'd be ... this sort of talk would be going on all the time, wouldn't it? You know, the future of the battles that are going to go on, your own organisation, the air force is involved, you're a youngster that's just joined?

Well the key to that answer I suppose is the word you used yourself, youngsters. As I recall, I don't think many of us thought very much about the total organisation. We were very, very busy, we were desperately keen to pass our exams and go ahead with whatever we were doing.

> But you would have been fascinated to know what was happening? Real world of the air force?

Well I suppose we would have been. We thought we were in the real world, I suppose. We were really only on the periphery. But, no, I think the truthful answer, as far as I'm concerned, to that question, was that I really wasn't aware, at that stage, you know, of the big world out there. That came later on, when we got into the thick of it.

> Right. That gunnery instructor wasn't telling you things about what it was like?

Well to tell you the honest truth, most of the time he spent in the Sergeants' Mess, getting drunk, poor old man. (Laughs). And we were only ... don't forget, we were only bits of kids, we were only AC2's, so we ... we didn't see anything of him outside the classroom.

(20.00) There was a strong hierarchy, by the sound of it. I mean you – people in more senior ranks didn't talk to people in more junior ranks?

Well no. (Laughs). Certainly not. Not to trainee airmen anyway, right. No, we were only ... excuse me. Not to trainee air men, oh no, no. We were the lowest of the low. We were AC2's, we were just 'sprogs'. The officers had nothing to do with us at all. Strangely enough, many, many years afterwards, when I finished up in the Education Department, one of the first senior masters that I worked with in a big high school, many years afterwards, he had been one of my instructors in the navigation school. And of course we – we became great friends. As a matter of fact he lives nearby, and we still talk about those days as a matter of fact. But no, as a – as a trainee airman, oh no, you were, you know, the lowest of the low.

And how did you feel about people who were even lower, like people who were training to be mechanics?

Well there wasn't anybody lower. There wasn't anybody lower than an AC2, a trainee airman. No, no, we were ... oh no, no. The mechanics, the armourers, the fitters, the riggers, the storemen, we very quickly realised that they were pretty important people. And they had a very definite role, a definite function – a definite function, they were a definite part of the hierarchy, and they were much more important than we were. The key people on any air force station in those days were the people of about the rank of sergeant. The sergeant level. The fellows who ran the orderly room. The ... the chief mechanics and riggers, someone like that. The CO was rather a powerful, God-like figure. But the ordinary – the ordinary run of the officers, no, they weren't ... they didn't have much impact on our lives. But we used to be very, very wary of the chief warrant officer, who was in charge of discipline, and of course the sergeant in charge of the cookhouse. And people like that, you see. So ... but we were very definitely down there, like that.

Well perhaps, moving on to, say, a place like Mount Gambier, how much were these training places, you mentioned Western Australia, Mount Gambier, Nhill, how different were they?

Different only in the physical aspects, I suppose. Cunderdin in Western Australia, was out in the wheat country, flat, dry. Mount Gambier, in the middle of a very settled, rich district, very, very cold and wet in the winter time. I think I was .. there's another factor that I've just suddenly realised of course, it was much easier to form associations with the townspeople in a place like Mount Gambier than it was in Western Australia.

That's what I was going to ask you about.

Yes. And we very quickly became friendly with families in the town. Particularly of course as some of the lads in actual fact did live in ... in the township. And we'd ...

What, they'd come from there?

Mmm. I can remember one very well-known character, as a matter of fact, who finished up on the Dambuster squadron in England, and I think his parents had a pub down there, so ...

In Mount Gambier?

In Mount Gambier, yes. The Carey family I think the name was. And our girlfriends and fiancees and mothers and so forth used to be able to come down and visit us. They couldn't very well visit us in Western Australia. So that – that was one rather important difference.

How would you meet local people? Obviously if you had a direct contact like that you could.

Yes, well that was the first way I suppose. The second one was you'd have a few hours leave and you'd go into the town, wander around the sights and that sort of thing. And remember in those days the blue uniform was very distinctive, and, you know, dear old ladies would invite you in for a cup of tea. There would be little places in town, you know, the Salvation Army, little places where you could go and have a cuppa and ... and write a letter, that sort of thing. So you very quickly formed friendships. And very, very nice friendships too.

You d dn't have parents of – of local girls looking with great suspicion at these young blokes who were coming and then going fairly rapidly?

(Laughs). That's a leading question if ever I heard one. Well now I'll answer that one for you, very clearly. A very dear pal of mine, who lives in this city, and who, as a matter of face we served on the same squadron, he finished up with a DFC, he met a local girl, and he's married to her. They've stayed married for forty years, they've raised a family, and so there we are. So I don't know whether her parents looked at him with suspicion or not, but the outcome was very, very pleasant. They've had a long and happy marriage, and they've got a string of children and a string of grand-children. So there's one answer. I have no doubt whatsoever, I suppose, that the sight of a blue uniform probably ... (laughs) ... probably did cause one or two local dads and mums, you know, to drag their daughters off the street. But I suppose that was quite common in many parts of the world, wasn't it? When the Americans came, for example, (laughs), [inaudible] somewhere like that. And it was the same in England. The ... we were very, very popular over there, but I – I suppose there were some mums and dads that thought it mightn't be a bad idea if little Sally was, you know, brought in off the street. There we are.

So you were training for quite a long time?

Yes.

And you learnt navigation skills to a reasonable level?

I would say to a very high level indeed.

(25.00) This was in Australia?

Well not to a great deal here in Australia, no, that's true. Because we were not using the most modern equipment, our aircraft were not the most modern aircraft, and there were techniques, navigation techniques, that we knew nothing about, but that had been developed under the stress of war, in England. And it wasn't until we got to England that we really refined our arts.

Right, well when did you first know that you were going to go to England? Because you did ... you might have been going to the Pacific, mightn't you?

Yes. Well we didn't know, until the ship pulled out of Melbourne. At least I didn't anyway, I don't know whether some of the other fellows had ... I suppose the officers in charge of us,

they must have know. But when we left Melbourne we arrived in New Zealand for a couple of days. And then suddenly the message dropped – 'Well if we're going to New Zealand, well very obviously we're not going to the Pacific'. So after that we knew we were bound for England.

Right. So what were you told? In preparation for going to England did you get last leave, or what happened?

Oh yes. Oh yes. We were just simply told that we were going overseas. So we had our final leave, which was a pretty hectic sort of time. Very emotional time of course. Mums and dads, and fiancees and girlfriends, and wives and children, and so forth, were involved. And that was that. Off we went. We went to Melbourne. I'm talking about my particular group of course.

Just wait for the train. That's all right. By this time there must have been ... we're talking of '43, aren't we?

Yes. Early '43 when I left.

Right. So this information must be coming back about casualties in Bomber Command? In England.

I suppose, yes, I suppose the ... such information of course would have been being published all the time. But I can't remember whether that had much effect on me personally. I really don't ... I can't remember that. I've kept a lot of letters that I wrote to my mother, and to my fiancee as she was then. I kept a diary, I've got that in my little study in there. But I don't recollect being affected one way or another very much by what was going on then. I may have been, but you know, the memories are blank there.

Well could you describe life on the ship?

(Laughs). It was ... it was a bugger of a life. We were packed in like sardines. Eight or nine or ten to a little cabin, which would have been a single berth cabin in the old days. And you ate, and lived, and drank, and fought, and quarrelled. You know, we'd ... there was no drinking, I must say that. And gambled. And got on each others' nerves. And grizzled. (Laughs).

What could you do? I mean were they ....?

Not a damn thing. There was nothing ... you know, they used to do the best they could to have some kind of a program. But by the time you got up in the morning, and fought your way to ... into a shower to try to clean yourself up a little bit, and then queued up for endless hours for food, and then went and sat out on deck and whinged. Then queued up for lunch, and so on like that. And then got into a gambling game, well that was about it. I think they used to try and organise sports, but you can't have very much sport on a – on a ship that's carrying about ten times as many people as it would normally in peacetime.

What ship was it?

I think we went away on the HMS *Nieuw Amsterdam*. She was an immense ship, she was about a 40,000 tonner. She'd been a big cruise-liner, and in peacetime, I guess, she must have been a marvellous ship. But she was very, very packed and crowded, and the food was very, very ordinary. I think it took us ten days, if I remember correctly, to cross the Pacific from New Zealand to ... to California. That would have been to San Francisco.

That's fairly quick.

And it was ... oh it was, it was. Well of course they were big, powerful ships, you know. They moved pretty quickly, because of course there were Japanese submarines around. No, there was no escort.

Let's turn off the tape.

END TAPE 1 SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B.

Identification: Side Two, Mr Peter O'Connor. End of Identification.

Right, so you're on the ship. There's no attempt to organise a program, a daily program, have sort of instruction courses or anything like that, on the part of ....?

As I remember, I don't think there was time, the numbers were so immense, and there wasn't very much that they could tell us that we didn't already know. I suppose there were a few lectures about what to expect when we finally got to England. But as for training in the sense of telling us more about navigation or something like that, no, I can't remember if there was anything like that. There might have been a few briefing exercises, but I think most of the time it was just a matter – we endured in boredom the trip.

All the people on board, were they RAAF?

No, no, on our ship we had quite a group of air force chaps. We had some New Zealand soldiers that had been in the Middle East, they were coming home. We had a number of Americans, who ...

They were coming home? Oh, from Australia to New Zealand?

No, they were coming home from the Middle East, to New Zealand. Remember this is the beginning of 1943.

Right. But they were on the Australia–New Zealand leg?

Yes, that's right. And there were a number of American veterans, who had been in the battle of Guadalcanal. And they were on their way home, they were wounded veterans. They were a very interesting group. And I can tell you a somewhat indelicate story about ... (laughs) ... about one chap that I chummed up with. A fellow, his name will be Hank, I suppose. And we very quickly chummed up, it was a big adventure for me. I mean a real live American soldier, he'd been in battle. We left Melbourne, and we cruised across to New Zealand, and I think that took us two days. We arrived in Wellington, discharged the – the New Zealanders, and then we set sail. And I talked to my friend, Hank, 'Oh, we're not going to see – see New Zealand'. And Hank was standing looking at Wellington with a very, very upset look on his face, and he said, 'Peter', he said, 'they can't goddamn do this to me, Pete'. And I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'Goddamn, Pete', he said, 'I ain't had a woman in two days'. We left Melbourne two days beforehand. Anyway that's an indelicate story, you'll have to edit that one out. They were an interesting bunch of fellows, and great gamblers. Anyway eventually we arrived at San Francisco and ...

