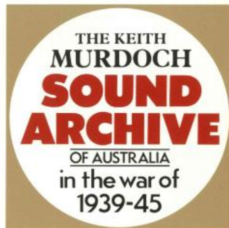

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00598
Title	McKay, James Frederick (Wing Commander) (Reverend)
Interviewer	Winkworth, Gail
Place made	Richmond NSW
Date made	26 May 1989
Description	Reverend James Frederick 'Fred' McKay Chaplain RAAF, interviewed by Gail Winkworth for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45 Discussing pre-war ministerial appointments; enlistment as padre in Air Force and posting to the Middle East; chaplaincy appointment to Laverton Base; summary of war service and post-war work with War Graves Commission; reactions to Air Force discipline and procedures; issues that arose after the introduction of WAAFS to Laverton; development of ecumenical relationship between padres from different countries in Middle East; understanding of servicemen's use of brothels and unnatural demands of war service; daily routine of padres; difficulties in writing condolence letters; description of communal burial at Bari, Italy; experiences in Burma and New Guinea; role in allocating resources from the Australian Comforts Fund; Welfare Officer System in the RAAF; impact of war experience on development of ecumenical attitudes and appreciation of family life.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: My name is Gail Winkworth, this is the first tape, first side of the first tape, of an interview with Reverend Fred McKay, at his home in the Hawkesbury Village. The date is 26th May, 1989.

Right, I was just going to ask you first something about your family background, your education, and just what sort of things you did before you became a minister. Going into, you know, what sort of theological training that you had. Could you just sort of tell us first where you were born and ... and your family, and a little about that?

Yes. I was a country boy, born up in North Queensland, in a town which holds the same name, Mackay. I did my primary schooling in a local state school, and then went to boarding school in Charters Towers for five or six years where I did my secondary education and matriculated to the university. From there I went to Brisbane, became a resident of Emmanuel College, which was the Presbyterian college affiliated with the University of Queensland, and there did my arts course and divinity course. And from there went out into the wide world.

What ... what led you into the ministry, did you have a family background, a Presbyterian family background, and ... and other members of the family that were in the ministry?

No, my father was a farmer, and our home was a very humble one. Big family. Nine children.

Where were you?

I was the third. And a family with typical religious affiliation. My mother was of German extraction, and came out of a ... a family which had strong, robust relationships with the church. My father came from the North of Ireland as a young man, as an immigrant, and came from a family which had a strong covenanting background - you know, the old Presbyterians of Scotland and Ulster. And so it was natural in our home that there would be the normal influences of a church family. We went to Sunday school, we had to go quite a distance to a Sunday school and attend the church. And then I went to a church boarding school, and in the end became captain of the school, and a prefect, and had to give leadership in various aspects of school life, which fostered ... which nurtured, you know, a religious atmosphere all the time. But not over-pious. You know, a real healthy religious background in my home.

So there were no direct influences toward the ministry in our family. Except that in a certain crisis in my own boyhood, when I was six years of age - should I tell you all this?

Some ... some of it, yes, I'm okay. (Laughter).

When I was six years of age, out in the country on the farm, mum and dad were working - mother actually was working on the farm herself, helping dad to plant corn and crops - and I developed an appendicitis, and I sort of hid away for a while, not wanting mum and dad to know that I was crook. But in the end it developed very seriously into peritonitis, and ... and

dad strapped me to an ironing-board, put me in a spring-cart, and he and mum drove into town. As soon as the doctor saw me - I by that time was, you know, in a pretty ... pretty critical condition - soon as the doctor said ... soon as the doctor saw mum and dad, he said, 'Oh, it's too late.'

(5.00) But Mum stayed in, Dad went back to the farm. Mum stayed, and, with her simple religious trust and belief, she made a contract with God that day, and I remember it so well. I was only, you know ... well I was just over six years of age, and mum said, 'God, if you make this boy well, I'll make him a minister.' (Laughs). And, you know, out of that sort of climactic experience ... it was a miracle, I gather, that I came home again. And from that point in my life, I never had any doubts. I just had to be a minister, because mum had made a contract with God.

And that was the simple faith of our home, Gail, it really was. It's ... and from that point ... . They sent me to ... I was the only one of our family to go to boarding-school. They all hopped in together, made it possible financially, and had some difficulty. So I was the ... the one, according to the old Scottish custom, that would become a minister in the family. And it all developed from that.

So you ... .

That's not a story I tell very often.

No. (Laughter). That's good, that's ... it's obviously really shaped your whole destiny really, didn't it?

Well it did. I never had a moment's doubt. Although I didn't have at that time, you know, what you would call a warm-hearted Christian experience, but it grew. And when I was at the university it really, you know budded out, I became a very keen enthusiastic young evangelical. (Laughter).

Right. What year was that?

When I went to the university? 1928. Now, because ... .

Which university was it?

Queensland.

Queensland University?

Brisbane. Mmm.

My schooling was interrupted by that dramatic bit of surgery I had in ... in the Mackay General Hospital - or the Mackay Private Hospital - and I didn't start school till I was about ten years of age, so I was twenty-one when I came up to the university, virtually. That was 1928, and I graduated in 1931. And did my divinity training then. And when I'd obtained a Bachelor of Divinity, in 1933, or '33 and a half, I was sent to Southport in Queensland, in the days when the ... when Surfers Paradise, and ... and Southport were really lovely places.

And I was the minister there. And while I was there this intriguing man of Australia, John Flynn, Flynn of the Inland, came and visited Southport, and, through a very interesting dialogue and confrontation, he had me in his team within a few months. And I went to the outback of Australia, which was my total life from that point.

So ... so where ... what year are we up to now?

Well '35 ... John Flynn came to Southport in 1934. In 1935 I was equipped with a truck in Brisbane, pedal radio, swag and a tucker box, to go out to the Far Western Patrol of the Australian Inland Mission, in Queensland. I was one of six patrol padres. There was one in Alice Springs, one over in Western Australia, one up in North Australia, one down in South Australia at Oodnadatta, one up in Cape York.

And I was the one who was appointed to the area where the Flying Doctor Service had been started, and where John Flynn himself was working. And therefore I was lucky, I was thrown into a ... into an environment where I worked beside Flynn himself, and where I was able to see the Flying Doctor in all the pioneering stages, and the pedal radio network became part of my ministry really.

(10.00) Anyhow that's what I did up till the time that the war broke out. I was in a station homestead up in the Gulf the night that war was declared. Actually servicing a pedal radio on a cattle station on that ominous night when I heard that war was declared, and I, you know, first of all had my reactions to the cattlemen who were there, because one old cattleman said, 'Oh that'll be great, it'll send the price of beef up.' (Laughs). So ... so that was the sort of context in which I heard the declaration of war.

I had to go to Darwin the next year, with John Flynn, to open a ... an inter-church club for troops. And in Darwin I decided to enlist as air-crew in the air force. And John Flynn ... .

> What was ... can I just ask you what ... well presumably it was your contact with Flynn, but ... that's, I guess, why you decided on air force, rather than anything else?

Yes. It was obvious that our interests were in aviation, and I wanted to do a ... a pilot's course, you know, so that I would be useful in my sort of work in the inland. So that was the motivation in ... in a way.

But John Flynn, who was moderator-general at the time, he over-ruled my intentions, because I was a member of his staff, and he classified me as being in a reserved occupation. So I couldn't go. Until the next year, he ... he said to me, 'I wouldn't mind now if you enlisted as a chaplain.'

> So your original intention was not to enlist as a chaplain?

No, it was not, no.

> Do you want to talk ... talk a little bit more about that?

