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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description Thomas Michael Fitzgerald, Navigator No. 547 Squadron Royal Air Force (RAF), 1944–1945, interviewed by Tim Bowden for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45.

Discusses enlistment; Australia; Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF); Britain; Royal Air Force (RAF); Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS); air force training; selection of aircrews; Coastal Command; Liberator planes; crew performance; casualties; social life.

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TAPE 1 SIDE A

Tape identification: This is an interview with Tom Fitzgerald recorded in Sydney on 10th March 1989, for the Australian War Memorial History Collection.

Tom, why did you choose the RAAF rather than perhaps one of the other services?

I did make tentative approaches to the navy. I was a late starter in the war. For family reasons, I wasn't able to – and for other reasons, too; I had been in a reserved occupation until my father died – I wasn't able to get away until the first half of 1942. Having a sense of delay, I approached both the navy and the air force and found the air force were much more ready to give one definite commitment to take you. The army had already provisionally told me I had one flat foot and that therefore I was ineligible. This was earlier in the war when I went for a medical check-up. So I suppose that was another consideration. But I'd always thought the air force was an interesting service, a new, young service, and for that reason I eventually settled for it.

Did you have any particular role in mind, or did you ... ?

I assumed I would try to be a pilot. I discovered fairly quickly that everyone's wish was to be a pilot, and that the proportion of what they called 'scrubbings' at elementary flying school – which was the second school a pilot went to after the initial training school – the incidence of scrubbings was enormously high, more than fifty per cent. I took a fair bit of persuading at initial training school that I still should not apply to be a pilot. I was given co-ordination tests, aptitude tests, intelligence tests, and they very heavily urged me to apply to be a navigator. Right up to the eve of the little ... appearance before a board of senior officers at the initial training school – which, by the way, for me was in Kingaroy, Queensland, a very unusual despatch of Sydney chaps to Kingaroy – until the very eve of that meeting with the senior officers I was resolved to still ask to be a pilot. But at the last minute it dawned on me that I should face the realities of what they had found about my qualifications and, and to the relief of my own training officers and their surprise, when I stood smartly to attention before the very senior president, visiting president of the board, I said 'navigator'. And that, incidentally, would at least speed up the process, the assured process of my getting a wing – only one wing – and getting into air crew, because if you failed as a pilot, either at the elementary flying school or the more advanced flying school, you had to start all over again to become a navigator. And there were many such failed pilots I found along the course, the courses that I subsequently took, very large numbers of them.

Before we get on to the training, could you just speak briefly about your family background. Would you consider yourself middle class, or working class? What was the family background?

(5.00) Very nearly working class. I was born almost on the precincts of my grandfather's dairy in Marrickville. The dairy was condemned, as being too close to the city, when I was about ten years old. But before that my father had set himself up as a milk vendor, and I ran around on milk carts for my father, serving milk in working class districts –

Marrickville, Newtown, St Peters, Leichhardt, Annandale – over a very wide area. I got an exhibition to the university, studied economics, and had finished my course by the time I enlisted in the air force. I was then, until my father's death, I was technically a research officer in the Federal Treasury on secondment to the Department of Defence at Victoria Barracks, where I met Margaret. When my father died, I was able to do what I wouldn't otherwise have been able to do: get out of that desk job in Defence – because I was the only child of age, when he died, of six children, and I had some responsibilities to carry out. That's the sort of ... I ran around those milk carts and therefore got to know hundreds and hundreds of working class people, mainly working class or lower middle class people, and formed a great liking for that kind of world and those kind of people.

Now, were you engaged at the time you attempted to join up?

No. We became engaged while I was away.

Well, when you got in, or rather when you ... Did you regard yourselves as part of an elite?

[after a pause] I don't think that's quite the case. There was an average level of education among air crew that was above the general run in ... I suppose, actually in operational personnel, both in the army and the navy. Because, as you know, in the ... this is a point I was wanting to raise with you, Tim, this class thing, status thing, was one of the curiosities of the air force. There was an unwritten understanding that roughly one third of people who qualified as air crew would be commissioned. The other two thirds would be all non-commissioned officers; they did exactly the same jobs in the aircraft, there were occasions where a non-commissioned officer would be in command of an aircraft which carried among its crew commissioned officers.

But the pilot was the boss ... I mean, in the air?

Nearly always. There were occasions where the navigator was the boss. But in ... there were cases where a sergeant pilot was the captain of the aircraft and commanded commissioned officers. It was anomalous. It was also arbitrary in the decisions made as to which people would constitute one third. It was largely determined by educational qualifications, either before entering or as shown in the various examinations and tests. But not entirely on that. I remember being very puzzled at some of my friends and colleagues being passed over for commissions, I could not understand it. It created difficulties occasionally. There must have been a sense, even in the senior officers, that this was an arbitrary thing. It was ... I was ... we were told it was enforced on them by the necessity of appeasing the other services – the army and the navy – that even getting one third of our operational people commissioned was far above the proportions in the army or the navy and therefore we had to recognise that. At Christmas ... I remember that at a Christmas dinner put on at Kingaroy in the mess for the trainees, our instructors – the commissioned officers of our instructors – made the gesture of serving us at table for the Christmas dinner. Well, rather like Christ washing the feet of his disciples – but it was a gesture, that the rank is, for the moment anyway, irrelevant.

(10.00) Also I noticed in England, towards the end of the war, this was from the beginning of 1945 on when the end was obviously in sight, the RAAF in England adopted a very liberal policy towards NCOs air crew who applied to be commissioned. There was a rapid commissioning of them. And, again, the inference was, I think, that these lads deserved the best chance they could in re-entering civilian life, to be able to say they had finished up with commissions.

But they'd have lost a few, of course, as well, wouldn't they. I mean, they needed to commission officers, surely, because of the losses?

Ah (a little pause), well, that's a good point. They lost both NCOs and commissioned officers. There was a terrible – as I'll come to later – there was a terrible incidence of deaths among the boys I was with who ended up in Bomber Command, even though they only got into operations about the middle of 1944. There was a fearful incidence of deaths. But that applies to both commissioned and non-commissioned.

Well, we will get back on to that, Tom. So, just coming back. So there was this anomaly that you were talking about. How did you finish up? Did you finish up officer, or non-commissioned officer?

