



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00717
Title	Mills, Howard L (Seaman)
Interviewer	Connell, Daniel
Place made	Barton, NSW
Date made	10 August 1989
Description	Howard Mills as a seaman, Merchant Navy, interviewed by Daniel Connell for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in The War of 1939-45.

Disclaimer

The Australian War Memorial is not responsible either for the accuracy of matters discussed or opinions expressed by speakers, which are for the reader to judge.

Transcript methodology

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

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

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

Copyright

Copyright in this transcript, and the sound recording from which it was made, is usually owned by the Australian War Memorial, often jointly with the donors. Any request to use of the transcript, outside the purposes of research and study, should be addressed to:

Australian War Memorial
GPO Box 345
CANBERRA ACT 2601

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is side one, tape 1 of the interview with Mr Howard Mills – M-I-L-L-S. Um, Mr Mills.

And I'm Daniel Connell and this is I think, the 10th of August, 1989.

That's correct, yes. 'Cause you're coming up to Brisbane Exhibition.

Right. End of identification.

Right. If we could go back to your childhood. If you could give me some idea of ...

... Childhood ....

... Where you grew up and ....

Yes, yes, I can tell you. I was born in Carlton in Victoria - that's a suburb of Melbourne. My father was in the postal service all his life, so consequently we resided wherever Dad was virtually posted, and he was posted to Warrnambool in Victoria - which is pretty well known - and he was at that particular stage, in my early boyhood, he was a telegraphist, which was a sender of morse code - telegrams. And Warrnambool, of course, was famous for its steeplechases and they had them on Wednesdays and Saturdays. So the telegraphic communication was pretty hectic. They had a team of round about ten telegraphists on a Saturday, to handle the telegraphic communication.

That's the bets that people were placing?

Well, not so much. Results to papers, and of course, in those days, articles - the newspapers - weren't just short cryptic ones. In those days, if they wrote an article about someone ... I remember when my mother died, it was a full column. So it'd give you some indication of the length of the articles in those particular days in newspapers. They're not just short cryptic ones like they are today.

I went to school in Warrnambool, to the Warrnambool State School and after my mother passed away I was farmed out to various relations, because it was difficult for Dad at that particular time to - to look after a fairly active little fella and as my father was one of nineteen - nearly all living round Melbourne and my mother with two sisters, I sort of spent a lot of my time between Melbourne and Warrnambool with different families who had a input to my teaching. All having a little says and so forth. So consequently, I - I had a very ... in my formative years, which in your young years, you had a rather remarkable input from a number of people. Not just a normal one family situation. I was sent to Kerrie Baptist Grammar School when I was ten as a boarder and I stayed there for four years.

Right. And when did you leave school?

Well, I didn't leave school until ... gee whiz, that would be in Warwick, but that's jumping a long way ahead. Uh, my father remarried in Warrnambool, so I had a stepmother and in resulting years I had two stepbrothers. We moved from Warrnambool to the Riverina - to Deniliquin and actually I shouldn't really reveal this, but I don't mind. I sat for a ... it just came back to me - I sat for a PMG - that's the equivalent to Australia Post today, Post-Master General's - examination in Tocumwal, which is about sixty miles further down the Murray River from Deniliquin, and I deliberately flunked it. I just couldn't stomach working in the - the thought of working in the post office. Upset Dad no end, but he couldn't understand why I didn't pass it either (laughs).

However I was a bit of a rebel. And we moved from there to Warwick. Dad was posted to Warwick as a - as a assistant post-master. He became post-master at Warwick. I continued schooling in both places naturally, and I went to the Warwick State High, where I found very quickly the immense difference in the grading of schools from Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland and I was, you know, dux of the class without any effort. They didn't know what to do with me. So they shoved me up to a higher grade and I still could handle it, so I was virtually a bit of a problem.

(5.00) Uh, made some good friends in Warwick and we still have a couple. We have one of my old school chums living not far from here - a young lass.

Well just pushing ahead to the war ....

Oh sorry ....

That's all right. The ... (clock chimes) I'll just wait for that.

When did you join the Naval Reserve?

It wasn't called Naval Reserve. Actually in Cairns in those days it was the Naval Cadets. Like, uh, the Royal Australian Navy had a cadet operation, which is similar to Boy Scouts and Girls Guides [sic]. I actually was also in Scouts, um, which I did in Deniliquin and also in Warwick. But I left that to join the Naval Cadets and I aspired to rank fairly quickly - enjoyed myself.

I was coming up to ... let me see ... what'd it be ... sixteen years old. Yes, and ....

This would be about 1940?

No, I was thinking of '38 - '39 actually, when we were in Cairns. I was in - it was in Cairns that I was talking about, and, um ... my father, being of a conscription age coming up, he was concerned that I didn't go to war, I decided that I wanted to go in the air force. So I travelled down to Townsville, from Cairns, to do the examination down there for the air force - for aircrew. And I passed the examination - the written examination and the oral, no trouble at all. But the medical, they failed me because as a child I had a - a stick in my eye which left a scar tissue and they considered that the cataract - which they called it in those days - might cloud the eyesight and would be detrimental. So they failed me on that particular problem. But in actual fact, there was only scar tissue and it was no problem.

But you had been in the Naval Cadets before this?

I was in the Naval Cadets then, at the same time.

Right, right.

So when war broke out, um ... the manned personnel in HMS *Trinity* was very small. That was the base in Cairns - very small indeed. I can't remember actually how many, but there also must have been a bit on the lazy side. I had a crew of four matelots and myself and I was a sub-lieutenant in the cadets. To row out, up Trinity Inlet - and if the tide was coming in, it was one hell of a job - and our job ... each night mind you, we'd go out and at that channel, it's the best part of eighteen miles long to the pilot light. And we had an Aldis lamp to wake-up - or communicate with HMS *Trinity*, which was on the wharves back in Cairns - and we had a .303 rifle four matelots and one sub-lieutenant cadet. Our job was to challenge every ship that came in. Can you imagine how - the stupidity of it (laughs) with a .303 rifle. We - a number of ships came in the channel but no-one even ignored us. They didn't even bother to look at us or listen to us. So, you know, it was a stupid situation. So after ....

You didn't think you could stop a German raider?

No of course we couldn't. (Laughs). After - after I think about three or four weeks, we'd had it, because, you know, it's a long row with the tide. Not too bad, you know, when the tide's on ebb, but it's a long row. So we took a Cairns - a keg of Cairns beer out with us, and of course in those days the Cairns beer was just like champagne. It really was. It came out of the pure water - no preservatives - it wouldn't keep. That's why you couldn't get cans of beer, you know, anywhere virtually other than Cairns. If had it in Townsville, sort of, you'd ask the date of it because if it was a fortnight old, you wouldn't drink it. So we all got absolutely sloshed and neglected our duties, and next morning the tide dumped us very, very nicely right alongside the jetty of HAMS [sic] *Trinity*, the matelots got thirty days in the brig, but they didn't serve it and I got cashiered. So that was my short but brief experience in the navy. (Laughs).

Uh, I was working at the time in the Cairns timber mill and it was a pretty boring job so I went into the post office. Another one of my father's ploys to keep me from going to - to war, being a protected situation - essential service I think they called it - so I became a postman for about a year.

Was you father open about this or he kept it a bit of a secret as to why he was trying to get you to ...?

No, no, Dad - no, he wasn't - no, no, we understood each other. There was not... nothing secret about it. No, we discussed it. It was a family matter and they considered they didn't want to send me off to be fodder and that was ...

(10.00)I think it's very reasonable ....

Oh, well they thought so too. I was pretty impetuous though and I was often in trouble, one way or another - and I was coming into my physical prime, so I ... a few of my friends that were left hadn't gone into one service or another, we decided we'd go to sea. Well they beat me to it.

So you decided to go to sea?

I went to sea, yes.

How did you go to sea?

Well quite simply. I walked up to the shipping office and asked for details and they - in those days you went to sea through the shipping office because they filled the berths ....

The shipping office was, what, a government ...

In Cairns ...

... a government agency?

Yes, government agency. And I said ... well I think at the time, he said, I had a choice of a couple of ships and I didn't know a from b. And he said, 'This one's going to Darwin with a load of meat.'

What date?

The actual date was the 9th February, 1943. There you are and I went ....

1943?

1943, yes. I went to sea on the SS *Alagna*, which was one of the Johnny Burke ships that was named after the - his two daughters, Alice and Agnes - *Alagna*. She was a small little ship of only 413 tons net - net tonnage - but very comfortable little ship and I signed on as a deck boy. The derogative term of course, was 'Peggy deck boy' and which was meant that you were - you cleared mess tables, you served food and ... did any job at all on - on deck within reason, that was required of you. You had no-one to complain to, you were inferior to everyone. It's - it was a very broadening of my senses. Humiliating at times, as I vaguely remember some incidences, but ah ...