How many people were on the ship?

I reckon there must have been ... there must have been about 2,000 fellows on board that ship. Oh and that's right, there was a group that was going to England to pick up an Australian cruiser, the *Shropshire*. About 400 of them. [Sound of train].

(5.00) It's all right. Just ... just take it back, 'there was a group ...'

Mmm. There was a group of about 400 Australian Navy-types, who were going over to pick up the cruiser, HMAS *Shropshire*. They went through with us, all the way through America and across the Atlantic, and then they left us, when we arrived in England, to go and pick up this ship. Well we didn't see them again, that was our last contact with them.

So how did you travel across the United States?

By train. And that was quite an experience too. We were only in San Francisco, I think less than a day. Had no chance really to look over the place. And then six days and six nights travelling on this troop-train. Right across America. We passed through New York, and right across to the East coast, to Massachusetts, where there was an immense camp, an enormous place called Camp Myles Standish. I think there were about 100-150,000 troops of all nationalities there. It was an enormous staging area, and people came to there from everywhere, and went from there to everywhere. And this was an amazing experience for us. We were only there a few days, but that was our first and only real experience of America. We were able to go into Boston, and experience a bit of American life there. Would you believe it ... There's another train.

Thank you.

Right. Would you believe, but some of the fellows were only there a few days, but I can tell you at least one marriage took place. (Laughs). It doesn't take long for people to .... (one clap). Keith Miller – Keith Miller met an American girl there whom he later married. He didn't marry her then and there, but ...

How many days were you there?

About five days. (Laughs). Australian boys work very quickly. And then from there we ... sorry?

But what was it like meeting Americans, and also ...?

We thought that it was fascinating. We – they were a marvellous people, great, yes. And they were very hospitable. They really were, they were wonderful to us, there's no doubt about that. And this enormous camp. You know, we'd never seen anything like that. Remember, many of us were very raw Australian boys.

I was just going to say that. I mean America, then and now, was a more technologically developed country.

A very, very sophisticated place, it was incredible to us that, you know – New York, for example, now I – I never really experienced New York, but the chaps who escaped from the camp and went up there for a couple of days, they came back with incredible stories of this enormous city. And the big ... the big attraction in those days was Jack Dempsey's bar, and that became a very famous watering-hole for Australian lads. And some of the young devils hopped off the train in San Francisco and made a beeline for ... for Los Angeles, went down to Hollywood. And they were feted left and right, and film stars took them here, there and

everywhere. They never had two bob to their names, but that didn't matter. With typical Australian brashness they got away with that. And our commanders, our commanding officers were grey with worry. 'Where are these fellow?', you see. Eventually they turned up in England, and there ... there we are. I was never game to do that.

Ended up in England?

Oh yes, they – eventually they made it. How they got there I don't know, but they eventually made it. I was never game to do that.

Sorry, you're saying they vanished in San Francisco?

Yes, they just ... they vanished, that's right. We didn't see them for weeks, and the next thing they bobbed up in England. I suppose the service police rounded them up and said, 'Look, lad, you're supposed to be on an Australian draft, now get on that ship and get to England'. But I was never game to do that. I ...

Do you know any of them? It would be great to interview one of them?

Yes. Well I do know one, but unfortunately he's dead and gone. He lived round the corner. He got up to that sort of mischief. He's gone. No, I can't think of anybody offhand, but the tales they used to tell, oh dear.

Right. Getting across to Britain.

Mmm. We left Massachusetts, went up to Canada, and embarked at Halifax, Nova Scotia, on a ship called the *Louis Pasteur*. I believe it was a French liner. It was about 5,000 feet long, and about one foot wide, and there were thousands of us packed into this place, down in the bilges, and it was a very, very rough passage indeed. It took about five days. There was a submarine pack after us, and this confounded thing went like the clappers across the Atlantic. The conditions were very rough and smelly and horrible, and we were all seasick, and the ...

What did you know about the submarine pack? Were you told anything about it?

We were told, yes, that, because of the danger of the submarine pack, I think she altered course very drastically, and I think the darned thing was doing about thirty-five knots, it was an incredibly speedy thing. And I think they went down in the ... down south towards the Equator, and then turned sharply to get back to England. It was a pretty rough trip across, but we made it to ... went round the North of Ireland and docked at Liverpool. That would have been end of March, I think. End of March, 1943.

(10.00) So you were in the home country, as people used to say?

Yes, that's right. I think one of the exciting things, for me, was coming around the North coast of Ireland. My mother had been born in Ireland, and I can remember writing in my diary that I had seen the green hills of Ireland for the first time. Of course Ireland's most beautiful place, a lovely place. And I remember that made a very deep impression indeed.
And then we landed at Liverpool. And of course so many of the boys, with English roots, they were tremendously impressed by that. My roots were more Ireland, but that didn't matter. And that was ... that made a big impression on us. Here we were, we'd arrived in the country that we'd come to save. (Laughs). Putting it that way. And I think we were greeted with an air-raid on Liverpool.

So what was the ... what was the air-raid like, your first one ...?

Well we thought, 'Well this is it', you know. 'gosh, this is war', you see, 'we're really there'. Little did we know what was to come. It was a frightening experience, a very sobering experience. We suddenly realised that this wasn't peaceful old Australia, this was pretty fair dinkum. This was a country that had been at war already for ... well in their fourth year of war. And of course there was more to come, but we didn't know at the time.
But from there we went ... from Liverpool we went to the south coast of England, to a very big camp, a huge place, where the aircrew were ... were held until they could be dispersed to their various places. And one of the first things that we had to do there was to take our turn at guard duty on the outskirts of this town. And I vividly remember mounting guard on a little old machine-gun in the early hours of the morning, and the ... a German aircraft came across the Channel, to attack the town. And I remember, in a state of great fright and confusion, leaping for this machine-gun and loosening off rounds at the English Channel. I don't ... I don't think it scared the German pilot very, very much, then then we felt ... when that sort of thing happened to us, we felt, 'This is it, we're really at war'. (Laughs).

How were people reacting to you? How were the British reacting to you?

We were very, very ... very well received. They knew what we were over there for. They ... they'd been through it, and they ... my memories of England are of the happiest, in every possible way. We were marvellously received, and by the people themselves and on the air force stations. There were very, very few of the English air force officers, senior or otherwise, who treated us with anything else, but, you know, 'Glad you're here, chum, right now here's your job.'

You weren't treated as colonials?

There was an element of that, but not really. I mean, by that time there were far too many Australian airmen, you know, who had done a magnificent job and had won VCs and all that sort of thing. Oh no, we were pretty well received, there's no doubt about that. We had ... we had the occasional clash, there were a few clashes, but not ... not many really.

What sort of clashes?

Oh. (Laughs). I do remember one occasion where a couple of us, Australian boys, we were walking up and down a corridor in one of the training camps, and we noticed a notice on a door, and the notice said that this office belonged to Lieutenant Colonel Sir Graham Wigsley, or some name like that. Late the Queen's Own royal Hussars. And he was very obviously a very senior army officer, and he was there, he was head of the aerodrome defence section of that particular place. And my chum and I ... (laughs) ... we were walking up and down pretending to be colonels, and saluting each other, and talking in ridiculous English accents, you see. And the door suddenly opened, and this very formidable British army officer appeared. Monocle, stick under the arm, beautifully dressed. Rows of ribbons and decorations, you see. And he looked us up and down, and he said, 'Be off, you young jackanapes, or I'll kick your arse.' (Laughs). So ... so we went for our life. We were only ... we were only sergeants, very humble. So there we are. (Laughter). Right. I hope you're going to edit that?

Actually I think it would be a great story to leave in. (Laughter). It won't do anyone any harm.

No, of course not.

You won't mind that story?

No, I won't mind. Oh no.

Right. I'll just turn the page down here. The ... your postings, you were going to RAF squadrons, not Australian squadrons?

Yes, oh yes. Now wait a minute, we'll qualify that.

(15.00) Well first of all your training, let's go to your training?

Yes, right. Training first, right. Only a few days in the south coast of England, and then, as quickly as possible – because of course aircrew were needed, there had to be a constant flow of aircrew to the squadrons, because of the casualty rates on the operational squadrons. They were pretty ... pretty darn high. And I'll take my own case as being typical. Right, I was a navigator. With a group of navigators I was sent to a little tiny aerodrome, more or less in the middle of England, in Wiltshire I think it was, where we did a few days flying, with pilots ... with young Australian pilots. At this time ... at this particular time we kept together in nationalities. The New Zealanders went one way and we went another way and the Canadians another way, and so on. Anyway we went to this little place and did a little bit of flying around the countryside, mainly map-reading, to get used to the English countryside, which was so vastly different from our own country. From there we went to Scotland to do further advanced training in navigation. And that's where the job really began. We had a month's course up there, using for the first time somewhat more sophisticated radio equipment for a start. The old aircraft were much the same as the ones we'd used out here.

What sort of aircraft?

Ansons, Avro Ansons, which, would you believe it, they were front-line aircraft way back in the beginning.
Then, from there, the job really started. We came south to the middle of England to what they called OTUs, and Operational Training Units. And here, this was the real thing. Much more advanced aircraft. Wellingtons. They were still being used on bombing raids over Germany, even in those days, but they were vastly more sophisticated and complex. Well-maintained, well-looked after. And there we had ... for the first time, we had the experience of what they call 'crewing up'. Now you mentioned that earlier. That was a very interesting part of our lives, because all of a sudden we weren't navigators any more, or wireless operators, or pilots, or gunners. All of a sudden we became a crew. And it happened something like this. A whole draft of us, there'd be a couple of hundred chaps, would arrive at one of these operational training units, I went to one called Lichfield, near Birmingham. And there we were, a great big room, a big assembly room. And it happened something like this. 'Now, you get to know each other, meet each other. Pilots, you pick your crews.' And that's about how it happened.

How much did they know about each other?

We didn't know anything about each other. Except, I think, some shrewd pilots probably did a little bit of homework beforehand and looked up ... tried to find out the records of blokes. But I know in my own case it happened something like this. A gang of us were milling around, and a chap walked up to me, a little short and stocky, fair-haired fellow, from Sydney a fellow called Bill.

Bill ...?