Yes, yes. Took officer, mmm. It was very good in a way. Again, it reinforced perhaps the democratic sympathies I developed as a milkman. My skipper, also commissioned, Cec Boxall from Melbourne, was a carpenter by trade. My co-navigator, or second navigator, commissioned, was Bill Simpson, a tiler by profession, a tiler. Now, we, from our different walks of life, we ... they were not only outstandingly competent men in their jobs, they fitted perfectly well into the officers mess among British and Canadian and other people. So there was ... the one-third proportion did allow still a fair bit of cutting across so-called class structures.

Was this less ... was the class structure less pronounced while you were in Australia than it was when you got to England? Or Canada, for that matter?

Very hard to remember any great distinction. The British were, of course, a class-ridden society. Accent, the way you spoke, had such a bearing on your place in their society. As an old literary man, Hilaire Belloc, said to me when I visited him – since we were stationed in Sussex towards the end of the war and he lived in Sussex I went over to see him to get him to sign a book I wanted to send to Margaret – and the first thing he said to me, I suppose in response to my accent, was 'You know, Mr Fitzgerald (or Flight Lieutenant Fitzgerald), in this country a man is judged by the way he speaks.' And that's exaggerated, but still, even during the war, when there was a great breaking down of barriers, the status thing was very marked, yes.

I've often felt that Australians had a slight advantage in this regard, that nobody could actually pick where they came ... whether it was red-brick university, or whether it was Oxford or Cambridge.

I'm sure that prevails. I'm sure Clive James would think he has an enormous advantage, given his background – you know, his working class father and so on – he could scarcely have hoped to break through so well. Because you are outside their classifications, they let you off. That's was very much the case.

However, so from Australia you joined the Empire Air Training Scheme?

Yes, yes.

How did you get there?

By ship. Incidentally, there was a slight ... That, I regard as the first of the two personally lucky, but nationally regrettable, streamings off that occurred in my air force career. By that I mean that I was streamed out of participation in the Pacific war. I felt then, and I feel perhaps

even more clearly now, that the airmen who did the most ... really, the most concrete things for Australia in the war were those who flew in the New Guinea area, particularly during the years 1942 and '43.

(15.00) I still think that such people as the great Flight Lieutenant William Newton VC epitomised the ... the highest standards of service that an airman could perform. I was streamed, however ... it's still a puzzling question – I don't criticise it – as to why, in that extremity of 1942 and '43, we were still allowed to go off to Canada to the Empire Air Training Scheme. One of my fortunes was not to be too tall. At the Bradfield Park embarkation section of the big area there that the RAAF had, I met, through a friend, a very tall friend, another very tall gentleman called Gough Whitlam; they were not allowed to go to the Empire Air Training Scheme, they were too tall to be interchangeable bodies on a piece of paper that could be allocated to any kind of aircraft. And they were kept here for that reason.

Fascinating.

Yes. We sailed on an American vessel which seems to have had a role as a kind of a rather exclusive passenger vessel. It was called the *Mount Vernon*. And we sailed, I think, in early August 1943, and had an uneventful – but obviously roundabout, because slow – voyage to San Francisco. That vessel had been in very hazardous operations, as I've subsequently discovered, before we were carried in it, it had done some very risky runs round about India, Burma, Malaya, and so on.

Right. Now, what was the state of your training when you'd left?

I was a pilot officer. I'd gone through initial training school at Kingaroy, followed by bombing and gunnery school, in my ca ... we were streamed into various directions for each of these subsequent courses ... bombing and gunnery at Port Pirie, South Australia, air navigation school at Parkes, New South Wales, and there the seeding out of the commissioned and non-commissioned occurred. And the so-and-sos at the officers mess in Parkes exacted an unscrupulous tax on the newly commissioned officers, by telling us that, if we paid a substantial admission fee to the officers mess in the day or two we had – barely a day, actually – before we left Parkes, we would thereafter be given concessions and exemptions from fees in all the other officers messes we went to around the world. None of us believed it, but somehow we all went along with these cunning so-and-sos who allowed us to buy them drinks and pay a special entry fee to the officers mess in Parkes.

And you didn't notice any of these other benefits later on?

None at all, of course! We didn't expect them, or get them.

Yes. I have a note here that there were some 2,832 that were termed 'major casualties' – in other words, 'going finish' as they would say in Papua New Guinea – during training. Was that ... was the greatest danger in training in that early period? Or later, in Canada?

(after a pause) I'm not in a position really to answer that. The incidence of training casualties, in my experience, was nil. On none of the ... we did a little bit of flying at each of those places I've mentioned, after Kingaroy. Well, we did varying degrees of flying. I can't recall a training accident of any kind, and ... Of course, one did hear about such things, but I have no way of quantifying them at all. One of the amusing things, Tim, if I can mention it, in the bombing and gunnery school there were ...

This is at ... ?

At Port Pirie. There were standards laid down whereby, in one's bombing exercises one underwent training in flying over a hypothetical target, pressing the button so that a little small apology for a bomb went down and either hit or missed the target by so much. And there was also a system of testing you as a gunner, by having you, with a machine-gun out in a rather awful slipstream – in old ... old ... er, Wellington aircraft, I think – trying to shoot a drogue, a kind of a long canvas drogue, being dragged along by another aircraft, so flying in parallel.

(20.00) Now, almost all of that course I was on passed out as 'above average' in bombing and 'below average' in gunnery. Now, that seemed to me a contradiction in terms. And when, at the end of that course, Group Captain Charlesworth, a very impressive man, presided again over a kind of a review board and asked us did we have anything to say – each of us went in singly to him, a few minutes – to have anything to say, I swallowed hard and said 'Well sir, I can't understand how everybody is above average in one department and everybody is below average in another department'. And he turned to a very distinguished English RAF officer, Wing Commander Harding, and he said 'Wing Commander Harding, do you have any comment on Leading Aircraftman Fitzgerald's comment?'. And Wing Commander Harding, in a beautiful voice, said 'Well, that's the way it's laid down in the RAF manuals'.

Things did change, I think, by the time that war ended? – Or maybe not all that much. Er, moving on to Canada. How did you find it there, the training, contact with the local people, and so on?

