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# TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Side One, Tape One, with Mr John Maher.

And I'm Daniel Connell, and I think the date is 12th August, 1989. End of identification.

Right. Okay, well just to - to go back to the period before the war, if you could give me some idea of where you grew up, and the circumstances?

Well I grew up as a youngster in the western suburbs of Brisbane. Born and bred in Brisbane. Brisbane was a pretty small town, but a pretty amenable town in those days. And there wasn't a great deal to do after school and weekends, this sort of thing, and I always had a sort of a yen to - interest in vessels, ships, and eventually hopefully to go to sea.

So one of the things I got involved in was a local group called the Merchant Navy Sea Cadet Training Corps, run by a gentleman named Commander [Hamilton-Grace?]. Who did an outstanding job. I first joined the unit at seven years of age, and participated avidly from then on until I actually went to sea.

What age - at seven now, what's the date?

That would have been about 1933, mmm. And ....

Where did you go to school, incidentally?

I went to school at St James's Christian Brothers' College, in the heart of Brisbane, initially. And we were in a family that - like thousands of others - that was pretty heavily hit by the depression.

What sort of work did your father do?

My father was a coal-miner and - here in Australia, and a gold and tin-miner in Papua New Guinea. And for quite a number of years of course he was away from Australia. So that it was up to mum to bring up three growing lads. And being the youngest of the family of course I sort of sought my interests, which were the sea, and continued to get involved in this cadet training group.

Well could you tell me a bit more about the - this cadet group? It doesn't - was it a one-off type organisation, or was it affiliated to a national league?

It was a one-off in that concept that it was entirely sponsored and funded by the organisation itself, under the auspices of Commander Hamilton-Grace. At one stage we would have had possibly in the vicinity of five or six hundred cadets, at its peak. And, as it turned out, as time progressed and the war clouds grew, training was intensified, and diversified, to cater not only for seamen going to - on deck, or below, on a merchant vessel, but for those people interested in following a career in the Royal Australian Navy, but more importantly those who wanted to take out cadetship, or apprenticeship - (coughs), excuse me - through a commercial vessel. And so that this was catered for, and required a fair amount of organisation. And quite a number of lads availed themselves of this opportunity.

Commander Grace, where did he get his money?

I'm not really sure about that, I was a bit too young to sort of understand that. We used to have to pay so much for each weekly attendance at our parades, and then we used to have weekend camps and this sort of thing. So I really can't in all fairness, in all honesty, answer that.

> Well Warren Keats went and did a short intensive course there, a man I interviewed fairly early on in this process, and he was talking about this particular question, and it seemed to be quite definitely a private venture with official backing was the impression he had. But it was also a product of enthusiasm by a single individual without making a lot of money was the way he was describing it.

(5.00) There was no doubt about that, because at one stage there a - they branched out and actually had a merchant navy sea cadet training branch here on Bribie Island, where I now reside. And surprisingly this has been overlooked by lots of governments and lots of organisations over the years, and that is the actual provision of trained people for merchant ships, and I think we suffered for that during the period of the second world war. The crews suffered for that rather dramatically, because they were simply one day a - a very young civilian in lots of cases, and the next minute a - on the high seas, and trying to combat with not only a new career, but all the odd functions that were necessary to carry out their daily routine. And then to meet the needs of security and safety on a vessel at sea during wartime.

> Could you tell me a bit more about the training you were getting?

Well for instance, I could best describe this by - this is in the cadet corps - I could best describe this by the first time I went to sea on a ship, we did lifeboat drill as - as - this is an actual wartime incident. And we had some young people on the vessel, and when they launched the lifeboat we had to row round the entire length of the vessel. And the usual way of returning on the vessel was to ascend a Jacob's ladder.

Not a simple feat if - unless you know how, or you've been trained how to do this successfully, because of the contours of the shell of the vessel. And I was able to go up that thing with no hesitation, no problem whatsoever, simply because, as a cadet, I'd been trained to do this, whereas other young fellows in the same lifeboat as myself couldn't manage this successfully, and were sort of subjected to all sorts of commands and harassment until they overcome the problem.

One of the things of course was the size of the oars that we used to have in the lifeboats in those days. When I sat down in the thwart end of the lifeboat I couldn't see over the side benches; I - I wasn't very big. And the oar they'd give you was approximately twenty feet long, so that when you put it in the water it wasn't uncommon I couldn't lift it out of the water, and I used to have to jump up and run down the sidebenches trying to lift the oar up, and receiving a clout at the same time for not being able to do it.

So those sort of things. We were aware of common navigation, the rules of the road. We were aware of ship construction, right up to modern construction at that particular period of time. We were aware of the command structure of nominally merchant vessels, the daily routine, watchkeeping, which we used to do as cadets. We used to be able to determine the situation in relation to weather, and determine cloud formations and make log entries on the

ship's log. Be able to do splicing, rope and line maintenance. Carrying out care and maintenance of our own small vessels that we had in the cadet training. So we took all of this background and knowledge with us to sea.

Even though we didn't get any recompense for this, in essence we received the - the personal satisfaction of being able to carry out our function diligently and efficiently, and to the satisfaction of, in my case for instance, foreign flag vessels, where I really couldn't understand a lot that they were saying anyhow, but you could see by the look of their intent and application that they were satisfied that, for a youngster going to sea, that you had this background. Even though they weren't aware of what had taken place beforehand.

> The - you mentioned five or six hundred cadets at - at the peak. How was this - how were they dealt with? I mean obviously one man can't deal with that number of cadets?

No, they used to have a - an inbuilt structure, command structure, within the cadets. Each cadet was responsible to supply and maintain his own uniform. The department stores in the city of Brisbane, such as McDonnell and Easts, and [Elnar Starks?], they used to cater for regulation uniforms. This included both winter and summer uniforms. Caps and cap tallies, lanyards and various other accoutrements that were necessary for the uniform. The internal rank structure was such that their uniforms actually cost more, because it was sort of long pants and what have you. And there were rank markings and badges for proficiency.

(10.00) And I think the reason why it was successful was that, even though probably there were other youth organisations at the time, it didn't offer the forward adventure and comradeship for growing lads in those very hard times of depression and pre-war for the youngsters of South-East Queensland. And that's why it was so successful.

And I think because of the then ongoing involvement of young people in the merchant ships, and in some cases to the RAN, both in apprenticeship and in lower deck areas, the authorities then realised that here was an organisation that had the potential to fill those gaps that couldn't be filled anywhere else in Australia. Not as successful as here in Brisbane. And I think then possibly it received some, probably semi-official, backing. And there was no doubt those of the cadets that survived to a man will tell you that that background was the best thing that was available to them when they went to sea.

> How practical was the training, would you get into boats, would you go out on camps, or was it basically classroom stuff?

No. We had a fair amount of classroom involvement, a fair amount of in-training, within the service, but we used to have our own launches. We had sailing boats, and we even had a duty boat, which was a small, very well-maintained vessel, [with a Chapman Pup?] engine, which we used to run from the southern side, where the depot was located, up to the mainstream area of Brisbane, to pick up cadets, to reduce their problem of negotiating some of the darker areas of the city at night. So that it was all done ship-shape, and you couldn't man this duty boat, or go on these courses, unless you were correctly made out in your correct uniform and carried out your particular functions.

And eventually it even - and this was a unique thing, and a very good thing - diversified into allowing female cadets to be involved. And that was a really good thing, I think, for - it's the sort of thing that had been overlooked for years in other organisations and today even, in this late stage, to a degree is overlooked.

I mean, that's quite unique in that pre-war situation.

Yes, quite, no doubt about that. And we had a reunion just recently of our cadets from that era, and we had some of the female members show up at the reunion, and it was really something to be proud of. To look back over all those years, in my case from 1933, and to sort of meet people that were only youngsters, running round, more or less just on the seat of their pants in those particular days.

What - what would the girls be learning, would they be learning the same as the boys?

Much the same, except that they didn't get as physically involved as we did. They sort of were a little bit pampered, because the lady in charge I suppose looked after them in the sense that they were female, as against the boys. But, by the same token, they were recognised as an on-going organised train group within the cadet structure, even though the merchant service, sadly, at that stage, within the bounds of the Commonwealth, didn't really cater for female involvement. As I went overseas it was obvious to me that lots of other countries had realised the potential of their female population and utilised them, and of course - nowadays of course this is happening right across the board.

Come 1939 what were you doing?

I was still at school, primary school. Towards - getting a little bit agitated about what was happening. My dad had been in the first world war in France, and been gassed and what have you. He was a bit concerned with what was happening, and I had two elder brothers, and obviously, at thirteen years of age, I was starting to sort of be in that transitional period between boy and teenager, as we know today - that wasn't the word that they used in those days. I think delinquents more than anything.

But the dad was looking around, and in 1940 I had sort of attained scholarship standard at school, and decided to leave primary school and take out an apprenticeship, which the dad more or less arranged for me, at Evans-Deakin shipyards, again following the - the sort of field that I was keen on, and that was to be involved with ships. And that was to - constructing vessels, both merchant and men-of-war for the wartime effort.