Bill Felstead was his name. And he said, 'G'day', he said, 'I'm looking for a navigator.' And I said, 'Oh. Righto, I'll be in it.' He said, 'I've got a couple of other fellows.' He'd picked a bomb-aimer, and he'd picked out a radio operator. He said, 'We'd better start looking around for a gunner.' There were only five in the crew of that ... that particular aircraft.

What sort of aircraft?

Wellingtons. They were Wellingtons. And so after a while we spotted a fellow there and, 'G'day, what about it, would you like to be a gunner in a crew?' 'Oh yes.'

Did people have signs on them, saying 'Gunner', or ...

Oh yes, oh we all wore our 'brevvies'. We were all of us ... pilots had pilot's wings, and – I've still got my old uniform in there, I had the navigator's brevet. The wireless operators the same, you see.
And all of a sudden there were five young lads, we were a crew. And it was just ... it was something like getting married. We just simply weren't ... I wasn't Peter O'Connor, navigator, any more. All of a sudden I was Bill Felstead's navigator. And Brian Grasby, the ... the wireless operator, he wasn't Brian Grasby, wireless operator, any more, he was Bill Felstead's wireless op. And then ...

Bill Felstead, how old was he?

I suppose he would have been all of twenty-one. And I must bring this in here, at this stage. The terribly sad part of all that was that I left that crew for reasons which don't really matter any more, shortly afterwards. And they went off on a raid one night, and they didn't come back. Mailly-le-Camp which was a holocaust. And within a few months of that they were dead and gone, the whole bloody lot of them. And it's ... that sort of thing, it leaves an indelible mark. I still choke up when I think of that. One of them wasn't even twenty-one. He never even saw his twenty-first birthday. Bill Hancock, the ... the bomb-aimer. He was a lovely boy. He was a tall handsome lad. And the girls on the squadron on the unit, they fell for Bill in a big way. And he was just the most gorgeous kid, and he never even saw his twenty-first birthday. So, you know, that part's pretty sad. But anyway ...

Can I ask why you did leave that group?

Yes. Bill and I, the pilot and myself, we didn't get on too well in the air, as a navigation team. We didn't cooperate well. There had to be a marvellous cooperation, particularly on the navigation team. And it's all important that the bomb-aimer, the navigator, and the pilot, work, you know, like ... like a close-knit team. And he and I just didn't quite hit it off too well in the air. The exact ...

(20.00) What sort of things used to happen?

I think it used to happen something like this. I think he was a little bit impatient with me for perhaps not coming up with courses quickly enough. I would get irritable with him, because I didn't consider that he was flying dead accurately on the courses that I wanted as a navigator. And so this friction rose in the air. On the ground, you know, mates, buddies, no problems at all, it was when we got into the air. And ...

Sort of things like, 'Where are we?', 'Well I could tell a lot better if you were flying the course that you're supposed to be flying.'?

That kind of thing. Yes, it was a bit like that. Anyway eventually it ... apparently it got to the stage, as I remember now, where the ... the instructors simply said, 'Well look, you two must cooperate, because you're ... in a few weeks time you're going to be on operations.' Anyway it didn't work out, so they split us.

How were they monitoring what was happening?

Well the ... the specialists in each section kept a very close eye. The navigation instructors kept a close eye on the navigators, and so on, and so on, and so on.

They were flying with you?

No, no. Well sometimes at Operational Training Unit, yes, sure. But the main person who flew ... the people who flew with us were not so much the navigation instructors and so forth, but the ... the pilot instructors, the flight commanders and so on. The pilot was the key man, they kept a close eye on him. But the pilot would have to render reports on each crew. And if he wasn't satisfied with his crew, well that was it.
Anyway that's the way it worked out with Bill and I, we just didn't hit it off, and, sadly, we split up. And, as I said, they never came back. I did. I was held back for a few weeks. Another crew was coming through that had lost a navigator in some circumstances which I ... I've never found that out, I don't know why they lost their navigator, but I was placed in that crew. And we went on and completed a tour of operation. And we ...

Right. How were you told ... how were you split up? I mean how did they approach that? You know, going back to the original crew?

Yes. The ... the chief ground instructor just simply called me in and said, 'Well it's not working out with you two, I'm taking you out. Felstead is going on.'

Was there a sense of failure in that?

I think it was a sense of disappointment, rather than of failure. Because we were destined for a very famous squadron, the 467 Squadron. A famous Australian squadron, up at Waddington. And we were about to go. We had actually completed Operational Training Unit. We completed what they called our heavy conversion unit, where we went to ... went to a unit where the pilots converted onto four-engined aircraft. From there we went to yet another training unit, called the Lancaster Finishing School, where, for the first time, we flew Lancasters. Again this was mainly for the benefit of the pilot. We'd do a few days there and then the squadron. And we were all packed, ready to go to the squadron, and the CGR said, 'It's not going to work out with you people, I'm pulling you out.' So that was it.
At the time disappointment, not a sense of failure, I had ... I was confident that I was a good navigator. But I could also see ... well both of us could see that it wasn't going to work out too well. Operations was much too important to have disharmony in the team. And Bill and I – as I said, on the ground we were great pals. But we ... we could see that that's the way it had to be. So we said, 'Goodbye', and that was it.

So you got in with this next crew, and the word Pathfinder, when does that come into the story?

Well I of course was by now a fully-trained navigator, and I'd been all through the stages of training and I was ready to go on operations. Now I was held back for a couple of weeks, and this new crew came through. An Australian pilot, Canadian bomb-aimer, myself, and the rest of them were English. This chap was a few weeks behind me, the pilot, and I had to go back, for a few weeks, in the training stage, and become familiar with him, and with the new crew. And we completed a stage of training that I had already completed.
It was a perfect marriage right from the word go. The very first training trip we did together, I put up a pretty good show. It was a long training trip all the way round England. And the skipper, and I can tell many, many stories about the skipper, said, (affects strong Australian drawl), 'I think you're going to fit in, mate, I like your style, I reckon we're going to be all right.' That's the way he used to talk, you see. So that was it. It was great. And from there we were sent to a ... sent to 44 Squadron, a Rhodesian squadron. And did ... and began our operational tour there.

And when did you become Pathfinder?

We hadn't been at the Rhodesian squadron for more than ... I don't think we were even there a month. And we had only done a few operational trips. I think we had four or five up, something like that. And the pilot informed us, he said, 'I've got news for you, we're going to PFF. We've been selected for PFF. Pathfinders.' And we didn't really know what was involved very much, but it's ...

(25.00) A train.

You're paying far more ... better attention.

No, that's all right.

Do you switch off, do you?

It's all right, doesn't matter, it's just tape.

We ... the crew ...

Okay, well right, well I just want to get the sequence of that. Before we go to that, I'd like to talk about your ... well first of all if you could describe the base that you were on, and arriving there, and your reception, and how people reacted to you.

What base are we talking about here?

This is the ... well this is now the Rhodesian, the 44 Squadron.

Oh yes, the 44 Squadron. Well all the English training bases were pretty much the same. They were very efficient, extremely well-run. All the ordinary amenities of life were pretty good.

This wasn't a training base, was it? 44?

No, I'm still talking about training.

Sorry.

Mostly in the centre of ... central part of England. Some of them were a little bit out in the backwoods, or we used to think they were. Of course we didn't ... we didn't stop to think that

there wasn't any place in England I suppose that was more than about forty miles from the sea. And if we were more than a mile from a village we used to think we were out in the scrub somewhere. And some of them were a little bit rough. They were wartime aerodromes, they had a lot of mud and that sort of thing in the winter, but they were pretty efficient places. Right, anyway. We'd completed our training. The Royal Air Force said, 'Right. You fellows are ready for operations', and we were posted ... formally posted to 44 Squadron. And our arrival there was a very traumatic one indeed. This was in March, 1944, and that was ... the night we arrived there ... the day we arrived there, was the day after one of the most infamous and notorious raids in the history of the Royal Air Force. The Nuremberg raid, which is a ... an infamous word, when more than a hundred aircraft were ... had been ... were lost. And hundreds and hundreds of chaps were killed. We arrived on the place, and it was a big dispersal place. Not a permanent aerodrome with the brick buildings and so on, but the Nissen huts and so on. And we were moved into a hut, and I remember saying to one of the guards, 'What's the story here? There's blokes belongings, everywhere.' And the guard said, 'Well they ... they went off, they went last night, they won't be back. They're your beds.' We walked out and looked around the aerodrome, and there seemed to be, instead of about twenty-eight aircraft scattered around there only seemed to be about ten. So I said to the skipper, 'What goes on?' He said, he said, 'This is fair dinkum, this is ops.' He said, 'This squadron ...', he'd found out already, this squadron lost about fourteen that night. And I thought, 'My God, if this is operations, spare me please.' So it was a pretty traumatic beginning to our operational life. But we were well-received, we were well looked after. In no time at all squadron ...

> I mean there must have been a sense of shock on the base, and you were walking in when you hadn't been part of the trauma?

We walked ... yes, exactly you've .... It was, it was a sense of shock all right. Not only for the people there that were ... you know, all their pals had gone, there were WAAFs crying all over the place, because their boyfriends were ... didn't come back. It was ... the place was stunned and dazed at this ... it was, it was a shocking raid, a terrible raid. And ...

> But you were a stranger at a funeral.

And we ... yes, we were strangers at a funeral. But we were already posted, we were already part of the place, even though we'd only arrived a couple of hours beforehand. But it was a very traumatic beginning to an operational career.
And in no time at all the commanding officer had, you know, his new crews were coming in. Others like us. We were out ... allotted to an aircraft, and in no time at all we were training, practising, getting used to our new aircraft, getting used to our groundcrew and so on. And being prepared for our first operation.

> On Lancasters?

On Lancasters, yes. Mmm.

> Well perhaps I'll just turn the tape over there, because we're nearly at the end of it.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Identification: This is side three of the interview with Mr Peter O'Connor. End of identification.

Right, so how long were you there, before you went on your first operational flight?