We – just in parenthesis – we had a very brief taste, from San Francisco, of the enormous hospitality of the American people. As soon as we got off that boat, we were picked up by various passing motorists, taken into the city, sat down in pubs, not allowed to buy a drink. And we had a brief glimpse. And we then went up by rail through those beautiful western states of USA, into Vancouver and then on to what was called (attempting a Canadian accent) 'the Manning Depot' at Edmonton. That's where we waited for the subsequent postings. From Edmonton we were given our time to report at the next training course, General Reconnaissance School at Summerside in Prince Edward Island, just off the east coast of Canada. We were told to report in there in the late ... some time in the late autumn. But we were given a couple of weeks to go where we wished, and of course we all went through the USA again, had another marvellous experience of the USA. At Edmonton we did nothing, we were just gentlemen of leisure for a few weeks. At Summerside there was a quite a good course, it may have run for perhaps two months, in various new ... some new subjects. Ship recognition: we learned, at least on paper, to recognise the silhouettes of virtually the whole German and the whole British fleets, down to the destroyer classes. Map reading: we were – both in practice in the air, and with photographs – we were taught how to tell where you were, as much as possible, from looking at the landscape, and things like that. Also our morse code was brushed up. At that school – this was the second fateful streaming point for me – we were told towards the end of the course that, as it turned out and quite contrary to our expectations, there was no prospect of any of us going into Bomber Command in the UK, Bomber Command had its complement, we would all be in Coastal Command. We were also told that, if we took our absolutely final training, which was the operational training unit, OTU, in the Bahamas, we would get into operations more quickly than if we went on to England where the OTUs, again, were a bit over-blessed with people. There was only a limited number of places available in the Bahamas, at Nassau in the Bahamas. I opted to go to the Bahamas. I

asked my very best friend, Cam McCall – his real name was Cyril, but he refused to be called Cyril – whom I'd known since Kingaroy days, to come with me to the Bahamas so we could be together. But he had a brother in England, and he said he would prefer to go to England. I therefore went definitely to Coastal Command in the Bahamas, that was a Coastal Command OTU.

(25.00) He, like the others, went on to England. In his last letter to me, dated early June 1944, he said that when they got to England they found the delays in Coastal Command OTUs were even worse than they had expected, and he and some others had asked could they be transferred to Bomber Command, been told they couldn't, but later were told they could. And he did. While others were virtually told that they had to, in his words, in quotation marks, 'volunteer' to go from Coastal over to Bomber. As it turned out, he was killed on his first bombing mission over Germany.

So, in the Bahamas, you did what?

Ah, that was operational training. And it was more or less what they said, you went out on a few big exercises in which you did in fact patrol the ocean, using rather limited navigational ... to test you, they made you rely on the basic navigational methods, which was what they called DR plotting navigation, you weren't allowed to use any of those marvellous electronic aids that in fact were available to us as soon as we got to England. Again, the course ... oh, I suppose it went over lots of navigational work. The pilots ... I should have said, briefly, that at Summerside we were encouraged very much to choose crew mates. If my memory is right, the only categories who went through that GRS course at Summerside were pilots and navigators. I may be forgetting wireless operators, but ...

This is Summerside in Canada?

In Canada, in Prince Edward Island. I may be forgetting wireless operators, but I don't think ... but you were certainly encouraged to pair off with a pilot. And sometimes a chap would have approaches from several people, and so on, and we sorted out who it would be. But that was only virtually a two-man conjunction. You knew that that pilot would almost certainly be only the co-pilot for a while, that there'd be a more experienced man coming to the Bahamas to be your captain, first pilot. And you knew that you had to team up also with wireless operators, flight engineers, wireless operator mechanics, and sheer gunners, mere gunners.

Now, you were encouraged to form these groupings yourself, were you?

These pairs, yes. And we did. It seemed to work out very well. You know, I can never do other than be grateful for the fact that Cec Boxall approached me. And I knew he was the man I wanted; a very practical, sane, sound, reliable man, quiet, very impressive Aussie.

It would be terribly important, I would think, to have that confidence, particularly between the navigator and the pilot.

But ... er, yes, and even more ... I have a very dear friend, Ernest Hyde, who was streamed off to England and into Bomber Command, and he survived, one of the ... I'm sorry to say, one of the few of my contemporaries who did survive. And whenever I see Ernest, I like to get him to tell me how he, getting to England, looked around hard for the right man to be captain. And he picked a person with experience, who'd been over Germany a lot of times, and he said 'I thought that was my man, and I was lucky enough to get him'. And Ernest attributes his survival more than anything to that choice.

END TAPE 1 SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE B

Continuing the interview with Tom Fitzgerald, recorded on 10th March 1989.

We were talking about the selection of the crew, which began in Canada when you were told to try and pair up with a skipper. Did this continue in the Bahamas? When was the process finalised?

We paired up ... one navigator paired up with one pilot, in Canada, in Summerside GRS. He probably would not be the skipper, as I think I said before. Then there descended on us at Nassau the due complement of experienced pilots, who had in fact mostly been second pilots but who'd done either a tour or a considerable number of trips in Coastal Command, and they were ... they again looked around and negotiated whom they would join up with.

How was this done – socialising? Or what?

Yes, that's right, it was done very informally. Nobody, to my memory, none of the authorities ever interfered. Maybe there were ... there may have been some loose ends to tie up at the end, I don't know. But it was simply done by a kind of ... a kind of –for want of a better word – osmosis. You just felt that this chap would be worth teaming up with. Whether ... it must have been somewhat different, I think, with regard to the other members of the crew, who then also joined. As it happened, we chose an Australian as our ... we joined an Australian as our skipper. That wasn't always the case, by any means. And it worked out perfectly well with those who did not.

You're still in the Bahamas at this stage?

Still in the Bahamas. Then ... but we had to ... we had become a full crew, absolutely, the whole box and dice, there. We were ... you left there ready to go straight into operations. So you had to have, by there, your wireless operators, three – we had two or three, certainly two, fully qualified – who would also become qualified at the Bahamas in the use of radar, and possibly some little initial introduction to these marvellous new electronic devices that made navigation so easy within a confined range from England. There were two of those: there was one called G; and the other was called LORAN, 'LORAN' being short for long-range. They were brilliant, quasi-radar screens, which showed you the landscape below you, particularly if there was a coastal landscape, and enabled you perfectly to spot exactly where you were without taking – as we had had to do, up to this – enormous numbers of star shots on queer old calc ... er, queer old ...