Your father had been in the first world war, you had older brothers, now you were too young, but how did he feel about you boys being involved in the war effort, did he encourage you, or was he a - a parent wanting his sons to keep away from it?

No, he wasn't real keen on the idea, to be quite candid. But by the same token, even though he pointed out the problems that we wouldn't be aware of at that age, and the horrors of what he experienced - he would never sort of tell us these things normally, but he took the time when we were showing interest in ....

(15.00)I can remember the eldest brother joined the army, under age, was posted to go overseas, and he took the steps to go up to the army authorities and notify them how young the eldest brother was, and they discharged him. Which was a bit of a blow to the eldest brother, and sort of knocked him around a bit, psychologically. He later then rejoined the army, and went away. And the other brother had a choice - he went into the Royal Australian Navy, and was on vessels like the cruiser *Hobart* and so forth. And I was sort of still in there building those ships. But very much champing at the bit.

So that he hopefully was intending that I stay home and complete the trade and end of story. But of course ....

What was the trade you were learning?

Boilermaking.

So I sort of - I started at thirteen years, ten months, which was pretty young to start an apprenticeship, even in those days, but we were building up in intensity in the yard, increasing the number of slipways, the number of vessels under construction, and so forth.

Was the war bringing much change for that shipyard?

Yes. Dramatically so. And once areas like Hong Kong and those places fell, and once Manila fell and so forth, and most of all war materials, both for the Americans and Britain in those areas, were redirected to Brisbane. Brisbane become, not commonly known, one of the largest bases for US forces and - marine-wise - and to a lesser degree for Britain in - right through the rest of the duration of the war. I think outside of Pearl Harbour - became one of the largest submarine bases outside of Pearl Harbour. Here in Brisbane. So that it had all the support ships and logistics and naval supplies that went with that.

I became involved in that as a young boilermaker, doing maintenance and repairs on vessels that had been involved in attack, and structural damage. Both at sea - that's US submarines, we used to bring them in the South Brisbane dry dock, where we now have the maritime museum. And other merchant vessels used to come in, in some cases where they'd been torpedoed, but the torpedo hadn't exploded, but tore an awful gaping hole in the hull. And because of the demand on our very limited services in Brisbane, as against Sydney and those places, Newcastle, e used to do a sort of a temporary repair here, and then - enough to get them back to sea and back down to Newcastle and Sydney, mainly Sydney.

And in the case of US vessels, because they had - they had two major mother ships here in Brisbane - these vessels were very large, the *Fulton* was one of them, I know the other one, but can't just recollect the name. And I had occasion to go aboard, and they - they had everything there, it was just like a city, they had their own machine-shops, there own fitting and turning, their own blacksmith shops, their own optometry areas, and full medical services, so that they could maintain full back-up for their submarine and their crews.

And with the result that we used to sort of get involved in a fair amount of work, both for the Commonwealth Shipbuilding Corporation, the US services, the Commonwealth Defence Department, and various other groups and organisations, and when Manila fell, and they directed all the war material to Brisbane, they seconded a lot of the young people like myself to building landing-barges for the Pacific war, on the mudflats actually, out near Breakfast

Creek, with no facilities whatsoever. Which posed some considerable problems initially, but once we got organised, well the thing went pretty smoothly from there on.

When you say, 'no facilities', how do you mean?

Well they would bring a - a ship would come into Brisbane, and unload this - all these parts for these landing-barges, which were all sort of structurally constructed over in the United States at some particular area. Numbered and identified, and the plans inserted with them, and the whole bit, just like a big Meccano set, and they would then ....

Dump - what, just dump on the beach?

Yes, and they'd put them - or in this case they'd unload them down in Hamilton or Brett's wharf, and put them on a truck. They took them round to Breakfast Creek on the - which was then pretty bare out there, opposite [Drysdale and Ridgeways?] actually. Not far from the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

(20.00) And they dumped all these on there, and Drysdale and Ridgeways actually had the original contract, but because they weren't shipbuilders - they were structural engineers, not shipbuilders - there were some particular problems surfaced, so they moved crews, not very many of us, from Evans-Deakin shipyard, over to - to take over and relieve Drysdale and Ridgeways, because we had the expertise, whereas they didn't.

And they put us on an eighty-four hour week, which was a pretty heavy old load for a youngster, and away we went, and this was ....

Eighty-four, that's twelve hours a day, seven days a week?

Yes, mmm. Yes, and around the clock, no in-betweens. And there was no - virtually no facilities at all. If you dropped any tools it was a major feat to retrieve them, because they disappeared through the surface of the mud. Bitterly cold, and in wet weather no cover, until eventually a US army major from their Department of Supply surfaced, and we sort of had a bit of a whisper in his ear, what was going on, how we could probably improve our number of vessels that we could construct, if he could support us with certain facilities, and - which he did. He give us duckboards, which were essential there, because you just couldn't even walk even.

So this was the sort of thing that transpired, so that it was a pretty hectic period. We were doing ship repairs down at - in the [Camp Gosse?] area, down the bottom of the river, we were doing ship repairs where - AUSM [sic] - where - at South Brisbane dry dock.

What's AUSM, what are they?

They were structural engineers, and also did ship repair and ship maintenance.

Right, so a Brisbane company?

Yes. And so - and a shipping company too, by the way. This was a sort of an - an offshoot from their main company. Long established in Brisbane.

So that I was heavily involved in all types of vessels at that particular time, but still hadn't lost that yearning and that yen to go to sea. So I had a number of mates who were overseas, and they used to write me letters and what have you.

And surprisingly one of the things - and a tragedy - is how hard it was for a young Australian to go to sea in an Australian port. To get onto an Australian ship was a ridiculous situation. Here in Brisbane. Possibly better down south, but then that's open to debate. In the sense that you could go down to what they called the pick-up centre, which was a pretty untidy sort of a place, down near Petrie Bight. And there'd be a few old-timers down there that were a bit under the weather, but used to run the union, the local branch of the union, and when you tried to get a ship they'd ask you the question, 'Have you got a union ticket?' And of course you'd have to say, 'No', and they'd say, 'Well no union ticket, no ship.' And we'd say politely, 'Well alright, fair enough, how do we get a union ticket?', and they'd say, 'Well you get a - get a job on the ship and we'll give you a union ticket.' So it was what they termed - in the second world war they had a parlance for it, which they called catch-22.

And no matter how hard you tried you couldn't break that barrier. No matter how keen you were. And only the odd ones that had people in a position outside of that particular area that could get influence, probably through the company, or through somebody along the line, could you break that barrier. And blokes like myself of course didn't know people. And a number of my mates, some since deceased, who were all cadets, we tried through that avenue to no avail, no success.

And in the end I sort of had a little bit of a brain-wave, and I thought, 'Now the best way to approach this problem is to go through foreign consulates, and see if I can pick up a vessel there.' You couldn't simply walk down to the wharf and go on a ship in those days of course, they had security, they had home defence guards, and wharf guards and so forth.

What's the date that we're talking about? Roughly.

Well I - I was trying right from, say, 1942 onwards. And not having much success.

And so I got to know a particular gentleman whose name I can't recollect at the time. Very nice gentleman, who was the Norwegian Consulate [sic] here in Brisbane. And I'm afraid, in desperation, I made his life pretty miserable. I got to finding out not only his work number but his home number, and I used to really give him a rough time, and I think he eventually got organised to get rid of me out of south-east Queensland too. So that it - it paid off eventually in the end, and ....

(25.00) Why were you concentrating on the Norwegians?

Well I thought that would be a good way to get to sea, and I had a couple of mates on Norwegian ships, and I don't know whether you've ever seen them or not, large Norwegian vessels, they're a sight to be seen. And they're well-maintained, the - they're well - usually well-constructed. They maintain their vessels as seagoing vessels, which isn't the case with lots of other flag vessels.

And another thing I pursued at the same time was an American Small Ships division that was in Brisbane. And that was a better - that offered better opportunities than anything at all. And I eventually got successful through there. Because, as the war increased in intensity and

the demand for supply vessels, and all sorts of ancillary vessels became apparent, it was easy - just as easy for them to recruit in Australia as it was back in mainland USA, so that avenues opened up rather dramatically for young Australians, and any Australians that was that way inclined to pursue a sea-going career with the US government. So that worked quite well.

So you actually got a position with them?

Yes, and - very good, very good. And got some experience.

Could you tell me, you know, what sort of - could you describe that?

Well they - we were on what they called LTs - excuse me - which were a type of salvage vessel-come-tug, a seagoing tug, with large winches and so forth, and we used to more or less maintain the sea-lanes and the sea-lines, in the sense that any vessel that had any breakdown, any vessel that was - had been attacked, and it was still salvageable and so forth. A lot of barge traffic where you couldn't get larger vessels close, because there was no landing facilities.

What area were you operating in?

All around the Pacific area, in Southern New Guinea and South-East New Guinea. And the islands in between of course. So that a lot of barge traffic where drummed material, like drummed fuel, even drummed water, in containers, was actually taken up to a close area, and simply discharged into the sea, and then sort of floated ashore, to maintain supplies.