Why 'Peggy'? What was the word Peggy?

Well it was derogative, female derogative term. Uh, they could have said 'Alice deck boy' but they used the word Peggy. I don't think it's any other reason than that. I never heard of any other reason, so all deck boys are known as Peggies.

And what sort of incidents were you thinking of just then?

Oh well, you get ... men - men are rather cruel, you know. Well you can well imagine, and there were occasions when - when seamen would ask you to wash their clothes ... and underclothes and, you know, if you baulked well you get a snuff around the ears or you might've been treated with a worse punishment. I mean, it's just incredible what they could actually apply to you. Because you had nowhere to go, you couldn't go over the side, you're just confined to a ship. Uh, but you learnt their respect by your abilities and by - and your handling of what they asked you for. I mean, they might have asked you to do something ... there were even sexual implications - advances. Well, men will try anything, but by the fact that you - you know, stoutly refused or you gave them one reason or another why you wouldn't do it, and they could see that you had character, well they begin to respect you. And the way you carried out your duties and you learnt that respect. It's just a case of, you know, a small number of men confined to a very small area, which was virtually a prison in one sense. You couldn't go any further than one length of the ship to the other, and you couldn't get away from anyone, so you had to live with them.

The bosun, was he a person you could appeal to?

Uh, yes, on occasions. The bosun on this particular trip on the *Alagna* was, uh, a typical example of a man who had been too long to sea in many ways. He had a tragic life, I don't know the full story - or can't remember it - but he would come .... When he hit port he would head for the nearest hotel and he'd drink himself into a stumour [sic] and he'd always ... they always knew where he was and when we were going to leave, they'd go and get him and bring him on and ... it was one of my first jobs on the *Alagna*, look after the bosun, clean up his mess and he'd go into DT's. He'd be that way for a week and he'd come out of it and .... He was a good taskmaster, he taught me lots of things. Little wizened of a monkey of a man. He was only about six or seven stone, wiry as a hen ... work himself to the death though. Incredible. But that was the bosun. Ah ....

What sort of accommodation did you have?

Uh, in the fo'c'sle. The, um, and aft for the stokers because she was steamship. They segregated them. Uh, just bunks, not hammocks, bunks. We had bunks, one above the other and they were in the sh... they were shaped into the fo'c'sle and aft they were into the stern. And of course, the *Alagna* only carried a crew I think, of memory, of, um ... uh, I think ten. No twelve, sorry, twelve, twelve.

(15.00) So how many men in a room?

Well in the fo'c'sle we had ... two, four, six. And in the stokers end, they had four, so that was - I'm trying to work it out - it's ten and then there was the chief engineer, there was the captain, uh, first mate, second mate. We had no third mate, and there was a bosun in a cabin. So that was the total - the total crew. And of course as Peggy deck boy, I couldn't go on watch. I had no - no watch. But invariably in this particular time period in the war, they often sailed short-handed so I very soon - right from the word go - had a watch. I learnt to, to - I mean, to steer but to navigate to a certain point. I was always interested and I found the, um, chief mate in particular, who would take the - the prime watch, he would - he was quite ... what's the right word ... affable, he was quite affable, and he was willing to teach me virtually any... I was always asking questions. 'Course you're not supposed to talk at the

wheel, you know, you're not supposed to talk to a - to an officer on the bridge particular [sic] and you'd go for hours sometimes when not - not a word was said. But, as I said, being an inquisitive sort of a character and it was rather unique being a Peggy deck boy, you get away with murder. In some ways you can be quite cheeky about it. So I formed this nice liaison and friendship with the first mate, and he was very helpful.

And when you say you formed a friendship, um, what you just talked when you were on watch together, I think so?

Only on watch, yes. I mean, he would call me sometime to his cabin and I might spend a bit of time in his cabin and we could relax a little bit then, but on deck it was always, yes sir, no sir. You couldn't call them by their first name.

No.

Now that - that discipline of the sea was, uh, not spelt out, but it was most obvious. Even - I used to call the bosun sir, until I got to know him much better.

Could you describe a typical day?

A typical day. Gee whiz that's hard. We were coastal ships. You're talking about this, on the *Alagna* to Darwin? Well a typical day, um, at that level - Peggy deck boy - I'd be up at ... the watches were broken into four hour watches. I would be up by six, no trouble at all and I would have to set the tables in the - in the mess. Set the tables. The stokers would sit one side and the seamen sit the other. I'm just trying to think in reverse now. The seamen had the starboard, that's right, and the - and the stokers sat on the port. You make sure that the cutlery was clean, the plates were clean and washed-up - you did all the washing-up. The hot-water urn - or the steam-urn was full, supplies were drawn. You know, there was tea and butter whatever that, you know - cereals and so forth. You'd liaise with the cook and make sure what was on the menu today because they'd ask you the question - you know, 'What's for breakfast?', you know, you'd tell them. You didn't always have to carry the food from the cookhouse to the mess but if the cook was busy, you did. That was part of your duties so you carried the food down to the - to the mess. Um, after that you washed-up, after the - the ... because the men would be on watch by eight - [inaudible] watch. You'd clean up, scrub the tables, scrub the floor, everything was clean, wash the tea towels, wash the clothes you used, hung them out to dry. You'd report to the bosun, if he hasn't checked on you in the meanwhile and give you a thick ear because you... you're taking too long - malingering. Uh, there would be work to do on deck, chipping - chipping the iro... chipping the rust. Red leading where you chipped so it wouldn't rust again and then painting over the red lead the next day, but presuming it wasn't wet, there'd being painting woodwork, there'd be splicing to do - wire-splicing, rope-splicing. Of course they don't do that these days ... a thousand and one jobs. There might be cargo covers to repair - the canvas covers - covers to repair by the palmer needle - sew them .... There's never any spare time. You'd have to go back and make sure the food was there for lunch, you'd have to wash up after lunch, do the same procedures all over again and on afternoon you'd be back on deck with the bosun. And then for the evening meal you did the same thing again. And after the evening meal, you prepared for supper because there'd be the watch going on at midnight would want something to eat -

biscuits or a cup of tea or coffee or whatever they wanted, so you always made sure that the tin of biscuits was there, and there was plenty of coffee and tea and sugar and milk.

Who actually organised your time? Who gave you your orders in a sense?

The bosun basically. Except when I was on the bridge and I was under the direct control of the officer of the bridge. Be it the captain or the - or the first or second mate.

What sort of things, um, if there were - if there was an infringement of - of the rules or discipline, what were the likely - I'm not saying that you did this yourself - but what were the likely sort of offences that could happen?

Well, the prime thing of course, if your sea was a career you would not get a good discharge. I mean, your discharge would - would ....

(20.00) That's a punishment, what sort of offences ...?

Oh offences. Oh, well, that's difficult. I can't remember to be honest with you. I would say that if you were ... cheeky, insubordinate, um, unruly. I won't say untidy because most of us were. Oh you learnt to make rope sandals too, by the way, one of the first things I did, was you learn to make rope sandals. Um ... that's basically it. Oh you'd have to be abso... you see you're in a company of men and you couldn't really be a one-off, otherwise you'd be completely, you know, you'd be sent to coventry. You'd be just, you know, shunned completely and that - you know, when you're on a small ship that's something ... you've got nowhere to hide, you can't go up in the hills anywhere. So you conformed, or you didn't.

So the pressures for conformity were fairly strong?

Oh, extremely. The sea's a strong master and of course in times of crisis at sea, it's - that, that bond, that discipline is totally necessary. You can't have - you couldn't have any cowardance [sic] or you couldn't have any breaking down of that discipline in times of crisis.

What did people talk about?

What did people talk about? Oh, gosh, that's a hard one. After fifty years, he asked me what they talked about. (Laughs). Oh deary me. What did they talk about? I really can't remember Daniel, but I would say ....

Politics?

Uh, if it was sparked, if it was sparked. Of course without much hesitation you could say the lower deck - this is the deck - deck and the engine-room staff would be strongly Labor. I can't recall having sufficient conversation with ... at this early stage in my sea career with the officers as to what their political ....

See the sort of thing I'm thinking of, I've heard people who've had shearing experience, talk about how shearers, at night, would have long discussions about all sorts of things, serious intellectual discussions ...

Yes, yes ....

> ... and political discussions. I was just wondering whether there was a similar sort of ...

Yes, well there actually is, in a sense. You're just sort of slowly bringing memories back. Um ... conversation was naturally the only form of - of - in these particular small ships - of, I won't say amusement - but entertainment. Um, you didn't have radio, you didn't have television, you didn't have any of those amenities. There was no piano or anything in these small ships, so you made your own entertainments. Crib, poker - poker was frowned on nine times out of ten because invariably it meant the smart bugger got all the money and the other blokes didn't, and of course this created dissension, so invariably the - most masters under the first mate of course - chief mate - would put a strong emphasis, no poker. But you could play cribb... crib boards and seamen made some beautiful crib boards. Um, they made - they spent their spare time whittling, some made models, some painted. Invariably, um, you'd find someone who enjoyed poetry, so this would bring out a treasured book from somewhere and ....

> And they would read poetry aloud? Would that ....

Not necessarily aloud to - to .... They'd lend you the book, men were a bit shy about that sort of thing. Invariably you'd find that if you had someone sensitive with poetry and you struck a - it in conversation, a friendly nerve there, you would be - you'd get a loan of the book and sometimes you'd go and ... next time in port you'd go and buy something for yourself, so you could lend it back again. That developed a sense of - of ... in that area. They wrote letters. No diaries were kept because it was completely frowned on and we soon found out - as I found out - very quickly, that any insurance policy you had was just null and void, wiped completely.

> Why was that?

Well the insurance companies wouldn't insure you. You see the merchant seamen in the second world war didn't enjoy much of the amenities or understanding of the first world war. In the first world war they were given a medal. I mean, a merchant navy medal was struck for them, for the second world war it was a different story altogether. But, um, the insurance companies ... advised your policies, and in thinking back now, I sometimes wondered then, how in the hell did they find out, but it must have been part of the official process. But your insurance policy was - was suspended, and there was a rider in - in the thing, which was a real snake, that if you were lost at sea and you didn't leave a will, that was it, no refund. Now how seamen who went to sea with an insurance policy ever wrote a will out. In fact without an insurance policy, how many seamen went to sea ever wrote a will out, I doubt very few of them. You might get an odd master or skipper who has had shore assets and a married life, but most of the young fellows wouldn't even bother about it.

(25.00) Was there a - um, a superstition about wills?

No, no. It wasn't even thought of. What I'm saying is, the services had it the other way around. The insurance companies would have paid their next of kin, but see this is the difference between the services and the merchant services, we were not given that - that equality. We were just virtually .... And for donkey's years after the war, even governments would not recognise the fact that we were a service. We were just private people going to - going to sea. Over-paid and over-fed, over-sexed and whatever, but there it was. 'Course that's a myth which has been proved in this enquiry, that that's absolutely stupid. We were actually paid less than the services.

Just going back to that first voyage - no that's fine - how did you sail to Darwin? Did you sail in convoy or ...?

Oh no, not in those days sir, no sir. We're on our own. We had .303s which was under the lock and key of the - of the first mate and were we to be under attack he would get out the .303s and issue a number of rounds - a handful usually - and we'd protect ourselves with, with .303s. I couldn't tell you the number of them, but there were - I can vaguely remember in a rack, there'd be no more than half a dozen. So that was our total ... on our first voyage to Darwin, our first - first armament, no convoy, no escort. We just went across the top of the Arafura Sea and into Darwin. As a matter of fact, the first trip we were attacked by Zero fighter planes.

Could you describe that?

Oh, dearie me. Yes, I would say - we were going across the Gulf, uh, we would be somewhere - in memory - about parallel with Arnhem Land, near Groot Eylandt virtually, that end of it - the east... the western end of the Gulf. We didn't - we weren't far out to sea, never ... and they came out of - it was just after dawn, they came out of the - out of nowhere, three Zero fighter planes, and they strafed us. And of course we had no protection whatsoever, just .... By the time we got the six .303s out and the got the - the bob out of the fo'c'sle who could fire the bloody things (laughs) they were gone. (Laughs). It was incredible. Uh, but they came back, came back about ten minutes later and had another go at us. But, uh, we had the .303s up there and very stoutly fired off rounds - not I of course, I wasn't allowed to have one - but fired off rounds which would have been hopeless in effect if they'd even have reached their target. Stupidity of it. Ah, so that was - they left us alone, they had better targets I should say. That was just a reconnaissance and they probably had enough fun with us and left us alone, luckily.

But we weren't so lucky on the next trip back.

Well we'll come to that. Um, Darwin, how was Darwin? What was it like?

Darwin was in a mess because Darwin had been vacuated [sic]. Had it's first bombing, the *Neptuna* was blown up alongside the wharf when we tied up between her and the wharf. That was my first taste of coming into Darwin. A very big harbour. In fact, you come into Darwin Harbour for virtually a day before you get into Darwin, you know, when you're on a little ship like this. Um, the - I think the - I can't remember the name of it, but there was an American destroyer which was sunk also. I think it the *Peary*, I think it was. Is that the name, *Peary*? She was way over on the far side and you could see her and the bits and pieces of her in the

low tide. Uh, there were streets flattened, the post office was gone, a number of p.... I remember walking up and down the streets wondering how in the hell all this happened. Uh ....

You hadn't heard many of the rumours about Darwin?

At that time, no, I hadn't heard the rumours at that time. We knew of course it was bombed, we knew it was bombed, but I hadn't heard the - or read, as I have since - of the resulting panics and the cowardance [sic] that went on. It was incredible really that they behaved the way they did. But then again, you can't blame them. Survival's, you know, a strong thing.

What sort of impact did it make on you to see such destruction when you didn't expect it?

Ohhh. Amazement I think. I don't remember being angry, I don't remember having any - any anger at them. It's fairly hard to remember what you thought of. I think it was more curiosity, because I was only a young boy don't ... well, say, late teens, and ... I don't remember having any particular feeling at all.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

Identification: this is side two, tape one of the interview with Mr Howard Mills. End of identification.

Right, the trip back. You said the trip back was ....

Well the trip back was uneventful except we came into a bit of a cyclonic weather. I soon had my first taste of a small ship on a huge sea. And when you're a little ship like the *Alagna*, it's an amazing experience. You get the - you get the full force of the elements and sometimes you'd have a landmark and you'd come out nex... come back next day, like you know, the same period next morning and you'd virtually be at the same landmark there again. You'd be making no headway at all. But that was isolated. The sea calms down.

We came back to Cairns and loaded again and we went north and .... One of the joys of going north was the, you know, the daylight hours in particular, was the - the far reaches of north Queensland - the beaches - and in those days, when you got up near the tip, near [Queta?] Rock, which was named after the ship of course, that was sunk, you could see Somerset Station which was pretty well famous we know, and I knew enough about it then and in the interim period I'd found out as much as I could. I wrote back home and Dad had the information for me, and the Jardines was - was a remarkable family. It - it's a pity that the whole things now gone, but in those days you could see that the homestead on Somerset then was very much in tact and there were people living there. We would go into Thursday Island and we'd inevitably had some cargo for Thursday Island. We'd unload, probably supplies, in the way of food, sometimes ammunition. It's hard to remember what it was but we didn't carry much general cargo. It was nearly all refrigerated on the *Alagna*. But we did have one small hold, and on the next trip we picked up a - a - an escort. We still only had .303s. It was

a Fairmile - a little motorised launch you might say the navy designed called a Fairmile and I used to feel sorry for those poor buggers. Like a corkscrew it was. It was never - unless the sea was flat calm it would be virtually, you know, nice to live on. But invariably any of the wind came up, it was like a corkscrew. It's unbelievable how that thing ... and that escorted across to the top of Arnhem Land and over to as far as the Darwin Channel and then it came back again.

I don't know the full history of the Fairmiles but they used to carry a Bofor gun - a Bofor gun. We were again attacked on that particular thing and the little Fairmile copped a fair bit of ... I think someone was killed on the thing from memory and they got a fair bit of attention, rather than us.

Right, good. Could you - do you remember any more detail about that?

No, it's the same - same procedure. Just after dawn they come - that was the time - the danger time. You'd always be very much aware. But the Japanese changed their habits later on. See that - that dawn time period let them come over from - from Milne Bay, where they had their base ... I think it was Milne Bay from memory and they would leave it in sufficient time to get to dawn so they could get back in daylight hours and that dictated the time period. I think only once did we ever see, uh, a - have an attack round about midday.

Just getting an idea about activity on the northern Australian coast. How many times would you have seen enemy aircraft, or enemy ships for that matter too?

Well, we never ever saw enemy ships, never ever. Um, there may have been submarines but we certainly never sigh.... We did have a couple of submarine alerts going across the top. The Fairmile obviously had some sort of gear, which alerted them, but we never saw them. The only aircraft we ever saw was Zero float planes. We never even saw a Zero itself, until I went further north later on. But going across to Darwin, no. And on that second trip, again, the same pattern appeared, as I told you. They appeared, three just after dawn and attacked us. Um ...

(5.00) So there were two - you had two - two attacks?

Two attacks yeah, well one each trip. Uh, we went on down after Darwin, went down to - to Wyndham. Now there's a very large meat works at Wyndham. I don't know whether you realise or not, but the - they would keep one or two season's catches in caverns underneath the ground, which went for, oh, literally for miles. And they had refrigerated entrances and they kept the meat catches in there and we went ... we tied up and of course, at Wyndham, I think the name of the river was Columbia [sic] - Columbia River? And I - I can just vaguely see it in my mind's eye now, going up this river, which was a dirty brown river, and I was amazed at the landscape until we came to the last bend in the river and there of course was the - was the meat works. And the wharf was probably round about forty feet high - unbelievable. And I realised the reason, because the tide drop there is immense, and we - we'd been prior alerted of course, that when the ... when the tide rose, we'd have to tie up and you're constantly on watch - on sea watch, you weren't on land watch - to man the hawsers to let out the strain on the wire - on the wire ropes as the ship virtually came back down again.

Uh, one other trip later on in the *Babinda*?, we went up to Merauke, in Dutch - which was Dutch New Guinea in those days, and they had a very similar in the Merauke River there, a very similar situation. The tidal drop is forty-odd feet, and you were constantly on the hawsers, constantly easing them off. You know, you'd feel the strain and then you'd let a little bit off and the ship would gradually come down and sit virtually on the mud and there was the wharf, towering above, over the - the truck of the mast. That was a good trip, the Merauke trip. The Dutch plantation people were there then and they drank nothing but gin. To go into a plantation home and there were these huge houses with wide verandahs. You could virtually hold a ball on the verandahs and tables, and not pitchers of water, but pitchers of gin. They drank ....

The ... um, was that after you - you went to ....

Oh yes, yes, I'm jumping, I'm sorry.

Well we'll come to that later then. Um, so how long - how long were you on that northern route?

Well, uh ... to refresh my memory, good job I kept all this, (looking through papers). I paid off in Cairns on the 22nd December, 1943. At that time I was an ordinary seaman. I spent my period as Peggy deck boy and I signed on the *Babinda* which was a motor vessel. Again not a very big vessel. She was registered for the Australian trade and islands of the Pacific, which was normal in those days, and she was 325 net tonnage. She was on charter to Johnny Burke at the time. A beautiful little ship. I can show you a photograph of her shortly. Uh, most comfortable after the - the old *Alagna* and a darn sight cleaner.

Of course in this - by now I had gained a status of being a seaman. I hoped I was - I was kind to the Peggy deck boy, I can't remember, being ... (laughs). I might have inflicted a few things on him, but nevertheless, she was a powerful little ship and the .... We took a air force radar station - complete - with air force personnel which we .... They bunked on deck. They put a canvas over the - the stowed masts - or the derricks I should say - and they put the canvas over and they bunked on the hatches and they used our facilities naturally, and in the holds we had a complete radar station. Uh, that went up to Milingimbi, which was ah, a mission station - Anglican mission station - on the western side of the Gulf of Carpentaria. And at this stage I was keen to learn and I was learning navigation. Again I found a very warm spark in the second mate on the *Babinda* and he was most helpful. He lent me his books and coaxed me along, gave me things to do navigation wise. Uh, by this time I'd earned a reputation of being a very good helmsman and I was a master helmsman, which was a - an unusual rank for a - for a seaman. Usually it was to someone who'd been to sea for a lot longer than I had, but I had a nice touch. I could feel the ship, I could feel, uh, currents. In other words, I was in affinity with it and I - I was - I used to pride myself on watch and most seaman did, but if you looked aft and if you had a curvy wake, you know, you weren't a very good helmsman. But I used to pride meself ... be as straight as a die.

(10.00) How did you - did you do a course or how did you become a master helmsman?

Only by ability.

So you didn't do any formal training?

Oh well, your formal training is only at the helm. See when you take a watch, you ge... you're on for two hours.

But who calls you a master helmsman as opposed to an ordinary helmsman?

That would be the - the officers, the officers by choice. They would - they would confer and when they came into port, or into a narrow channel, whether you're on watch or not, you'd be called out to take the helm. You take it off the - the helmsman on the watch and you'd take over. That's a master helmsman, and you were supposed to get extra pay for that, but of course, you never did (laughs).

Is that the same as being a mud pilot?

No, not the same, no, no. A mud pilot is a different thing altogether. A mud pilot is .... Where did you get that term from?

[Break in recording.] So what's the difference between the two?

Well a mud pilot, to my way of thinking, is someone who is - has inought [sic] or amazing ability to navigate in very tight areas or unknown areas. Ah, they invariably earn that title, mud pilot. But a master helmsman was someone who could be relied upon and that was the emphasis on the word 'relied' to - to have the discipline to obey instant orders and to steer a course given. In other words, if you were going into, um, on this particular case, the *Babinda* going down this river - Columbia - because of the type of river, we had the first mate up the bridge, the top bridge, the top deck, and he would - in the voice tube, would tell me the course and he would - he'd be a mud pilot - he would steer through the channels the sandbanks and any obstacles that he may see and he'd be working through a compass upstairs - up top - and he'd say, you know, 'Nor'-nor'-east, sir', or 'nor'-nor'-east by east', and he'd give you half degree changes and you would have the ability to instantly convert that to action on the helm and steer the ship and that thing. And in tight channels, you know, he would - he had a - a ... also had a dual command to the engineer up there and he could regulate the sp... the speed of the ship at the same time. He could have, you know, half speed or whatever he wanted and with the other direction to me. So he was the mud pilot but I was the master helmsman, so that's the subtle difference.

Um, I found Wyndham a remarkable place - we all did actually. War hadn't reached Wyndham .... In the shops, there was just a couple of little - or one little store I think from memory and one hotel in those days. We were able to buy clothes without clothes coupons, it was unreal. 'Course not that we had many clothes, I mean, a shirt and a pair of shorts was all we owned, but we were able to buy things without - without clothing coupons, which was amazing. I'll never forget that, and I was able to - to buy a few things, you know, in that way.

How did you ... when did you go to New Guinea?

Well you're jumping a bit, can I ...?

Okay, yeah, sure.

Uh, we landed - when we .... One of the things I found, I was ... we've sort of jumped a bit. One of the things I found in doing navigation was all the charts for the northern waters are still the original Matthew Flinders. Nothing had been done in the way of surveys in any - since that period. We were still operating on his soundings and his bearings, which was amazing, absolutely amazing. Of course, he never poked his nose into - to Gulf of Carpentaria and all the - the charts and knowledge of the Gulf of Carpentaria belonged to skippers of little coastal ships and they never committed it to maps other than the ones that they used, so it was never published. So when we took the *Babinda* into the Gulf of Carpentaria, on the west hand side to, um - to, um, land this radar station, uh, we had nothing to go on. And 'course in the wartime period - and this is I explained to you earlier - even in published books today on the history of the Australian shipping companies - these little companies in particular - the wartime ... the second world wartime history lacks any detail. So it seems to me that somewhere along the line these ships operated under strict maritime commission, or whatever it was in those days, orders. 'Course they didn't operate as far as the company was concerned, so there's little or no histories in the companies of these things, which is a pity.

(15.00) Anyway, uh, we hit a rock and - in the *Babinda* and she holed herself. It was on low tide thank God. She was powerful enough and we plugged the leak with a plate and wood and sealed as best we could - pumped out - and we couldn't shift any cargo at that stage, so at high tide I was called to the helm and she pulled herself off. So we still had to land this ....

How did you plug the leak?

Well it's a normal method. Uh, just a steel plate. Every ship carries steel - steel plate, even little ones, they carried steel plate - and that and ... bagging - canvas - the pitch round the hole and then the plate was - was sheared up with wooden - wooden bulwarks, you know, sort of .... What's the way to describe it? I can't think of the right word ... oh just wooden - pieces of wood, heavy, heavy wood angled one and - and pressed against the plates at the bottom and forcing the other plate to hold in. Uh, of course these days they're probably arc-welded or oxy-welded but we didn't enjoy that sort of gear. Uh, we had to make ... we had with us, um, empty forty-four gallon drums and gums so we, for we make rafts. We'd make the deck crew ... we made the rafts and the raft landed all the - all the radar gear. And we were there for about three weeks, and we used to swim everyday on this glorious beach, coconuts, and the Aboriginals were marvellous, absolutely marvellous to us. The place you were, you wouldn't want to leave (laugh) and of course, you had nothing on, you just, you know, we were as brown as berries - black almost. And the fish, all the fish you could catch and eat was incredible.

No crocodiles?

Uh, not that I know of. I never saw any and I don't remember ever being warned of anything. The beaches were, of course, it was pretty open sea there and it was a beautiful beach. Anyhow we came ... we bought the *Babinda* back and as we came round past Thursday Island, we had the first warning of a very large cyclone-off the coast, and oh, it gave us hell. And we got down to - we were to come to Br... into Townsville, we couldn't into Townsville.

Uh, so we - we were still pumping out water, so we took - we came on down to Brisbane and it was so severe that I remember seeing Caloundra one dawn to the next dawn to the next dawn and our engines were going virtually, you know, not flatout, but at a good rate of knots, that's how bad that wind was. In the end they bought us into Sydney.

And you tried to get into Townsville initially?

Yeah, we couldn't get into Townsville because Townsville's channel is a very bad place to get into with very choppy seas, so they ordered us into Sydney. So we went on down into Sydney and I'll nev... I never forget that, I can still see it in my mind's eye. We came through Sydney Harbour Heads and the wind - the cyclone of course, by this time, had abated, and we'd just had swellings, and we got into - through Sydney Harbour ... through the Heads, into Sydney Harbour and the first mate, it was his home port. So he knew the place backwards, and I can still remember coming underneath Harbour Bridge and they were playing the *Maori's Farewell* at Luna Park, and we were frozen stiff. All I owned - all I owned was about four pair of shorts, a couple of pair of rope sandals, no shirts at all and this was in the middle of winter in Sydney. We - we didn't even have too many .... We scrounged the ship to find something warm and when we eventually tied up at Number Two or Number Three Pyrmont, I think it was Number One Pyrmont which was the old wharf - it's Pier One now, but in those days it was, of course, a prestige tie-up for liners and so forth. But we were ordered in to - in to tie-up there anyway, and of course, the ... by radio they'd told them and thank God they brought down blankets and clothing, we would have been frozen to death (laughs). But I never forget that coming into the harbour. It was a moonlight night, full moon, and the water was as flat as a pancake and there's this *Maori Farewell* to the chattering of our teeth. My God, I'll never forget that. Yeah, it was the *Babinda*.

Well I signed off her on - in Sydney on the 5th of January 1944. Can I mention that I've kept my discharges?

Yes.

Thank you sir. Then I got into trouble. When I say trouble I ... I was a bit disenchanted with the rate of pay. I think at that time I was earning a magnificent sum of, I think, it was two pound ten say for [inaudible] say a month - magnificent money, it really was.

(20.00) And of course, in those days, in Sydney, you - if you had a girlfriend you had to compete with the Americans who, you know, who would get two pound ten per hour, you know, and you weren't in the race to get a girl in Sydney really. Unless she was a particularly nice type of girl and wasn't interested in the Yanks. But it was difficult. So we were a bit disenchanted and I bumped into a couple of other guys, who came from Cairns, and they suggested why don't we get into the Small Ships. So, we decided ...

American Small Ships.

Yep. Because - I had to get a release from the Australian water trade, they weren't keen to lose us at all and they said, 'No, no way in the world'. But I can't remember the - how it evolved, but we eventually got a release with a forewarning that we would never be allowed back on the Australian coast. You know, we were young, so what, you know, so that was it.

Away we went and the three of us joined the - the US Army Transport *Colorado* on the 16th of September, I think it was. Now was it the 16th of September ... not it ... sorry, the 12th of July 1944.

Right. So this is one of the Lake ships, is that correct?

This is one of the big huge Lake ships - the Lakers.

Can you describe it? Tell me about it?

Oh gee whiz. Ah ....

You see, what I'm interested in is the - the impact of the war on shipping and the way in which, for example, it caused shipping to move out of its peace time pattern, to perhaps bring in old ships or bring back seamen who were ...

Right well, that would be a fairly obvious explanation because these - these ships were the biggest cargo ships in the world. I think there were four of them from memory, the *Edward Chambers*, the *Colorado*, and I'm not too sure of the other two, what their names were. Er, they were all lost, subsequently, by enemy action. They never went back to the Lakes. But because of their huge carrying capacity ...

The Lakes we're talking about are ...?

Oh, the Canadian Great Lakes, sorry .... Um, because of their huge carrying capacity - well in excess of a couple of Liberty ships, which at that stage, were now being turned out in great numbers and were being lost in great numbers as well - they were pressed rapidly into the army service and all transport in the sea in those days, in America, was done by the US Army Transport - all mercantile marine was done by the army transport.

What sort of - no involvement by the US Navy?

No, the merchant ships didn't come under the - the command or of the navy at all as I understand it, it was all under the US Army Transport. Uh, they came I suppose, all over the world. You'd have to, fi... you know ... I've no doubt their history's been written up and be well worthwhile getting facts from it but they bought an enormous amount of material to Australia and New Zealand and Pacific islands. They were never, to my understanding, uh, put on the Atlantic run to England because of the fact that they were too slow, too cumbersome and too big a target. I think their main role was in the Pacific and they - they supplied ... they supplied Australia and New Zealand and of course as the war went further north and they started to capture, well of course, they supplied the north.

Well, our first trip on her was under convoy. We left Mel...

Your first time in convoy?

No, not the first time in convoy. The little - the *Alagna* I think, in its last trip, picked up a convoy of three ships I think. That's the time I think, we lost ... I can't think of the name of the ship - I think it was the *Dorrigo* I think, that was lost up the top there.

Enemy action?

Enemy action, yes, submarine.

What, in your group, close by?

Yes, yes.

You see it?

Oh well I only saw it go down, because you didn't stop. You couldn't, you had to remain in station, one thing you do is you don't break station and then we had ...

... You picked up the survivors ...?

... we had I think a Corvette, I think, escort that time.

Who picked up the survivors?

Oh the Corvette went back - the Corvette went. There weren't too many survivors on *Dorrigo* I think from memory, because she sank rather quickly. Um, on the .... Yeah, go on.

No, I was just going to bring you back to the *Colorado*.

Yeah, on the *Colorado* we - we went in convoy right from Melbourne and we picked up more ships from Sydney. We didn't go into Sydney - we picked up more ships - and off Newcastle it was, again, an evening under moonlit sky and there were a great number of ships in the convoy. I couldn't tell you how many, but I would say at hesitation probably a good twenty-five to thirty, spread out - well spread out. And I can still remember - I was on watch - and it would have been probably, oh, probably the midnight to four - the dog - I ... I was on lookout, 'cause you did two hours on the wheel and two hours on lookout and I was watching - and I was looking out to sea and I thought I heard a noise and there was a sudden brief colouring and there was a Greek iron ore ship there, coming up from Whyalla to go into Newcastle. She was to break convoy and go into Newcastle, and a torpedo hit her and one minute she was there ... it's a quick as that and within seconds she was gone.

(25.00) You don't remember her name?

There were no survivors. No I don't remember the name but I didn't know the name to be honest with you. You wouldn't know the name either - ships in convoy. You weren't allowed to - there's no conversational communication, you didn't break radio silence, so you had no ... unless you knew a particular ship in daylight or could pick up her name by glass you wouldn't ever know who she was. Although you recognise some ships by their shape and the fact that

you could pick out their name, you could ... but otherwise you wouldn't have a - you wouldn't know who was in the convoy.

So we went - we crossed - it was my first crossing then up to New Guinea and I was amazed ....

Crossing - crossing of what?

Well, leaving Australia and crossing the - what's the call the ocean between, uh ....

The Coral Sea?

The Coral Sea, that's right. And I was amazed at the depth of water. I can still re... you know, in recall the enormous depth between Australia and New Guinea in that particular area. It ran into many miles deep. It was incredible the depth. Uh, whilst I'm at it, we - I should mention that, um, one of the delights of that trip - not that there were many in the strict sense of the word - but was going through the Whitsunday Passage. We went through in daylight and the Whitsunday Passage in - in sunshine is a glorious sight, it really is. We came out of the Coral Sea and we had to slow down. Um, it's all right. At this particular time I think we were probably only about ten or twelve ships in the convoy. We had an American destroyer then looking after us, and we had to go through [China Straits?]. Now the water rushes through there, you don't go through there in - in night-time - in darkness, you go through only in daylight and you pick the ebb tide as best you can, otherwise you - navigation is very difficult. Particularly with a large ship like the *Colorado*.

I was - that was my first taste of New Guinea. Beautiful little area the China Straits. Uh, we did learn later on that an American destroyer before us, when she was escaping from Milne Bay, when the Japs came down, did come through at night-time but it must have been an amazing feat. Because I don't know today, whether they still go through, I don't think they go through even in - in other daylight now, the cruise ships.

What was the atmosphere? I mean you had ships being sunk around you, how did - did this affect morale? I mean, what did sailors say about things or not say perhaps, just feel?

Oh, there was anger, uh, a sense of loss to a point, because of fellow seamen, but you didn't know them. I mean, they were virtually strangers to you, just like I suppose, it must be a bit of a feeling of the herd instinct. You know, you get in animals, one animal gets killed but you don't stop, and there's no sorrow for the animals, so that's unknown to you, so it's gone (clock chimes).

Um, but it's not just a matter of grieving for the people who are lost, they - what happened to them represents what might happen to you?

Oh true, but as I said, we were all young, and in a wartime period, every man has his own feelings regarding the imminence of death in - in enemy action. But I ca... I suppose you're all fatalist too, it's not going to happen to us, it's not going to happen to me, so there was no constant sense of fear. There may have been some of them, I don't remember. I suppose

some must have had a constant fear, must have worried them something awful, but the general feeling was, you know, it wasn't us, and that was it.

Did people like convoys or did they feel they attracted trouble?

Uh, oh no, convoys were good protection. There's no doubt about that. Uh, as far as the little ships were concerned you're better off without a convoy because you were - only went as fast as the slowest ship and which is often a bit of a detriment and that's always a - a curse with convoys. You can only go as fast as the slowest ship and the ships that were capable of going, you know, much faster felt it - a stronger sense of risk I suppose (laughs).

Uh, we went up to - we were - were loaded at that particular time for the invasion of Manila, on the *Colorado*, and we ...

What were you carrying, troops you said?

No, not troops, no. We were carrying, uh - I don't - I couldn't tell you what the cargo was in the strict sense of the word, I don't recall. But I would say it would be a lot of supplies for the - the men coming into Manila, after they took it - so I really couldn't tell you what it was. It probably would be machinery of all sorts of kind, supplies of food, and Lord knows what. I mean, immense carrying capacity these ships, it was incredible.

Uh, we were ordered into Hollandia ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Tape two, side one, Howard Mills. End of identification.

Well I think we were talking about the *Edward Chambers* [sic] going up to Hollandia

Colorado or *Edward* ...?

Oh sorry, the *Colorado*. I get confused with it too. I was - I remember being keenly interested of the geographical area of New Guinea, on the coastline and above Salamaua in particular, the cliff rise way out of the sea and there was - they were bare for the first maybe 2,000-3,000 feet and they were heavy forested up to the crags and that's an inspiring sight from - from sea wise. I was a bit of a romantic I suppose, because I always used to enjoy the beauty of sunsets and sunrises and, ah, any of the natural beauties was always moving to me. I even remember on occasions, and it was a joyous - joyous occasion of having a sunset and and a moonrise or the transit of sunset and Venus hanging under the - the moon, you know, we saw it once not so long ago here, and that was, you know, it's just spell-binding, it really is, the beauty of it.

Never mind, but we - we came into Hollandia and I think they were still chasing the Japs down the beach. We were ordered into a station - probably be about 600 ships in that big bay, 500 or 600 ships. Oh a lot of ships, you're not wrong. Ah, we were ordered into a holding

position and we anchored and we were there for about, oh, about a fortnight I think from memory while more ships came. Ah, we were not allowed ashore. Some of the officers got ashore but we were taken on odd nights across to an American ship that had the facilities for movies and we'd see a movie. Sometimes it'd be a navy ship, sometimes a merchant ship and they'd send a motor - motor launch over for us and it was - it was quite good. But on the *Colorado* we had a very large crew. We also had ....

How much?

Oh ...

Just roughly ....

... in excess of 100, in excess of 100. There were mixed - mainly Americans and we were not too many Australians, one or two New Zealanders. I think one New Zealander and a couple of Englishmen but mainly Americans out from the Great Lakes. There was the - the defence of the ship was carried out by navy marines. They were the defence personnel on board the ship. There were a full hierarchy of officers. She had a Dutch skipper who was completely - you couldn't approach him at all, you couldn't approach him at all. You had to approach him from the fourth mate's level upwards. There was a full complement of cooks and stewards. She was a very big ship - goalpost rigging of eight hatches, remarkable - remarkable ships.

Anyhow we held station at Hollandia, we weren't allowed ashore, but the officers were and they'd bring back reports and of course, it'd go round the ship very quickly. So we used to play a lot of - in the - in the huge stern of the ship was a gallery, or a galley, I better give it it's right term and we played cards, and you'd .... There'd be poker, blackjack, even a roulette wheel and table which the cook ran, and there'd be many thousands of dollars would change hands in the course of an evening. I used to pride myself on playing poker and we had plenty of money naturally, and on a table .... It was interesting, recalling it now, particularly with my numismatic knowledge, there was Australian currency, and we never - never played for coinage, it was always notes. So there'd be Australian banknotes, New Zealand banknotes, American banknotes, English banknotes, Dutch banknotes and even South African banknotes, and we had to sort of get an agreeance [sic] on - on the area of exchange before we started playing, and I used to bank my winnings. Ah, we had the bank on board with the captain, in his safe, and they were - they were very honest and I had a fat little packet when I paid off, but that's beside the point.

(5.00) The officers didn't mind you playing poker?

No, sometimes they'd join us. Sometimes they - you never get beyond the second or third mate would come down, you wouldn't get the second mate, a chief mate, they kept to themselves. They had their own elite... eliteness and they didn't mix with the crew at all. As I said the captain wasn't approachable. Um, and the hierarchy on a ship of that size was immense. Again it was the - the element of discipline. If you were spoken to - if you were sure the captain - you on watch and the Australians mainly were on watch, we were very - very well suited for this particular purpose - and he, in the day time, came on the check the navigation or to check the courses or to - to take control. He would... he wouldn't take a watch. Uh, you'd only speak to him if he spoke to you. You weren't allowed to say, 'How are

you today, sir', you weren't allowed that. That was not frowned on, you were .... And of course, the Australians were a very disruptive element aboard that ship. We were naughty boys. But the fact ....

what ...

I ended up - I ended up being expelled but that's beside the point.

Well not it's not.

Well not at the moment. I'll tell you in a minute. Um, we then learnt the main reason why we were so many ships, although we had of course deduced it, that we must have been going in a northern convoy and of course, from the wartime news, and we were allowed to listen to radio, it was obvious that Manila was going to be the next big push and to have so many ships. So we were ordered then up to Japen Island, which is almost up on the top crown of ... of ... New Guinea and we we're ordered ....

How do you spell that Japen Island?

J-A-P-A-N [sic], I think, I don't think it's spelt any different. And the convoy of course, went north from there, but we had a breakdown in the engines and we had to maintain radio silence, so we drifted for oh, best part about 800 to 900 kilometres to the east, so we didn't go to Manila. Um, we got - we went ... when we got the engines going again, we went back to Hollandia ....

Did they leave an escort with you, I mean, it's such an enormous ship by itself?

No, no, no, no, no, we were completely alone. Oh we were well armed, but we had no - we had Bofors I think from memory, machine-guns, and I think from memory we also had ... a single-shot - I can't think what it was. There were two Bofors but I can't think what the single-shot was, probably about a three pounder I'd say of some description. Probably about a 3-incher.

But I'm just thinking of navigational hazards as well as submarines and things like that?

Well don't forget we're in pretty open water there and there was nothing we could about it. You can't drop your - an anchor in the depths of those waters, you just had to run with it. I must - I suppose they were well aware of the dangers and everything, but there wasn't much you could do about it. They couldn't give us an escort and drop us for the number of ships .... There were more ships by the way, at Japen Island so what the total convoy that went to Manila I have no idea, it must have been immense.

I was talking to an old chap down at, um, Cleveland - Wellington Point - the other day, he paints. He was in the army of course - Australian Army - and he paints. He's mad on ships and he does about two a week and the detail's incredible. He's turned in over a thousand odd and we were talking the other day about - about .... I mentioned Hollandia, 'Oh', he said, 'yeah, we were chasing Japs down the beach', and of course it was a com... common phrasing,

but it was factual. They were fishing them out and chasing them down the beach. Didn't surrender, they just shelled them. And they came overland you see, the Australian forces. He says, he remembers in the glass he said, looking out to sea, he said - he said, 'all day long, there was a fence of ships'. That was his wording, a fence of ships ... on the horizon, all you could see was ships moving. That must have been part of that, um, that fleet.

Um, we unloaded at Hollandia into the *Edward Chambers* - this is why I'm getting confused - and she took the material up to Manila. Uh ....

You got back to Hollandia after you got the ship's engines going ...?

Going, yeah. And we came back and by this time I - the Australians had ... well we'd misbehaved ourselves so - so badly ....

What did - but what had you done? I mean that's the ....

Oh, insubordinate, cheeky, we were egg... there's the peacocks. We were egged on by the Americans, it was an interracial type of thing and of course there were dark Aboriginals - dark Negroes as well amongst the American crew, and also in the marines, and there was a lot of friction on board. One way or another, just too many men tied up in a ship and a lot of feelings came out.

(10.00)We had one chappie there who I remember ... and they - he used to soap his skin with Palmolive soap, lather it in - he'd skin like a duck ...

They're the peacocks for the transcriber, they're the peacocks in the background.

Um, and he used to lather this soap in and his skin was like a - like a woman's skin and he used to take a lot of flak, particularly from us because it was alien to us in this type of treatment to - but it was, as we soon learnt, that the American ... they thought nothing unusual about it at all, they'd take so much effort in their grooming, and this created fights and we had fight .... 'Cause he couldn't ... you could get in the brig for a fight and you'd spend days in confinement and it was not very pleasant. So ...

Basically the Australians were accusing the Americans of being sort of too smooth and ....

Well yeah, 'cause there was a lot of resentment against the Americans. They were paid - even though we were well paid, they were paid still twice our salary.

So you were working on an American ship and you weren't getting American wages?

No, no we only got what they paid us as Australians and it was a bit of a - a bit of a ... disappointment. So you can imagine the only intense rival we had was in - in the card games and we took great delight in sort of taking them down a peg or two, and they - they likewise with us. But it - it got too much for us in the end and we virtually rebelled. We were lucky

we weren't, you know, seriously charged, because we were under - under the discipline of the US Army Transport and they went to their rules and we could've ended up in heaps of trouble.

Could you be a bit more specific about what you did?

Oh, well, it's basically insubordination, swearing at officers, and telling them to go and get nicked and so forth, or probably a bit stronger than that. Uh ....

What sort of things would they be saying to you that would cause you to that to them?

Oh dear ... they called us limeys for a long time, they couldn't differentiate between Australians and Englishmen, and we soon educated them. It was just intense rivalry in a sense, and 'cause we didn't have much in defence in numbers so our defence came in, I suppose, words, you know and feelings. And we gradually grew worse and worse, you know, we'd grumble about this and bitched about that, and refused to do this and you know, if we were ever told to go and do a job, oh get st... you know, get nicked, and we wouldn't go and do it. So we were constantly a thorn in their sides and I suppose we had - we probably didn't reason it out, but we probably realised we wouldn't last the trip out anyway. So we done our dash and that was it. But in doing that defiance, it gave us some little sort of com... commardance [sic] and we sort of, you know ... that's basically what it was I would say.

How did it all come to head?

Well it came to a head rather quickly when we got back. Um, they didn't give us any indication. We came back to Brisbane and they very quickly dragged us to the bridge, the whole three of us - four of us I'd say - four to the bridge and that was the only time that I had been spoken to by the captain. And we stood there like soldiers, hands by our sides and he read the riot act to us. Never in all his life at sea had he ever struck such undisciplined, unruly, unworthy and you know, we just had to cop it (laughs) and he gave us the whole - the whole - the whole drum. And it - in the end we were to be discharged - dishonourably discharged, never to be employed by the US Army Transport again, and our discharge certificates were to be so endorsed.

Well you were in a bit of a mess. I mean, you've been told that you can never go back on the Australian coast?

That is dead right. Now that brings up another story. Uh, as I said, we paid off in - in Brisbane, I had plenty of money, more than I knew what to do with really, I mean, it was stupid. It was several thousand pounds - oh I won a lot of money, 'cause that was a lot of money in those days.

Not small now.

Oh not sm... well, in those days it was a lot of money then. I mean, that was the two or three years wages for an average Australian worker. I had two suitcases full of American cigarettes - I didn't smoke very much so I - you could draw four cartons a week - I think two cartons of

week, that's right, and I'd invariably smoke one or half a one and keep the rest and I had the problem of getting these ashore and we were tied up, uh, roughly at the Expo site is now.

(15.00) She got up as far up as there, no trouble at all, where there used to be the - the fish market used to be there then - and I was talking to a wharfie and I said, 'Any chance you can get a couple of suitcases ashore for me?' and I said, 'a couple of carton cigarettes for you.' 'American, no trouble'. He didn't ask what was in the suitcase. If he had I wouldn't have seen them (laughs). But I met him outside the GPO, two hours later and there he was. I gave him the two carton of cigarettes and when I opened the suitcase he nearly died. Because a carton of cigarettes was worth a lot of money, like you'd sell it on the black market for an enormous amount of money.

So well armed with money and cigarettes, I decided - at that time I had a lady-love in Melbourne - so I applied to go back to Melbourne.

Who did you apply to? I mean, who were you working for now?

No one, no one, but I applied to - I'd ....

You had to get permission to go interstate on the railway?

Yes, yes, I had to get permission and I think the reason I gave was - was, um, to get back to sea. They did not know - I think they were - the Transport Authority did not know that I was not eligible to get on back on the sea, but they nevertheless gave me the priority and I - I, um, went back to Melbourne, to my lady-love and who'd since got cold on me. She'd - she developed a romance with a Frenchman and my mother's sisters, who had a great influence on my life, took me in hand, took most of the money off me, thank God, and I ran wild for, I suppose, about six to eight weeks. Bohemian life - be sharing women, not drinking, I wasn't a heavy drinker, seriously studying for fourth ticket and it was my ... my mother's middle sister - the middle of the three sisters, Aunt Winifred - who ran a business, [buyers in toothpaste?] - extremely ... extremely remarkable woman. She built up an enormous wealth and then squandered it on through the auspices of the Seventh Day Adventist mob - spiritualist mob. I don't know how the hell it ever got to happen with her. Anyway that's beside the point. She had a great influence - when I say great influence, she was a very capable woman and she hounded the shipping master in Melbourne to get me to go back to sea. And she won. If it hadn't been for her I would not have got back on the Australian coast.

So they ... were going to ex... get their pound of flesh. They kn... I had to supply them with Certificates of Discharges - oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. I could see it in his eyes. 'Right', he says - let me get the rest of the darn thing - oh yeah, 'Right', he said, 'All right, well your first job', he said, 'will be in Devonport.' I said, 'Fine. How do I get there?' 'Best you can, mister'. 'Well', I said, 'I'm not going to swim across Bass Plate [sic] Bass Strait', so they put me on a Dakota, unlined air force plane. I lucky had an overcoat, 'cause the two pilots - or pilot and co-pilot - and the crew all had fur-lined jackets and everything and when you get up to the height they go to, it was minus degrees and I, oh, I suffered from cold again, but that's beside the point. So they let me go - they dumped me off at - at Launceston and I had to find my own way to Devonport, you see, pound of flesh.

So I signed on. I got to the Devonport and fin... found the little *Koonda*, which was not so little. She was almost 1000 tons and I wouldn't care what it was so long as I got back .... The Seaman's Union by the way, were not very helpful. I had to rejoin the union almost instantly and they were try to get all that back money - they claimed that I was never - not a member. 'Well', I said, 'you endorsed my ...' - lucky I kept the book - 'you endorsed my book, not to be reemployed, so how can I owe you anything.' So you know, we got away with that, so they - we - let me get back in the union. Oh God it was funny.

> Just talking of the union, did you have much to do with the union in your career?

No, not a de... not from any level whatsoever, except that I had to fork out. In other words, every time a ship came in there'd be a union bloke down there. It was always the same guy, nine times out of ten, and you wonder where the devil he went - what happened to him, but still.

> What happened to the money?

Oh, Seaman's Union, you don't ask me what happened to the money. But you had to pay it though just the same, otherwise you never went to sea. So I joined the - a ship called the *Koonda* - K-O-O-N-D-A - on the 11th of March 1945 at Devonport and I signed on as a seaman. Uh, I paid off in Melbourne on the 21st of March. So I wasn't on her for very long at all - for ten days exactly. But I got back on the coast.

(20.00) So, what did I do? I didn't stay in Melbourne, lady-love didn't want me, so went home to Cairns. Naturally drawn back to Cairns, the family. Uh, I had presents for the - my step-brothers and I found another lady-love in Cairns and she was a very intellectual lady and we struck a very strong bond and it was the hope of both families that we'd marry, and as far as I was concerned, that was on. But, dear Dorothy had more wisdom than I did, and as it turned out, she - she, um, she married a Tobruk Rat who'd lost a leg and we became very friendly, the four of us, later on, even in married life until they died. It's a strange thing that happened.

So when I got home to Cairns, uh, I hung around as the phrasing say, at a loose end, and I probably annoyed everyone. So a few months later on the 16th of the fifth, I joined a little ship called the [*Karu*?]. Now, she was so small in the strict sense of the word that on your discharge there's no tonnage. But she did have a registered tonnage of 143 nett and she was - we went .... It was a remarkable experience from my point of view, coming from one of the biggest ships in the world down to this little thing which was no more than virtually, you know, a lifeboat size. She carried a captain, an engineer - well the captain did everything, the engineer did everything, and a seaman who did everything. So the three of us ran that ship and we used to .... [recording fades]

Oh, we'd go down to the two main sugar ports and pick up bagged sugar and take back and load on any ship that we'll [clock chimes] ...

> Okay ...

... any ship that was loading sugar - raw sugar - in Cairns in those days it was all bagged. We'd either go up to, um, Port Douglas - no, not Port Douglas - to, um, yeah, Port Douglas, that's right - to Port Douglas or down to south Mourilyan which was on the Johnson [sic] River. Ah, that's an amazing sight. Now this little ship, the *Karu*, you'd never be any more than a jump away from the land. You could virtually in some cases jump on the land. If - you just skirted the coast all the way because you wouldn't dare get out any further because the steering arrangements on these ships was a huge steering wheel, round about ten foot to twelve foot in diameter and they used chain blocks through hawsers direct to the rudder. So you had to be (a) strong and a you had to be a good helmsman because you were virtually steering by the balls of your feet. You weren't told where to go, the captain was too busy doing otherwise, you know, he'd give you course, and you just - you know we're going north so you go north, and you just sort of steered yourself. It was incredible.

Going into the - into the south Mourilyan sugar refinery you go in an opening in the cliffs, and it's all heavily forested, rising up probably - probably about 800 or 900 or maybe 1000 feet and all of a sudden there's this narrow opening, and you got to manoeuvre this little ship straight through that opening. Incredible, and the wharfies - 'cause you go under a railway bridge - under the main northern rail bridge in those days, up to a little wharf at the - at the sugar refinery and the wharfies would be waiting for you. And those poor beggars only had a pair of shorts on and sometimes not even that and they used to have to wear canvas or a sugar bag over their heads and shoulders because the sugar can cut you to pieces. And they would load that manually, the big bags of sugar which probably weighed 100-112 pound probably in those days, would come down the chute and they would load one on staggering under the weight and dump it into the hold and there'd be someone in the hold to make sure that the stack was built and stowed properly. And as soon as they finished we would leave, and they used to try and work it so you could come in on the full tide and go out with the tide. So they had four hours to load the best part of 150 ton of sugar.

I did that for, uh, oh, how many ... how long ... two months and they paid off in Cairns on the 10th of July 1945. Again became a gentleman of leisure for a little while and joined the *Goodna* [sic] which was the - the *Goondi* which was another small ship of nearly 400 net tonnage. Again as seaman and I joined her on the 26th of July 1945 and I paid off on the 17th of September in Townsville. She was running sugar again and we did much the same thing. We went a bit further, went down to Townsville.

(25.00) Well perhaps, um, in this period at the end of the war, are there any particular significant experiences that you remember there? Um, or when did you finish going to sea there?

Well, we're coming up to it now. But to answer your question there was no, uh ... wartime activity that I was involved in because we were ... such small ships working virtually all - just offshore that we didn't offer any target, we didn't offer any reason to be attacked. I'm conscious at that particular time - early in Cairns - of the Catalinas that were based in Cairns. The Americans had a squadron of Catalinas, I think there were five, I think all told and the whole city of Cairns were very much aware of them. They were feted ashore as you can well imagine. I met a couple - I can't remember their names - but they - I have no memories of any dislike or anything, they were quite nice chaps - they would take off ... they would load up with their bombs and a huge intake of petrol and they would take off up Trinity Har... up

Trinity ... up the inlet of Trinity Bay and they would use the whole of the e... the whole of the channel to take off. They would run for miles before they get off - off the ocean. And they would fly up into New Guinea .... That was often a common remark in those days, uh, whilst the B52s were up at - up at, say, 15000 or 20000 feet the Cats would come down to 1000 feet or 800 feet or whatever it was and drop their load. And then they would fly back again to Cairns. And sometimes they'd be gone for - they're gone from one dawn to the next. I think they'd be in the air for thirty-six to forty hours and the whole city would count them in when they came back, and there were occasions when they didn't come back - some never came back and they eventually, as the war got further north, they took Manila and they cleared New Guinea, the Cat... the Cats moved up. I don't know what base they went to, but probably went up further, much, much further, maybe into Manila. I just don't know. But they were used by the Americans a lot, the Catalinas. Remarkable plane.

Just coming back to your story, were you running in blackouts still in '45?

Oh yes, yes, still - oh yes, always blackouts. So you - the ports of all ships were painted black so there was never any danger of any glint or anything and it was a golden rule that if you had a wind chute in the porthole, to get wind, you always made sure that there was no light reflected onto the - the inside of the wind funnel. Because you can imagine in these little tight fo'c'sles it was, you know, no air at all. You didn't have like lines of funnels up on the deck to direct the wind, you had wind chutes which you stuck out and that let the wind in and you corrected where you wanted to put it.

Ah, yes, you always kept blackout situation. It ... but there was no - other than the American activity or American personnel presence in Cairns and Townsville, there was no ... and of course obvious, our troops etcetera, but there was no real evidence unless you start scouting around. There were dug-out trenches, there were, um, nearly every household had a trench, there were - those that did remain behind dug trenches or had the dug-out of some description. 'Cause Cairns was virtually only inches above the - the sea-level in the sand. You didn't have to go far down and you struck salt water. So you couldn't virtually dig much of a trench. There were gun displacements in Cairns and Townsville but you had to go looking for them. But that was the only obvious - outside of course the - the ration tickets and the absence of normal shopping like we know it today. That's the only activity. 'Course plus the news of course.

Well I joined in - in Cairns, I then came back again from Townsville and I joined the - the [*Orldinga*?], which was a - a Johnny Burke ship and by this time I'd made me mind up that the sea was going to be my - my life and I was then studying very seriously and I decided I'd go to Sydney and sit for the - my fourth ticket and the - the exam was to be early in 1946, the next sitting, so I said, I might as well stay at sea and get a ship and do that. Anyhow the *Orldinga* turned up and she turned out she was going to Sydney so I thought, 'Whacko, that'll do me.' I signed on as 2nd of the October 1945 and paid off on the 8th of November, so it was only a short trip as you can - seven days - six days. Signed off in Sydney and I found a - I can't remember where I was billeted. Where was I?

[Voice in background]

No, no, no, I was paid off, I had a boarding house room or something and I used to enjoy Bondi Beach in those days, it was - I was a good swimmer and it wasn't polluted of course like it is now ....

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Identification: side two, tape two, Howard Mills.

So if we just go back a sentence and ...

Right, well I ... oh yes, well, as I said, I was a very good swimmer and I enjoyed the water swimming. Uh, the - so I used to go down and spend most days - most mornings that was - on Bondi and spend the afternoon studying. Uh, being a young blood it didn't take long of course to have a roving eye I suppose and stirring of nature and I met my dear wife. One thing led to another and we became unofficially engaged and I soon realised that if I wanted to have a happy married life and a family which we both considered necessary, that the sea wasn't a suitable life really. So I made the decision to leave the sea. I didn't sit for the examination and then I started a series of jobs which I found it hard to settle down for a while. But I applied myself to everything I did.

Well just looking back at that wartime period and just remembering what you're saying about finding it difficult to settle down, what was the impact of - of those years at sea? How did ... were they ... was it a, um, a good period in your life or did you feel you lost time out of your life?

No I did not consider it a loss of my life. As a matter of fact it was a good time. That's about as fine a word you could say, it was a good time, an exciting time. I was fortunate to suffer no effects. Um, there was a period that in my life which I was - in my late teens - I was still reasonably informative to the point of view that I was influenced by factors around me, one way or another, it formed a good portion of my learning and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Be it wartime or otherwise.

END OF INTERVIEW.