Sextants?

... sextants, bubble sextants that wobbled in the air – star shots, direct navigation of course, three-course winds – if you sensed there'd been a wind change and you asked the skipper to turn off and do a little equilateral triangle and you threw down markers of various kinds, either by day or night, to get an idea of the drift, and therefore of the wind, in these three sides of the triangle, and from those three sides you calculated the wind.

(5.00) You chucked something out of the plane?

Yes, you chucked it. By day, you chucked a marker that was white and visible; by night, you chucked down a little thing that burst into flame. And oh, this was an invaluable check; on some of the more important missions I went on, the three-course wind proved to be a very good aid to navigation at night. So you'd learned all these little tricks and things at the Bahamas. But, as I say, a couple at least, or perhaps three, wireless operators who knew their radar; another wireless operator mechanic, who not only could work the wireless very well but also knew how to deal with mechanical troubles, particularly in the radio and electronic area; you had a flight engineer; and you had the odd simple gunner, one or two gunners. Now, we then began to be a mixed crew, of English and Australians.

No other nationalities?

Not in our case. But of course there were Canadians there in considerable numbers, there were a few South Africans, Rhodesians ...

Poles?

... and New Zealanders.

Sorry. Would you mind repeating 'and New Zealanders'?

... and New Zealanders. There were Czechs. I'm not sure that there were Poles at Nassau at the particular time I was there; but certainly on squadron we had Poles, we had Polish crews, yes.

Right. Just before we leave the Bahamas – anything about being there that's worth commenting on at all?

The Duke of Windsor was the governor. And Mrs Simpson – I don't think she was allowed to be called 'the Duchess of Windsor', or was she, do you remember? – she was there, and she charmed the air boys, the airmen. She put on the odd tea parties for them in Government House, and they thought she was great. I didn't attend any of those parties. The Bahamas, beautiful turquoise water, rather sad, the black population ... not quite sullen, but it was very very quiet and removed from the white people there. It was a rich person's holiday place, Nassau. There had recently been the mysterious murder of a millionaire called Oakes, Sir Harry Oakes, which remained unsolved. But there were two pubs, there were two bars there, one called "Dirty Dick's" and the other called "Sloppy Joe's"; and, just about that time, perhaps a few months later, W.H. Auden's poem, a poetic sequence, which is really a kind of a supplement to Shakespeare's *Tempest* ... now what's it called? I think ... but I remember there was a line in it:

'At Dirty Dick's and Sloppy Joe's
We drank our liquor straight,
Some went upstairs with Marjorie
And some, alas, with Kate.'

I suppose you were a bit itching to get into it by this stage, aren't you? I mean ...

Very much so, very much so. Yes, and we ... as it turned out, we were just on squadron for D-Day and were able to join in the patrolling of the English Channel – not a very hazardous thing – during D-Day, and do a few ... I don't know why ... excursions of a kind of reconnoitring character ... into occupied France. That wasn't our main role, but for some reason we did that, and we got our first taste of a bit of flak coming up at us. Yes, we were

very keen to get in. And, in fairness, we didn't waste much time once we got to England. There was a ... we embarked at Liverpool ..., we disembarked at Liverpool, we spent a day or two – perhaps a few more days – again at a kind of a ... interim ... a depot, in the city of Waddington, and then were sent straight down to a bombed-out, a destroyed, village in Cornwall called St Eval, E-v-a-l, where there was a very substantial station, active and busy with many squadrons, to do this D Day job. And I remember it was there that I got my letter from Cam McCall who expressed a little touch of wistful envy that I was in operations and he was still some weeks away from getting into them.

10.00 What are you flying, at this stage?

Liberators. All our operations were Liberators. And ...

That's a crew of ... ?

Well, I wish I could remember exactly. I should have done my homework on this. Two pilots, two navigators – see, we often went out for eleven, even up to fourteen, hours, so there was a bit of a rostering system – two pilots, two navigators, at least two wireless operators, the wireless operator mechanic, the flight engineer, at least one full-time gunner. That takes me to nine. I suspect there were ten. But, sorry, I ...

That's a big crew. Because I think the Lancasters only had seven, didn't they?

Yes. Yes, they didn't have to stay out so long.

Mmm. And what about the Liberator, what sort of an aeroplane was she?

I loved it. It was not the most commodious or comfortable aircraft. The navigator had the good luck of being allowed to sit up by himself in the nose, with the perspex ... complete perspex visibi ... transparency, and his little table, and these peculiar little G and LORAN boxes. And you were up there in a world of your own – or the two navigators, one taking it easy while the other one worked. It had ... the Liberator B24 had four Pratt and Whitney engines, Pratt & Whitney. And we were told that it could fly on any two – luckily, we only had to test it on three. But they were good engines, they were very reliable motors. And I developed a great fondness for the Liberator. Towards the end of the war – again, I'm lapsing into literary junk – but there was a poem in the London *Spectator*, I remember, towards the end of the war, in which a very fine man called Tangye, T-a-n-g-y-e, who was himself something to do with the air force, perhaps public relations, a bit of a poet, and he wrote a poem in the *Spectator* praising and thanking the US Air Force, which consisted basically of Liberators and Flying Fortresses, more Flying Fortresses than Liberators, but there was a line or two in that poem. He said:

‘Liberators, they are all
The punch-thrust of an arm
A thousand leagues in length.’

And the Liberators were lent by the Americans because of the long-range capacity and ... ?

Yes, yes. Yes, the British seemed to have quite an ample complement of them. Australians couldn't get so many. As you know, the Austra ... the Pacific theatre was neglected in terms of allocation of up-to-date aircraft. Dreadfully. And that's one of the great things to be said about the men who flew in the Pacific: they had to fly in inferior machines in shocking weather

conditions knowing that there was no prisoners-of-war situation with the Japs. Yes, the Liberators were freely available over there.

Could you talk about the operations that you flew on, perhaps take ... go through, if there was a typical one, to sort of just describe what it was?

Yes, there were typical ones. They were called anti-submarine patrols. You went at various times of day – and night, seldom late at night, you usually, if you were going on a night trip, you left, set out fairly early. You ... the crew first went to what was called the briefing, in which you were told the patrol area you had to concern yourself with and for which you would be given very exact points of latitude and longitude all set out for you.