Just to talk about that, and some of the aspects of that, the - the crews that you were in, these were basically Australian crews, or mixed crews?

Mixed crews, yes.

And what was it - what were the - how did you find the Americans?

I found them pretty good. There was - they - their approach to seagoing command, as I later experienced on Norwegian ships, was completely different. Their attitude was pretty easy-going. They didn't seem to take an overall attitude as to - there was any real urgency. This is purely my viewpoint, I didn't - I don't think - take this in any derogatory manner in any way.

So that - but by the same token they got the job done, and they did a helluva job, and there's no doubt in my mind that we couldn't have survived in the Pacific area, without their - which I've since found out, being - I spent some time based in Pearl Harbour and Honolulu and so forth, and I went aboard some of their big attack carriers, and I got to sort of know what was going on.

I used to go over to places like Schofield Barracks, the big pre-war army barracks, and these sort of places, and went over to the sub base, round the navy yard, and at Hickam Field, and talked to the people. They had a lot of what they used to term 'thirty-year men', because in pre-war US forces, when they enlisted they enlisted really into a thirty-year hitch, unlike people of course that came later into the war who were sort of on a temporary basis. Similar probably to on British ships, like the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* that were sunk of Malaya. It's not generally known, but they used to have boy-seamen and boy-midshipmen on there at

fourteen years of age, and those lads would have been in a similar category, where they were looking at a career of at least thirty years within the Royal Navy, and this was the same in there, so that I sort of had a background eventually that I could tie in with this temporary background in the early years of the - the early years of the Pacific war.

But by the same token they did a darn good job, and I'll be the first one to ....

[Recording ends on Side One of Tape One].

Identification: Side Two, Tape One, John Maher, end of identification.

It must be understood that - a lot of people don't seem to understand that the American merchant seaman, he was in the war from 1939, because he was operating in areas in the European and Western approaches area, in merchant ships. Being stopped by German U-boats, and German surface vessels. The same with the US coastguard, who eventually had to escort - escort US vessels, before the US government was declared - you know, declared state of war. So that the people I met over there in the US vessels had an entirely different attitude to the war, as against the people that I first initially struck in the South Pacific. But I ....

What were the differences between ...?

I think the differences were it was a - it was a sort of a more all-embracing war in the European and Western approaches, the Atlantic and those areas, and into the Mediterranean, where some of the ships they were using there in those places were pretty old ships. Worn-out ships, and, to be quite honest, worn-out crews.

And eventually of course the word came round from the German forces, they realised that sinking vessels wasn't enough, that the crews, if they survived and were returned to their bases, could then man new ships pretty quickly, so the word went out that the crews were to be annihilated, so that it began to get common knowledge that this was was what was going to take place, so that everybody took a more alert, more thinking attitude in relation to their role, their responsibility, in lots of - if - most cases. There's always the odd person.

But the demand over there was sort of greater. There was a greater need for all sorts of equipment than ever occurred in the Pacific theatre. And Great Britain alone - just to maintain Britain for one week, the number of merchant ships and crews that were required was phenomenal. And I can best explain this probably by referring people to make reference to the recent Falklands War, do some perusal there, and really, apart from the actual shooting bit it was a merchant navy supply war, the same as the second world war was. And even though our governments, and our media, our historians, don't give credence to this, there's no doubt that the second world war was a transport war, and it was maintained by the crews of all nations through their merchant service.

I've lost track in a sense of where your career is fitting into the picture you're giving me. When we were discussing it before, we were talking about these LT vessels around New Guinea, and then, could you tell me, how did you get over to places like Pearl Harbour, and - and also New York?

Well I came back to Australia. This - this South - see this South Pacific business was a sort of a local thing, but still outside of Australian waters, and I came back to Australia and

pursued the Norwegian consul, and got myself on a very large Norwegian tanker. Very heavily armed Norwegian tanker, actually a special tanker, it had a big flight deck that run from the aft accommodation area right through above the well deck forward, so that we could carry military aircraft for delivery. And depending on the type of aircraft would depend on the number we could carry, but it wouldn't be unusual we could carry six or eight of the aircraft, that's on this flight deck, as we called it, but it was simply only a support area for the - for the aircraft.

(5.00) What's the name of the ship?

It was a motor tanker *Marina*, out of Tonsberg in Norway. And very heavily armed, and ....

What sort of armaments?

We'd have - our main armament was 4-inch - what they termed 4-inch fixed naval gun. That means with - it has fixed ammunition. The - the propellant is in a brass case fixed to the projectile. And then we'd have 3-inch, high angle, quick-firing, which is a very efficient weapon, and it's both for anti-aircraft and for anti-submarine work, and an extremely high velocity weapon. And then multiple mountings of twenty millimetre Oerlikan anti-aircraft. And then large multiple mountings of anti-dive bomb rockets, chemical smoke-generators, and that's about it, I think. And we'd have a - a nucleus of a DEMS group, these were raw Norwegian sailors, who trained us over a period of time to maintain and operate these weapons.

The service maintenance on weapons on a merchant ship at sea is pretty high, specially on the armament in - such as an Oerlikan where you've got pan ammunition. So that it wasn't as simple as sort of lining-up to to go to school.

The - in my case you'd do it when you'd find time, in between jobs. So that you'd go up with a guns-crew of, say, six of us in a guns-crew. All speaking Norwegian, and you have to grasp the sort of intent, because you can't understand the language.

Eventually - and then each man has to rotate, because you've got to be proficient in the other man's function to make the thing viable. So that you get to know that pretty efficiently, and it sort of becomes second nature to you. You also have to be available to work in their magazine areas, which is very confined areas. And very limited facilities. And in the case of the 4-inch requires a considerable travel distance with the projectile in your arms. So that ....

Sorry, when you say considerable, twenty yards?

More than that. I'd say around about fifty yards, at least. And that's on two levels. Because the normal means of getting the ammunition up was through a hatchway, which was in the muzzle, discharge area, so you couldn't use that normally, under those circumstances, so you had to travel a considerable way forward, come aloft to the next level, and then come aft again to supply once they used the daily-use locker up. Which was only a matter of three or four shells.

So that .... And in between that you had to become very proficient in operation of the lifeboats and all the equipment that went with them. These were maintained to a high degree by the Norwegians too, by the way, and the - their lifeboat stores, for instance, were checked

more or less every couple of days, and rotated. And of course on a large Norwegian tanker, as soon as you would leave a port you would take your lifeboats out of the cradle and swing them out ready to launch them, because there wasn't time normally. So they had to have everything spot on, and surprisingly, no matter how much preparation, work and training went in, things still always of course went wrong.

But all in all they - they used to work you pretty long hours, and - and they were pretty intent on ensuring that you did a good day's work, but, by the same token, looked after you well, fed you well, and - to my knowledge. Pay wasn't exciting, but that wasn't my intent to go to sea anyhow, it was to - it wasn't to become rich. But ....

> Why had you left the Americans, and continued with your campaign to get onto a Norwegian ship?

Well that sort of was always my base plan, and I had a - as I say, a yen to go to Europe.

And as it turned out of course this was the - it turned out to be the ultimate, because we went across up into the Persian Gulf, and then around the Mediterranean, and then across the Atlantic, and so it went on. And so that all the things that I'd sort of dreamt about and envisaged that I would have liked to have done as a seaman, and all the things that I wanted to see in the world, this was the sort of way to do it. I'd love now to be able to have the time and the money to sort of do it at my leisure, you know. Properly, on the *QEII*. (Laughs).

(10.00) The - on - on this ship, this was what, getting in the latter stages of the war?

1944, mmm.

> Right. At this time, were you worried about - seriously worried about enemy submarines?

I personally wasn't. I think I - I've thought about this, I've been asked this question, but I thought about it myself as a youngster - I was young enough to seek adventure. I loved the sea, I still do, I'd like to even go back even now. But it's always been my yen. And so that never at any time did it really become boring in any way, even though there was interminable periods where you could expect it to be. And that didn't pose any problem.

And, when you think about it, you're operating in areas - we used to have breakdowns for instance on our main motors, and it might take us up to two or two and a half days to fix them, because you'd be lurching around, and we might be operating in an area that's four miles deep, or six miles deep, where you couldn't drop an anchor or anything. So, when you think about it, and - logically, there's not much chance that you can really do anything, you might be 1000 miles from anywhere anyhow. So that didn't really pose a problem to me.

It wasn't until I was - the war was over, and some - quite some time after the war was over, that I was coming home, that I sort of then sort of realised as to what I'd sort of been a very small part of, and I was pleased to think that nothing had happened, nothing had upset me in any way, and that I hadn't been hurt or what have you, so that there was no problem. No, it didn't - it didn't pose any threat to me at all.

And yet - eventually of course I got to know the language a bit, I used to study the language, study grammar, had books and records and all this sort of thing, so that things were going pretty good, you could sort of talk. Still had this problem of not much money, but that doesn't really matter .... [Break in recording.]