Not very long. Less than a week, I think. In my case – the pilot and myself had to do what they called 'a second dickey' trip. In other words we were sent off with a fully operational crew, for our first experience of operational flying. And I went with one crew, as a second navigator, and the pilot went with another crew, as a second navigator, and the pilot went with another crew, as second pilot. And so we had duties to carry out, but we were flying as strangers in a ... with an experienced crew. And I guess I was pretty fortunate, I flew with a very experienced man, a Flight Lieutenant Stephenson who had already many operational trips. And I think the first operational was mine laying in the Kiel Canal. And all I had to do was just sit around, help the bomb-aimer, and generally be a spare bod around the place. And it wasn't a very dangerous trip. It was a long and tiring trip. And so were able to ... the pilot and I were able to come home and tell the rest of the crew, 'Well there's ... there's nothing in it. That's operations.' So that was our first operational trip.
Actually we had been over enemy territory before that, way back in the training stage. They always made sure that every crew had the opportunity to fly over enemy territory. They ... you'd be given a little mission to do. And we were given the job of dropping leaflets on Paris. Would you believe it, of all things? (Laughs). And off we went to Paris, and duly dropped our leaflets, which we thought was rather silly. And then turned to come home, and some wretched German anti-aircraft gunner decided to have a go at us. And he got us. He blew out the side of the front of the aircraft as a matter of fact. And one of the crew was ... was injured. We got home okay, no problems, but ...

How badly injured?

He was all right, he was okay, not badly injured. But the annoying part of it, you couldn't count that. That didn't count as an operation. You'd just been on a practise run, you see. I thought that was a bit unsporting.
But our first real operation, as I said, was the Kiel Canal. And then, having been successfully blooded, they didn't waste any time with us. We then operated for three nights in a row. Off we went, the whole crew. I've forgotten the targets now. I think one of them was Paris, again. And another one was ...

What would you be doing in Paris? What sort of ...?

That was fair dinkum this time, we were bombing a railway station. I think it was La Chappelle. La Chappelle railway station. Then I think we did a very, very long trip down to the south of France, where there was an aircraft factory. And then I think the very next one – three nights in a row I think it was – off we went up to Norway, to bomb an aircraft factory up there. And I can remember thinking at the time, 'What on earth is an ordinary, simple, country boy doing poking around in a fjord in Norway?' It seemed to me to be absurd, but anyway there we are.

Well talking ... which ... perhaps, you know, to talk in a bit more detail about one of those trips, so we get an idea of what's involved in a trip. You know, starting from scramble procedure and briefing procedure and ...

Well I'll give you ... good, well I'll give you an indication of – I think it was the longest trip that we ever did, in terms of time in the air, and it was a pretty important one. And it was about this time, we still hadn't made it to PFF. But we ... we were on an attack to Munich, which happened to be led by the famous Group Captain Cheshire, VC. He was the masterbomber on that trip. That was a very, very long and tiring trip indeed. We took off around the dusk. By this time winter was coming on.

Could we go back a bit further than that? Briefing?

Mmm. Well briefing usually started about two o'clock in the afternoon, depending on the time of take-off. The ... and the main people who were briefed in the early part of the afternoon would have been ... would be the pilot. He had a separate briefing. The navigators had a separate briefing. And the radio operators had a separate briefing. And they were given – the radio operators, for example, were given their signal codes, and all the information they needed, the channels to use and that sort of thing. The navigator, very obviously, had the ... he had the job ... he was given the route to take, and all kinds of information that would help him navigationally. The channels to use on the sophisticated nav. equipment we had. And the pilot would be told all about the ... the bomb load, the petrol load, etcetera, and the flak positions, and that sort of thing.

What ... what are the flak positions?

The positions over enemy territory where there were heavy concentrations of anti-aircraft fire. Where the searchlight belts were and all that sort of thing. The nature of the target, the nature of the attack, was it going to be high level, or low level, was it going to be medium level, would there be fighter support. What were the Pathfinders going to do. What diversionary tactics you could use. And also things like, would ... would there be a spoof attack on at the same time. In other words, would a group of Mosquitoes go out in the North Sea somewhere, while we shot off down into the south of Germany. Things like that.

(5.00) What about weather?

And ... oh yes, weather was very, very important. And the navigator was the person who was given the most information about the weather. Obviously the pilot would too. But the navigator had to know a great deal about the weather, because he had to take regard of such things as icing conditions, barometric pressure, changes of wind, and all that kind of thing. So that he was fully prepared as far as his navigational duties were concerned. Obvbiously if there was going to be a very, very strong wind from the north, for example, well he had to allow for that.

How were they collecting this information?

Well their meteorologists, you know, they're ... they're pretty clever people. They ...

But they couldn't have had a station in sort of north Germany?

No, but they didn't have to. They ... they had any amount of stations up and down England, right? Well the air masses moving from the Atlantic across England, you know, if they knew exactly what was happening in England, or was about to happen in England, they could then predict with a great deal of accuracy what was going to happen over Germany in the next couple of hours. Also they did have very, very high level weather aircraft that used to go over beforehand, and take photographs, and establish what the conditions were. No, the Met.

people were marvellous. They did a wonderful job, and they could predict very, very accurately indeed, we'd have been lost without them.

Okay, so you'd had the briefings.

Mmm. That'd be about two o'clock in the afternoon, so then we'd have a little bit of a spell, and then all the crews, all together, would have the big formal briefing, at, say, five in the afternoon, or six, or seven, or eight, something or other like that, depending on the time of take-off. And there would be a great big group of us, all in one great big room. And that briefing would be conducted by the commanding officer of the station, or perhaps the commanding officer of the squadron. You might even have one of the high-ranking officers of the group, or even of Bomber Command, might be present, if it was a particularly important raid. And that would be a repetition of what each individual had already been told, but you'd be given a total picture of the whole raid, and what it was all about. The intelligence officer would come in and tell you why. Why are we bombing this particular place. There'd be the great big map with the route across there, and all this kind of thing. You've seen the sort of thing on television, on pictures, and that sort of thing, a thousand times. And that would be the big, formal briefing. Everybody would be together, each crew.
Then, if there was time, you'd go out and have perhaps a cup of tea, or a bite to eat. Go and pick up your parachute. Go down to the priest and go to confession, that was always important. (Laughs). And then you'd be taken in the crew bus out to the aircraft. And a little WAAF would take you out.

Would it be normal to go to confession?

Well it used to be for me, I can tell you that. (Laughs). Yes, most chaps ... many chaps used to see the padre, before they went. There were all sorts of things.

Protestants too, or not?

Oh yes. Not necessarily would they go to the Catholic padre, I don't know, but ... (laughs).

No, but I'm just wondering ...

I only used to be concerned with my soul, you see. Yes, sorry.

No, I'm just wondering whether it was normal, from what you could see around. Obviously you'd be encouraged to go to confession, but whether Protestants would also be talking to the padre?

They would, yes, they would. And of course there were the hard-bitten old souls who ... you know, that didn't mean anything to them. They'd rub their rabbit's foot, or whatever it is. Or have a leak on the tyre of the aircraft, or something or other like that.

That was ... leak on the tyre of the aircraft, that was ...?

That was ... that was traditional with some crews, yes.

What was meant to be achieved by that?

I'm not too ... quite too sure. Well of course sometimes if you were pretty busy you didn't have time up in the aircraft. So I suppose that was one good reason. I don't know what the little WAAFs used to think, but ... (laughs).

Did it happen in front of the WAAFs?

Yes. Oh yes. I'm quite sure that's why some of the WAAFs used to sort of linger with the truck. (Laughs).

Then the ground crew, they'd be fussing around like one thing. They were absolutely marvellous. They would swarm all over the aircraft, last minute checks, particularly with the pilot of course. And then they would stand by to see us off.

Can we just stop there. [Break in recording].

Right, so you're ... you've just had a bit of a break after the briefings. And what happens then, I mean how do you go out to the aircraft? And what's the atmosphere as you're going out to the aircraft?

Tense. Everyone's pretending to be gay, and gay, and carefree, and nonchalant. In actual fact you're very, very tense indeed. And I guess scared, wondering, you know, 'Are we going to make it', and so on. I used to, anyway. But you're also ...

(10.00) You didn't talk about this much?

Not really. No, you didn't talk about that aspect of it. You were too busy making darn sure that you had all your equipment with you. Going over in your mind again and again the things that you had to do. The pilot would be intensely absorbed of course in the performance of the aircraft. Checking out the ... running up the engines and checking that everything was all right there. He and the ground staff, the fitters and riggers, would be in ... in collusion all the time. And each member of the crew would be settling into his little place. The gunners would be checking their turrets. The wireless operator would be checking out the radio. The bomb-aimer would be checking the ... the bomb switches. The engineer would be in close cahoots with the pilot. And eventually all the hatches would be closed down, the ground staff would lean back, and a big wave goodbye, and then we'd taxi out to the end of the runway. And there you'd wait, a great long line of you would wait to get the ... the word from the control tower, and at the ...

How many planes?

Well a squadron would operate up to ... up to twenty aircraft, possibly more. But we used to take off, ususally, about sixteen aircraft, round about there.
And at the precise moment you'd get the ... you'd get the green light from the control tower, and away you'd go, down the runway. The skipper would ... or at least the engineer used to control the throttles, while the skipper just kept his eye on the ... on the runway and just ... as she gathered speed, he'd just slowly lift her off. And as soon as you'd achieved take off, then the navigation team would switch into gear. You would start your log, you'd turn onto your first course, and you'd begin to take your ... your ground positions as regularly as possible. Using the – the three main devices that we used for our navigation would be radio, and you could get radio-fixes, with the radio operator helping you, but mainly we used two magnificent devices, which had been developed by that time. The first one was a marvellous device called 'See', which was a system whereby signals were sent from ground stations in England, and were ... were received by a transmitter in the aircraft, and they were translated onto what amounted to a television screen, and by use of machinery in the aircraft you could plot your position on a special map that you had with you that ... a sort of a grid that overlaid the main navigation map. And you could plot within half a mile where you were. The

accuracy of that particular machine decreased the further you went into Germany, because the beams didn't cross each other at right angles, they crossed each other at decreasing angles. Then we had another marvellous device called ... which we called 'H25'. And that was just like a television set in the aircraft. Or a television transmitter in the aircraft. A beam went from the aircraft down to the ground and returned and was received on a screen in the ... in the aircraft, and it gave you a picture of the ground. Not a colour picture, but a contrast. Whereby, if you were flying over water, there was nothing there, you didn't get any return at all, but the second you flew over land the bright beams of light would appear and show you the outline of the coast. A town appeared as a dark green, glowing dot. A river, you could see the shape of a river quite clearly. It was like flying over the sea, but there was a contrast between the land and the water. And that was by far their most important device. And you very quickly learnt to identify where you were on the ground by the picture that came up on the television screen. So you plotted ... plotted your way across Europe. You tried to fix your position about every three minutes, if you possibly could, to make sure you didn't stray off track. You had to watch the skipper all the time, to make sure he maintained the right speed, the right height, and you constantly checked the wind. We used – to find the wind ... you used DR [Dead Reckoning] navigation, as it was called. You knew your ... your course and your airspeed. Right? Because you could fix your position on the ground you very quickly, you could work out – by what they called DR navigation you could work out the speed and the direction of the wind. And so you made your way across ... across Germany, until you reached the target.

Right well you ... it wasn't just ... you'd taken up as one squadron, but you probably had joined up with some others?

Oh yes.

(15.00) So what would you ... in terms of heading for Munich, were you ... what sort of formation? Were there a whole lot of separate formations that were going to come together at Munich, or what happened?

There were a whole lot of individual aircraft. They were there in the sky alongside of you, but you couldn't actually see them. But you ... a great gaggle of you flew across Europe, maybe as many as six to seven hundred in a ... like a vast box in the sky. It might be as much as twenty or thirty miles long, and it might be as much as, say, a mile high, and a couple of miles wide. Because each squadron would be given a particular height to fly, and a particular time of departure. And you hoped ... the planners hoped that by the time you'd reached the target they would have ... that box would be reasonably concentrated, spread over a period of perhaps twenty minutes to a half an hour, and would pass in this gigantic wave over the target, dropping its bombs as it went. So you didn't come along as a kind of loose gaggle. You came along in a tight box, a fairly tight box. Even though you couldn't see each other, it was, you know in the blackness of night and that sort of thing. And I ...

You ... sorry.

I suppose it was a miracle really that there weren't more collisions.

I was just going to say.

Yes. But remember, we were all ...

Sorry, could you say that, because I was talking over you: 'It was a miracle there wasn't more collisions.'

There weren't more collisions and accidents in the air. They did happen, of course they did. And bombs ... bombers dropped bombs on each other, that sort of thing happened, but not as much as you would have expected under those conditions. The loss rate, through collisions in the air and bombs dropping on other aircraft, was amazingly low, when you come to think of it.

Didn't it ever happen to you?

No, no. The ... we did a couple of daylight raids – most of our raids were at night, but we did a couple of daylight raids, and I do remember, vividly, in one of the daylight raids, having a quick look out, alongside the engineer, and seeing a gigantic Lancaster, which seemed to be a couple of feet away, just above us. Naturally of course he was many yards away, and he did, he dropped his material, and I thought it was going to drop on us. But it didn't, it missed us. And there we are.

Right. Well coming back to that flight to Munich, which is what we were ...

Yes, we started off, yes. That was a very, very long and very, very tiring trip, because we ... we more or less flew directly down to Italy. We flew from England down to Italy, and the turning point, I think, was actually the city of Milan. In doing that we crossed the Alps, and I vividly remember looking out, one of the few times I did look out, I had a quick look out through the astrodome, and there was Mont Blanc only a few miles away. A great, gigantic peak of ice in the moonlight.
And it was ... that particular night we must have taken off somewhere round about midnight, because it was about five o'clock in the morning when we crossed over the Alps and turned on Milan. Then we turned and crossed the Alps again, and attacked Munich from the south. The idea being, I suppose, that the Germans were ... they thought we were on our way to Rome, or something like that. And so we attacked Milan [sic] from the south round about six o'clock in the morning.

Wasn't there a danger you were going to fly back in ...?

We did. We flew back in daylight. After leaving the target I know we ran into a lot of trouble on that particular trip, because not only had we sustained an attack on the fighter, and we also had a lot of problems with the anti-aircraft fire, it was a very heavily defended target, Munich. Then we ran into unexpectedly bad weather. A cold front was across the route home, and the pilot ...

Sorry ...

Yes. A cold front ...

Could we come ... could we come to that in a minute. I'd just like to talk a little about sort of coming to the target itself. You're coming up from the south.

Yes. That's right. Now it was my job to get them there dead on time, dead on track, and so on. And when we began the approach to the target that was very much a matter for the skipper, the pilot, holding the aircraft dead straight and level and so on, the bomb-aimer who guided the aircraft in, and the engineer, who was keeping an eye on the engines, and so on like that.

In the middle of this caffuffle that was going on, and we were actually over the target, and remember we weren't on PFF at this stage, we were still just an ordinary bombing crew. We were just about ...

PFF?

Mmm?

PFF?

PFF means Pathfinder Force, we weren't Pathfinders on this particular raid, we'd only just begun our operational tour. But somebody said to me, 'Why don't you go up and have a look?' I forget who it was, it might have been the radio operator. So I poked my head out into the pilot's cabin, and had a look down at this carnage going on down below, and I said, 'That's enough for me, you fellows can handle that', and I ducked back and hid behind my little curtain. That was the only target I ever looked at.

(20.00) Do you mean carnage on the ground or carnage in the air?

On the ground. Yes. I don't know what carnage was going on round us, but there was certainly an awful mess down below, and I just simply said to the rest of the crew, 'Well that's ... that's your problem, I'm going to get back in.' And I hid behind my little desk. (Laughs). Lots of navigators did that. They hated being involved in what was going on down below. It was much ... it felt safe and cosy and comfortable back in your navigation ... (Laughs).
We were speaking earlier about very traumatic moments. That was always a traumatic moment, as far as I was concerned, on the run in. Straight and level for anything up to about ninety seconds, at a particular air speed. The attitude of the aircraft had to be dead right, there was no way of weaving, if a fighter came in, well, you know, tough cheese. And so on, like that. And I always imagined at that moment, that that was exactly when, when the bombdoors were open, that that was when we'd get a direct hit from the flak. We never did, but about thirty-four times, I know I always panicked like mad. You know, 'We're going to be hit when the bombdoors open,'

Why would the bombdoors open be worse?

Well it wouldn't be any worse, (laughs), but that's ... that's when your imagination worked overtime. I suppose it would be a little bit quicker. Instead of the aircraft going ... going up in flames with the petrol tanks hit, I suppose if they ... if they hit the bombs and they were fused and so forth, well it would be a very, very quick passage up there, wouldn't it?

So when were the bombs fused?

The bombs were fused on the run in. They were ... we carried them all the way across Germany, but they were only fused by the bomb-aimer at the last minute, and he had to select a panel up in the ... up in his little compartment. And they were fused and 'armed', as they called them. And once he had dropped the things, then – the pilot was free then to take evasive action. And that's what usually happened, the pilot would peel away from the run-in, the second he felt the bombs go, or the ... or the bomb-aimer would give the word. Then the pilot was free to take any sort of evasive action, if he thought it was necessary.

So, in other words, you'd come across Europe in this neat box formation, and then going back, you've got all threse hundreds of aircraft all over the sky?

Yes. It was rather more scattered going back.

Rather more dangerous?

I suppose, yes and no, I suppose.

You had more room, you were spread over more ...?

Well for one thing it was a little bit better, because you didn't have that enormous load to carry. And also of course your petrol situation, you had far less petrol to carry, so your aircraft was a bit lighter and a bit more manoeuvrable. And, within reasonable limits, the skipper had more opportunity to ... to take any ... some form of evasive action. But you still had the same dangers, you will had flak concentrations, you still had searchlights concentrations to ... to watch out for. And of course you had the ever present fighters. And the German fighters were ... you know, they were crack pilots and tremendous ... tremendous airmen. They were ... they were dangerous until you'd crossed over the English Channel. Then you started to feel a little bit ... a little bit better.

Well let's continue that ... the story of that particular thing. It's got a lot of these, it's got the fighter, it's got the weather, and all sorts, so just concentrating on the Munich trip, tell me ... keep on with that story.

Right. Well after we left that particular target, and remember we did ... we had a fighter attack, and he ...

Can you describe that?

Well the gunners screamed that a fighter was coming in. The skipper started to take evasive action, and he missed ... he missed us, thank goodness, and disappeared off into the darkness, so the gunners reported. We all said, 'Thank God for that', and that was it, that was the only attack that we had that night, but he didn't ... he didn't get us. But then this weather problem cropped up. We had a radio message from base that the weather had moved rather more quickly than was anticipated, and a heavy front was building up across the route that we were taking home. I think we took a more direct route home, from ... from Munich, flying across Germany, to the north, the Ruhr Valley, I think, and so home that way. But this massive front was building up, and the skipper didn't want to go through the weather, because of the danger of icing. So he decided to climb, and he got her up to about 24,000 feet, I think it was, and then we started to really worry, because petrol – the fuel became an issue. And he had to throttle the engines right back, he and the engineer did a marvellous job really, when you come to think of it. Very, very slowly we began to descend from that great height, and conserving fuel, throttling back the ... the throttles and so on like that. But the time, the time was going on, you see. We were supposed to be home from that trip in about nine hours. In actual fact we were airborne eleven hours, which was quite a feat for the old Lancaster, and quite a feat for the pilot. We got home eventually, very, very late, causing everybody worries back at base.

What was it like coming in, I mean by the time you got to the Channel it would have been daylight?

Oh yes, oh yes, we came home, I think we might have crossed France probably, we would have, in daylight. Because this was April of '44, and this was only the beginning of the spring, and the nights were still pretty long. But, oh no, we ... certainly we came home in daylight.

(25.00) You weren't used to daylight, were you?

No, we did all our flying at night. And it was ... it was an uncomfortable feeling, indeed, very much so. I think we must have landed somewhere round about – from memory, I think we must have taken off around eight or nine o'clock in the evening, and then we got home about seven or eight o'clock the next morning. So we definitely ... we flew the last part of the journey in daylight. And I know that when we landed and taxied in, I think the ... I think the engineers told us that we wouldn't have had ten minutes left in her. So it was a pretty close-run thing. That was easily our longest trip, as far as being in the air. It was just on eleven hours. Very, very long, terribly tiring.

Could you describe the normal procedure, perhaps using this as an example, for what happened after a flight, debriefing?

Yes. As soon as we taxied in and shut down, we'd step out of the aircraft, and we'd all be very, very tired, and cranky, and irritable, of course. And the ground staff chaps would rush up and make a great fuss of us, and we'd made a fuss of them too, because of the wonderful job they did to keep those magnificent machines going. They were marvellous, the ground staff fellows. Then a bus would be waiting, the crew bus would take us back to the aerodrome proper, to the buildings, and we'd be taken straight into the debriefing room. And ...

Let's just wait for that plane.

Yes, debriefing. We'd be taken straight to the debriefing room, where, crew by crew, all members of the crew present, there would be several debriefing or intelligence officers would be waiting to get our reports. And the main report, of course, would come from the skipper, and he had to give a report on the outcome of the raid, what he had done, if anything in particular had happened to the aircraft, was anybody injured, had the navigation been spot on, and so on, and so on. And after that, once we'd submitted our reports, the individual crews would then go into the dining-room next door, and you'd be given a feed.
I can tell you a little story about my beloved skipper on that one too, this is one you can keep on tape, if you like. I had never actually heard the good old expression before, but I heard it for the first time from Johnny, my skipper. And I think it might have been after this Munich trip too. We were a pretty raw crew, we hadn't had many trips, and Johnny was an Australian with a particularly drawly Australian voice. And we were being debriefed this particular night by a gorgeous English girl. She was a squadron officer, she was quite a high-ranking lass, very bright, very intelligent, lovely speaker and that sort of thing. And she said to Johnny, 'Well now tell me ... tell me, Sergeant Bryce, did you see the target? Did you actually see the target?. And Johnny said, 'Oh cripes miss', he said, 'see it?', he said, 'the bloody thing was sticking out like a country shithouse, I couldn't miss it.' (Laughs). I'll never foreget this slow drawl. And the girl said, 'Oh, really, I think you've made your point, Sergeant Bryce.' (Laughs). Anyway that was that. So debriefing they ... and of course ...

But just on the debriefing, accuracy, I mean did people take photographs, to check that they'd been ...?

Oh yes, you ... there were cameras fixed in the aircrafts, and they ... cameras rolled as the bombs fell, and every crew brought back a photograph. In fact that was one way to check that you'd been to the target, as a matter of fact. People that went out into the North Sea and circled round in the North Sea and dropped their photo flashes out in the North Sea ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Identification: Side four, Mr Peter O'Connor. End of identification.

You were saying, people who went out to the North Sea could ...

Circled round and dropped their photo-flashes, you see it didn't take very long to catch up with them, because their photos wouldn't coincide with the rest of the crews', you see.

And did you know of cases like that?

I did hear of a couple of cases, yes. Those crews were very quickly taken away from the squadron and banished. I don't know what happened to them. They ... it did happen, but it was rare, and it's pretty sad, I suppose. But I couldn't say what happened. I suppose they were sent off to sweep aerodromes in Alaska, or something or other like that. I really don't know what happened, but other fellows might know better than I did.
At the debriefing of course all that information was collated by the intelligence officers and a picture of the raid for each squadron was built up. All that information, incidentally, is on file, in records in London, to this very day. Every single raid. And what happened, and each individual aircraft's part in it. I have a copy here of a raid that we did up in Norway, that a friend of mine got for me, and, to my astonishment, there are my words quoted on this record. 'The navigator said ..., the pilot noticed that ...'. And it was uncanny to look at that record forty-odd years later, and that is officially there on record up in London.

Right, well just to go back a little bit, and check on some of the details, what sort of food and drink would you have been taking on a flight?

Compressed sort of food. You took vitamin tablets, that sort of thing, because of course there was always the possibility that you'd be shot down and you could escape, and so you carried milk tablets and vitamin tablets and that sort of thing. And chocolate bars. I don't recollect ever taking any food. I suppose we did, we'd have a packet of sandwiches or something or other like that. Coffee. I do remember coffee. I think we used to take coffee in flasks. But my memory's faded a bit on that sort of thing. I think we sometimes took food. On short trips of course it wasn't necessary. I mean if you were doing a four or five hour trip, say, to Holland or something like that, there was no point in – in taking food, and you didn't have that much time anyway. One of the pressing details of course on very long trips was the necessity to ... to 'go to the can', that was a problem, sometimes. But generally speaking you ...

What did you do?

Well mostly you didn't. You just hung onto it. But there was ... there was a provision in the aircraft, but it was a pretty ...

Quiet on the packet [sic].

It was a pretty messy business anyway. Pilots used to provide themselves with little funnels and rubber tubing, and that was quite common. But I don't ever remember that being much of a problem, quite frankly. It may have been. The food part of it, unless it was going to be an exceptionally long trip, you didn't worry about it, and the same with drink. But sometimes, as I say, we did. And we carried a bit of food, and ... and a flask.

You moved around the aircraft a bit?

Not really; you didn't have time to, and there wasn't room. They were operational aircraft, you know, they weren't passenger liners, and unless something drastic happened you didn't move around your aircraft, you were stuck. The gunners in particular, they were stuck in their turrets. I don't recollect moving around, except perhaps once or twice, I might have moved from my station to stand just behind the pilot and look out. I remember that on one specific occasion, when we crossed the Channel on D-Day, we took part in the – in the invasion of Normandy, and I do remember coming up and standing in the cockpit then, and looking at the Channel that was black with ships. But no, you stuck to your station, you ... there was too much to do. And you couldn't move around comfortably, particularly if you were at height anyway, you had to drag oxygen bottles with you and that sort of thing. Or plug into the oxygen lines, so, no, you didn't move very much.

(5.00) And what were you told in the event of ... of being forced down? Sorry, we'll just wait for the train? So, first of all, if you were forced down over France, first of all?

We were given general instructions on what to do. The first thing you were supposed to do, if you survived the crash, was to bury your parachute, so that you could delude the ... the soldiers as to ... whether there had been anybody escape or not. Then in general you did the sort of thing that evaders had to do. You hid somewhere if you possibly could.

Were you given quite a bit of instruction about this?

Oh yes, we used to carry – as a matter of fact we used to carry things with us. We used to carry compasses, little language cards. As I say, concentrated food, little maps, they were all ... your compass, for example, was disguised in the form of a button on your battle jacket, this kind of thing. The ... the idea then was to try and make your way, as unobtrusively as possible, towards ... towards the coast.

What were you told to expect in terms of German attitudes towards pilots ... towards aircrew?

Well one very, very obvious thing was, if you were bombing Hamburg, or Berlin, or somewhere or other like that, and you got shot down, and you landed on the ground with your parachute, you ... you tried to conceal the fact that you ... (laughs) ... that you had just been carrying out these outrages on German cities. Oh no, you knew darn well what you ... what to expect. You certainly weren't going to be greeted, you know, as a long-lost pal, that was for sure.

Just talking about Germany, because you went over Germany a lot – so the procedures over Germany would be much stricter, wouldn't they?

Yes, yes. Hide, evade, try and pick up food if you could. But inevitably you were captured, and then your instructions simply were to keep your trap shut and put up with whatever the Germans did to you, and just hope that you landed a decent sort of prison camp. There were strict rules about your conduct. You had your duty not to say a word, except give your name and your number, that sort of thing. And then wait until you were herded into a camp. And behave yourself until the end of the war. Or, theoretically, I suppose, you would try to escape and that sort of thing, but the vast majority of blokes that I knew that were prisoners of war, they didn't do anything about escaping, they just simply put up with it as well as they could.

Did you know of any air crew that, for example, came down over France and managed to get out through ...?

Oh yes, there were two or three. There was one fellow on our squadron, dear old Alec Saunders, how the devil he did it, I don't know, but he walked back. I met Alec up in Queensland a couple of years ago, and he was well-known on the squadron as the bloke who walked back. But he just made his way from place to place. He must have had some assistance, I suppose, and eventually ...

In France?

In France he ... yes, he wasn't shot down over Germany. And I think eventually he found his way to Switzerland, I think, and then he ... I think that's how he got out. I think he was flown home from Switzerland.

Did he have to go back to operational flying?

No, I don't think he did. Generally speaking, fellows who escaped in that fashion didn't go back on ops. The ... they didn't want to anyway, I suppose, for a start. [Inaudible] risking things. No, generally speaking they didn't go back. Some of the harum scarum fellows, the Poles, for example, you couldn't keep them away from it. They were great blokes at going back again. But most of the chaps that I knew, Australians, New Zealanders and that sort of thing, didn't go back on ops.

Did you see much of the Poles?

Oh yes, we had a few of them on our squadron. There were two things they could do superbly. One of them was fighting. And they were ... they were monsters where the girls were concerned, my godfather. (Laughs). They were marvellous fellows, they were, they were tremendous blokes, but God, they were reckless daredevils. And they were absolute fanatics where the Germans were concerned, and I know the squadron WAAF officers used to lock their girls up whenever they found out there was a Polish pilot or a Polish navigator was on the squadron. They were ... they were very, very ... they were great fighters, there was no doubt about that.

(10.00) Well, talking about that sort of thing, on leave, relationships with the village nearby, for example?

Well we ... I'm speaking for myself here now. We were near a little place called Coningsby, a lovely little village in Lincolnshire. And we became very friendly with the local people there. It was a farming area, they grew a lot of sugarbeet round there, they had a little pub down in the village, and we did, we enjoyed visiting the people. We used to ride around the village on our bikes, we got to know the people. There was a farmhouse on the edge of the aerodrome, we used to go and have cups of tea there with the old couple. Our crew did. They were very, very nice people indeed. We'd have a bit of a party down in the village pub every now and again.

But then, about every six weeks, aircrew, the operational aircrew, were given about five or six days off, and most of us made a beeline then for the big cities. We'd go to London, or, if we had made friends in other parts of England, we'd go and stay with them. I used to stay with a family, that I met through one of these introduction agencies, down in Cardiff. Lovely family called the Leonards. And I used to spend a lot of leaves down there. They had a couple of lasses, couple of daughters who ... I think they worked on business or something in Cardiff,

and they were a ... they were a lovely family. And they looked after me marvellously. We used to play cards, you know, go out to the pictures, take the two girls out, this sort of thing. The mother and the father, they were a lovely couple. That sort of thing.

Would you be there with a friend or by yourself?

Pardon?

Would you be there ...?