You're looking for shipping presumably, are you?

Looking for submarines mostly, mostly. There was a little bit of anti-shipping work later on. The briefing you were given told all about the weather, all about any information as to whether or not there were indications that submarines were in the vicinity, when one was last sighted (U-boats of course). Quite a good briefing. The navigators then tended to stay on and what they used to say 'draw up their maps'. This meant, on the big printed map of the area you were going to fly over, you drew up the actual course you were expected to take for the whole patrol period.

(15.00) That laid down the real point-to-point positions you expected to arrive at at various times on the patrol. You then, with the information you had about wind directions and speeds, would plot a tentative course for the aircraft, either into wind or away from wind, to allow for the crabbing effect that the wind always makes on an aircraft. Remember that speeds of the aircraft were a good deal slower than now and this wind effect could be very, very enormous ... enormous, if a strong wind was blowing. The navigators did that; they therefore remained behind in the control room after the others had started to put on their flying boots and various other things. And then you were all taken down as a crew in a covered wagon to your aircraft, and from there you took off.

Generally night?

If you like I'll try and answer that. I dug out this morning my old log.

Well, you've just got your old log book ...

Old log book. I'm getting on to the more interesting ... I should tell you this, I should have said this. After the D Day operation was completed, later in 1944 when that job was no longer necessary, we moved to a permanent air force station in southern Scotland, a place which you have to give a slight cough to pronounce, Leuchars, Leuchars, between Dundee and St Andrews.

Will you spell it?

L-e-u-c-h-a-r-s. A village of perhaps six houses, one pub, but a splendid permanent air force station. And our really long-range navigational jobs were from Leuchars, rather than from Cornwall. So I'll turn to the Leuchars period and take a typical page. There's a ... (sound of turning pages) we ... on patrol, almost equal times of day and night flying per trip. That's the test there. On this occasion – these are all patrols – well, they vary, this one was much more day than night. Yet this one did quite the reverse.

But of course one would blend into the other, depending on the time of take-off?

Oh yes, of course, yes.

By the way, did you get good `met' reports? What was the quality of the `met' reports?

Superb. Absolutely superb. Both in Australia in training, and in Britain with the notoriously changeable weather. It was very impressive to see how well they could tell you what the weather would be like for the next ten hours, twelve hours. It was really very good. I made a few inquiries as to why in our peace-time civil life we didn't get equally good forecasts, and I was told there were two reasons: first of all, the period for which forecasts had to be given was, after all, not a full twenty-four hours ahead, and, secondly, there were far more observation points brought into use for wartime purposes. But it was outstandingly good. You remind me of an occasion at Leuchars. We were going out in the evening on one of these missions and the `met' – meteorological officer – gave us an outline of a rather rough period ahead. Quite rough. But we didn't take much notice of it. And when the navigators were left alone in the control room drawing up their maps, we overheard the duty officer, a flight lieutenant – quite obviously, I think, a man who had been a civilian before the war, but a very cultivated voice – he rang up Group Headquarters at Edinburgh, just outside Edinburgh, 19 Group, and said that in his opinion we should not go out, the whole exercise of the six or seven aircraft should be scrubbed because of the weather. He obviously got a pretty tart answer, and asked could he speak to someone higher in authority, and he went gradually up in authority, all the time speaking with great deference, `Yes sir, no sir', but he sticking to his guns, and he finally won. The flight was scrubbed on the basis of the met report that was given to us.

(20.00) Did that happen often?

No. I mean, that particular ... There were occasional scrubblings, but I never knew a case where that kind of confrontation took place apart from that one.

So when ... let's just continue a typical operation, because we got slightly sidetracked there. You get airborne; and then what's the procedure?

Well, you settle down. The navigator, he's fully occupied – well, he should never, for various reasons, relax while he's on the job, he can hand over to his co-navigator – but he takes as many wind drifts as he thinks desirable, more than he thinks desirable, immediately checking that the wind direction and speed are at least approximately what he was told – that's an instant job to do ...

You got a little hatch or something that you throw down ... ?

Oh, a little hatch. You could throw down these flares, they called them, if it was night time. Or these ... oh, blessed white objects that bobbed on the water for quite a while afterwards. And you had an instrument, a kind of a mirror instrument, to be able to watch how this damn thing drifted away either to your port or starboard. And you could also judge, if it was daytime, the ... get an idea of the speed of the wind, as distinct from the direction ... get, by white caps in the waves, streaks – there were streaks, you gradually learned to observe streaks – which gave you at least an idea of the wind direction or its reciprocal, 180 degrees. You could tell the wind, say, was coming either from north-west to south-east – or vice versa.

And you're flying generally at what height?

Yes. I wish I could remember that.

Probably down a bit, aren't you, if you wanted to see anything?

Ah, yes. We didn't go out of sight. We kept below clouds because of the job we were doing. Look, I wish I could remember. But I have a vague idea 10,000 to 12,000 feet might have been the kind of altitude.

That's high.

Um. We had to wear pretty warm ... pretty warm clothing. It was such a height that we were all ... we usually thought that the horizon was thirty miles away. I'm terribly sorry I can't recall that height for you.

Not to worry.

The pilot took more notice of that, obviously, than the navigator.

Did you go low on occasions, at all?

Oh, yes. If there was something suspicious looking, or if the weather made the pilot feel he should come low, that was done. There were occasions when you'd actually have to go above the weather – which was, in a sense, a kind of defeat, except that, by night especially since you couldn't see anyway, you were relying on the radar blips to tell you if there were objects on the surface which you should investigate. And you just carried on on this patrol, taking either star fixes or sun fixes of your position or, more often I must say, just using the G and LORAN, those marvellous things, to check that you were at the right turning point, and you just carried on.

If you got a blip on your radar at night, was it up to you to go down and drop something on it?

No, it was up to you to ... The skipper was given a fair amount of discretion but his object, of course, was to ... was never to let such a thing go by – and thereby hangs a tale – but, to investigate and, depending on the visibility or otherwise, again on his discretion if it's very dark, to turn on his big searchlights. They were called Leigh lights, L-e-i-g-h, Leigh lights, very strong, very strong beams and, of course, to attack if it was what you wanted. I'm sorry to say there was one occasion when I flew with another man as captain – I occasionally used to accept invitations, if my own skipper was ill or something, to fly with others – when the captain was told there was a blip – admittedly it was a very rough night – and he said that in that kind of weather it couldn't be a sub, disregard it. Now we were very concerned about that, but fortunately the moral dilemma of whether or not somebody should report it was solved when he, almost immediately, left the squadron of his own will.