And when I say it doesn't really matter, I'm not being facetious when I say this. One of the things about tankers, gasoline tankers, is that when you go into a port, in wartime especially, you're not in there very long. And possibly thirty hours would be an outside period for a tanker to come into port, discharge its cargo, or in some cases load its cargo, and then to leave the port again. And in that period of time you'd have to carry out your watch-keeping, or your day-work, or whatever you were going to do, so that if you got a couple of hours ashore you were lucky, so that you didn't really have much need for a great deal of money. And lots of cases I've seen myself go ashore in places like New York where they looked after our seamen, I'd have ten cents, which would be the equivalent in those days, in our Australian equivalent, of sevenpence - and that's our subway fare in, and our subway fare home - and come home after having a wonderful night. But of course that - they had wonderful facilities to look after the seamen, and they used to have Radio City Music Hall and those sort of things, so they would look after us.

So getting back to the - the business ....

Well we - we want to come to that in a bit more detail.

Yes.

So that that sort of didn't matter, and only when we had major overhauls, such as if we'd go into a graving[?] dock, or a major overhaul in - where we'd have to pull our main motors completely down and this sort of thing, where'd we'd be in port for five or six weeks - and that would be unusual, where we'd be in the need for a great deal of money. Even though you had to still buy your own clothing, and your normal daily needs and that sort of thing. See the - we had to supply everything ourselves, all we got onboard the ship was a - a full rubber survival suit, which was like a diver's suit, and a life ....

What was the idea of that?

That was to try and keep you alive in - should you be put over the side in the cold areas, to try and give you a chance to survive, till you were rescued, and to keep some form of thermal layer, to keep you warm.

It's - it's an old-fashioned wet-suit we're talking about is it?

In essence, yes. And they had a lot of trouble with them initially, because the earlier ones they didn't weight the soles of the boots, and they lost a lot of seamen initially when they jumped over, by the air rushing up to the sole of the boot, keeping the seaman upturned and he couldn't get back to the surface. So eventually they solved that problem by putting heavy weighted soles in the bottom of the suits, and this worked reasonably well.

(15.00) And they give you a life jacket, and a light, a little light that clipped onto your life jacket, and a whistle, and a tin helmet, and that's the extent of the - the business.

And they don't mollycoddle seamen at sea, they have a schedule on the bulkhead, when you go aboard, and that schedule will tell you what cabin you live in, what port - what cabin you live in, what bunk you sleep in, what lifeboat you will man in an emergency, and what gun you'll man, and so forth. So that's all done there, and you've got to pick up that pretty quickly, otherwise the bosun will very smartly remind you precisely what your responsibility is, and the mate.

But all in all they looked after the Australians, and if there was occasion for some special Norwegian special day, they would try and cook, and - the steward would try and cook up a few days before some nice goodies, and we'd have a little bit of a do. And in my case I wasn't allowed to have any beer, the captain deemed I was too young, but we used to dream up all sorts of stories to say that it was Ned Kelly's birthday, and all these sort of things, to try and con the captain, but he was pretty wise anyhow. But all in all they - they used to look after us pretty well.

Did they give same treatment to Norwegians and Australians?

Yes. Yes. They have a peculiar ....

That wasn't true on the - the American ships was it, they got a higher rate of pay as I ...?

Yes. Yes, much higher, mmm.

I mean you - when you were a crew on an American ship, mixing with American crew, you'd have different rates of pay?

Yes. Yes, different rates of pay.

And Norwegians have some unusual things. Took me a while to wake up. They don't address themselves by their Christian name, or their surname. They call each other by the town that they come from. For instance, if a chap comes from Stavang, he's called Stevanga, and so forth, and if he comes from Oslo, he's called Oslo. And this is the procedure, how they identify each other. And, surprisingly, it works pretty well.

But they - they used to assimilate us into their group pretty good. There was a few problems at odd times used to show up as to what did occur back in Norway pre-1940 and around about that period. But we weren't ....

What sort of things? I mean ....

Politically. So that we weren't interested in that sort of thing, and it really didn't matter, and we didn't know anyhow.

No, but - well okay, but what could you tell from what was going on?

Well they - they had a sort of a quisling government came into Norway, and from what we could gather from snatches of the conversation, and some ....

That's where the name comes from doesn't it?

Yes, that's exactly right. So that there were occasions where - valid or otherwise - where people were accused of leaning in this direction, and - but this was usually after long trips.

Some of our trips on those big tankers, I can remember one of sixty-three days, and by the end of the sixty-three days they were starting to have a bit of a - get a bit naggy, and have a bit of a bash at each other. And it wasn't the sixty-three days really that caused it; previous to the sixty-three days we hadn't really been anywhere of consequence anyhow. And we were up in Sicily and we were in a military - martial - declared martial, military area, and under strict control, in a place called Augusta, big naval base in Sicily, and under military-police control.

And the captain came down to see the crew, because we hadn't been to anywhere where we could have any leave of any consequence for quite a considerable time, and tried to explain that he couldn't tell us where we were going, but he was hoping that eventually we would get to an area where we could have leave. And of course as it turned out we went to Iran and Algiers - same story, military-declared zone, same problem. So that these are the sort of things that can compound, and they added to the overall problem. So it wasn't just the sixty-three days, you know.

So that there were instances of stress, and they showed up in lots of cases. Norway I think recognises this, in the sense that they claim any seaman that spent six months sleeping over 17 500 tons of gasoline up in the European theatre, he deserved a bit of consideration. We're having a bit of trouble getting a - some other governments to recognise this fact, but that's ....

You're referring - what, they get pensions, or what happens?

Yes, they get - they really get looked after, they get pensions and all sorts of goodies. And it's surprising, I've had communication since, just recently, and they've sent me out a booklet, and it's quite amazing what they catered for in relation to their seamen. And at the moment I'm negotiating with a Norwegian/Australian organisation here in Australia that apparently has a fair understanding, and a fair communication with homeland Norway, hoping to rectify this problem.

(20.00) But there's no doubt, they - they were one of the first to recognise that - the role their merchant seamen played during the second world war. And, as you know of course, the United States has given full recognition to their merchant seamen. At the moment we're hoping to gain that similar recognition through the McGirr Commission here in Australia.

Just while we're talking about the Norwegians, you mentioned passports earlier, and medical coverage, and talking about the way in which different nationalities treated their seamen - just elaborate on that please?

Yes. This was one of the problems as a young Australian seaman going overseas into the European theatre. Leaving Australia, no medical checks whatsoever, no passport, the document of identity as the only thing that we carried. Initially like an A4 sheet of paper which became dilapidated, and that was improved upon, giving us a cardboard document of identity.

But at no time did anybody give us inoculations such as cholera, yellow fever, these sort of things. And it was necessary after going right over into the European area that we received

these shots by medical checks on port authorities on entering ports. Where we couldn't produce documentation of having received certain medical coverage, that it became necessary that we then took steps to receive inoculations. The US authorities, for instance, were paramount on this in relation to health, and I was very pleased eventually to be in a position where I was provided with that coverage. Whereas here in Australia absolutely nothing was catered for at all.

The ship you were on you were just talking - a particularly long voyage. Where - the - in terms of interesting places you went to, where did you go from that Mediterranean sphere that you just described?

Well we - we were over in a place called Talara in Northern Peru. Which was an unusual area. We were picking up a load of oil there. And when I say unusual, it's unusual in this sense, that they had port protection both by their - their navy in the port area itself, and by the army on the land. And when we arrived in Northern Peru they sent a detachment of the Peruvian army down to guard the vessel.

Peru was neutral during ...?

Yes, that's right. So they sent this detachment of the Peruvian army down. They had rifles and everything, but no bolts. No bolts in the rifle, they wouldn't give them them. And the only food and water that the soldiers got in the three days that we were there was what the ship provided them with. And - but by the same token - and they were poorly-shod, poorly-catered for - and yet the navy, the sailors on the port protection vessels were well-catered for, well-clothed, well-fed, well-everything. It was obvious to us that there was a few political influences there as to which group of the armed services you were in as to how you survived, on how you transpired.

And, as you mentioned about neutrality, while we were there it intrigued us, we'd just come in blacked-out, not even a glimmer from a mirror, and in comes this huge passenger vessel, lit-up like a Christmas tree, music, and people in flowing gowns, and you could see - like this area, Northern Peru was a pretty poor area, and here's this - the complete opposite on this vessel.

A Peruvian vessel?

Peruvian vessel. And everybody living the good life. And when we went ashore in the town the town there is so bad that even the dogs, there was no hair on the dogs. The town consisted of like you see in the movies, like an old Western town with boardwalks and bat-wing doors, and those big vultures that have an area of their neck about eight inches with no feathers on and this huge hooked beak. We could have - and when the backdrop of course is the Andes, and that's got to be seen to be believed. So that that's the sort of environment where we'd go, which is not a good environment for a seaman really.

Why's that?

Well there's no facilities for a seaman, none whatsoever, and the only redeeming feature - and of course it was a redeeming feature - was that you could buy beer there made in - of course right through South America in those days. They call it [Cevisa?], it was made in Milwaukee, in the United States, transported down, and you could buy a quart bottle for what they -

Peruvian currency, one [soldiero?], which was - the equivalent Australian was elevenpence halfpenny. So that was pretty good buying. One quart of beer for elevenpence halfpenny, so that was the only - and you could buy watches pretty cheaply.

(25.00) A lot of the shopkeepers were White Russians, but they had a - a sort of a barbed wire run down the centre of the town. The Indians were one side, and the Castilians were on the other, and ever the twain shall meet. And I don't know, I see a lot of documentaries now, and I don't know whether it's really changed a great deal, you know.

But then we went from there ....

It's exploded, I think, but ....

Yes, that's right.

So that we went down to off-load some oil at New Zealand, and then we came back across the Southern Ocean, right up through the Indian Ocean, through the Arabian Sea, and round through the Straits [sic] of Hormuz, and up into the Persian Gulf. And went up to Bahrain Island and picked up some more oil.

And that's where - and I think this point should be mentioned at this stage - that's where approximately seventy-four percent of the cargo for the Russian front went, is up through the Persian Gulf. Only twenty-six percent went around the top, around Arkhangel, Bear Island, and to Murmansk. The cost in ships and crews was so high that they had to come up with a secondary route, and that was the route, was either down around the Cape, or through the Suez and up through Persian Gulf to the [Hadd?], and up to - which now you hear a lot about, through the Shatt al Arab Waterway, and Khorramshahr and those sort of places. Basra. So that was a busy old waterway, and that's why they used tankers.

Could you - those names, could you spell them. That waterway, that key waterway, you mentioned?

Well that's the - the junction of the Tigris and the Euphrates River, and its spelt, S-H-A-T-T , a hyphen, A-L-A-R-A-B [sic]. The Shatt al Arab. Yes, mmm. Waterway.

And surprisingly it's - it's like a delta area, and big ships can't get up there, and they've got to sort of run smaller vessels to sort of top up. They can get them in and fill up. Bit like Brisbane, you can sort of bring them in, fill them up so far, and then they've got to take off.

And it was a - surprisingly, an unusual thing that when we first went through the Straits of Hormuz, which in recent times has been in the news, we were called amidships by the captain and warned that should our ship broach in that area there was a possibility that we could be attacked by local Bedouins and what have you, and that the ship could be pillaged and what have you, and we wouldn't know what our result would be. And I thought to myself, 'My god', you know, I never expected this sort of thing.

And these are the sort of things, as I say, as a young seaman, like every hour of every day was monumental in the sense that no matter how many books you read, or how many movies you'd seen, you just couldn't sort of replace it with what you could experience.

And that particular waterway has a - an enormous phosphorescence input in its water. In night-time going up - it's a pretty big waterway, even though it's got a lot of traffic, you'd be going up through there, and the light illumination from the phosphorescence, you could nearly sit up on the fo'c'sle of the tanker, and that's pretty high up in the water, and read the paper.

But it had added problems, that people on watch would notice things appearing to be torpedoes, which turned out to be bottlenose dolphins, coming in at a phenomenal rate of knots. Passing under the vessel and out the other side of course. Everybody would have a seizure until the moment passed. Even though this happens a lot up there, at that particular area, you're never really sure, you know.

So that - and the - what amazed us was the quantity of fish in the Gulf. But for every fish there was about twenty birds. So that, even though it's a huge desert expanse area in those days, there was still an awful lot of things, wonderful things, to see, and it's an area really worth visiting.

Was there serious concern that there would be enemy submarines in that area?

Not necessarily in the Gulf itself, but outside the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz into the Arabian Sea, yes. Both German and Japanese.

There was a fair amount of traffic from Aden, across that area. Not necessarily into the Straits of Hormuz, but from Aden protectorate, which was a bunkers port, for - there was still a lot of coal-burning ships being used in those days, and for water, across to both - to India, and what was then the Indian protectorate or what have you, which is now Pakistan, and down to Bombay and those places, so there was a fair amount of shipping moving through there, and it was a prime old target area, yes.

Did you see anything when you were there?

Not particularly, no, no.

You've got - I'll just ....

[Recording ends on Side Two of Tape One].

Identification: This is Tape Two, Side One, John Maher, end of identification.

Right, well perhaps just going back to the Persian Gulf that you were just talking about, where to from there?

Well we went around to Aden. For what reason I don't know, but most ships called at Aden, to - for bunkers and water and so forth. It's also a convoy-holding area, a very large convoy-holding area. Policed at that time I think by both British and Indian navies.

And we were there for, I think, two or three days, for some reason or other. Whether it was to do with the traffic in - further up the line towards the canal I don't know, I wasn't sort of privy to this. But we didn't need any fuel or water, we were pretty right, because we'd just come back out of the gulf.

So for whatever reason we were there, we - whether there was some flap outside I don't know, but we came back out, and then entered the Red Sea itself, went up the Red Sea, and up into the Great Bitter Lakes. And then from the Great Bitter Lakes up through into Port Tewfik, and then up ....

How do you spell Tewfik?

T-H-E-W-F-I-K (sic), I think. Mmm.

And then up through the Suez to Port Said. We stayed at Port Said for about - I suppose six or seven hours. But on the way up we had to pull aside our sort of - they used to have a traffic concourse control, where we'd be going north, and they'd be bringing stuff south, and of course, even though we were a tanker, and we had a priority, capital ship had more priority.

You mean naval ships?

Yes. So we used to have pull over for, say, a cruiser or a battleship or something, and it would come down, and we'd dip our flag, because a merchant ship recognises - gives it the respect it's due. And this used to delay our run through the canal.

And I should preface that by saying that down at Taufiq they rigged up the vessel for night-running in the canal by putting big searchlights on fore and aft and what have you, and - because that area's - was prone to aerial attack, from - because the Mediterranean really is a narrow waterway. And as you come out of Port Said there's all these - the upperworks of merchant ships everywhere, that had been caught just outside - coming out of the canal.

We then went up to - up past Pantelleria, and into Augusta in Sicily, which was a big naval base. And it again is like that area up in the Gulf. It's the - it's the original Europe, the real old area, and to an Australian of course something really to see. It's the first time I could see Mount Etna, for instance, the volcano. Never seen a volcano in my life of course, till then.

And this naval port, they'd knocked it around a bit, and knocked a lot of the Italian aircraft around and what have you. And the English navy were pretty strict there about what transpired. Anyhow we had to discharge some petrol there for the forces, and there was no berth for us, so we had to - every tanker has a line that goes over the top of its aft superstructure, and discharges directly over the stern.

Well we rigged our - and then we rigged up a line to float ashore on forty-four gallon drums, to discharge a fair amount of petrol. And while we were discharging we broke a flange up on our boat-deck.

What's a flange?

Where the pipe connects. And we had a spill of petrol, which meant we were in trouble, we had to kill all galley-fires, all machinery, and so forth, post special guards. Get our fire-hoses, and dilute our - the fuel and everything, trying to repair the damage. The navy got quite concerned, because we were a very large vessel, and we had a fair amount of petrol on, and they didn't want us blowing up half of Sicily. So they come down and read the riot act to us in no uncertain terms. And, being the senior service, we took it all in good faith.

Anyhow, to cut a long story short ....

(5.00) It wasn't much help was it, I mean you ...?

No, it's not much help, but anyhow that's how it goes.

So, after we tidied all that up and everything, there was a Greek vessel near us that was apparently having a bit of trouble of some sort also, and a British destroyer come down, and they - I can distinctly remember, they boarded this Greek vessel, it's - I never ever did find out what the problem was, but it was more serious than ours, obviously.

But we left there and went round past Malta, and around to - into the Algorin (sic) Sea into Iran and Algiers. Again a martial area. Martial - military area. And a convoy-holding area. And a pretty strict area too, by the way.

Strict in what way, what they were doing?

In relation to military control.

And the seaman's - he's always the odd man out in a - in a martial area. In the sense that he has limited identification, and his dress is open to question. And in lots of cases we used to buy - if we were in - specially in Egypt and these places, buy military khakis, and we'd wear them. Because they're good to launder, they last long, good to iron up. And of course you couldn't walk twenty yards in these places without a British red cap picking you up, and he wouldn't believe you anyhow. Next thing you spend half your leave in the Provost office trying to explain to him and prove to him who you are.

And then they'd limit the amount of currency you could take ashore. Let's say 300 francs, which is a very paltry sum of money. And of course they used to get up to all sorts of tricks, some of the seamen would wear two or three shirts. And all sorts of extra clothing. And then flog this to the local population of course, and make a fortune, to have some money to spend ashore. When I - when I - that's a mis - wrong term to use, a fortune, but they used to sell - they used to get enough money to have a bit of a - bit of shore leave.

But it was mostly to no avail, because everywhere we went was 'out of bounds', 'out of bounds', 'out of bounds', and that was the end of the story. Those sorts of places I'd draw my 300 francs, and I'd put - keep some for souvenir, and put the rest back in my paybook. So you didn't sort of have much out of that.

And then from there - we waited there for a while, I forget ....

When you were going ashore, I mean were you by yourself, or did - was it a fairly companionable group, mixed Norwegian, mixed Australian, mainly Australians, what was it?

Yes, well in that particular place we were anchored in the roads, what they called the roads, the Iran roads, and we'd go ashore in ship's boat. And there might be twenty of us go ashore, and - but by the time you hit the berth they'd break up into small groups and away they'd go, you know. Usually there'd only be about two or three if you're lucky, together.

And what, you'd - you'd stick with Australians?

You'd try not to go ashore on your own. You wouldn't go ashore on your own, no, if it was humanly possible.

And you'd stay with Australians?

Not necessarily, but usually, yes, if there was an Australian on the ship, yes.

You see one of the problems in those areas is the junior population of Algerians has a habit of harassing you, and pretty belligerently, and if you attempt to say even anything nasty to them they bring in the adult population, and then there's all sorts of problems. (Laughs). So that they're not really good areas even in those days, and I don't know whether they've really improved.

Anyhow we waited there for some time actually, for a - in a convoy-holding area. And then we moved to go - become part of a large convoy. Went out through the Straits [sic] of Gibraltar, and out past [Salgeseras?] there and - in Spain. And this was a very big convoy, and we picked up a number of components from Gibraltar. There was an English component, of a large number of ships going to England, and we were with a group of - going to both Canada and to the United States. And out around the Azores area somewhere, lo and behold as the sun come up there was the English convoy defence vessels waiting to take that section of the British part of the convoy.

And they took off, and we all waved and what have you, and then the rest of the convoy, the - which was still a large component, continued over to the east coast of the United States, and then we kept down - going down through Florida Straits around to the Gulf of Mexico.

And it was in Florida, going down in Florida Straits, when we actually did see a submarine on the surface. And he appeared to be in trouble, and there were a number of vessels - whether they were trying to save him or attack him I'm not really sure - but he was on an acute angle. And we come plodding down, and of course one of the escort - one of the whatsename vessels, naval vessels come out, and give us a good sort of a going over, and told us to clear out in no uncertain terms, and made us go away from where we didn't want to go. And we had to go fifty miles away from where we wanted to go.

(10.00) What they'd captured a submarine, had they?

I'm not sure. I guess that's probably what had happened, because that was a pretty prolific area for them. You see there was a lot of tanker traffic used to come out of the gulf, out of the Caribbean there, from Curacao, and Aruba, which was a very rich area for oil. And they had a habit, which was a bad feature, of cleaning their tanks on the way in, and discharging it over into the ocean. Nowadays they fine you if they catch you. Even with slop tanks, and - with the result they used to leave this great swathe of material, you couldn't go wrong in finding out where the tankers were, you know. They were their own real enemy. And it wasn't unusual that you had to be extra alert, because that was a pretty bad area, for 'under-sea bootens [sic]', as we called them, you know.

Under-sea, whats?

Under-sea bootens, the German name for a submarine, yes.

Bootens?

Yes.

How do you spell a booten?

B-O-O-T-E-N. Mmm. So that - I'm not really sure - that's one of the frustrating things about lots of things when you're at sea, is the things that happen that you can never really get explained.

Not long after that, down towards Key West, we were going down to - very hot day, very hot and humid and still, and we had all our fans going in the accommodation area. And 100s, literally hundreds and hundreds of tiny little birds, like our Australian canary, came out of the area from the mainland and descended on the vessel and come through the portholes and into the accommodation. Before we could realise what was happening they were getting splattered by the fans over the bulkheads and deckheads and what have you. These little birds were everywhere, poor little beggars, and we shut down everything to try and minimise the loss of life. I suppose they were with us for another five miles. Just as if somebody blew a whistle, they were gone. And that's sort of like that western boundary of that - you hear them talk about now, the Golden Triangle, you know.

You mean the Bermuda Triangle?

Yes, the Bermuda Triangle, that's right, that's the one I'm thinking about. And ....

The Golden Triangle's heroin.

Yes, that's exactly right.

So that you hear a lot about that, you read a lot about it, and I always sort of remember this one particular incident, where everything seemed to happen at once.

And it's such a beautiful area through there, down through the Florida Straits, it's - it's real Captain Morgan country, you know, and really beautiful. We weren't enjoying it fully, in the sense that a lot of us had food-poisoning which we'd contracted from crated fish, that we'd picked up in Egypt. And we - three of us got so bad that they radioed in for a rescue Catalina to come out to the vessel to take the more seriously ill into a place called Tampa. Near St Petersburg on the west coast of Florida. And they never ever did arrive, and we went up to Mobile in Alabama, and arrived in Alabama, and we bought the local paper in the morning, and here it was extolling the virtues of this Gulf rescue service, which we weren't impressed about, you know. (Laughs). Yes.

Talking of - of going ashore, what was it like, what sort of reception did you get when you went ashore in America?

Pretty good. Surprisingly in places like Alabama, which we went to a number of times, and we even did a - later on we did a main overhaul there and all in the dry dock and what have

you, and we went to lots of places. Like Pascagoula in Mississippi's a big ship maintenance and ship repair area of [Ingles?] shipyards.

> Could you spell Pascagoula? I'm thinking of the transcriber, that's why I ask you these things.

P-A-S-C-A-G-O-U-L-L-A [sic]. Pascagoula.

And a lot of people - for instance we were there, and I was pretty fair in those days, and we were getting some work done, and the bloke said to me, he said, 'Where are you from?', and I said, 'Australia', and he said, 'Where's that?', and I had a quick think, and I thought, 'Oh yes, American, he'd - he'd know where the Philippines was, or know where New Guinea was', and I said, 'Well south of New Guinea.' No, he didn't know where that was. I said, 'Well south of the Philippines.' No, he'd never heard of that either.

And in the end he was - I reached the conclusion he was - he more or less considered we were Austrians, not Australians, you know. And it was amazing how little they knew of Australia, and Australians.

And we used to get into a fair bit of conversation. We went to a lot of areas in the South, right through from Texas, right back through Louisiana, and Mississippi, Alabama. And we then started a run between South America and the Gulf coast, and so we sort of had a fair involvement, and go to quite unique places down there, like places like Lake Charles in Louisiana, where the oil port is inland.

And that area is a real levee country, where it's mostly little mounds of dirt with square miles of swamp water, and you'll see this huge tanker wending its way up through these pools of water, say eighteen miles inland, to pick up a massive load of oil. It's sort of - and out on these little hummocks they've got houses. And they've got that - that - what do they call it? Spanish moss, it grows wild there, all over the trees. And then they've got that sea-grass, where they have the fires in it. And it sweeps across, you know.

And - and yet you go a bit further around the Gulf, we went to a place called Mustang Island, in Texas, and what a miserable place. And they got that stuff that grows on the prairie, and it builds up in its size and intensity until it's nearly the size of a house. With the wind behind it, about a forty-five knot wind, pushing it down, if it runs over the top of you, it'll squash you. You know. And the place is all desert as far as you can see. You know.

And the variance in the type of country, the types of people, for instance, that inhabit the - those areas in the Gulf, and how most of them east of Texas live off the Gulf itself, whereas Texas lives off the oil. And, to a degree in the northern areas, the cattle, you know.

And we go round to places like Tampico in Mexico, and - where you see really a third world country at its worst, and where there's no doubt they've got the oil, and they've got the assets from the oil, but it's not really going back to the people, you know, or the community or the country. And if ever a youngster wants an education, really, when you think back in retrospect, they couldn't have a better one than become a merchant seaman and travel the world.

Well just going on the comments you made then, the experiences you were going through, was it effecting your political perspectives on the world?

Not really. I didn't have a great deal of interest in politics, even at that stage. Probably because, in all fairness, I didn't have any problem from the time I'd left school getting employment. Always had a shilling in my pocket, and in Australia you could do well with two and sixpence in your pocket, which was the equivalent of twenty-five cents, and, no, it didn't have much whatsename. I happened to be in the United States later on when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died, and we happened to be down again, down in Mobile in Alabama, and the police came round and virtually closed the town up. And turfed everybody out and what have you.

But, by the same token, I was at another place in New Orleans, and I was wearing a slacksuit, or I purchased a slacksuit. And it had a brand on the shirt, 'Kangaroo brand'. It was like a herringbone twill slacksuit, I hadn't seen - never seen them here in Australia at that time. Like - it's like a twin-set. And there was - I went out to get a haircut.

And I - I happened to mention to the barber that this - I'd just bought this and what have you and that it was Kangaroo brand. 'Oh', he said, 'you're an Australian?', I said, 'Yes', and he said, 'Oh well, that's what it's all about.' He said - he said, 'You're the only country' - and this just goes to show you - he said, 'When we send all those war materials over', he said, 'you send a ship back full of wool', he said, 'and you pay for it there and then', he said, 'and you're the only country in the world that's doing it.' So it just goes to show you.

And he was aware, at the time I think John Curtin had just passed away, and some of them were well-educated, had a good understanding of not only the politics of their own country but overseas. But I found a lot of lack of understanding of anywhere outside of their own area of the community in the southern part of the United States.

Did you get up into the north, on the east coast?

Yes, did a fair bit up around the north, and lived in New York for a while, and even worked out of there, on what we called the harbour boat delivery pool, on American flag vessels. Which I really shouldn't have been doing, because a lot of it was coast-wise work. And, even though I was a resident alien, it was purely for American citizens. But we used to sort of be aware of the Justice Department, as to how we could sort of survive, and how we couldn't, and how you could get extensions on your work tickets and what have you.

And they were pretty thorough over there, by the way. One of our blokes in New Orleans jumped ship. And I was up New York later on, and I happened to talk to a bloke that had - with the Justice Department, I was asking for a permit, and he recognised the ship's name, and he said, 'We got one of your blokes' he said, 'over at Chicago', he said. Six weeks after he jumped ship they caught him in a restaurant in Chicago, pearl-diving, as they call it over there, that's washing dishes, you know. So that's not bad, when you think of the population that must have been going on, and the movement of people. So that was pretty thorough.

(20.00) But they used to raid various haunts, the Justice Department, and ask you to produce your whatsename, but it was a - still left to the individual. You'd have, say, a ten-day permit. If you wanted to extend it you had to write to your coastguard department that issued the

permit, asking for an extension. In most if not all cases they would grant it to you. So it was pretty good.
But what you had to watch was cases where you didn't have sufficient documentation.

Ellis Island was still a live thing in those days. Lots of seamen from Central and South American countries that boarded American ships or were employed on American sh ps, entered America, and were placed eventually in Ellis Island, because they couldn't produce the documentation that was necessary to justify their - the fact that they were in the US and not employed.

And what happened on Ellis Island?

Ellis Island was an immigration prison, and if you haven't got the representation that you should have, from your legations or consuls or what have you, you can get yourself into some bother, you know. And ....

How long would you stay in Ellis Island?

Well I struck a poor beggar up in the war shipping administration in New York one day. I forget, he was from Honduras or somewhere. He was just beside himself. We went up and it was Yom Kippur's birthday. I'd never heard of him till then. And nobody was at work. This was wartime US, and Yom Kipper was more important apparently.

And this poor beggar was trying to get some documentation from the war shipping administration, who were responsible for the crewing and manning of the vessels, and of course he was looking like going back into Ellis Island that night, because there was nobody there to process his case. He was making reference to suicide, and I was trying to do my best to sort of convince him not to. Only a young fellow too he was, but he told me. I forget now, time's erased it, but he was in and out of this Ellis Island that many times it just wasn't funny. And all he'd done was been crewed down in some tiny little banana port to fill a hole in a vessel, to do a job, and when they reached mainland US, they just promptly forgot all about him. Discharged him, end of story. You know.

And it can happen of course. We were in a place called Puerto la Cruz in Venezuela, and there was a New Zealander in prison there. And the mate and I were approached by a young lady at night-time, and she, sobbing and carrying on, said that this chap of hers was incarcerated, and could we assist her. And we sort of played it off a bit, but she was so upset we thought, 'Oh well we'd better see what we can do.' And this place by the way, the port area was in barbed wire, then there was a bushtrack up through the scrub, and then the city was in barbed wire, or the village, and guards on the gate, and they search you before you go in to see you've got no arms, and when you go inside everybody else is armed to the teeth.

But to cut a long story short we got this New Zealander out of the jail.

How did you do that?

Well I'm not prepared to say at this stage, but we got him out of the jail.

Well I mean, I think you're - you're fairly safe from the South American authorities.

Well sufficient to say that we - we bribed certain people, not using currency but using other facilities such as liquor and cigarettes and what have you, and we smuggled him out of the town past the gate security, past the wharf security, past our own ship security, and took him aboard the vessel. A chap named - [Daniel Whitehead?] was his name. We took him with us back to northern United States.

Did the captain eventually find out about him?

Oh yes. Well we got him to give himself up about a day or so outside of South America, and he - he radioed ahead of course, and the immigration were waiting for him, and I got a little clip somewhere inside where they eventually deported him back to New Zealand.

But the moral of the story is this, that - in discussions with him - he'd missed his ship at this little port in Venezuela, and of course there was no legation there, no consulate, no nothing, so there was nobody to sort of look after whether he lived died or what have you. And, without blowing any trumpets or anything, the only reason I think he's alive today is because the mate and I took the time to sort of make sure that he stayed alive you know.

And that's how main - mainly seamen are, they look after each other even in the worst of situations, and usually keep track of each other in wartime by going to the seamen's missions, and they have a book in there. And each seaman when he goes into the mission he signs his name, the ship's name, where he's been, what have you, and you can go in and have a quick perusal of the book and see who's been, where they're going.

(25.00) And if you're going through, say, Panama Canal or Suez Canal, and there's a ship you recognise, you converse with them, and that hasn't changed since the sailing days, since the days of sail, where they took a year to get to Australia, that is still occurring today on merchant ships in places like the Panama Canal, say in Balboa, Cristobal, Colon. In Suez, in places like Port Said and what have you. Tewfik. Even in the Cape Cod canal, and seamen are still conversing with each other exactly as they did a 100 years ago.

The seamen's missions, who runs them?

Usually they are a religious organisation. A church organisation, and they do a wonderful job. They've always done a wonderful job, and they still do a wonderful job. They receive very little patronage from - which they should receive. By the same token, nowadays of course the seaman - in all fairness to the missions, the seaman of today doesn't require that need. He seems to have all the things he needs aboard ship. They've got - they have refrigerators full of beer, TV, you name it. Short trips. Lots of them now have got two crews for the one ship, whereas in our day there was none of that, and we were - we were all foreign-flagged, so in lots of cases you'd - the place you went to that's all there was. You might go to some places, for instance Covenas in Colombia, with that Che Guevara, old Fidel Castro's mate, he used to come down out of the bush there, with American lend-lease jeeps with .50 calibres on and shoot up the tank farms. Well we'd go in there on a big tanker and ....

A bit earlier than Che Guevara?

Yes, yes.

And we used to go in there in a big tanker, and the only - we'd go on shore leave, which was ridiculous really. And you'd come ashore from the - what they call a T-berth, about five mile - from out in the ocean into the jungle. And there'd be a group of kids there with horses, and that was the only transport. And when you hired the horse, the kid you hired it from, he rides on the back, he wo 't let the horse go, see. And the only enjoyment is to run up and down through the village hurrahing the village. And that's it. Once the ride finished, go back to the ship. (Laughs).

Well talking of that sort of thing, at one stage you talked about landing in - on the east coast of Canada, and going down to New York, and you were saying some interesting things about the way in which Australians were being looked after in New York?

Yes, that was an outstanding thing was the - in West 56th Street in New York was a club called the ANZAC Club, run by a group of American women, and in some cases some Canadian women. And any Australian or New Zealand seaman that arrived in the environs of the City of New York, if they proceeded to the club they would arrange for them to be accommodated with families who had nominated to look after any number of seamen.

What sort of familes would be nominating for Australian seamen?

Well these were middle-class families that had - well you could say in some cases probably well-to-do by Australian standards, but probably middle-class by American standards, and ....

What, they had some Australian connection possibly?

No, no, they simply - part of the war effort. They had a greater attitude towards the war effort I think in the United States, a lot of people, than we did in Australia. For instance, even though we had coupons and that for our meat and everything, over there they had Meatless Tuesday, in other words they went without meat for one day, which I thought was unique.

But even though you - these families were well-off and that sort of thing, and they used to look after us, and they used to give us the family car - which we couldn't drive anyhow, because neither this other chap and myself drove, because cars really weren't the vogue when we were kids as far as the average Australian family was concerned - they did ....

That's fairly generous. It's fairly hard to imagine, well, many people giving two strangers, friendly they may be, two friendly young strangers, the family car.

Yes, well they used to give us the run of the house, it was a two-storey place, a beautiful home out on Long Island. And, as I said, they made us honorary members of the Manhasset Yacht Club, which ....

Which yacht club?

The Manhasset. The Manhasset Sound, that's a beautiful - you may hear about it in the America's Cup a lot. It's a well - it's a well-to-do yacht club involved in the America's Cup.

And that had a unique involvement during the war, is that while we were there there was a chap arrested by the FBI because one of the women at the ANZAC Club thought he was impersonating an Australian. And, surprisingly, this is one of the quirks of fate, he was an Australian in the Canadian Black Watch, and that's a bit of a ....

[Recording ends on Side One of Tape Two].

Identification: Side Two, Tape Two, John Maher.

Sorry, could you just go back a second.

So he actually was an Australian that apparently was overseas at that particular time of the war, a youngster, and he eventually joined the Canadian Black Watch, which was a pretty good regiment in Canada. He was on leave in New York, came down to the ANZAC Club.