Well sometimes I'd go down with one of the crew. Usually I went by myself. But that ... that was very, very common indeed. And of course some of the chaps married English girls, had already started families. Some of them had relations over there. I had a cousin, who was ... he was a lecturer in Cambridge University. I used to go and visit him. That ... they were delightful interludes.
But a lot of us used to go to London, and we'd have a high old time, we would. We'd play up, all go to the pubs and drink beer, go to the theatres. I remember going to see one of Noel Coward's plays. Of course we always went to the Windmill Theatre where the ... the nude showgirls were on, we always went there. And there were dozens and dozens of friendship and hospitality clubs all over London. You'd ... you'd meet, you know, very nice lasses there, nice girls. You'd make friendships and ... with these people, they'd take you home to their families and that sort of thing. I've no doubt that some of those relationships went a lot further than that too, but for the most part we were ... we were a pretty innocent crowd of blokes, and we just enjoyed a little bit of family life. That was rather important. A lot of sight-seeing, it was a wonderful place for sight-seeing, even in the wartime days. Particularly ... I mean England simply reeks of history, it was a delight to be in a country like that, even in ... under wartime conditions. You could go to Ireland. I went to Ireland and visited the ... the home of my ... where my mother had been born. I actually went there and stood in the room where my mother had been born. Way back in the 1890s. So there was a lot ... there were lots and lots of things to do when you were on leave. And those periods were very, very enjoyable, they were ... they were certainly a relief from the stress of flying. Becuase it was – flying, operational flying, was stressful, there's no question or doubt about that. And I have very, very happy memories indeed, of leaves. London.
There were a few purple patches. (Laughs). I can remember getting tangled up in ... in a nightclub of all things with some wild fellow who came down from Scotland. I'm absolutely certain he was a black marketeer, he seemed to have tons and tons of money, and he used to pick up these groups of young servicemen and take us around. Unlimited food, unlimited grog, seemed to ... unlimited girls and all this sort of thing. But I have a feeling that he was a black marketeer.

Giving some of it back, by the sounds of it.

Yes. So there we are.

You mentioned stress, how was stress showing up? I mean, after you'd ... we'll come to the Pathfinders in a minute, but after you'd flown a number of missions, how was stress showing up?

I think it showed up in your attitude. You became jumpy and irritable. This is really a medical question, I suppose. I don't remember suffering from stress, if I can put it that way, I suppose because I've forgotten about it, I've put it all behind me. But chaps did get twitchy and

nervous and irritable. Also of course if you couldn't sleep very well – because we used to do a lot of our sleeping in daytime – if you didn't sleep too well, okay, that showed up in terms of physical tiredness. The doctors were on the watch all the time, they were extremely good, RAF medical ...

(15.00) Actually if you could say that again, that motorbike?

Yes. The Royal Air Force medical men were ... they were very good indeed. They were experts at watching the lads, and looking after them, if the signs of strain were coming up. But of course ...

What would they do?

Oh, medication, a couple of days off. 'Right, you, you're off flying for a couple of days', that kind of thing. And also there were certain physical manifestations too. Some chaps used to have skin rashes, all that kind of stuff would become apparent. But for the most part chaps weathered this sort of thing, over a period of six, eight months, a year, over a period of thirty to forty operational trips. And by that time the authorities would simply say, 'All right, that's it, you've done your share, now off you go. That's it.' You'd go and ... they'd give you six months off and you'd go off to training command or somewhere like that. You always ... of course you had the press-on type, the Guy Gibsons and the Cheshires and – I remember our navigation leader on 83 Squadron, Tommy Blair, he did a hundred operational trips, spread over four years. Never showed any signs of stress or anything, just a calm, placid bloke. A hundred. Operational trips.

Did you hear the phrase ... sorry, go on, finish.

I was going to say, the one that showed the stress was his dog. He always took his dog, would you believe? Oh he was a fabulous character. The poor damn dog would sit at his feet in the navigation cabin, it's a wonder the thing didn't die, because ... from lack of oxygen. It's be up to 20,000 feet, you see. God knows what would have happened if they'd been shot down, what the Germans would have thought. But there we are. You were about to ask a question?

How did the dog show the stress?

I don't know, whether the dog ...

A twitchy dog?

A twitchy dog, I suppose, yes. (Laughs). The poor thing probably suffered from oxygen starvation, I suppose, and went to sleep. Tommy Blair's dog, yes, I ... (laughs). Amazing. Now, you were going to ask ...?

The phrase 'low moral fibre', ever hear it?

Oh yes, yes. That was one of those dreaded phrases that you didn't use, but if you did, you would ... it would be done in a joking way. You see, if a fellow wouldn't ... wasn't game to come into the dance-hall and pick up a pretty girl, you see, 'You're suffering from LMF', or something like that.

But no, that was a pretty dodgy sort of business, you hoped it would never happen to you. It did. I guess there were fellows who were taken off operations for LMF. I ... I don't remember very much about that sort of thing. I don't know that I can remember anybody that it happened to. Others might have. But I think they were very much more humane about that sort of thing

in world war two than they were in world war one. I understand that blokes were lined up and shot for cowardice and desertion in the face of the enemy and that sort of thing. I don't think that happened in the Royal Air Force, as far as I know. But I think, you know, blokes were just quietly spirited away, and I suppose they finished up in the backwoods of Wales or somewhere or other like that, probably as aircrew guards or something. Something like that. I really don't know. I'm not a very good source of information on that particular aspect. But there was such a thing as LMF. I don't know whether a bloke's papers showed it or not, when he was discharged, I wouldn't know. It didn't happen to me, thank God. (Laughs). There we are.

What about casualties? First of all was your ... you were hit on your first mission, were you hit later?

Oh yes. Yes. No, we were hit several times by flak. We took a couple of beatings, as a matter of fact, from flak. Twice we sustained damage from a fighter.

Sorry, can we just close that door. [Break in recording.]

No, we sustained a couple of bad fighter attacks. One in particular, I think our worst one was ... I think it was Brunswick. We always seemed to have a bad time on Brunswick, that was a bad target for us. But a fighter lined us up, and our gunners couldn't do much about it, because we were out ... he was out of our range. We had .303 machine-guns in the turrets, and this particular fighter, I've forgotten which one it was, I think it was a Messerschmitt 110, he had .5 cannon. So he was able to open fire on us from about 600 yards out. And there was no way we were going to reach him. But he put a burst through us, and amazingly, we got away with it. He didn't do any permanent damage to the aircraft or to any of us. Not one of us. We went through a whole tour where not one of us got a single scratch, seven blokes. But when we got home we just about died of fright, because the – the ground staff said, 'Well you'd better come and have a look and see what happened to you.' And there was a row of cannonshells through the fuselage, missing all the vital parts. And, as I say, she wasn't ... the aircraft wasn't even damaged to the extent that it was difficult to fly her. But we were dead lucky on that one. Had he been, you know, a yard or so either way, he would have got an engine, or he would have got the pilot or something or other like that.

(20.00) What about casualties in other aircraft? I mean you've got it going on around you all the time, what's it like?

Yes. Well it's scary, and of course sad, because you know that, you know, one of the boys has gone. This happened to us on Hamburg, when my very special buddy, the one I mentioned in Canberra now, he survived it, he got out of it, and finished the war in a ... in a prisoner of war camp. But they were hit right alongside of us, and pilots had an uncanny sense of knowing where the other blokes were in the sky, and as soon as this aircraft blew up, I can remember our skipper saying, 'My God, I think that's Jennings, he's gone.' And sure enough, when we got back, that crew was missing. And ...

What was your feeling?

My feeling, I was absolutely devastated, it took me weeks to get over that, because we were bosom pals, in the way that chaps became bosom pals in those days. We're still the greatest of mates, and we talk to each other, correspond regularly, and when we see each other it's just like a pair of schoolboys. But I was absolutely devastated, I just couldn't believe that he was

gone. And I know that the skipper had to take me in hand at one stage, he said, 'For God's sake, snap out of it. You've got to think of your own crew, stop worrying about Brian.'

This is on that particular trip, or later?

Not the Munich trip, no, this is the Hamburg trip.

Yes, but on the ... you were on the ...?

No, this was some weeks later. We were already – had done another two or three trips. And Johnny kept saying to me, 'You've got to snap out of it. You've got to stop moping about Brian. We're a crew, we're still alive, and we have a job to do. Now pull yourself together.' And shortly after that we got the word that they were prisoners of war, and there we are. But it was ... I found that devastating to think that my special buddy was right alongside of me, you know, only a few hundred hards away in the sky, and he was gone, just like that. It was ... and I think that would have been a pretty common reaction too. Quite a few of the blokes would have felt that, when a special pal was gone.

When ... with that happening to so many people, the reaction of some people at least would have been to become hardened to it, and get used to it?

Yes, that was ... that was quite common too, you know. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. And let's face it, I suppose, that was the sensible thing to do. What was the good of sitting around and moping, you had a job to do, they were gone, there was nothing you could do about it, and that's ... that was so. In my particular case, with that particular bloke, it was a very, very personal thing. But during my time on the operational squadron dozens and dozens of chaps that I knew got shot down. Some of them killed, some of them prisoners of war, and so on like that. But you did, you developed that attiude – well ... well what was the good, anyway, of moping about good old Smithie? Beaut bloke and that sort of thing, and then you got on with the job.

When a plane got shot down, what was the feeling, that probably they were all dead, or that the chances were that they might be prisoners and survive?

I think you just hoped that they would get out of it.

Most of the time they didn't?

There must have been an awful lot of them that didn't, because I think there were ... I think there were something like 55,000 killed on Bomber Command, that's an enormous number of lads, when you come to think of it. Casualties on Bomber Command were by far the greatest of any of the services, or any of the major units. I mean not even the 8th Army, for example, in its march across Europe, they didn't lose as many as that. The British ... the navy didn't lose anywhere near that number of people, but Bomber Command, during the war, seven years, lost 55,000 blokes, dead. And thousands and thousands of course injured.

On the bases, unlike the navy or the army, you had women on the bases. How significant was that?

(Laughs). Well very significant. They did an absolutely marvellous job, of course. They released tens of thousands of blokes for more active duties. They were wonderfully conscientious, highly trained and highly skilled. And it was an absolute delight to have them round. All our ... our cooks and stewards and so on like that. Our parachute girls, radio girls,

the ... they were wonderful, they were marvellous, in the offices, the orderly room and all that sort of thing, they were an absolute delight to have around the place, wonderfully conscientious, and a wonderful comfort to have them round. And of course, inevitably, romances developed. In many cases lads married the girls on the squadron.

How close was the mixing. I mean were you in the same messes, for example?

Oh yes. For example, when we ... when we were commissioned – quite a few aircrew finished up as commissioned officers – yes, sure we shared the same mess. Obviously we didn't share the same quarters, the same living quarters. The WAAFs had their own little ... their own little home. But no, we lived and worked together. And, for example, as young officers, about six of us would share the one girl. She'd make our beds, tidy up our rooms, and that sort of thing. Wake us up in the mornings and dig us ... dig us out of bed, and say, 'Right, come on', or bring us cups of tea and all this sort of thing. No, they were ... they were absolutely marvellous. I've got nothing but admiration for those youngsters. Particularly the ... the technical lasses were wonderful. The radio girls and the parachutists, they were marvellous. Train. [Break in recording.]

(25.00) Did superior officers keep an eye on relationships between ...?

Well of course they would, yes. The ... that would apply in almost any organisation, wouldn't it? The same thing happens in the business/commercial world, education departments and that sort of thing. Of course it would, yes.

I mean it was official that you shouldn't ... where was the line drawn, I mean could you go to the pictures with a WAAF?

What line were you talking about? No, you could go to the pictures with a WAAF, if you wanted to, of course you could, yes. You could put your arm round her and give her a cuddle too, as far as that goes. But, no, it's just ... there was a commonsense attitude about that sort of thing, and there we are. But men and women working together in a war – well have a look at Israel today. And there we are. It's probably the beginnings, I suppose, of women's equality and women's lib. Or whatever. Mmm.

What about problems of discipline. What sort of problems did occur? Or more serious breaches as well?

Well I don't recollect serious breaches of discipline, on the squadron, on the bases, because there was a big, fundamental and important job to do. Every now and again somebody did do something awfully stupid. And they were, they were very, very firmly, not savagely, but they were firmly and ruthlessly dealt with. I can remember one particular case where a Canadian lad got as full as a bull one night and he went round the mess, the sergeants' mess, talking all the pint pots off the shelf behind the bar and throwing them through the windows in the big mess. It was a big, permanent aerodrome, you see. Bit permanent base. Lovely old brick building. And he did thousands of pounds worth of damage, you see. By ... within twenty-four hours he was gone, and he didn't come back for a month. When he came back he was the most polite, courteous boy that you've every stuck in all your life. He was a model of behaviour. And we found out that they had sent him to a place called ... I think it was called the RAF Disciplinary School, at a place called Sheffield. I think that's where he went, but very obviously he was dealt with very, very firmly indeed. Like, I suppose, like they treat recalcitrant criminals in our ... in our jails and so forth like that. He would have been ... he'd

have had a pretty torrid time, and I suppose after about a month of that he would have been given the opportunity, you know, 'Want another month of this, or do you want to go back to the squadron and behave yourself and be a good boy?'

What ...? Sorry.

Well I was going to say, certain silly things happened at times. I can remember a person, who shall be unnamed, who with one of his pals one night got a little drunk in the mess, and the two boys got up and they painted their names on the ceiling of the mess. Which was rather a silly thing to do, because they betrayed their/our identity. And the next morning the group captain in charge of the whole station, not the squadron commander, but the station commander, had these two Australian boys in front of him, and said, 'I'm not going to have you damned young colonial pups desecrating my mess. Get up there and clean it off.' And these two young men did. But they only found out a long while afterwards that, when the group captain had dismissed them, he and his righthand man had a good old chuckle. 'Hammered, those young devils, weren't they?' ... But that was the kind of ... as I said, I won't tell you who the person was. (Laughs).

Obviously you were one of them.

I was, yes. And a very dear old buddy of mine. As a matter of fact we were talking about it the other day, when we were in Perth. We were the two concerned.
There was very, very little of what you would call criminal activity on an operational squadron. Silly acts like that. There was very little theft, or that kind of thing. People were too busy with their job. If a WAAF and an airman were indiscreet enough to ... you know, to breach the moral code, well that was dealt with, I think, quietly, by the commanding officers and so forth. But breaches of what you'd call discipline, there weren't many of them, and you were an operational type, and you were expected to behave sensibly, you had a job to do, and that's that. On the training places it was a different matter, the discipline was pretty rigid. Appearances were kept up. A different sort of an attitude altogether.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A.

Tape 3, Side A. Peter O'Connor, on 14th January. End of identification.

How did you become a Pathfinder? When did you find out you were going to be a Pathfinder?

The pilot took us aside one day, we'd only had a handful of trips on that first squadron, 44 Squadron, and he said, We've been selected for PFF!' And the reaction as for as I was concerned was, 'Oh, gee whiz, that'll be interesting.' I had no particular views about PFF. I didn't know very much about it. And I really don't know, to this day, why we were picked. Because we were ... I thought we were a very average crew, but apparently each squadron was supposed to give up a quota of its crews who'd had some experience, who would be taken to the Pathfinder training unit. And would be trained and tested to see if they were capable of undertaking Pathfinder word. Well that happened to us. Off we went down to the ... to the training base, it was a place called Whitton, down near Cambridge. We went through the Pathfinder course, which was short and intensive, with a great deal of emphasis on navigation and very sophisticated navigation techniques. Really no time in this interview to tell you all about that sort of thing. And the next thing we were shot off up to our ... our Pathfinder

squadron, 83 Squadron. Up at ... up near Lincoln. And within a matter of days we did our first operation as a Pathfinder.

Perhaps, if you could just choose, say, one trip, and use that to illustrate what the Pathfinders did?

Right, well there were two trips that I remember very vividly indeed. One of them – we had about twenty-five operations up by this time, and we were starting to move up through the Pathfinder hierarchy. We ... you started off simply dropping flares over the target to light the target up. You graduated from there to dropping different kinds of flares under different conditions. You were taught – you would perhaps illuminate the target on a cloudy night, on another occasion you'd illuminate the ground itself, on another occasion you'd illuminate the target in the air, flares up in the air. Then you got to the stage of actually dropping target indicator, as they were called. [A pause]. You actually dropped the red or green or yellow flares on the aiming point itself.

What were the red or green or yellow, what were they ... ?

They were flares, they were very, very powerful flares, like a great burning candle. And it was your job to drop that precisely on the point where the bombs form the main force had to be dropped. They were a ...

Why were the colours different?

For ... this is rather a complex answer that's required here, and I really haven't got the time to tell you.

Okay, lets leave this, I'll talk about that with David Leicester.

Yes, we'll leave that, Yes, you can talk about that with David Leicester, and concentrate on that, why, the different types of technique, they had different names and that sort of thing. But anyway you rose up through the hierarchy to the stage where, as I said, you were actually marking the target. You were the first person to get there and to mark the actual target. You didn't have to back up the main marker and so on like that. Finally you got to the stage where you actually controlled a raid. Mow we only ever did that once. We only got to that stage right near the end of our tour as Pathfinders, to the stage where we were sufficiently skilled nd sufficiently experienced to be able to identify the target and put the first marker down, and then control the test of the Pathfinders with what they had to do, and then finally control the ... the main force. Bringing them in to bomb the actual target. That was the pinnacle of being a Pathfinder, to be a marker. We only ever did one of those trips. You had to be pretty good and pretty experienced.

There's one particular trip that stands out in mind, or two in particular. The first one was a trip to ... to Bremen, to the port of Bremen, Bremerhaven. And we laid our flares in a line across the line of attack, a line of twelve flares, and the sixth flare, the middle of the stick of flares, when photographed, the photograph showed up when we got back to base, our flare was exactly on the aiming point, which was the corner of the docks, or something or other like that. We got what they called an aiming point photograph. And that was the absolute pinnacle of perfection, you couldn't get any better than that. In other words we weren't a mile off, a yard off, we were right on the target, so we felt pretty good about that.

(5.00) Near the very end of our tour we did a daylight raid on the Dortmund–Ems Canal, which was a famous target in those days. And it was done at daylight, and we were

deputy controllers, our pilot was the ... he was standing in for the deputy ... if the controller, if something happened to him. We also had to control the radio messages for that particular day. On the way in to the target we were hit by flak and we lost an engine, but we battled on, bravely, and reached the target, and the controller of the raid, he was knocked out of action, and our skipper took over control of the radio. Carried out his duty and brought us home. And we reckoned he was a great bloke, obviously, because he brought us home on three engines, but he got a DFC for that, later, he was awarded a DFC. Not an immediate DFC, but that was one of the reasons why he got one.
Those two raids stand out in particular on our Pathfinder trips. There was one other that – I still boast about this today with Leicester. We did an enormously long-range target, Konigsberg, in East Prussia. We were one of the ... we were one of the flare force attacking Konigsberg. That was 1,000 miles each way. 1,000 miles there and 1,000 miles back. Oddly enough that didn't take us as long as the trip to Munich. It took us about nine and a half hours. But there were no weather problems, or anything like that, like there had been on the Munich trip. But I always brag to ... to David, he never went to Konigsberg, and I did.

> Right. Well, just getting near the end, how did you feel about the overall strategy. I mean all the questions have been raised about whether it was ... it was worth the effort? You mentioned fifty-five [sic] dead aircrew, there's all the civilians on the ground.

Mmm. Oh yes. Well that ... that was something of course you shut out of your mind. You knew – I guess you couldn't afford to be sensitive about these things, but you knew darn well that children were dying, mothers were dying, hospitals were going up in flames, and that sort of thing. But, I mean, you had a job to do, and that was that. You were under orders, so it was no good thinking about that sort of thing. At least that's what I did. I never did get any attacks of conscience or anything like that.

> How do you feel now?

In retrospect I think I feel like most chaps do. They wish to hell that there hadn't been a bloody war anyway. I think the greatest pacifists of all are people like myself. It's a ghastly waste of human life and human endeavour, and all that skill and knowledge and science and bravery and courage, you know, to ... to that end. That's the big broad, philosophical thing, I think as a weapon of war, I think the Bomber Command was supremely successful, and supremely important. There are many, many books have been published on this. I don't think there's any doubt whatsoever that if it hadn't been for Bomber Command the damn thing would probably still be going on. Because the Germans were very, very tough, resolute, brave, enormously capable people. 60,000,000 of them, with tremendous resources. Their armies and their air forces and navies were tremendously powerful and efficient, and I quite seriously think that, if it hadn't been for Bomber Command, I think it would have gone on for years and years and years. Same as the atomic bomb. You know, it shortened the business in Japan. I don't think there's any doubt about that. But that raises all sorts of moral and philosophical questions which, with due respect to what you're doing, really are rather too big, I think, to be discussed in any kind of depth in this kind of interview. I mean I'm not knocking your ... what you're doing in asking the question, far from it. But I'll give that one a pass, I think, in trying to answer it in any depth.

> Fair enough, sure.

END TAPE 3, SIDE A.