25.00 What happened on occasions when a member of the crew was not really performing up to scratch?

It was the only occasion I ever knew of. Occasionally a person would disappear. Gone! Without a word. And you heard indirectly that perhaps, you know, he'd been under strain, his nerve had given. But this was extremely rare, I can only think of two cases – and at least one of those was in training rather than in operations – of Australian boys disappearing on that

ground. It was extremely rare. The peer pressure, or the sense of having responsibilities to one another, was very strong, extremely strong.

That awful phrase, you know, 'lack of moral fibre'. I mean, one needs a medal to get into one of those things in the first place, in my view. But there were cases, weren't there?

I only first ... I first heard that word well after I'd been operational. I'd never heard of it; and then one of my crew members said 'Well, you've got good initials: T.M.F.' and I said 'Why?' 'Oh,' he said, 'that means tons of moral fibre.' And I said 'What are you ...?' 'Oh,' he said 'well, that's the opposite of lack of moral fibre.' I'd never heard of it.

END TAPE 1 SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2 SIDE A

Tape identification: This is tape 2 of an interview with Tom Fitzgerald recorded in Sydney on 10th March 1989, on his experience with 547 Squadron. End of identification.

Obviously the navigator has got plenty to do, and he's got his co-navigator to take over if he gets tired. What about the rest of the crew on those very long eleven or twelve-hour flights?

Can I briefly say that the navigator was also expected to be, normally, the bomb aimer. The navigator who was off-duty as navigator would take responsibility for the quick actions needed, the very quick actions needed, to go in and drop the depth charges on the submarines, or, occasionally, on shipping. There was a similar rotation of a kind between the various wireless operators – and between the pilots, who sat, of course, side-by-side in the front cockpit, in the cockpit, which, of course, was behind the nose where I was – they were pretty cramped, I must say, the wireless operators. Those who were not monitoring for signals on the radio – remembering, of course, that there was an enormous silence, that there was very little communication between the aircraft and ground, it was only in abnormal circumstances – those who were not actually at the wireless operator's table would take their sort of rotation, in a gun turret usually or, if not in a turret, in one of the side windows with a gun, with a machine gun, for defensive purposes. And so the hours went by.

Did you ever see any, or did anyone ever see anything, out of side windows?

No attacks. Ah, well I may as well tell you. Towards the end of the war we did some, a few, more exciting jobs. We were, for some mysterious reason, round about ...

Just referring to the log here.

... round about, perhaps February March 1945, when the war was clearly only a matter of time ... the European war was clearly only, only ...

On the wane?

Yes. We were asked ... for a period of about a week, in turns, we were asked to do something a little different – to go into the Baltic Sea, or to the western beginning, tip, of the Baltic Sea. And the route was to go through the Skagerrak, this is the narrow passage between Norway–

Sweden and Denmark, through the Skagerrak, down the Kattegat, which is the eastern coast of Denmark and northern Germany, and then, depending on your instructions, to go varying distances into the Baltic Sea and attack surface shipping. They were all night operations. They possibly were confined to a brief period, I suspect now, because of the moon, full moon, because we were encouraged if possible to avoid using the Leigh lights, and to attack, if possible, down moon or up moon without letting the ship below know that you were there.

You were operating on your own?

Yes. Single, single aircraft, yes. Why that was done, why at that particular junction of the war, conjuncture of the war, I have no idea.

(5.00) No fighter cover?

No fighter cover. Oh, now, there were ... we could see on the radar ... and we were told in advance there probably would be German fighters patrolling the Skagerrak, but, we were told, if we went down low and skimmed just above the surface they probably wouldn't be able to see us. And that was dead right. We were never attacked, never attacked, either going in or coming out. It was on one of those trips, just briefly, that I remember how marvellous the little old three-course wind check was. When we came out of the Skagerrak I had a feeling that the winds had mucked around on us, and I said to the skipper 'Can we do a three-course wind?' and we did. We changed course and, to my delight, as the dawn broke, there we were spot on over the Bell Rock, the Inchcape Rock, which was our landmark in Scotland.

That was a good one. Did you ever have any navigational disasters?

There were occasions when, in cloud, in my earlier days in England, I must confess I was very ... We used to go off on acclimitisation exercises, or trying out new aircraft, testing the motors of engines. And, because I was a little careless in setting rigid courses or laying down strict operational kind of conditions, we would go touring around the south coast of England, all those beautiful ports, Plymouth and all those, and occasionally on the way back ... I remember I had to ... particularly on a cloudy day, you know, you had the occasional breaks below, we had to, by trial and error, get back to base. But nothing was ever known, or said, by the higher-ups.

But not when it really mattered, anyway?

No, no. Not when it mattered.

What was, for you, the most – for your particular sort of operation – the most dangerous time of a mission? (after a pause) Or wasn't there one?

I don't think there was one, really.

Take-off and landing, I suppose ...

Yes, take-off perhaps. You were very heavily loaded of course, with petrol, to carry you for such a long time, and your big depth charges. But I had a marvellous pilot in Cec Boxall, and ...

And his co-pilot was ... ?

The co-pilot was a young Englishman called Eddie Beech, a young undergraduate of Oxford, studying history at Oxford, who had broken his course to join us. B—e—e—c—h. I've never heard of him since.

You were going to talk about Boxall.

Remember, the pilots only became fliers in the matter of a few months. And, good as they were and wonderful as was their assimilation of the intricacies of aircraft motors and everything else, they weren't always able to bring the aircraft back and land with that totally imperceptible result that you get on the regular airline. And it was quite common, when we came down and had a few bumps as we landed, for the crew to yell out, 'Bloody good, skipper! Bloody good!' – when they meant the opposite, of course.

Well, it was a good second landing, I suppose that was it.

Yes, that's right. Yes. You know, of course, that the practice for new pilots ... when Cec Boxall took over as our skipper, the practice of going around ... er, the practice in take-offs and landings, you know it was called 'circuits and bumps', that was a well-known ... 'circuits and bumps'.