One of the women at the ANZAC Club who was talking to him, and he was telling her that he was an Australian, and then also telling her that he was in the Canadian Black Watch, and she was under the impression that there was only the Black Watch in the UK, and so on. So that, to cut a long story short, she thought he was a bit suspicious, so she notified the Justice Department. And they don't muck around, they sent a FBI group up, and they interrogated him, and actually arrested him, in the sense that they took him away from the yacht club for interrogation, but all his bona fides were correct like.

But she thought he was possibly a Nazi spy. And I think it - the story eventually ended up in the media in the US. But one of those things, and we didn't complain or anything, because we were pleased to think that they were looking after everybody. (Laughs).

But you could - we could go to that yacht club, and even though we were honorary members, they could really - from the time we stepped in the door they'd really look after us. And I often wonder now if I went back and asked for the attendance book for that era and pointed out those days I'm sure that they would have still looked after us, you know.

Because Australians had a pretty good rapport with New Yorkers at that time. Even though a lot of people still pushed the old republican bit and that sort of thing in relation to Australia, and asked us why didn't we stop being British subjects and only Australian citizens, and we were proud that we were British subjects at that particular time and we told them so. But all that aside Australians got on pretty well with them.

And they - they for instance used to give us double-passes to Radio City Music Hall. All you had to pay was the entertainment tax and - into the [Center?] building, where [Sonya Heaney?] would have a show on and this sort of thing. And we'd go to the Modern Art Museum for parties on a Wednesday night, and fantastic nights, you know, and they - you couldn't - in New York an Australian seaman, as I said, could go ashore with ten cents, five cents for his fare in, five cents out, and have the most wonderful night every night, as long as he could stand up to the strain. (Laughs).

Well I mean considering - in terms of class terms a merchant seaman would normally rank on - on most conventional sort of terms, fairly low down, I mean that's - that's very good treatment isn't it?

Yes. By the same token there was a party used to be held up on 5th Avenue on Sunday night. And the mate and I got to hear of this, and being sort of resourceful Australians ....

You were an ordinary seaman at this stage? Or an able - able seaman?

Yes, an able seaman. We went up to this party. And one of the things that you had to - there is a class-conscious group in New York, same as everywhere else, and this was the young single ladies of the upper crust in New York, used to entertain the officer gentlemens of the services, and we broke through the barriers to get into the group, and we used to - where you had to sign this book, they had an attendance book, and we used to sign, 'WT', as wireless telegraphers, that's the only thing we could come up with pretty close to home, see. And eventually of course I think they twigged. They didn't really say anything to us, but they sort of give us the cold shoulder, but for quite a few number of weeks we did pretty good. (Laughs).

But the modern - modern - the New York Modern Art Museum, that was fantastic. It was held on the roof-top of the museum, and wonderful food, wonderful entertainment, and wonderful hostess, both male and female, really used to look after us, you know.

(5.00) The - just to double back in the story a little bit, and bouncing again off a comment that you were making earlier, and that is, the sorts of ships, particularly back in Australia - you've been away from Australia in the story for quite a while now - back in Australia the sorts of ships that were brought in during the wartime, what were your observations working in that shipyard up in Brisbane?

Well the ships that were built in Brisbane, the river-class freighters, that's - they were round about the 10 000 ton mark, and the B class, they were 6 000 ton, and then the D class, 2 500 ton, they were very sound - soundly constructed vessels. Excuse me. And very well-built, and I think quite well-designed for that current trade at that time.

They then started to use the larger ones to do overseas work, and of course they really I don't think shaped up with the same modern type of vessel from overseas at that time. But virtually it's a case of economics I think from a commercial viewpoint in relation to the type of vessel. Nowadays of course it's all specialist vessels, whereas in those days it was all general purpose vessels, or general cargo vessels.

And the river-class freighter, why I say there's some still running, it had that unique feature of a five cargo hold vessel, well-designed, pretty good main motors, with the right carrying capacity to make it a viable proposition. But of course probably would have been priced out of the market, as appears to be the case in lots of Australian vessels and companies in recent times.

You were saying that quite a few antiquated vessels were being brought back for wartime service?

Yes, anything that moved in Australia was - if not used for commercial work, was seconded by the - either the Australian navy, or by the US army, or by the United States navy. So, because there was so many authorities of some considerable domain after vessels, usually shallow-draught vessels, that there was demand for really - even for normal pleasure craft, local pleasure craft.

For instance here in - where I live here in Bribie Island, the two vessels that used to come here was the [*Cooper*?] and the [*Doomba*?]. Both coal-fire - one was coal-fired, one oil-fired, and shallow-draught commercial passenger freighter vessels, used by the populace of south-east Queensland over the years very successfully. They were employed quite efficiently during the second world war. I think one was lost up in the islands. The *Cooper* returned, and went back into service, but I think old age caught up with her.

But it wouldn't be unusual. For instance there was always - and this is the important thing to understand - there was always a market for Australian vessels. When we'd finished with them after fifty or sixty years, we could still sell them to places like the Philippines, no trouble whatsoever, and they'd use them for another forty or fifty years, so that there was still a market there, they were still a viable proposition. And because of our situation in relation to distances here in Australia - and we still experience this problem. For instance Darwin I think is still placed in the position where it - it relies a lot on probably one or more shipping companies to maintain the populace of Darwin. With its daily requirements.

> Just to go back to that end of war phase, where did the end of the war find you?

Well I was in - I was in New York for the victory in Europe celebrations, which was fantastic to experience, in New York City. I was in, I think, Cristobal in Panama for the victory in Pacific War. Coming back from the Pacific.

I'd spent a fair bit of time in the northern Pacific by this time, and I was with the US army, marine division, at that time, operating out of a place called [Fort Mason?] in California, originally from Bay Ridge in Brooklyn.

(10.00) And they - the US army played a - surprisingly, a very big part in the marine traffic involvement in the South Pacific, central Pacific and northern Pacific during the second world war. Surprisingly they played a - the logistic support was - a lot of it was US army. So that - and they had a helluva support chain that went right back to the east coast of the United States, that sort of - that controlled and administered this, right across mainland USA, across the Pacific and into countries like Australia, and right through eventually into Japan.

> At the end of the war, looking back, what had the war done for you?

Well it - it allowed me to see how the rest of the world, or a lot of it - I ended up visiting about thirty-five countries - it allowed me to sort of briefly in - in some cases, and to a more comprehensive degree in others, to understand how the culture and background of those nations and the people that live in them, and that made me, I think, richer for it, in the sense that I could appreciate, without a doubt, and I underline this, without a doubt, that Australia, no doubt, at that time, was the best country in the world. No doubt whatsoever about that. And I feel, to a lesser degree, probably is also now, but not as good as in those days.

> What are the things that stick in your mind when you - when you say that?

Well, for instance, even though times weren't real good when I was a youngster in Australia, the standard of living was extremely good when you think about. For instance I can distinctly remember when the Americans came here in 1942, they were able to go down into

Brisbane City, and get a big steak dinner, with two eggs, and a big plate of chips and everything for two and sixpence. Now not long after that I was over in US, the United States mainland, and the community there could not afford to buy steak, nor could they get it, and you - even if you could, you wouldn't get it for two and sixpence.

So that I can remember at one stage I nearly married an American girl in - out in Brooklyn, in New York. Danish girl actually. And I can remember her mother querying me as to the background of Australia, and prices, rents, and all the things that mothers are concerned about. I couldn't answer a lot of the questions, because I sort of hadn't given much thought to those as a - as a youngster. And she asked me what the average wage was, and it was about thirty shillings. And when I mentioned thirty shillings, and she didn't know what thirty shillings was, and we sort of worked it out, and she was appalled to think that it was only about three dollars. And - whereas youths of the same age over in the United States, for instance places like [Littleferry] and Hackensack with some of the mates I was working with from New Jersey, at sixteen years of age they owned their own automobile. Not a new one, but one worth 4 000 to 6 000 dollars. And they had bank accounts, whereas that wasn't possible in Australia. So conversely they had some good things going for them.

But I think we had a lot of better things going for us. Your thirty shillings went an awful long way. There's no doubt whatsoever about that. Getting back to the eighty-four hour week as a - a boilermaker, the wage I was getting there was so poor it wasn't funny, and it wasn't really worth going to work for, for the work I was doing. But that didn't concern me a great lot in those days. But looking back now, I think security-wise, stability-wise, there's no doubt this country is, or was at that time, superior to anywhere in the world.

And yet New Zealand impressed me of all countries with its welfare. There was - it's beauty, you can't hold a candle to its beauty, and its people at that time were wonderful people, but the thing that mostly impressed me was its welfare, which was superior to Australia. But because Australia's so big, and our people are spread over such an area I can understand that they had sort of in built problems.

But looking at it from the merchant seaman's viewpoint now, I can probably say to myself I'm pleased that I didn't stay at sea, because they're paying off ships and crews now like they're going out of fashion. A lot of the seamen today, probably this time next year could be looking for a job. And that's the one thing I didn't want, and the fact that I entered the fire service and have had a good career in those forty years since the war, I'm pleased to think that that was possible. But I still miss the sea.

[Recording ends on Side Two of Tape Two and interview ends].