Well it was a sort of a pragmatic hope on my part. Because I was aware, through my experience round Cloncurry, that flying was going to be an integral part of the church's work

in the future. Up till that time - well, previously, we'd been using camels and horses and trucks, and I was interested, mainly because I'd been flying with the Flying Doctor, and, although we had no specific plans for any development of aerial work for padres, I felt that it was inevitable that we'd have to be flying. And of course that did come later.

But I accepted John Flynn's wisdom at that time, because in the end I had a far greater experience, from the point of view of the work which became my life work later, by being a chaplain. Because I ... I was given the opportunity finally, after being at Laverton for a year or so, I was given the opportunity of going overseas. And that period of time - I was overseas I think three years and four months - that period of time was formative in so many ways in my attitudes to life, and also to what I'd be doing in the future. So it was a great experience from my point of view, although devastating, and critical, and demanding, because we were right in ... in the forefront of things with ... with the 8th Army. Because desert air force was army co-op.

And we had ... we had several Australian squadrons. 3, which is the famous one, 450, who operated beside them. Then 454 and 459, which were bomber squadrons. 451 was another fighter squadron. 458 was another bomber coastal command. 461 was another one. These were total Australian squadrons.

> These were the squadrons you were involved with?

They were Australian squadrons in the Middle East command.

> Right.

And we had Australian personnel on a host of other RAF squadrons.

Now, shall I go back and ...?

> How about you just give a brief summary, you can use that if you like, of your war experience? Just where you were in what years, and what sort of service you did.

Yes.

> And then we'll go back and ... and go into more detail of those areas.

Well a rough summary would be - I had my rookie course at ... at Laverton.

> Which is where?

Laverton is in Victoria, Werribee.

> Sorry, yes, yes.

It is the big station adjoining Point Cook. And I was there for a year working as a ... as the Presbyterian chaplain on base.

(15.00) And that was '39, was it, or ... ?

No, no, no, this was end of '41, or middle '41. And I was there until the end of '42. And that was a normal chaplaincy duty on a ... on a, you know, a permanent air force station. Very pukka. But it was again a good opportunity for me to see what the workings of a chaplaincy were in an established air force big base unit.

From there I was posted, with two other chaplains, a Catholic padre, and a Church of England padre - I was the so-called 'other denominations' padre, as a Presbyterian - and we were commissioned to form a team of command chaplains in the Middle East. That is, to be equipped with a truck and a driver each and to cover the complete area wherever there were Australian personnel on squadrons. And to carry out duties on a coordinated basis right through, you know, Libya, Cyrenaica, Tripoli, Sicily, and Italy and Palestine. That was a sort of a Mediterranean area, which we ... we called the Middle East command. And we were command chaplains with no particular squadron posting, but a posting to all squadrons.

Our liaison, or head office, was in Cairo, and we were looked upon as being part of the staff of headquarters, but out in the field all the time. Three of us ....

> Do you remember the names?

Father Johnnie, or John McNamara, and Padre Bob Davies, and Fred McKay. And we were called 'The Terrible Three', or 'The Trinity', and we worked together as a team with an extraordinarily warm relationship, and became accepted for what we really were amongst the boys right throughout that total battle area. And that took us also into Sardinia and Corsica, as well as right through Italy, right through the desert, right from Alexandria to ... you know, to Casablanca, so it was a ... it was a mighty area to cover. And that experience was a ... was something which is unforgettable.

The years covered in my total service was - or were - as follows. One year, approximately, at Laverton, and then, from the end of 1942 to early '46, I was in the Middle East. After the ... after war was ended, I actually stayed on and did work with the War Graves Commission, because we had lost several pilots, several air-crew boys, in the Alps, in the snow and so forth, and I helped the War Graves Commission to ... to locate certain graves, and to mark them.

So I was in the Middle East in the ... from the beginning of '43, to the first months of '46.

> Right. Fine. Well, just going back to when you enlisted, and your first posting was Laverton, right? That's where you did your ... yes, well do you want to talk about that? That was '41?

Well, going back to my earliest contact with the air force, I have to admit that it was a very formal sort of setting, because I was going into a permanent RAAF establishment, where everything had to be done in order, and we all had to ... you know, to dress properly, and do all the saluting, and attend parades. So that was a ... an interesting experience, because, coming from the bush, I was used to a pretty open life and not accustomed to this sort of regimented programme.

(20.00) But I learnt what I needed to learn about air force procedures and attitudes, you know, that had to be adopted in a big establishment, that is, your relation to commanding officers

and so forth. I wasn't accustomed to this. And I had some interesting experiences where I ... WAAAFs were brought into the air force while I was there at that time, and there were some very sensitive situations which arose between, you know, the WAAAFs and the men on the station, and we had some pregnancies and things like that that were ... were a new factor in ... in air force life, because girls had never been round the place before. And it was during these experiences - you see, a padre, he ... he does get confidences from people which he can never share with anybody, and that goes with my whole experiences in the Middle East too, because men share with padres their ... you know, their home problems, and their intimate personal disappointments and crises.

Well I learnt at Laverton that ... that I had still to maintain my position as a ... as a padre holding confidences of people. And this threw me into an awkward relationship sometimes with commanding officers, because I did not ... I declined to reveal certain things which they felt I should be doing.

But that was all very interesting, that was part of the deal, and it taught me, you know, what the air force was all about, and what the relationships between ranks and the medical section - because we had to establish a very close relationship with the medical section, and with the welfare officers - and this was all good training.

Right. What rank were you?

Padres were commissioned as flight lieutenants. And I was a flight lieutenant until I was posted overseas. And then I was promoted to squadron leader, and, at the end of service, in Italy, I was promoted as ... to a wing commander. I happened, by the turn of the wheel, to turn out to be the senior one amongst our team in the Middle East, but that was just, you know, the turn of the wheel really, I was the lucky one. But I ended up a wing commander.

What was your family attitude to ... family's attitude to your going off to war? Did you have a family background of war experience, your father at the first war?

No, my father, I forget what age he would be, he'd be forty, forty I suppose at the time of war. But we had one of our workers in the farm who enlisted in the first world war, in the Light Horse, and I'll never forget as a boy, I'd be about nine years of age, going to see all the troops off, as they were boarding a ... a lighter to take them out to the ship at Flat Top in Mackay, I'll never forget standing with dad, and waving to this Jim Laurie, who was one of the farmboys on our farm. And he was going off with ... you know with ... with emu feathers in his hat, and I was waving, and ... and a man standing beside me - and I ... I didn't know what he meant at the time, but I heard him say it - 'Poor buggers, they'll never come back.' And that, as a boy... . I went home and I ... I said to dad, 'What did that man mean', you know, 'that they'll never come back?' All these fine ... (laughs). And that was a ... a sentiment that raised a query in my mind, because I felt they were great, you know, to see them all going back, but to hear a comment like that made me sort of wonder, 'Well what the heck is all this about?'

And ... but coming to my own personal family relationships when the second world war hit us, by this time I had married a lovely nursing sister who worked with me in the bush, and then we had our first child, and little Margaret was two when I sailed overseas. And this was a very heart-rending experience, to be leaving, you know, a lovely wife, and a little child. Then ... I can still see them ... (laughs) ... waving me off. But ... .

(25.00) Was it a big decision to make? Because you could have stayed, couldn't you?

Yes, I could have said ... you know, I could have declined, and the chaplaincy department would probably have acceded. But there were others who ... there were others who were doing this, I mean I wasn't the only one, and I ... and I knew that, because there were lots of sweethearts and wives crying, when we ... (laughs) ... when we went away. And my little girl ... I was away of course those number of years, and when I came back in 1946 my little girl didn't know me. I said, 'I'm your dad.', 'No', she said, 'my dad's at the war.' (Laughs). You know. And she pointed to the picture on the ... on the sideboard. But that didn't last very long.

But that ... I was glad that I had a wife back home, because it gave me the sort of understanding of other men who had wives, and, you know, a big proportion of our men had wives back home, and children, some of them indeed had babies born after they left home, and we used to get signals, you know, that babies were born. And all that sort of experience gave me a ... a special fellow feeling. My two fellow padres weren't married, and I used to get, you know, Catholic boys and Anglican boys, who would come and say, 'Hey, you're married, you know all about this.' I was a sort of a ... a father confessor. And, although I was very young, it ... it gave me certain privileges, because, you know, I had a little family of my own. And you can understand that, can't you?

> Absolutely. Certainly can. So they would come to talk to you about relationship problems, perhaps, or ...?

Yes. Particularly when, you know, home loyalties were being broken a bit, and children were needing some fatherly attention and so forth. Very difficult.

War's a difficult situation, because it's unnatural. You are bonded together in a way that's absolutely remarkable, because the tent comradeship, you know, living under ... under these sort of communal conditions, eating in a common mess, and working together, you know, as a team, every day, every day, and the ... the end result you're not too sure about. It's a very extraordinary situation to be placed in.

Especially as a padre, because you have to, you know, understand some of the tensions that people had when they had to go out and kill other people. And they were real tensions. And these tensions are only being resolved now. I have a close contact these days with ... with some of our great pilots, who were distinguished men, with DFC's and DSO's and who had big killings you ... recorded in their logbooks. Nowadays some of these fellows at ... you know, at sixty-five and thereabouts, are writing to enemy pilots. I have in my ... on my desk a letter which just came last week from one of our squadron commanders, who was a great pilot, and he shot down, you know, some very interesting enemy aircraft. And he is able now to get records from Germany and Italy of these war operations. And he is writing to them, and he's developed a correspondence with some pilots that he shot down. And they're both saying to one another, 'Why the hell were we doing it?' (Laughs). It's interesting.

> How did ...?

Squadron Leader Murray Nash, who is a special friend of mine, who was commanding officer of 3 Squadron, has now entered into correspondence with one pilot whom he shot down in

wartime, and they have ... they have now a correspondence with one another - there ... there has to be an interpreter, because this particular pilot ... .

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

> Identification: This is the second side of the first tape of an interview with Reverend Fred McKay, at his home in Hawkesbury Village, Unit No 40, Chapel Road, Richmond. It's 26th May, 1989.

> So you were talking about ... I'll just wait till this aircraft goes over. You were talking about the correspondence between a close friend of yours and a ... a German? Oh, an Italian.

I was making reference to Murray Nash, Squadron Leader, DFC and Bar, who had a very outstanding record in the Middle East. Two tours. And a young man of ... of strong, you know, skills. He now is writing to people who were enemies in wartime, and already he has established contact with a pilot whom he shot down, under very interesting circumstances, it's a whole story in itself. But these two men now are writing to one another, and they're asking questions, 'What was it all about?', 'What the heck was I trying to kill you for?'

This to me, as a padre, is most interesting, and I ... I'm encouraging this, because we had a ... a German pilot who ... who parachuted out ... he was shot down by our boys, and he parachuted out near our lines. And we had him in the mess tent that night, a German pilot, and he was like a ... you know, just one of us. I mean they ... they weren't punching him or (laughs) criticising him, or condemning him, they were asking him about, you know, his life and his home, and ... . And I think that's typical of Australians. You know, they're ... they're mates basically, and they can't escape it. And war was something, you know, which was an event which was historically compelled on them. But the people, the men who were actually out in the firing-line, they were, you know, human beings. And I was ... I would think that that attitude showed by the few squadron boys in entertaining this German pilot would be just indicative of what the Australian attitude would be. You know, to a ... to a person who was on the other side.

I ... I came across one day a German despatch rider who'd been killed beside the track, and I stopped with my driver, and I looked in the ... the top pocket of his ... of his battle-jacket, and he had a New Testament there, with a message from his mother in it. (Laughs). And I ... I buried him, just the same as I'd bury, you know, one of my brothers or my mates. And I could just see that he had a lovely mother, and she was religious, and she'd sent her boy out, you know, with ... with her blessing. Well that's sort of a ... .

> You must have been very moved.

... paradox, you know, the paradox of war.

> Right, well going back to your ... just going back to the structure of the padre service, could you describe how the service was actually set up? You know, the hierarchies, and who you were responsible to, and how decisions were

made, and how you went about, you know, getting equipment, or whatever you needed?

The air force, I think, would be the last to appoint staff chaplains at Air Board. The right at the beginning of the war there was one chaplain general who handled everything, for navy, army and air force. But in 1941 the air force adopted the procedure of asking the major denominations to appoint staff chaplains, who would be given appropriate rank, and who would have officers at air force headquarters.

(5.00) So each ... now I knew well the Catholic staff chaplain, the Anglican staff chaplain, and the Presbyterian, or the other denominations, because they were the ones we worked with. And they were not over-experienced in air force life, they themselves had to learn, but they were senior ... senior ministers of the church, who were given, first of all, wing commander rank, and then group captain rank. And after the war some of them continued on, and of course they became air commodores and so forth too.

But it was from ... we were responsible, as padres in the field, to staff chaplains at headquarters in Melbourne. And they arranged postings. They' be in contact with ... with the personnel section of the ... of Air Board. And there were ratings established at certain places, you'd have a chaplain ... certain places you'd have a Catholic chaplain, the ... the staff chaplains would work it out together, and post their men. Now I was posted by my staff chaplain to the Middle East, and so were my colleagues.

And your staff chaplain was for other denominations?

Yes, the other ... Johnny McNamara was appointed by Staff Chaplain Morrison, and ... and the Anglican, Bob Davies, was appointed by the Anglican staff chaplain. And we each reported back. And there would be reports in Canberra, held by the appropriate authorities, of our reports back to our staff chaplains.

So if you wanted to take leave, a period of leave or other such things, would you have to put in a dual request to, say, your commanding officer and your staff chaplain, or how ... how were those sorts of things handled?

Well, being command chaplains, we had independent rights once we were on duty, and it would be too far away to ... you know to get immediate decisions.

Yes, I'm talking about extended periods.

Yes, well we didn't get extended periods of leave. We had courses, we used to go to chaplains' courses, but we arranged together, the three of us, we'd arrange ... and of course there was an RAF chaplaincy headquarters in Cairo, and we would always work with them too, because their chaplains would be out in their units ... squadrons. And we used to come into a squadron where there'd be an RAF chaplain, and always cooperate with him, and we'd say, 'We want to see the Australians', and we'd get the Australians together.

And the amazing thing is that I would frequently go with John McNamara, the Catholic padre, two trucks, two drivers, and we'd turn up at a squadron, and we'd go to the adjutant, or the commanding officer, and said, 'We'd like to see all the Australians.' So all the Australians would be paraded. And we'd each talk to them, that is a combined group, and then, if we

were having communion services or ... or church services, we'd say, 'Well all the Catholics go over there, and all the others come over here', and we'd, you know, do that sort of thing. But it was in cooperation, sometimes, with an RAF chaplain, who happened to be on the unit. And we got great cooperation from everybody.

And our working together, I'd like to make an emphasis, an emphatic point at this juncture, about the ecumenical relationships which we developed as chaplains in this team - Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian. I had never been in a situation where it was just totally ... it would have been totally foolish to work independently with denominational tags. And we agreed together that we would look after, you know, one another's personnel when there were bomb ... bombing raids, and casualties. We would always look after the other person's personnel, and even bury them, and write to their folk at home. And this sort of relationship beween the three padres was one of the facets of air force life in the Middle East that was spoken about very widely. That the three padres were just sort of one.

(10.00) And they always coupled us together, and John McNamara was ... was a good athlete, he's a good cricketer, I ... I used to do a bit of swimming, and Bob Davies used to, you know, do other things too. But we ... we weren't threats to one another, and we really loved one another, honestly, we developed ... and John McNamara died in Melbourne last year, and I ... I went down to see him, you know, during his last week. I wasn't able to get to his funeral. But Bob Davies actually gave the address in the Catholic church at his ... at his burial service.

And ... and that ..and Bob Davies now, he became the Bishop of Tasmania. And I became the Moderator of my church here, and we just ... I went to Tasmania, and we had a civic welcome there together. And Guilford Young, the Catholic padre, the Archbishop, he was, you know welcoming us both together, as heads of our churches. It was ... it was something which was bred out of the war atmosphere, and I give a lot of marks to our staff chaplains, because they appointed people who were like-minded, you know. They were obviously choosing men that would work together, I ... I feel this now as I work back. I wasn't ... it wasn't we who were responsible, I think they had a lot to do with this, you know, saying, 'Oh they'll work together, these fellows, and they'll make a ... they'll make a team.'

And it was. And, from the point of view of ecumenical relations in the church, you have reunions now, and I ... and I still march on Anzac Day, and I still go to reunions, although it's difficult, because there are so many squadrons we've had contact with, and you don't know which one to go to. But I've had ... you know, I have regular funeral services, unfortunately, or ... that's how the wheel turns of course in life. And everywhere we go we always say we're speaking on behalf of three people. I ... I was at a ... at a RSL function just the other day, and I said, 'I'm not speaking with one voice here, I'm speaking for Johnnie McNamara and Bob Davies.' We always, you know, speak with one voice.

And that is - even today. We were in Melbourne, you know, about two months ago, and 3 Squadron boys in Melbourne all got together, there were about sixty or seventy of them, and ... just to, you know, have a party. And the moment you have a party with them they're talking about three fellows, you're not just one fellow. And that ... you know, that has continued to be a sentiment which we nurture and which we feel is, you know, typifying what happened in the Middle East days.

Well for some padres it was a very isolated experience. Particularly those in New Guinea, who would be on ... on small manoeuvres, and they wouldn't

have much contact with other padres at all, but for you it was obviously very different, and you got a lot of support from them?

Yes. Actually, with the extent of the war-zone, when we had squadrons separated by ... you know, by big distances - because we had a squadron in Gibraltar, OTUs, training units, in Palestine, and we had transport or delivery units in Fez in Casablanca. And then headquarters in ... in Cairo. And then squadrons dotted all over the place. Quite frequently one padre would be in Italy, another would be down in Gibraltar, and the other would be in Palestine. We weren't together - there were only occasions when we would travel together, and that was in the beginning, before we got to know our ... . But I would be in Corsica, big bombing raid, JU 88s came over and shot up 451 Squadron, and I was the only padre there, and I had to bury seventeen boys, you know, after that, who were killed that night. And some of them were Catholics, and the Catholic padre, he was over in Italy somewhere. I just ... he just sent a ... I just sent a signal to him, he said, 'Carry on, Fred, look after my boys.' You know.

And when you talk about loneliness, we wouldn't have the experience probably that some of the New Guinea fellows had. You know, they'd be ... or the northern boys, they'd be all over the place, in small, you know, dangerous sort of corners. We ... we would be separated, but we were working to a common plan and reporting to one another, and I would say the natural loneliness of life, you know, does grab you at times, because you're in a tent and you ... you get a ... you know, a letter from home, and ... and ... (laughs), the ... the years are going by and you haven't got home.

(5.00) And no end in sight.

Yes, no ... no end in sight. But the ... the strong relationship you had with the other boys in the squadron made you feel you weren't the only one, and we were all in the same boat. And we had times when ... when we had fellows who were vagabonds a bit, and who over-stepped, you know, what you'd call some of the normal standards, but that again is part of life, and ... .

Do you want to explain that a little bit more?

Well, when men are a long way away from home, and the sanctities of the home are ... you know, are not being held together by daily presence, it's hard for men to pass brothels, which are pleasant and nice, I suppose, and that again is one of the ... one of the paradoxes of life, isn't it? You can understand men, three years away from home, and not having the opportunity of, you know, the company of women and so forth. We used to laugh about this, because sometimes it was so humorous, but it was very real, a very real thing in ... in life. And I don't want to speak in detail about this sort of situation, but ... .

Feel free to say what you like about it, but, I mean, it's obviously one of the important, difficult things that happened, isn't it?

Yes, yes. Oh my. Yes. Actually we had one squadron where the doctor, you know, had to give his okay to a certain brothel, so that it would be accepted on medical grounds. And when a padre sits in the side-line, you know, and talks to the doctor about ... what attitude do you take?

What attitude did you take?

You ... well you just have to understand, it's ... and you ... you can't impose your morals on people that have a totally different background. And in the bush of course I had this experience, because we had ... I know cattlemen who were, you know, having children to ... to Aboriginal women, and they were doing this quite openly, and it wasn't ... it wasn't over-criticised by the community. So I had a ... a sort of a sensitive understanding of that situation.

But this situation was a different one, and it ... we had good doctors who ... who sort of had a parental attitude to men, and with, you know, all natural safeguards and so forth. But there were occasions when I as a padre had to, you know, give counsel, because there were certain ways where this sort of action could go to extreme limits. And this was very difficult, you know, because you're one of the men, and when a commanding officer doesn't always agree with you, you are isolated a bit. But, for all that ... .

> You say, 'when the commanding officer doesn't always agree', in this regard what do you mean?

Well sometimes the commanding officer would say, 'This is a good thing for the men.' Yes. And I would say, 'Well, well.' (Laughs).

And when you ... when you are open-minded, and yet you have pretty strict convictions about, you know, the ... the sanctities of marriage and so forth ... but when you're of an open mind, and mix with men, and you realise you can't superimpose your moral code on them, you still have to love them, and you still have to stick with them, whatever they do. And they come to your tent afterwards, and, you know, I ... I've had fellows come to my tent, and ... and this is where the sort of ... you know, the secret life of a padre becomes very ... very precious. Where fellows kneel down and say, you know, 'Help me to get forgiven for this.' And Johnnie McNamara could tell you some real stories too. He's up in heaven now, and he's sharing them up there. (Laughs).

(20.00) Yes, but I'm speaking as I haven't spoken to anyone before about some of these matters, but they ... they were part of the unnatural life of wartime. And, once you recognise it's unnatural, you have to accept that there has to be some unnatural conduct, and I would say there'd be ... we had occasions where some of our boys fell in love with local Italians and local girls in Cairo, and the girls became pregnant, and they came and asked you - and some of them were married at home, but some of them weren't - and you ... you, you know, face up to these problems as you would in a parish, you know, because that's life everywhere. More so these days than it was, you know, in wardays, I guess.

> Were there times that you had a personal, sort of, crisis of faith? I mean, I'm expecting that there were times when that was so, sometimes more than others?

Now when you talk about a crisis of faith that's a fairly hard to describe problem, because all of life is a series of crises. I mean ... and as a young man, going for his career you ... you are confronted all the time with decisions that have to be made in changed circumstances, and this relates to your training. It relates ... it relates to your theological beliefs, because they ... they mature and round off. And there are experiences that make you depart from a previous 'no' outlook. And I would say that the ... the healthy development in any character is facing these sorts of crises as ... as natural changes and natural points in your total development.

At the university you naturally got confronted with ... with agnosticism, and with, you know, very liberal philosophies, and you're stunned by them, but you adjust to them, according to your own maturity and age. And it's remarkable, when you look back on life, how ... how God, I feel, guides a person. If ... if you're striving in a certain direction, and you've got ideals that are, you know, a bit sound, and you believe in prayer, and you believe that God's hand is upon people, it's amazing how these sorts of problems are resolved one by one. And I think that's normal growth and ... a normal sort of growth in a person's life.

And of course the older you get the less you know. It's amazing, isn't it? You're ... you think you know everything when you're young. When I finished my university course I was really well-informed. (Laughs). But you gradually discover that you know nothing about the university of hard knocks. And going to the bush was my first ... first place of rounding off, you know, the edges, and then war experiences. And, after the war, coming back into civilian life I ... I was able to understand the great difficulty of people who had been famous in wartime. Even flight commanders and squadron commanders and fellows who had great war records, coming back and they were nothing. And, although the universities offered reconstruction courses and so forth, that applied to a minority. And other people had to find jobs, and some of them who were trained in ... in some of the destructive things of wartime, you know, felt that they should continue in that line. So there were some awful problems when ... and that I think, is one of the offshoots of war, that society is affected by the type of things you see in wartime, and the type of things you're trained to do. You're ... you're trained to dislocate a ... a town. You go ahead and you destroy all their electric light power schemes, and their ... the community facilities and you learn how to destroy them. You come back to Australia, (laughs), come back, you say, 'Can I still do that?' (Laughs). Yes. It's very real.

(25.00) But I think a padre has a unique place in wartime. If he is close to the men - and of course we didn't have any women in the Middle East, except nurses in hospitals, but we had no ... none of the regular army corps, or ... or air force WAAAF people, and we ... . [Break in recording].

And, as I was saying, we were compelled to live as men, together all the time. And you ... you can't hide much when you're in that sort of situation. I mean you know all about the next fellow. I mean you're ... you're eating together, you're showering together, and ... and you're working together, and ... and sharing continually the things that relate to a man's life, and to his home back in Australia, and to your hopes for the future. Some of the talks we'd have in tents, you know, with ... where there were six men living together, some of those talks, I'll never forget, because men when they're together like that, they ... they do open up. More than you would think, particularly when you're a long way away from home, and that kind of life I believe that a padre was able to really share in all sorts of ways, which you can't do sometimes in normal life.

It's the continuous kind of being together that brings out so much?

That's right, mmm.

What was the normal sort of day for you? What are typical padre tasks?

Well the ... the task would vary very much indeed, depending on the operation. Everything revolved around the ... the war operation at the time. And I spent most of my time with ...

with fighter bomber squadrons. But we used to move out from them to the bomber squadrons.

And normally briefing would take place early in the morning for pilots. And you'd be up early with the pilots, you'd go to their briefing, you ... you'd know the targets that they were going to, an you'd go out to them to their aircraft, and you'd, you know, stand up on the wings of an aircraft and speak to fellows that you knew were ... knew were a bit... . And pilots, like everybody, you know, they would go through stages of great nervousness, you know, as they were going ... forming up to fly into action. And you'd see them off, wave them off, and come back and have breakfast with the ... with the ground crew.

And during the day one of the things that occupied us almost continuously was writing letters to ... to homefolk. And, maybe I should have emphasised earlier, we developed a ... a system of writing a common letter which became quite famous. Airgraphs, we would frame a common letter, the three padres, I used to ... I started this off and used to write them, and ... but we all put our names to them. And we left a space where we could write some extra stuff, but these letters became a feature of the chaplain's work. We'd come to a squadron, or living with a squadron, every day there'd be people who'd ... who you'd want to write to their family. And you'd be sending ... we wrote thousands of these. And I've seen what Bob Davies said about some of his work. He's ... he's listed the letters, and they run into thousands.

This is not just letters of families of casualties?

No, no, to every person. Every person on a squadron, we used to write to their home, or their sweethearts. And in Melbourne last week, or last month - two months ago - there were wives that brought my letters and showed them to me, and the tears ran down their cheeks. They said, 'Do you remember writing this to me?' (Laughs). And ... and you've forgotten about it, but they've saved these letters up ... and they weren't about ... they were just about, you know, their loved one, what they were doing, and what they looked like, you know, and what their activities were. There were certain things we couldn't say, for censorship purposes, but you could say lots of personal things. And I never realised how important these letters were, until I got back home after the war. But ... .

When you say it was a standard sort of a letter ...?

Well when I say a standard sort of ... we got them run off on the printery, so that we ... we'd have it headed, 'No 3 Squadron', you know, 'Middle East', or something. And nothing for the 'Dear', but then we'd have ... .

Oh, the tape's gone.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Identification: This is the second tape, side A, of an interview with Reverend Fred McKay, at his home in the Hawkesbury Village, Unit 40, Chapel Road, Richmond. It's 26th May, 1989.

Our time's running out, isn't it?

Yes, it's getting ... we're going ... we're going through, so how ... just ... just to explain those letters, those standard letters, basically what sort of ... what did you put in the letters?

There was a letter form provided to all army and air force personnel, on which you could write letters to your homefolk, they would be ... they would be photographed and sent home. What we did was formulate a letter on behalf of the three padres relating to a particular squadron or unit. And we'd describe the conditions generally, and how the fellows were, and what was ... we couldn't say everything, but we were able to ... to convey to the homefolk that the padres were with the men. And these letters, which ran into thousands, became a unique part of our ministry. And I discovered that other padres in other zones of the war weren't able to ... to do this sort of thing. We were lucky, because there were just the three of us, and we had access to a printing press in Cairo, and a printing press in Italy. It was difficult, you know, getting these foreign printing presses to understand our English and so forth, but we got these letters run off by the hundreds, and we each had them, and when we came to a squadron we would add to them, and put personal notes on them, and address them. And even these letters these days, so many years after the war, on visiting reunions and so forth, where wives and mothers talk together, they will produce these letters, and we realise what a ... what a ... how meaningful they were to people in wartime. We were lucky in being able to do this and it became one of the significant features of our ministry.

What about censorship?

We were the censors. Actually, with our rank, we were able to ... to censor our own letters, but we ourselves of course had to be very careful that we weren't conveying information that would be ... you know, information that shouldn't be spread about activities. And it ... that made it very difficult, because, although you could say you were in Italy, or you were in Sicily, or you were in Corsica, you weren't able to say anything about operations or what was happening, and whether, you know, you were winning or losing. (Laughs). But you could talk about personal things in the squadron, about people. And about dress and about, you know, weather conditions, because weather conditions so frequently affected the total life. We had muddy conditions, snow and sleet, and then, coming out of the desert, you know, where it was hot and ... and you ... hot and dry, and coming into country where there were no farms, you had no fresh food. We ... we scarcely ever had any, you know, fresh vegetables, because the Germans, even in Italy and Sicily, they would raze the country as they retired. And ... and you could describe, you know, the sort of living conditions under which you were ... .

I guess going through letters you would pick up on issues that may be worrying some of the men. Were you able to ... what use were you able to make of that sort of information?

You mean personal worries? Oh well, in the case of casualties, you would write a handwritten letter, and we wrote, you know, many of those. It was the padre's job to collect the personal effects of a ... of a pilot, or any member of air-crew, and, you know, see that they were sent home. And sometimes this was a ... a very sensitive sort of act.

(5.00) I remember ... you know, you'd be burying boys, and there was hardly anything left of them, just a bit of bone, and you would never, you know, say very much about it, but you'd

always talk about their ... you know, the action, and that they ... how they faced up to their service and so forth. And I ... we used to get letters back, you know, sometimes asking further questions, sometimes you couldn't answer them.

I remember burying a pilot, a wonderful young fellow, he'd just ... out of school really, but he was a brilliant boy, and he was shot down. And when I came to ... with my driver, we penetrated up into beyond no-man's land and I ... we buried him. The only thing we could find was his hand. You know. And that upset me a bit. (Laughs). But I had a burial service for a hand.

And other times, you know, you'd ... you'd find the bones of fellows in a ... in a bomber aircraft, and you couldn't establish that they were all there. You know, you'd ... I took a doctor up to a ... to a crash with ... the end of this aircraft was completely burnt out, and there were scattered bones, and there were four crew, and the doctor could only get enough bones to certify there were three. And I knew that the ... the captain, and the pilot, although we said that he was, you know, missing, believed killed, his wife never accepted it. Even till after the war. She thought he was still wandering around somewhere. And whereas you knew, but you couldn't prove by ... you know, by bodily remains that ... that he was killed too. Now those were awful letters to write, because you'd have to ... this young wife, she said, 'Oh dear, he'll probably be wandering round still, and you'll find him some day.' In the end of course, well after the war, I guess that she ... . She was a Melbourne girl.

But, oh, it used to, you know, rake at my conscience to have to write letters, and to ... although officially, the official records was, 'Missing, believed killed.' That's all that they ... the Air Board would convey, and although you knew that he was killed, you still had to, you know, exercise all the comfort and care and Christian faith that you had in helping that person to face life again. We had lots of those.

> Looking back on ... on those years, what would you say was your most difficult, or ... or most significant experience?

I'd say my most harassing, and probably most difficult, experience, was a ... a bombing raid of German JU 88s, who came in to try and destroy 451 Squadron in Corsica. It was the time of a mock landing in Southern France, and the Germans had come to Corsica, where the bombers were and the fighters were, and we were in the forward line, and they came over one night, and ... with a ... with daisy cutters, you know, bombs that fell and scattered everywhere with shrapnel. And we had two pilots killed that night just with one piece of shrapnel, piercing the heart, you know, and ... and I fortunately was in a trench, and ... although my tent was completely destroyed only a few feet away. But we had seventeen boys killed that night.

And those ... I've never been in a CCS, that's a casualty clearing station, experience similar to this. Because the boys who were still alive were rushed by ambulance to the CCS, which was only about two miles away, and I was there all night, with the doctors. And there were four boys who were so badly injured that the doctors couldn't do any more for them, and they were concentrating on a whole line of other fellows who were wounded, and it's the first time that I had the experience with a doctor saying, 'Padre, those four belong to you, you go and look after them', and they were the ones who were dying, you know. And that sort of experience lives in your mind always, because all you can do is to, you know, give them drinks of water, and hold their hands, and ... and they're lying virtually on the ground, you know, in this

casualty tent. And then the next day you bury them. You know, that ... that sort of experience.

(10.00)I guess it's one of the ... one of the privileges of a ... of a Christian minister, that you are with people, you know, at the last, and you can ... you can say prayers with them, and you can give them the comfort, you know, of God's presence, and ... but those experiences are part of life in other circumstances too, but in wartime they are pretty raw. And you wrap bodies in blankets, you've got no ... you've got no coffins, and so frequently, you know, it's ... it's an harassing thing just to lower a body into a grave with limbs still sticking out, and those ... that experience will never disappear from my memory. Some great boys went that night. Seventeen of them died.

> We were talking before about crises of faith, and you were ... you were, I guess, saying that ... that all the way through your life that's the way it is, and you're always thinking and questioning, and ... and using difficult situations, turning them around so that they are situations you learn from and grow from. But I guess for some padres that ... there were times when they felt they just couldn't go on. Do you know of padres that were burnt out, so to speak, I mean what happened to them?

I have to confess, I don't know of this happening to any fellow padres. I don't know of it, but I could understand it. You see, with the air force our losses would not be as great as in an army unit, where you'd, you know, be in a real, you know, hand to hand battle. And I could understand ... I had a communal burial of 217 bodies, in Bari, after a big raid in the harbour there, which has never been very much publicised until recently, because they've kept it ... .

> Where was that?

In Bari, B-A-R-I, it's in southern Italy, in the harbour there.

> Yes. Mmm.

It was like Pearl Harbour really. And all we did was, you know, had a big long communal grave. And the bodies were all placed in the grave, and there were several of us there.

But there would be army chaplains who would have, you know, pretty rigorous experiences of this kind. And the boys in Burma, you know, on ... on the Burma railway, and some of the padres' experiences must have been just terrifying. You know, when you saw people walking around who were just skeletons, and they'd die the next day, and ... and you were sharing your rice with them or something like that. What a ... what an experience that must have been.

> Well who could they have turned to? I mean, they were ... you were different from the men, yet ... even though you probably had a high degree of acceptance by them but ... . You had each ... you had a team of the three of you, which was very strong and important, but some padres, would they write home to their senior chaplains?

I wouldn't be aware of this. We were in a theatre of war where we would not have personal contact with, you know, the other theatres up in north Australia and in the islands. Virtually ... I would say the three of us, Johnnie McNamara, Bob Davies and myself, we were in a zone

which was different geographically, and we were fighting against enemies who were of a different culture altogether. So there'd be experiences of padres in other parts of ... of the war, which would be more harassing than ours, and much more difficult, and we would, you know, do great honour to them, in the way they'd be compelled to minister. Fancy on the Kokoda Trail, you know, and that sort of experience, and Milne Bay, and ... and Finschhafen, and ... and think of Burma. The Burma Railway. You know, padres there, they must have had terrifying experiences.

(15.00) So how close to ... to combat situations did you go? I mean you weren't a stranger to aviation, like some of the ... I was speaking to another padre that, you know, found himself in the air force, and he'd never been in a plane before. I mean, how often did you find yourself in really frightening situations?

Well we were army cooperation, and we were as close to Montgomery's army as any ... as any of his own troops were, although ... and I did exchange one time with ... with an artillery padre, who worked, you know, just over from us. And we saw Montgomery and Freyberg quite regularly, because in their ... Montgomery came up to me one day.

I was burying Dick Welshman who had been commanding officer 450 Squadron. And he was leading the team this particular day, and was shot down, and I went forward in ... in a jeep with a driver, and a couple of other boys, because I needed help, to find him, and this was on the Sangro in Italy. And while we were gathering up all the remains of the aircraft, and conducting a little burial service, Montgomery and Freyberg came in their jeep and pulled up. I had no shirt on, no hat on, I was just in shorts, and these other boys, we were all ... you know, had spades and shovels, and ... and he pulled up, and he just got out of the jeep and walked over. And I couldn't salute him, he ... I didn't have a hat on, I didn't have anything on. (Laughs). And he saluted me, and he said, 'Carry on, padre', you know, and that was right up where the ... where the army was.

What about your relations with the ... you know, the main officer structure? In the air force? What ... what sort of ... how did you find them in terms of their support of your work? You were saying before that you felt sometimes there were some disagreements, and that they perhaps had a slightly different idea about the sort of role you were playing with the men?

I would say no commanding officers disputed our role. They ... they ... there were recommendations made by a combination of commanding officers at the end of the war that these three padres should be decorated. Now that came from a common band of commanding officers right throughout, and that decoration was declined really by ... by Air Board, for good reasons. But that indicated, you know, their assessment of ... of the task by these three fellows.

But the air force, particularly in the fighter groups, when you had sergeant pilots, and pilot officer pilots, and flying officer ... flight lieutenant pilots, and a squadron leader leading them, they didn't differentiate between ranks. And the sergeants who were pilots were in the same mess. So there wasn't a sergeants' mess and an officers' mess in the desert. That is in the fighter groups in 239 Wing. They ... in the ... in the bomber squadrons, where the bigger numbers were, of course the sergeants and flight sergeants, they had a separate mess. And the ... the relationships between other ranks and the sergeants, and the non-commissioned ... and ... and then the ... the officers, in the Australian setting, in wartime, there was scarcely any

differentiation, because they ... they ... we dressed so ... you know, it was just in shorts and a khaki ... we had no blue uniforms or anything there. (Laughs). It was a case of one group of people.

And war conditions are so different from what it would be on a ... on a permanent station, where all the formalities and decencies and orderlinesses just have to be observed. But there wouldn't be saluting, or any ... if you went to parade before the CO in his tent, if you had a ... some reason to do that, you'd naturally salute the CO, as a mark of respect. But in your everyday operation, you know, you're moving together as one. And there's a great oneness, I would say, which you would not easily find in other circumstances. I realise that, you know, officers, when they were taken prisoner-of-war, they were treated differently from other ranks. And that would be a natural thing to do, you know, under normal, you know, international understandings. But in the field, when we were visited by Air Vice Marshal Wrigley and so forth, and he came out, and of course we had visitors from Churchill and so forth, they'd all ... we'd all, you know, dress up nicely and ... and do our hair. (Laughs).

Play the part.

Play the part. But the relationship between troops and officers was ... it was a family group. On the whole. There'd be very few.

(20.00) And actually Australians are different in this regard. We found that the ... the ... the RAF boys, the English, you know, they had their ... they had their differentiation a little more marked than we would ever have. And they used to wonder at us. And actually we were criticised by some of our fellow British chaplains that we were more national than we were religious. The fact that Johnnie McNamara would say to me, 'Hey, you bury my Catholic boys over there', the RAF chaplains would say, 'You don't do that, you know, that's not ... that's not right.' And we ... they used that expression, 'These Australian chaplains are more national than they are religious.' Which I suppose was a ... was a fair comment, but it didn't completely do justice to the acceptance that we ... we commonly had, you know, of our ... of our place, and our ... and our part to play. And commanding officers, if ... if there was ... if there was a Catholic ... if Johnnie was there, they would use him to look after everybody. You know, if they had problems, if they said, 'Look there's some ... there's a fellow over there, just had a letter from home, and his mother's died, but he's a Presbyterian, would you go and look after him?' You see and ... and that was just accepted as ... as the normal thing to do.

Did you ever get any opposition to that, to the notion of your burying Catholic men? I mean, apart from ... from what the British padres had to say about it?

From our own personnel? No, no.

Among the men? If it came up for discussion at all?

No. I've never experienced any contrary sort of opinion to that. It may sometimes have been thought by men, 'I wish the Catholic padre had been here to do it', but it was never evident. And sometimes, writing home to ... to the loved ones, we had to be, you know, very careful to say that everything was done in accordance with, you know, the Catholic ... my mate's wishes and so forth. And we'd be sending home the ... you know the caps and the belongings, just as if ... well whatever they were.

What about the issue of your having officer rank, was it important for padres to be officers? There's a certain amount of, you know, different feeling about that, I think.

Yes. We didn't ... I'd say we commonly didn't experience any resentment that we were commissioned officers. Because the doctors were the same. And the pay officers and the postal officers, and the equipment people, and they were all commissioned rank. So we were fitting into a sort of a pattern that was accepted. If ... if we didn't have rank other people wouldn't have ... would have been very embarrassed by having rank when we were working with them.

On the other hand there could be a case made for a ..a special kind of designation for a chaplain, that is he could be ... you see, we were non-combatants, we couldn't carry revolvers, we ... we ... and when we were up with the boys, we could never enter into combat, although I guess that some padres have been compelled to do that at certain times. I never was faced with that sort of situation.

But an argument I ... I think could logically be made, that a padre should be ranked less. We ... we were never confronted with that. Quite frequently we wouldn't wear our markings, but in fairness to ... to us, when we were negotiating leave camps, and going into ... into areas where we had to make arrangements, if you weren't of officer rank, you ... you wouldn't be able to start talking to people. You see we formed rest camps for ... for our pilots in various parts, and we ran welfare agencies, and you'd have to go and make dealings with commercial people about supplies, and unless you had a rank you could not ... you couldn't sign a document, you would not be entertained really. And in those circumstances we ... we did lots of arrangements for ... for ... and if you were going, you know, with other officials in the ... in the total community, we did lots of ... made out lots of overtures for people. That is, you'd go to a hospital, and you'd be wanting to get compassionate leave for somebody on medical grounds, and if you went without your rank you wouldn't get beyond, you know ... particularly into a ... into a non-Australian unit.

(25.00) It's been said that you actually had more credibility with the men, because you were able to ... to act on their behalf more effectively, having the officer status. Do you agree?

Yes. Yes, I never found it an embarrassment, although when I was at Laverton in my first year I used to dress in overalls like the men did in the workshops. Blue overalls, I didn't wear uniform as I went down to the workshops to move amongst them. But the other officers said, 'Just put your rank up, because it's not fair to the men, they ... they would want to know', you know. So I ... but also, although I wore blue overalls the way the workmen did, I still, you know. put a rank up.

On your shoulder, right.

Comforts Fund, did you have a relationship with the Comforts Fund at times?

A lot, yes. We were the agents for the Comforts Fund in whatever field we were. And I was commissioned on one occasion to take a three-ton truck down to Taranto in Italy - we were up in the middle of Italy - to take a load of comfort funds, because the weather was cold and they needed it. And I took a whole lot of comforts right throughout the units. And Colonel

[Howenden?] was the man in the Middle East who was in charge of the Comforts Fund, and we worked in very close cooperation with him, and the Red Cross.

The padre was looked upon as the normal link in a unit, you know, when it came to the distribution of comforts or anything in that line. And we were ... you know, if the army wanted to liaise with us - we had army units who wanted to liaise with us from the point of view of some of our facilities - they'd always come to the padre first, because he was the one that handled that sort of welfare activity in any unit.

And also sports. We ... we organised sporting teams. We had football teams that used to go up and play the army. We had a rugby league football team with our fighters, and I took them down to play the ... the Kiwis, who were, you know, with us in the army, just down the road. And they'd turn out their fourth team to play our first team, you know. (Laughs). Yes. All Blacks everywhere in the Kiwi army.

So you had a number of other sort of non-religious sorts of roles to play, as well?

Yes, it all depends what you mean by 'religious'. I think religion can't be divorced from what you're doing now. It's a ... if you believe that ... that our lord, you know, became a man and ... just to be with people, that sort of identifies him with everything that man does. And I think that you can get caught in just what you'd call social amenities and so forth, and ... and be ... be so involved in that sort of thing that you become sort of an agent and you're just dispensing things. That's ... that's a danger, and you could think by a lot of activity you're doing your job. But when you're ... you can get away with that, I guess, in a formal situation, but when you're in a battle situation, and you're having crises, you know, critical happenings, deaths around you and people getting wounded, you soon realise that you've got other duties to do, you're compelled to be part of, you know, what you'd call the spiritual buttressing of your mates. Particularly in ... in cases where men are badly wounded, or where they've got broken home relationships, or whether they've got a developing weakness of some sort. You know, that's where a padre can dispense, if you like, something that can't be got anywhere else. Isn't that right? (Laughs).

Put very well.

Were there ... there was a separate section in the padre service called welfare ... .

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Identification: This is side B of the second tape of an interview with Reverend Fred McKay, at his home in the Hawkesbury Village, Unit 40, Chapel Road, Richmond. It's 26th May, 1989.

We were just talking about the welfare section, and ... and how your roles fitted in with that.

There was a welfare section established by Air Board while I was at Laverton. And a welfare officer was appointed, I would think, to every major unit. And this person would be responsible for arranging facilities for sport, entertainment, comforts, and all the things that would be related to extra-curricular, you know, activities, on a unit.

In the Middle East we didn't have a person who was specifically appointed to do this, although there was one officer in Cairo to whom we could apply for sporting equipment and things like that, he would work through the Comforts Fund.

Now normally the padre and the welfare officer would work in very close liaison. In the Middle East in ... in our sort of setting I would say that the padre would be looked upon as virtually representing the welfare officer. That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but when it came to the distribution of comforts and things like that, that was left in our hands. And I think in most cases, and I think the same would go for my colleagues, but I got caught up with that very much in Italy, particularly under winter conditions, which were so muddy and rainy and sleety, following on, you know, our rough life in the desert. And we needed, you know, woollens, balaclavas, socks and jumpers and so forth, and they all came over by the ton.

> You were talking before about padres, you know, playing a non-combatant role, and that ... that in air force you didn't ... you weren't required at any time to carry a weapon, and you weren't faced with that dilemma. What if you had been faced with that dilemma?

I don't know how that would occur under air force conditions.

> Assuming that you perhaps were in army or something else. Would you have been prepared to carry a weapon?

I carried a ... I carried a weapon in the inland always, I always had a revolver, and I used to use it for, you know, killing Taipan snakes, and ... and I used to have it under my pillow at night, I just don't know what I would have done if I was attacked. (Laughs).

> What about for killing Germans and Italians?

A padre would have to have some extraordinary circumstance to make him, you know, kill a member of the enemy. If I were attacked personally, I think that I would try and defend myself. How I would do that would depend on, you know, what was happening. But it's hardly likely. If ... if I saw, say, an enemy torturing one of our nurses, or torturing another man, I think I might punch him in the nose. (Laughs). Whether I'd, you know, spear him through the belly or shoot his brains off, I don't think I'd come, you know, to that extent.

(5.00) I'm aware this happened in New Guinea sometimes.

Yes. Oh I ... I can well believe it in ... in those sorts of situations, it would be a very real agony for a person, you just couldn't stand off and ... and watch somebody being, you know, tortured.

> But you're really ... I know this is a difficult question, you're really saying that ... that if you were attacked, you'd defend yourself, but you're not certain about whether you'd actually use a weapon to defend yourself?

Yes, I don't think I would have had a weapon to do it with. But if there was a brick handy or a ... or a ... .

> You would have used one?

In certain circumstances I would be compelled to do that, because that's what I would have done at home too. (Laughs). If somebody came and attacked Meg, I would ... I would, you know, go into action of some sort. I just wouldn't stand there and say, 'Oh gee, I ... .', you know, 'Carry on mate.' (Laughs).

> Right. What about your feelings about the enemy, you know, as the war progressed? Do you think you changed your attitude to the enemy? Just thinking about how you were prior to the war? I mean you weren't a very young man, but you were young, and ... and you had not travelled overseas, I presume you hadn't met many Germans?

No.

> But you weren't short on experience, that's for sure. Do you think your attitude changed at all?

Having had a German background on my mother's side, I know some of the tension that she had in the first world war. And as a boy I was conscious of this, because my mother's mother still supported the Kaiser in the war. And there were people in our district who were interned because they were of German extraction. Our grandmother was a harmless dear old lady, you know, and lived by herself.

But having been brought up in that sort of a setting, I had a ... a feeling towards German people, which was accommodating and ... but it wasn't close. But that, I think, would affect my attitude to German culture, it probably wouldn't affect my attitude to heavy Prussianism and Nazism, because I ... I was quite convinced that Hitler was evil. I really did, I felt that he was a misguided lunatic, you know, in his ... in his political thinking, and in his ambitions, and in his aggression, and in his cruelties.

Now I had no misgivings about ... about that. But when it came to ... when it would come to a German soldier or a German airman out in the field, I wouldn't label him with a ... with a Nazi sort of guilt, I would feel that he'd be the same as we were. He was caught up in a big machine and he was doing what ... what normal patriotism would demand.

Now it's ... isn't it different when you ... when you consider the people who are responsible for the war and the people who are compelled, you know, to be in the war, they're ... they're two different ... . Even Rommel, you know, against Montgomery, Montgomery had a great admiration for Rommel, because he was a clever skilful general with army skills. And these two people, Montgomery and Rommel, facing one another, they were trying to outwit one another, like the Broncos, and ... and the ... you know, the state of origin football here. Just trying to out ... outmanoeuvre one another. And when it was over they'd shake hands, you know. And that's the ... that again is this paradox of war. I think that people who are trained in the army, they want to show their skills, they've been trained to defend.

But my own personal attitude to ... to an individual, I know that there were ... there were Nazis who ... who bashed a mate of mine with a rifle on his head, and bashed his brains out, he's ... he's now ... he lives in a wheelchair, and every time I think of that I think of the ... you know, the awfulness of those particular people. They were ... they were the Nazi troopers who were looking after prisoners. And they wouldn't be as bad as the Japanese I guess, but you ... you know, that makes you have a feeling of revulsion. But the ... the commoner, the average German I think would be just as good a person as I am.

(10.00) In your relationships with the men, and generally throughout the war, did you come to change your view of human nature, basic human nature, and the nature of good and evil?

I'd say it was a time of discovery as to what human nature was. Whether I changed or not would be very difficult for me to ... to estimate or be definite about, but life is a voyage of discovery, isn't it, and you are ... every day you're ... I'm discovering things about you, you're discovering things about me. Well that's ... that's part of, you know, day to day human experience.

I ... I would say in simple words that my war experience has left a definite mark on my character. That is, from the whole point of view of ... of being part of ... of a team of padres, first of all, it's given me a ... really a ... an insight into what can be done by padres being together, that is on an ecumenical common footing. And it ... it took all denominationalism out of my bloodstream, and that's why I ... you know, was so hearty about the Uniting Church, that ... . And I ... I'm glad it's uniting, because we're trying to unite with ... with other people.

Now that war experience affirmed in my mind the ... the goal of Christian people, that is to be together. And maybe that influence was ... conditioned a lot of my approach to my work in the inland afterwards. Otherwise in ... in character, and in, you know, personality, I would say you grow every year according to the experiences you're having.

Talking about home life, I think it enriched our home life. I think separation can have tremendous effects on ... on your love relationships, because when you're absent and you ... you ... this great devotion you have to your loved ones is kept alive by all sorts of things. You know, the letters that I got from home, and the letters that I wrote back, I would never have written those letters if it hadn't been wartime. And great coming home again. Great having children. (Laughs). Having home life. I mean it made ... it made you value, you know, home life, and ... and home affections. And I think that would be a common experience too, fellows coming back to their families and sleeping with their wives again. (Laughs). Tremendous. Yes. I shouldn't say that I suppose.

Oh yes, you should. (Laughter). Absolutely.

What about ... these are the hard ... really hard questions. How did you feel about the ... the bombing of the German cities, and Dresden, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I mean, when that happened, what did that mean to you? And ... and reflecting on it afterwards?

Yes, well it wasn't until you were able to reflect on it afterwards. At the time it happened there was a feeling of great relief, and I shared it, you know, that this was the end, I mean, it can't go on. Now that sort of sense of relief was ... was tinged with your own sort of selfish

hopes, you know, to get home again, and to get back to normal life. When in later times you ... you start to look at it objectively, you're faced with this dilemma. If it hadn't happened what other destruction would have been, you know, worse? And what can be done to ... to look after, or to, you know, mend that wound. And it's such a terrific problem that I would say that I wouldn't venture to have a solution.

(15.00) If ... if we ... if we believe that even a ... an enemy's action can be used by God in the long run to bring about, you know, some purpose in the world, you just stand off and say, 'Well that's not for us to make a judgement.' But Hiroshima was a far more dastardly thing, looking back at it, than we realised at the time. But we were very relieved that it signalled the end.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B.
END OF INTERVIEW.