Did you talk much ... Oh, sorry, were you going on, then?

No.

No. Did you talk much on the intercom while you were flying?

Very little unbusiness-like conversation. It wasn't ... that was ... it never had to be said, really, there was a very good tone among those boys. There might be the brief cryptic remark; but never any bloody gaggle-gaggle gossip, you kept to the business of what you were doing. I always in the air referred to Cec as 'skipper' or 'captain' – 'Can you change course, skipper?' giving him the new direction. Never ... I tried to make it, you know, correct. And that was the general tone all through, it was very rare to descend from that business of the job.

One might have imagined there'd be some chacking on the intercom.

My memory is, very little. There was a good humour among the boys, good cheer.

Were you equally, or more, half-Australian half-English? What was your make-up?

(10.00) Yes. Ah, we had ... the Englishmen in our crew that I can remember were Peter Shutt, a gunner; our engineer, Norm Hornby; our co-pilot, Eddie Beech; various others who came and went. There was a very good South African man who joined us from time to time. We never had Canadians, the Canadians tended to stick more together, perhaps, and make their crews more predominantly Canadian – not, of course, entirely so – than the Australians did. Our WOM, our wireless operator mechanic, Syd Gillingham, tragically killed almost immediately after the war in some ferrying operations, he was English. So there it was, it was almost half and half, I would say.

You say the Canadians tended to fly together. Could the Australians have done so had they wished?

Well, you're touching on ... you're touching on a strange subject. It doesn't become me to make any generalised remarks whatever, but, in our experience on squadron – and I'm

referring here now not only to my own 547 Squadron but our sister squadron number 206 which shared the accommodation at Leuchars – there were quite a lot of Canadians, of course. Now, what I'm going to say is very impressionistic and very very narrow in its sampling, in fact totally. The Canadians ... (a little pause) didn't want to be British, and certainly didn't want to be Americans. Incidentally, there were one or two – well, there were three or four – Americans on our squadron, for various reasons. Some of them had volunteered to enter the war via Canada before America entered the war, and for various other reasons. Some of the Canadians – and here I must be careful, because again I mustn't generalise on even the small quota of them that I knew – but some of them were almost continually conscious of this question of their national identity. There were some very fine, friendly ... they were all, by the way, extremely good, competent pilots and navigators, extraordinarily good navigators. (a little pause) I'm thinking now of the immediate aftermath of VE Day, when operations at Leuchars packed up very quickly. The Canadians were the first to leave. They just went. That was it.

Hardly any goodbyes?

That was it. They just went. On a person-to-person basis, I said goodbye to one or two of them. When the time came that the Australians were told they were to leave, there was an enormous shindig in the mess, the Brits and the Scots turning it on, drinking, and they came down in droves to the tarmac to see us off, including very senior men. There was one very taciturn young Englishman – Squadron Leader ... er ... Johnny ... Johnny ... I'll think of his name perhaps later – who became uncharacteristically sentimental, to me, before we left. Very strange. Maybe just an accident of one particular context.

But you're saying there was a strong affinity, and ease of mixing, between the Australians and the Scots, the British, and so on?

Yes, yes. Yes, yes. Quite a different farewell.

Mmm. Just getting back to operations for a moment. What value did you or the crew place on good luck charms, ritual, that sort of thing?

Well, I certainly didn't place any on it. Neither did Cec Boxall. There were a few devout religious people who clearly ..., thought religiously. But no, nothing in the way of good luck charms. There was never any question about the thirteenth of the month or anything like that. I can't recall anything at all. Of course, remember, all the time we are talking about Coastal and not Bomber Command where the pressures were of an altogether a different dimension.

15.00 Understood. Did this impinge on you at all? I mean, did you, apart from losing friends or so on, which you must have done, were you aware ... you must have been aware of the appalling carnage that was going on?

Oh, well, that brings me to Australia House. When you went on leave ... By the way, on a typical week on squadron, you flew today, it was a long flight, took the best part of a day, you were off duty the next day but you were to be available for operations on the following day. Which meant that, depending on where you were stationed, on the day off you could go into the adjoining city, Dundee, Newquay. And in addition to that, you had breaks of holidays – I think two weeks was typical, but certainly at least one week – when you usually went to London or some such place. Now, when you went to London, you of course reported into Australia House, where there was a very fine canteen arrangement, most of it was given over to RAAF boys, most of the ground floor anyway was given over. Stanley Melbourne Bruce,

the High Commissioner, would occasionally come in and speak in a very nice way to everybody. Now there you were brought up to date with the casualties of your friends. And on more than one occasion, I remember, young chaps, even much younger than myself in some cases, asking me with intensity, 'How many more ops do you have to do, Tom?'. And then I had to say, very apologetically, 'I'm in Coastal'. And then a glazed look would come over their eyes, they would cease to be interested, they were desperately thinking all the time they had so many more operations to complete their tour and they knew the incidence of deaths was tremendously high. They only found out, in many cases, when they got on to the squadron. They had no idea, and some of them, I think, struck that terrible period when Sir Arthur Harris, 'Bomber Harris', was trying to carry out his boast that he could destroy Berlin. That was a disastrous, extensive exercise. Futile. And Churchill, in a way, exacerbated it by also giving the Germans advance notice that they were going to carry out this sustained attack on Berlin which of course enabled them to prepare. I suspect that that diversion of Cam McCall and others into Bomber Command was associated with that terrible, futile exercise. But I cannot prove that. But there was the tension, there was the awful feeling that you were really out of it when you were with these boys. And then you would hear reports, and – my God!

Tom, did you have a finite number of missions to do? Or was it just the number that happened to be, or ... ?

In Bomber Command it was, I think, a maximum of thirty, sometimes twenty-five. And that's what they would do. We ... I noticed that I have ... I flew on op ... I flew on thirty-nine missions. Certainly I had no sense that this was a quota, on Coastal. There must have been some sort of a quota and, I suspect, maybe in the order of fifty missions, for Coastal Command.

Was it felt that Australians – or was it felt by the Australians – that they were being thrown into the meat grinder any more or any less than anybody else?

Not to my knowledge. Not at all to my knowledge. They went for adventure; they were volunteers; they didn't question. There was very little questioning. I remember, when I learned I would be in Coastal Command, having a mixture of feelings. It was a sense of ... contrary to my expectations, but it did cross my mind that there wouldn't be the moral difficult problems that perhaps area or saturation bombing would give one in later life if one survived. But that ... see, I was, because of the delays, I was twenty-one when the war broke out and I was twenty-three when I got into operations, and there were plenty younger than I. But I didn't hear any questioning of a political or strategic kind at any time among those boys.

Your obvious displeasure of the policy of 'Bomber Harris' – is that retrospective, or was that talked about at the time?

Oh no, we didn't ... I didn't know. And talking to the boys who've come through, like Ernest Hyde – he was even older than I – they didn't know ... they couldn't get the full picture of what was going on, but they could see that the casualty rate was enormous. Did you ... the ABC ran twice that two-part series 'Wings of the Storm' about Bomber Command. If you haven't seen it, it may be worth looking it up, it's very impressive.

(20.00) One of the [??] men, like me, recollecting, tells how, when he went onto squadron for the first time – Bomber Command – he asked how long it normally took to fulfil the tour of operations. And there was dead silence. And he implied that the silence was because there was practically nobody who had ever succeeded in finishing a tour. It sank in on

them there, but in a very partial way, they couldn't see the full picture. I never heard any criticisms whatever, from any of those boys in Australia House, of strategic policy.

So you really never had the experience of waking up to see someone's effects being removed on the next bed, and that sort of thing?

Yes, I saw that. There was some ... we had casualties, of course, but they weren't nearly as high as Bomber. Oh yes, I've seen that happen, yes.

Mmm ... just checking ... oh yes. The unreality, I suppose, of the life that was in the air and then the life back in England. Did you move into the English society, as it were? Did you have English friends?

Oh, yes. You see, again, remember I'm in Coastal. I could totally relax on leave, because I didn't have this impending question mark to anything like the same extent. And, look, to me it was a wonderful world trip, beginning in America. I fulfilled several ambitions of my life, I heard Elizabeth Schumann sing in the Carnegie Hall, I heard and saw Bruno Walter conduct, I saw Paul Robeson play *Othello* – this is all on the way over! I saw Catherine Cornell and Helen Hayes in the theatre – this is in America. I saw their great art galleries, terrific. And in London, on leave again, I saw Olivier, Richardson, Peggy Ashcroft, Gielgud. And the partial exhibition of paintings in their great National Gallery, particularly in the latter weeks of my stay in England when they were very quickly, as the Allies moved on in towards Berlin, they were bringing back great paintings, great paintings, from the Welsh caves, and if they had a really magnificent one to exhibit such as the unforgettable angel's head of Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks' they would put it at the top of the staircase for a day or two in the National Gallery. You'd walk in there and it would hit you as a new addition, it was dazzling. So you had this marvellous ... you know, as you say, conjunction of the highest pleasure with the other job. Whether the Bomber boys were able to do that as well, I don't know.

Did the experience change you, do you think, as a person?

(after a pause) It's hard ... I've never thought, really, about that.

Influences that perhaps persisted into later life, is a better way of putting it.

Well, Hank (Nelson) knows that I've given some talk on tapes for the National Library, to do more with the launching of a little fortnightly paper called *Nation*, back in '58. There I ...

I remember it well.

Oh. There I mentioned, to Ken Inglis who did the interrogation, how I was overwhelmed by America and wanted when I came back to try my chance by working and living in America, for a few years anyway, either as an economist or as a journalist. It was the energy of mental life – if that's not too pompous a word – that you came across in America, talking to economists. I went along to the Federal Reserve Bank in Chicago and had a marvellous discussion about postwar economics, and postwar international affairs really, the emergence of Russia as a great power. The strenuousness of their ... the candour, the articulateness of their conversations on the levels that we were allowed to move. We were treated ... because we had the little Australia patch on our shoulders, you know, we were taken up by lots of people. And that wonderful vivacity of American life hit me very hard. I told on the other tape machine that, in New York alone, I used to after a while deliberately go into a good high class bar, beautifully air-conditioned bars, and sit on the high stools, pretend to be reading a book

when in fact I was listening to ... just listening to the conversation, business executives at lunch talking about their business, you know, very very ...

(25.00) Had you started in journalism by that time?

Oh no, I was ... I think I ... did I mention to you? I was technically able to go back to the public service as an economist in the Treasury, economic research officer, in the ... under Roland Wilson in the Statistics Division. But it would have meant going to Canberra. It was only when I came back that I thought 'Oh, I don't want to go to Canberra. So I'll look around for something else'.

Well, Tom, thank you very much. We'll leave it there. [The tape recorder is turned off, but then on again.] Just adding a postscript to the recording. Perhaps you'd introduce it yourself, Tom?

Yes, a small afterthought, Tim, brought to mind by a remark you've just made, which I'll call 'My Version of the Re-Entry Problem to Australia after an Absence of a Few Years'. Because we had experience on Liberators, the Australians of my squadron and other Liberator squadrons were rather hurriedly brought together to be shipped across to America straight after the VE war was over, the European war was over, after VE Day, to pick up Liberators there in America, fly them home, and get stuck into the Pacific war in the Liberators. We embarked – on a day in August, having been collected and waited around for a ship – on an old liner called the *Empress of Richmond*, an old passenger liner which took us across the Atlantic, and while we were in mid-Atlantic the Japanese surrendered. We came into Quebec on a beautiful evening, up the St Lawrence River, and there were lots of Canadians coming home on our ship, and there was the lord mayor in his robes and dignitaries and lights on and bands playing 'Welcome Home' to the Canadian heroes. A few weeks later, we were able to pick up a very old tub, a Victory ship called the *South Georgia*, from San Francisco, to bring us home across the Pacific. And we landed in Melbourne on a Saturday afternoon. There was a solitary waterside worker waiting at the wharf, to tie the rope, to throw the rope that was ... to put onto the bollard of the wharf the rope thrown from the ship. The first throw from the ship, he missed, and he yelled out 'Come on! Don't you think I want to go home?'. And the boys, who'd been away for varying periods of years, gave him three cheers. And then an old covered wagon came up, to pick us all up and take us to the Melbourne Cricket Ground to sleep on the bare boards overnight before the train for Sydney. But, chalked up in huge letters on the canvas of the truck, were these words: 'Jap dodgers return!'

A grateful nation!

END TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW