



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00731
Title	(565) Arthur, Wilfred Stanley (Wing Commander)
Interviewer	Stokes, Edward
Place made	Not stated
Date made	11 August 1989
Description	Wilfred Stanley Arthur as a wing commander, 75 Squadron RAAF, interviewed by Edward Stokes 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

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur, 75 Squadron.
Tape one, side one.

Wilfred, it's been interesting getting that general background of your career in the air force and so on. Could you just tell us when you were born and where please?

Yes. Born 7th December, 1919. My father was a stock inspector on the Queensland/New South Wales border near ... east from Goondiwindi. He was a member of the New South Wales Department of Agriculture and the job was to prevent the ticks and infestations from the northern part of Australia - the tropical part - to northern New South Wales and so on.

And where did you go to school?

I went first of all to ... with correspondence for a short time. We were about seven miles from school. After that we went by horse to Yelarbon, the town of Yelarbon, a very small town on the railway line. It's the railway line that runs from Warrick towards Goondiwindi and St George. And when we finished that, I think, qualifying certificate it was called, I went to Scot's College in Warwick. I was there for about four and a half years finally from ... you know, from up to matriculation and then I was invited to stay on another six months which I did. So I in fact left there just before I went into the air force.

Right. So that just takes us up to just before Point Cook.

Yes.

That's interesting. Just looking back on that period of your childhood in the bush. Of course ... well, the ANZAC tradition generally was fairly strong, perhaps particularly strong in some country areas, was that something you were conscious of as a young man or not?

Oh yes, yes. My father was in the first war from ... from ... right from the beginning. In fact, after he was married I think he was actually away overseas for about four and a half years which was why I was born in 1919 instead of in 1912 or '14, whatever it was that they were married.

And was the ... in the circle you moved in, most particularly I guess your family, was the first war seen as a positive thing or a negative thing? How was that perceived?

Well ...

Or rather the experiences of Australians in that war?

Well, my father was there for a very long time but he was by no means a I mean, he hated the whole war situation of course and my uncles - I had several uncles - who'd been at the war including some that had been very badly wounded, with one exception they were all people

who had their feet on the ground who hated the whole war business and no ... I don't mean taking any positive anti-war activity, but were far from glamorising any damn war.

(5.00) Right. Well, I know that after you left school ... well, after you left school you'd made a decision that you wanted to fly and that you wanted to fly with the air force with a short term commission. Could you tell us a bit more about that? Was it being part of a service or was it wanting to fly planes?

No, it was ... I wanted to be an engineer. I didn't have the sort of money that was required. I also wanted to fly but I didn't believe that I wanted to fly for ... as a career. That was ... in my mind was to do this short service commission which was four years and then probably to become an engineer.

Were you conscious, incidentally, of the exploits of the well-known pilots of the inter-war years - Kingsford Smith and people?

Oh yes.

Was that a key thing in your childhood, or not?

Well, it was ... I remember those reports very much of course and I can remember listening on the wireless, as it was then called, to the Kingsford Smith actual sort of recordings of the ... of the flights. I can remember them, you know, the change in the tone of the engine as they were involved in dives or, you know, into turbulence in other words.

So the decision to go to Point Cook, you enlisted ...

Yes.

How difficult was it to be selected?

Well, I think quite probably fairly difficult. They were ... The air force had interviewed people in all states of Australia and only about thirty-five, or I really don't remember how many were in the course final selection, but it was quite a small number.

And I understand war was declared - war in Europe, that is - was declared I think the day after you arrived at Point Cook?

That's right. It was declared on the ... I think from memory, I think it's 3rd September, '39. I was actually in ... at Point Cook at the time I heard the BBC announcement.

I did want to ask you just one thing before I forgot. In those late years of the 1930s there was a perception amongst some people that war was imminent, you'd made this decision to join the air force, did you also have that perception that war was imminent or did you foresee a few - four or five years in a peacetime air force?

No, I think I expected that there would not be any immediate war, until just before of course. We realised that the build up was sort of quite sudden, or it seemed to be at the time. Sure, in

retrospect, people have made it seem fairly long drawn out but, at the time, I didn't expect to be involved in any war.

So, when the news was received at Point Cook, this fairly motley collection I imagine of young men like yourself, how did the news affect you? What was the mood?

Well, I think largely excitement and ... I can't remember people acting in any ... any sort of exaggerated way. I do remember of course that my ... what I expected to be doing at Point Cook was, in fact, changed immediately. The air force moved very quickly and decided that they were not the only people who could teach pilots to fly Tiger Moths or Gypsy Moths or those things so they, in fact, cut our course into - in half and one half stayed in Melbourne and one half went to Sydney.

(10.00) And the half that went to Sydney was again divided into two groups: one group that was to be trained to fly Tiger Moths and Gypsy Moths with a New South Wales aero-club and the other one with the Kingsford Smith aero-club. We were billeted in a Brighton Le Sands hotel.

The next few All that period was one of ... well, I can mostly remember the fatigue because we used to leave very early in the morning - like four o'clock or five o'clock in the morning - and get home again at seven or eight o'clock at night having, you know, waited around at the airport at Mascot and - not only waited around - I mean, had lessons and huge periods of just waiting and flying. I can remember being enormously tired.

How was the flying? You wanted to fly and you finally got there ...

Yes.

What's your very first memory or your strongest early memory of getting up in a plane?

Well I had always been very susceptible to ... to seasickness, and not that I'd ever been in the sea, but even a swing used to make me sick. So, that in fact, I was quite frequently violently ill with consequent bad headaches of course.

This was during your early training?

Yes.

How did you overcome the ... I mean, just the lassitude and the ...

Well, it was ... it was inconvenient; it was awkward, but I still got over it of course. Some of the instructors I must have been sick on which were probably pretty understanding people. Yes, well, later on, much later when I was at Mildura, I had a number of quite interesting small jobs. One of them was to ... to go over to Professor Cotton's development of the G-suit in Sydney. I ... I had the job of first of all going into his centrifuge to get accustomed to the G-suit protector thing which was basically a pair of heavy trousers and ... and an arrangement around your waist which would squeeze your whole body - whole bottom part of your body - with air pressure, I mean huge pressure say at the feet and the lower legs and then less and

less. The object of that of course was to keep the blood from running away from your head and your eyes - to prevent it running away by having this huge pressure. It did in fact, of course, allow you to ... to experience and put up with quite heavy G-forces.

Mmm. That's most interesting. Just going back to those early days in the air force. Of course, there was very heavy discipline in terms of parade ground drill and that kind of thing in the ... or if your experiences were typical. How important do you think that kind of regimentation was to your latter flying?

Well, I ... I don't think I ... I don't think it was really very related at all. I didn't object to it; I didn't even dislike it very much, but I, of course, enjoyed the flying and the ... and the other lessons that we had in, well, in navigation and in aircraft handling and so on.

(15.00) After you gained your wings in Sydney on Tiger Moths, I think you went to Richmond where you were attached to an operational training unit with Hawker Demons ...

Yes.

What's your first memory of that and what kind of work were you involved in doing with that unit?

Well, early on I was still being airsick. I enjoyed the training pretty much apart from the airsickness. I can remember being very tired because of the long periods of study and long periods of waiting around because our ... since it was a concentrated course they didn't have a few hours, they had lots of hours that you had to work. I was very pleased when that was over and I was able to join a squadron which was, well ...

No. 3 Squadron.

No. 3 Squadron which was just about to leave Australia for the Middle East.

Just going back to the period at Richmond, if you had to rate your training in as average, good, above average, very good, poor, how would you describe it?

Well, I think my earliest assessment was average ... or I don't think it was average minus but it was not very ... it was no better than that. It's really all I can remember about it.

When you said, your earliest assessment, were you suggesting that assessment changed later or your assessment of that earliest period was ...?

No, I think ... I think I finally ended up the thing with average plus or something like that. It was not ... you know, not very good but good enough to pass.

Wilfred, sorry. I think we were at cross purposes there. That was my fault for a poor question. What I was actually asking was: How would you have rated the quality of your instruction; not your own performance?

Oh yes. Well, I ... I think it was very well done. The flying instruction was certainly concentrated and fairly demanding. The other lessons were also fairly demanding. That's really about all I can remember about it.

Right. Well, going onto No. 3 Squadron, I think shortly after you were posted to the squadron, the entire squadron left for the Middle East, is that correct?

That's correct, yes. Yes, we left at fairly short notice and fairly, you know, unadvertised. We went to ... from Melbourne, I suppose - I forget whether we left Melbourne or At all events we went to Perth and then from Perth to Colombo as it then was and then to Bombay.

Just going back. You're leaving Australia to go to a war situation that was not particularly promising from the Allied point of view at that time. What were your feelings on leaving Australia?

Probably mainly of interest and of excitement, I suppose. I'd heard quite a lot about Egypt and Palestine of course from my father and father's ... and his friends and so on, nearly none of whom were glamorising anything.

That's interesting. I also think you said that the ship went after Fremantle through Colombo and I think perhaps Bombay - the precise places perhaps don't matter - but I thought what you said about the conditions on the shipboard life was rather interesting reflecting the difference between Australian and British attitudes to officers versus men?

(20.00) Yes. We left Bombay for Egypt in a British India boat, the *Dilwara*, which was a ship designed for transporting troops from England to India. It was a quite small vessel, I don't know what size, but I remember that there was ample, generous accommodation for officers and very limited accommodation for non-officers. Shortly after Very shortly after we left Bombay our ground troops in the squadron objected very strongly to the ... to being confined to such small ... a small part of the ship and the general conditions and explained that as far as they were concerned they were expecting during the war to have to suffer and so on but they had no intention, I think as they picturesquely said, well, while it's easy to get life we want to enjoy things; when there's only rubbish to eat we'll eat that without any objections. As a result of this the squadron commander approached the ship's captain and so on and a great deal of extra space was allotted to ... for all ranks, not reserved areas to ...

Were there also British troops or airmen on the ship?

Oh, there were British troops. I think, yes, there were airmen but only a very few. I got to know one of them quite well because he was a ... well, he'd been operating on the northern Indian frontiers as a pilot.

Was there any resentment between the ... or tension between the British officers and the Australian officers when the Australian officers made this rather somewhat democratic decision that might have flown in the face of British tradition?

I don't think so. The OC troops was somewhat of a caricature of an English army officer but I don't remember that there was any big feeling about it.

Right. Well, going on to actually arriving in the Middle East. You flew in a whole number of different aircraft and in different situations, but perhaps could you just tell us your ... where you were first posted and what your first duties were?

Well, we were posted to ... to an airport near Cairo, Helwan I think ... Helwan. We had fairly concentrated training periods. I can't, I really can't remember a great deal of detail.

The plan I think was for No. 3 Squadron to be used as an army cooperation squadron ...

That's correct, yes.

Could you explain what that involved and also I think it did lead to some fairly catastrophic losses?

3 Squadron as an army cooperation squadron was The concept at that stage was that there'd be a pilot and an observer and the observer's job would include navigation and also the plotting of artillery shots from the air, that is, the man in the aircraft would be advising the artillery through radio - I mean Morse, not voice - on the range and their successes and so on. It was In point of fact, after the training we were ... that concept was dropped because it was very early discovered that an aircraft like the ... with two people in it, doing a job like that was cat's meat to enemy fighters.

(25.00) So after that decision was made, Wilfred, how was the squadron used?

The squadron was used immediately as a fighter squadron. We were equipped first with Gladiators and Gauntlets which were radial engine aircraft - biplanes. Then later to Hurricanes and later still to a P-40¹ or a thing like a P-40 called a Tomahawk. Actually ...

Sorry.

Actually we were involved in the desert warfare up ... so we travelled up towards Benghazi and we had a very disturbed sort of period there because the war was moving so rapidly with some, you know, forward moves and then hurried retreats.

Of course, at this stage you're still very, very young and you're obviously a quite inexperienced pilot in a wide sense and yet you're thrown into this situation of active combat. What's your first recollection of that, of being engaged, actively engaged against the enemy?

Well, one of excitement I suppose. Also, well we always had an awkward situation where the Italian aircraft or ... and then later the German ones were much faster than we were which meant that we had ... we were in the situation where they could dominate ... they could decide when to attack and when to go home. And they also had better guns. The thing that we had

¹ Kittyhawk.

to our advantage was, in fact, greater manoeuvrability. We could turn tighter corners than they could.

Does that go for all the planes you mentioned then, the Gauntlets, the Gladiators ...

Hurricanes.

Hurricanes, Tomahawks, or only for some of those?

No. Well, right up to the Tomahawk the others were more manoeuvrable, turn sharper corners than the Italian aircraft. On the other hand, they were slower than the Italian aircraft and when the Germans came, again, much slower than they were.

Right. How did you ... you were saying a moment ago that your first memory of active combat was one of excitement. Fighter pilots generally tended to be rather ... or were alone in the air. You had people around you who you had to rely on but in the end you were on your own. Was there much fear involved, or not?

Oh, I suppose there was. I think you'd have to be bloody stupid if you were not afraid. Of course, the situation is that you're so busy in combat that you're not likely to ... you don't ... you get involved in what's happening and that's - that occupies the mind wonderfully; concentrates the mind wonderfully.

Sure. Despite that, what were the - not just for yourself but perhaps men generally - what were the most common outward symptoms of fear? Was it common, for instance, for men to sweat heavily, to be sick, that sort of thing or not?

Well, I can remember sweating a great deal but I don't think ... I don't remember many other symptoms. I mean, there were ... switch it off for a second.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur. Tape one, side two.

Wilfred, you were just saying about the issue of some men who, for no good or bad reasons, couldn't cope with combat. How do you believe the authorities handled that - well or poorly?

I think they handled it very well. That is, that people who are obviously in a bit of trouble were moved quite quickly. Naturally, sometimes they couldn't move them quite quickly because there were no ... not sufficient readily available replacements. I think that's ...

So you don't feel that men were ever treated too harshly for ...

No.

... in those situations?

No, I don't think ... I don't know of any instance where they were treated harshly because, oh well, just poor arithmetic that's all. You've got too much value, you can only use people who are going to be reasonably confident. Every person would be afraid a lot of the time unless they were bloody stupid and ... but that doesn't stop you from going on.

Mmm. Sure. Perhaps if I could just ask you - it's related to that - what would you see as the characteristics that were the most important attributes for a fighter pilot to have, and I say a fighter pilot not, for example, a bomber pilot? What characteristics did you need?

I suppose some sort of pleasure in contest ... contest. It's really about, about - I mean, in my case I didn't want to be anything other than a fighter pilot but that was partly because I would always have felt very uncomfortable with anybody else for whom I'd be responsible, and whereas I didn't have that feeling.

Mmm. That's an interesting point, yes, that if you mucked it as a bomber pilot you took a lot of people with you.

(5.00) Yes, and that would be a very real one, I think. A real worry to some people.

Do you think that was ... this is an interesting issue - I've talked about it with other men - was that perhaps why bomber pilots tended to be a little bit older, perhaps men who were more able to accept a kind of wider sense of responsibility which included the responsibility for other people's lives? Or were there more other factors at work there?

I think other factors. I ... well, I suppose I really don't know too much about the bomber people. Naturally I saw them plenty of times but, I mean, you live a very concentrated life and I hear people talking about it. The crews were obviously very dependent on each other and very closely knit groups quite often.

(5.00) Yes, there were those very tight bonds. How tight were the bonds amongst pilots in a fighter squadron? How much did individual pilots expect to rely on other men within their squadron?

Well, in all training we were aiming at all times to have people in pairs with a more experienced person running ... taking the initiative and so on. This, of course, included a great sense of responsibility for getting people to and from and not getting lost or getting killed, that sort of a way. In actual combat of course the ... once combat began you were very likely indeed to break up even though that was the object - was to stay as long as possible as a pair or as a group for a start of four - two pairs - but in combat, naturally, that came to pieces very often and very quickly.

Mmm. That's interesting. Just turning to a particular episode, a particular combat episode, you yourself, I think, were shot down during this period. How did that combat begin and what lead to that, to your being shot down?

Well, we were ... I was chasing some Italian aircraft bombers, Savoia-Marchettis I think they were. They were quite a lot faster than our aircraft were which meant your only chance of really catching them was to cut the corner if they were foolish enough to turn very much. In ... also, if you're chasing somebody like that you're concentrating very much on that and you are a sitting duck for somebody else. And, in fact, that's what happened to me. Chasing these Savoias, I suddenly realised I was being attacked by an Italian aircraft which almost immediately ... a shell went into the top main plane - do you know what I mean by the top main plane where it was a biplane - the top main plane tore straight away and swung back towards the tail and the bottom main plane sort of followed it but a bit behind and I had no control at all, just completely loose control column. So I got out quickly.

How many seconds or minutes did all that take from when you were ...

Probably only fifty seconds or seventy or something like that. I got out of the cockpit quite quickly but by that time the thing was nearly vertically downwards and I got stuck underneath one of the main planes that had folded back against the fuselage and I couldn't get out of that. I was kicking and trying to get myself free when I was very close to the ground and finally did get free but hit the ground very hard because ... well, because I hadn't had enough time to slow up, I suppose. I hit ...

You obviously ... Your parachute had opened?

Yes. Oh yes. And I hit the ground very hard and facing the wrong way, that is, I got dragged for quite a while with the parachute because there was a heavy wind. I then collapsed the parachute and I released it and then ran after the chute and caught it and rolled it up and folded it under some rocks - we were in open desert of course, so you were very obvious to anybody.

(10.00) Was this hostile country?

Oh yes, yes. And ... well, it was on the enemy side. I mean, great emptiness on both sides of course. I covered the thing with some rocks and just near it a can, a small can, which I presume was a surveyor's can or something on a heap of rocks on a particular ... it was probably an aid to navigation. And I was circled for quite a while by two Italian aircraft which I thought would shoot at me but they in fact didn't.

Was that typical or not, that kind of chivalry?

I suppose I'm not sure. I think that ... I think it was probably fairly common but, again, I don't know. Anyway, as soon as they left I grabbed the 'chute again and started to walk and after quite a short time - like two or three or four hours or something, I can't remember - I was picked up by a man in a curious looking vehicle who ... the man turned out to be a long-range desert patrol bloke and a New Zealander. And he ...

You must have breathed a sigh of relief?

And he took me ... headed me back towards the ... I really can't remember. I can remember that the first night I was billeted ... I was left with some long-range desert patrol people and English Coldstream Guards or one of the elite units, and I can remember that night being ...

sitting at a dining-in night which was hilarious because on the table ... on the table was a most elaborate candelabra. In other words, some of their mess gear. The tent I think was an EPIP, English pattern, Indian pattern tent with - but it was dug into the ground about three feet down. Then the ... see, the candelabra there and little candles - little candles, not for ornament reasons, for seeing of course and then the meal came round and it was one slice of cold bully beef and one biscuit.

(laughs)

They had no rations at all.

More appearance than substance.

Really funny.

That must have been ...

I sat up there, of course they were all, you know, well dressed - dirty, of course but everybody was dirty, except me, I was much, much dirtier than they were having walked a long way and ...

Did you have any water?

No, only very little water. Throughout the time that we were there, with the moving backwards and forwards up in the desert, on each move we were salting the water for ... to embarrass the Germans and Italians and, in fact, they were, of course, were doing exactly the same thing.

That's interesting.

In no instances I have ever heard of of poisoning but people were trying to deny the other side, naturally. Because most water that people lived on had to be carted, there was nearly no underground supplies.

When I asked if you had water, Wilfred, I actually meant when you parachuted down. Was part of your safety equipment in those desert conditions to carry a few litres of water, or not?

No. Later on, always, always carried a water bottle but I don't think I did then.

Just going back to that particular event, I mean being shot out of the sky. It obviously will happen very quickly. While you were tumbling down towards the earth - and this is a hard question to ask - while you were tumbling down towards the earth did you have any time to think about life and why you were there and what had happened? Or, I mean, were there thoughts going through your mind?

(15.00) Oh yes. I remember very well before I got out and got free from the thing I can remember watching the ground and thinking, 'Well, this is it', and while I was sort of watching the ground, I'd seen plenty of other aircraft hit the ground and in the main, all you

are left with is a little grey stretch on the ground where there's been a fire of course with the impact ... fire ... petrol spread around and then burnt. So I can remember thinking well, you know, this is it.

And were there other thoughts too of family and friends or it was just too ...

No, no. I meant the talking of maybe three ... a total of three or four minutes I suppose. No, I can remember that very clearly and other times you ...

Did that recur ... other people have talked of nightmares, did that become an issue with you, that crash?

No. I think only once did I ... I can remember being pretty worried. Not then, I think it was probably a few days or weeks later, I can't remember, and then thinking well this is damn silly, go to sleep, which is what I did do.

Just going on a bit. The very first time you flew into combat again after that incident, being shot down, how was that? How did you feel?

Well, I felt a bit nervous because in the very next, I think, maybe two days after I got back to the squadron I got hit again quite badly but not, you know, I'd only tore off a lot of ... I flew home in other words. Because ... well, altogether, of course, we had lots of smashes and damage.

Sure, that must have been very hard. I know you yourself, while you were there, I think, shot down four enemy aircraft for which you were amongst ... you were awarded the DFC for that and no doubt other things too. Do you remember any of those encounters with Italians particularly clearly or not?

Oh, I can remember, yes, the early part of that - there was sort of chaos where there were a great many aircraft circling and so on. And then I can remember chasing some ... well, anxiously trying to keep ... catch up with them but ... well, being unable to catch up with them, unable to turn to see where other people were ... it's fair ... it's largely excitement but what you are is pretty clear in your mind - it's not confused at all.

And the four aircraft that ... the four Italians that you did shoot down ...

Yes.

How much luck and how much skill is involved in that kind of encounter?

I think always a very big element of luck. There obviously were some people who could shoot very well too. That was a matter, of course, of judgment, of trying to work out just which way that bloke was going because it's ... well, anybody that's skidding and so on can have the appearance of turning this way but in fact the ... so that there were some people that must have been very good at getting those angles right.

Of course, that's critical. A plane that might appear to be, for example, turning to starboard might, in fact, just be slipping ...

That's right, yes. It could be very easily be doing the other and anyway it could also be climbing and diving and every combination of the

Just going back to perhaps two other personal issues. We've heard about you yourself being shot down. I mean, of course you were fighting a war but in shooting other men down out of the sky ...

Yes.

How did that affect you as a person knowing that there were other men in the situation you feared most of all?

(20.00) Well, I don't think we were very concerned about it except when ground attacks were on, then it seemed, well, say in Lebanon, I can remember attacking a horse cavalry and that was sort of a bit worrying. I can also remember attacking trains and things and that was just sheer 'I'm going to get it'.

What was the issue with the horses? Was that that the contest was unequal or something else?

No, no. Just surprise I think in the main. I was not expecting to see cavalry - probably only a dozen of them but they were French army. This was Vichy French you see in Lebanon at that time - anti ... you know, anti-British.

Sure. Just one other - again a personal thing - I know that ... I think it was November 1941, two pilots were killed in one day including I think a man called Knowles ...

Yes.

... who was your best friend and all during this period your wife was saying just a while ago that all these young men she knew had ... were mostly killed. How did the pilots who stayed on who did survive, how did you cope with that attrition of friends and comrades?

Well ... well, I can remember say when Knowles was killed there were three of us in the tent and Knowles was killed and another bloke, the same day, and I remember that I moved out of that tent into another one and I thought, 'Well, I'll get a big one this time' and I moved into a tent where there were five or seven - I can't remember whether there were five or seven - I remember there were fewer on one side than on the others, just stretchers jammed together into a tent. And I remember going into that one and the next day they were all gone as well. Actually I just stayed there because I ... I don't know, you just don't think about it very much. Too bloody selfish I suppose.

Sure. Just turning to something different. During this period in the desert, Wilfred, you were flying different planes - Gladiators, Hurricanes, Tomahawks and I think Kittyhawks?

Yes, later.

At the end. How did you adjust? How did you learn, I'd imagine very quickly, to fly planes which I imagine had relatively different characteristics in terms of flying ability, fighting ability and so on?

Yes, it was very, very difficult because there ... well, for a thing like a Kittyhawk there was no Tomahawk. The first one we had was very different, very ... not nearly as kindly as the Hurricane and the Gladiators and things were concerned. That is, they'd stall with a fairly savage way. Naturally what you did was to - on your first take-off - was to take the thing high and try and practice what it would ... how it would behave when you were slowing down. Some of them were quite docile and they recovered quite easily and some, including the Tomahawk, was very awkward. When it stalled it didn't sag or anything. It sort of flipped and moved very suddenly which was very ... well, quite frightening because it was hard to ... something's moving as quickly as that, changing attitude, it's hard to know what to do next. And the basic object, of course, is to get the thing going fairly fast so that you're getting leverage over your control system - your elevators and your ailerons.

Sure. As you were introduced to each different kind of aircraft were you getting fairly detailed instruction from men who were themselves experienced with that aircraft or were you rather thrown in at the deep end?

Thrown in at the deep end in the main. I mean when we moved from Hurricanes to ... to Tomahawks we were in Syria at that time and the three of us went down in the morning and came back in the afternoon in the new aircraft. We'd flown only once, I think, at Ismailia, I think it was, that we were doing our ... we were picking them up.

(25.00) Were there many accidents ...

Quite a lot.

... that could be attributed to this chopping and changing with aircraft?

Yes, yes there were. With those we lost several of them. We were actually operating out of Lydda which was the airport in ... I can remember that was a very short one - short airstrip - and that was ... that was ... that damaged quite a lot of our aircraft.

Just turning to a different issue, during this period you'd obviously lived, no doubt, fairly briefly in a lot of different places through the Middle East, how much were you able to mix with local people to learn something of local life? Or were you just going so hellishly fast that could never happen?

Well, you didn't meet people very much because, after all, well you were very, very busy and any leave periods were - well, in our case - very, very short because you couldn't be done without so to speak. But, I mean, in the main sometimes people were sent away to have a slight rest at a training unit or something. But in our case, in the main, they had to get ... you got called back at very short notice after a very short period just because of casualties.

And what were living conditions like in your camps? I assume they were mostly tented camps.

Oh very ... very poor, well, because we were moving so fast and just tents and no lights at night time and if we had a light it would be candles or sometimes just boiling oil with a floating ... a floating wick. But, of course, with other people it might have been very different. We were ... that war was moving very rapidly.

And I'd assume things like food were fairly basic too with such a rapid movement?

What was that?

Food.

Food, oh yeah. Food was very varied and mostly very, very frugal with ... because in the case of 3 Squadron they were broken into several units - usually when you're moving from one area to another people would go ahead and the people flying the aircraft would of course come in after they were already established. But before the rest of the maintenance people had been there too, you still had to get forward as fast as they got fuel and food, and the food was very ... oh well, biscuits - biscuits and bully beef and, you know, not much better.

That's most interesting. Perhaps just to end this hour of taping and we might call it quits, I know you met your wife who's here now ...

Yes.

... in Egypt. Could you perhaps tell us where you met and that story of how you became involved? I think you actually married late in 1941.

Yes. Yes, I met my wife in a shop in Alexandria. I went in - idly I suppose - I can't really remember if I had any purpose, just probably just curiosity and then met this girl and started to talk to her and did talk to her, I can't remember, maybe one hour or something like that. And from then on I think I met her again maybe the next day and then I didn't see her for quite some time like six or eight weeks, or something - I don't remember. I could easily check up I suppose. It was all very short periods.

It was obviously fairly rare for men to ... well, certainly to marry from what I know.

Oh yes, yes. And I must have frightened the life out of my parents. I can remember the first letter I got was a fair imitation of panic I think. The next letter I got, which I remember was ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur. Tape two, side one, side three of the whole lot.

You were saying a second letter had ... came much later but, in fact, it was only written three days later.

Yes. And in that one the general attitude was, well, you've been reasonably sensible up to date, you probably are fairly sensible. I never, of course, knew whether this was a sort of a con business or whether they ... At all events I did go, I remember, that I did go to great lengths to try and make it sound sensible. I know that ... I don't know how successful I was. In fact I do have some of my own letters that I just got from my sister some few months ago, letters I had written to one of them after that first accident which is quite interesting actually - I found it quite interesting.

Perhaps I might ...

I haven't read the others at all yet.

Perhaps I might look when I'm here tomorrow, Wilfred. Of course there must have been some doubts on your wife's parent's side too but ...

Oh yes, yes. Well Yes, of course. Lucille did have a brother who was in Melbourne and some relatives in Melbourne that she didn't know. I can remember that I got on reasonably well with her mother and I enjoyed her father very much actually although it was very difficult to talk to him because he didn't speak English very well.

That's most interesting. Anyway you were married and that was Christmas Eve of 1941 and you went for a brief honeymoon in, I think, Palestine and Syria. That must have been almost dreamlike after what you'd been through.

Yes, that was ... Well, we went to Palestine, I wanted to take her there and I also wanted to try and catch my brother who was in the army. In the end I couldn't easily find him and then I was told that he was doing sentry duty in Beirut. So we up and went up into ... to Beirut. Just got onto a bus and at the border we were stopped by the French - you see, this was after the war in Syria but the French were back there running things again - and we got to a place and they said, 'Well, where's your visa?', 'We don't have one' objections but in the end they finally said, well it was actually just a road cut into the side of a cliff - we were in a bus. So eventually the French police who had been talking to Lucille, in French of course, said, 'Well, you get to hell out of here. Go up to Beirut and you'd better be ... you won't hear anything more about this if you're back in two days. If it's more than that you won't go anywhere'. (laughs)

So you did see your brother?

Yes we did. We found him in Beirut. He'd been jammed into a military policeman there.

(5.00) Mmm. I know he was later killed in New Guinea ...

Yes.

Did you see him again?

Only once; one other time. We saw him in Adelaide and on that occasion we'd gone there specially to see him and his boss wouldn't let him leave the - leave to visit us. So, in fact,

what we did was I raced off and got some food and we sat and sort of - it was in a park in Adelaide - and this was the army area and we stayed on one side and he stayed on the other. This was not unreasonable at all, of course. I mean, you can see the army bloke's point of view if he let his blokes go to town and they were to leave tomorrow morning or something he wouldn't have them all. So there was nothing unreasonable about this; nothing stupid about it.

Anyway, you had that meeting.

Yes.

Well, that's been very interesting. We might perhaps leave it there I think and we'll continue tomorrow.

Yes. Come outside and have a ...

Right, this is continuing the next morning with Wilfred. Wilfred, after the end of 1942 of course Japan by then had entered the war, you were married. You came back to Australia, I think, via Bombay.

Yes.

I understand that was a fairly dangerous journey?

Well ... it was ... They were worried, yes. We joined a ship at Bombay and it went round to Colombo where the harbour was packed with vessels that had been very badly damaged by the Japanese. There were vessels there with their rear ends right out in the air and their noses pulled down because their rear end was damaged. There were others the other way round. There were a great many people there that had ... largely women and children - Dutch people in the main.

And these people evacuated from Singapore and ...

From Singapore, yes.

Dutch East Indies.

Yes. There we picked up a great many people, I don't know how many of course. The ... and the ship took off from ... from Colombo. It took off heading west of south. We didn't ever know of course exactly which way it was going because ... well, you weren't allowed into any areas that would tell you what the compass bearing was. But we kept going and going and until we were ... and we were certainly heading west of south so that we must have gone very close to Africa and they continued on and then one day ... turned more than ninety degrees left - that's east - and we just ... we headed off. At that stage we were in an area where there were huge waves but long ... with long intervals between them.

You must have been down in the fairly southern latitudes.

We must have been a very southern latitude because big rollers that ... that were, as I say, a long way apart - like hundreds of metres, not more than that - and then every now and then

you'd actually get into one where there'd be a lot of splashing and so on because ... well, somehow they'd got out of focus and you got two big waves close together.

After quite a long time we turned left again and - north, that is, of course - and we headed for three full days before we came into Melbourne. In other words, we were well and truly south and there we disembarked. There was a very motley crew aboard by then. The small air force group and then there were some army people but not very many and a great many were just refugees - largely women and children and many Dutch; mostly Dutch, I suppose.

Of course, you came back, unlike anybody else - any other air force officer I think with you - with a wife, a young wife.

Yes.

(10.00)How did that affect your attitude to the war, if it did?

My attitude to the war?

Now that you were a married man?

Well, I don't think it ... affected me very much because our short ... first of all when we came back we were involved in setting up an operational training unit and first at Mallala and then, immediately after that, at Mildura. And during that time we were sharing a house in Mildura with another couple and ...

This of course is ...

... I had a number of jobs when I was there, from Mildura, that were quite interesting. I had one at Melbourne - Melbourne University where there was a physiologist doing experiment with ... on oxygen lack and in a sneaky sort of way it sort of involved people. What I mean by a sneaky sort of way, typical signs of a ... of a person short of oxygen is exactly like a sort of caricature of an inebriate person, that is, false confidence and lots of confidence and not much capability, like not even in writing. In fact, I had seen people writing notes in the time and so on; actually the pencil wasn't even touching the paper.

Was this during this experiment or are you talking about men in the air?

No, no. Oh no. This was this experiment. It was a physiologist at Melbourne, Melbourne University.

Of course in the planes you were flying, I don't think it was normal to have oxygen, was it?

Oh yes; oh yes, oh yes. And we had oxygen, well, in Kittyhawks and things you had it all the time. Oh yes, because, I mean, you must, even for quite low altitudes, you're severely handicapped if you're ... well, twelve ... about twelve thousand feet you've got much less than half ordinary atmospheric pressure. So it's not a ... it's a hazard.

That's interesting. And I know after that, well, shortly after that you were involved in setting up 76 Squadron.

Yes.

How did that begin and how did your experience in North Africa bear on what you did?

Well, first of all, I was there for a short time only. I ... the experience in the Middle East was very, very relevant because, well, most of the people hadn't been involved at all in any combat and, anyway, the type of activity was obviously going to be similar in many ways to ... to those in the desert. That is, the squadrons would be operating out of makeshift aerodromes and also we realised that if we were at all successful we'd be operating from different airstrips at quite short intervals with all the involved problems of servicing and setting up camp and being reasonably fed and so on.

The relevance for combat, well, of course, it's much the same, I suppose it would be fighter to fighter than in all areas. In our case we knew that we were going to be flying aircraft that would be slower than the Japanese had. We also knew that they would probably be more manoeuvrable so we were going to repeat the sort of combat techniques of ... of Africa and that is try and stay low. I mean, that, after you'd got into combat because ... and to give yourself maximum opportunity to use your superior ability to get round sharp corners.

So ...

The only problems that we had were, of course, problems of weather and ... of weather and navigation - finding a way back home - because, after all, in any combat situation you're totally occupied with that and you're liable to be ... to put yourself into an awkward navigation problem unless you thought very carefully about it.

(15.00) Yes. I've often wondered about this. Perhaps we might just draw on two issues here - I was going to ask you later but you've brought them up so perhaps now is the time. I'll come back to weather. In a combat situation where a pilot's flown into a general area and then, perhaps for some period of time has engaged in very intense combat where all the mental energy is going into either killing ... avoiding being killed oneself or shooting down somebody else, how do pilots, or how did one - how did you - keep track of where you were during that time? Or was there just a general sense of locality and from that you worked back to a base?

I ... I ... First of all, before we went, we would of course discuss the ... where we were going and what the good landmarks were and, I mean, you all had to have a quite big list of those of course just because ... because you didn't know which ones you'd be able to actually see because of the weather and the cloud. We did make sure, right from the beginning, that all pilots knew their own area. That is, the area around their base in intimate detail so that if you came out of cloud and spotted something you'd be likely to recognise the spot. Because naturally, as with motor cars, the majority of accidents that occur in an aeroplane, and a motor car, are one's very near your home base. It's obvious the minute you think of it of course, because wherever you go you end up coming back to your own base and ... and it's there where ... wherever else you've been, you're going to be ... plus there's probably a psychological factor and that is the relaxation which is damned dangerous.

Mmm. No doubt on top of being, at that time, very tired.

Yes. I mean, the saying always was, of course - and I probably mentioned this yesterday - that if you're ever in a situation where you're not shit scared you're in a bloody dangerous situation which is, you know, sound advice.

So one had to be constantly on one's mettle. The Is there anything else to add about that problem of getting back to base, the general navigational difficulties thrown on top of active combat, or not?

I ... I don't think so. I mean we took care, of course - very great care - to check compasses because a compass in an aircraft is a difficult thing to - or was then - to make sure that it was operating properly because ... well, the local ... the other instruments and metals in the aircraft were liable to have a slightly different effect and sometimes a very great effect and the compass has got to be 'swung', as the term is, for that particular aeroplane and that's got to be done again and again, especially if there's any change of equipment.

I know with bomber command crews generally before any operation they'd fly off during the day and do all that very detailed checking of instruments. With fighter crews, were you ... fighters ... where you were often operating at very, very short notice, was there time for that detailed checking before any operation or was it just an ongoing thing that was done when there was time?

Ongoing thing really. You couldn't do it at very short intervals, you couldn't afford the time or the fuel or the The other things that we, of course, attempted to do was to make sure that people were very, very quick at taking off and, in fact, right from the beginning we had people taking off in very close pairs. That seemed to some people to be dangerous and it is a bit dangerous too of course but my view was that the speed with which you'd get yourself organised into a squadron formation was so much quicker if you took off in pairs and the whole concept was that no aircraft was on its own, that there were always two, and, in fact, under ordinary flying conditions nearly always four aircraft together - two twos - and the obligation of the leading man in that one was to look after his ... his number two.

(20.00) That is, it was he that was doing the navigation and making sure that when he gave directions or anything, he was giving directions and moving at a rate that would allow the other bloke to catch up with him. The number two's job then was just to stay with ... with number one. And he had also, of course, to know, since he was inevitably - a lot of them would get lost in combat or anything - to also know his own way home and what I'd said before, what the good landmarks - reliable landmarks would be.

I have heard - this is just a sideline on that issue of pairing - and a couple of pilots describing situations where they basically bailed out of a follow-up position because they, themselves, decided that their leader was, in fact, quite wrong and, for example, was making a bad navigational mistake. How common was that and what was the view of the authority's, say a squadron leader or wing commander, where individuals did decide that they were safer on their own?

I ... I really don't think I remember any ... I remember very many occasions of course where people got into trouble but I don't think they were ... I don't think there were any of them that

were deliberate ones. I mean, it's just very easy to get lost and in combat, of course, it's virtually certain. And what you then do is ... is attempt to get into a close association with whoever you can that's one of your mob and that ... so that you're each helping the other one.

That's interesting. Just one final question on this issue of navigation: In a situation where people were somewhat lost after a combat encounter and there were no immediate landmarks, was there any system of flying grids or squares - that kind of thing - where people could build out from an area to connect with some known landmark or not?

Ah ... local ... certainly local geography was what you had to make sure the man had in his head. I mean the main factor with fighters of course is that the range is very short and if you've been involved in ... if you're lost or something you've probably been involved in combat so that you've not only ... you've used a great deal of fuel anyway with high engine use so that, well, it really is an intimate understanding of your local geography so that you do ... you can recognise some particular We used to carefully decide which sorts of things would be hard to confuse with others, that is, a pair of small islands or a particular shape of an inlet.

So you're really minimising any time lost getting one's bearings?

Yes, [inaudible].

Just turning to the other issue of weather. Of course, in the desert I would imagine generally the flying conditions had been fairly similar to Mildura - generally fairly clear skies?

Yes, fairly clear skies.

New Guinea was totally different. Did you have, as desert pilots, did you have much to offer in that regard or was it just that you knew the dangers of bad weather?

Yes, we would have had quite a lot to offer just because we'd been involved in combat. The geography and so on was different but then you're - not really all that different because in Syria and Lebanon we had been in areas where there was a lot of cloud because of the high mountains and so on - so that you should have been accustomed to flying in cloud.

(25.00) How great was the - I'm going on perhaps a bit to when you're actually in New Guinea yourself - how great a danger was posed by weather there? Some people have said it was in a sense worse than the Japanese.

Oh, it was a very ... a very big hazard just because, of course, of the unpredictability, you didn't know anything about the condition except the ... well, the time of the year. It's a wet season, dry season, not as definite as say in Darwin but you knew when there'd be more clouds at other times but you didn't know any of the local geography of storm clouds except by guessing any especially high mountains and so on were virtually certain to have clouds sitting over the top of them.

Just going back then to setting up the squadron itself. Were you actually in charge of that process, Wilfred, or were you under somebody else in setting up 76?

In setting up 76 [Squadron] I was supposed to, in a very short time, to give people some training including the commanding officer and, well, the squadron as a whole so to speak.

What rank were you at this stage?

I would have been a flight lieutenant, I think.

So you actually as a flight lieutenant were giving training to a squadron leader and his entire squadron?

Oh yes. Yes, that was not unusual at all anywhere in the RAF or the RAAF I don't think because, well naturally you're ... and you've had particular experience it's ... oh well, that's just so much more relevant. I don't think ... I don't suppose I had very wide experience but I don't remember any problems like that.

So you weren't actually involved so much in the organisational aspects but in the training and passing on of what you knew to the people?

Yes, and the flying; the combat problems.

One question I'd like to ask - this is on a slightly more personal level and I certainly don't mean this personally because it just doesn't seem to fit from what I know of you - but I have heard that, certainly in the setting up of 75 Squadron, there was a level of acrimony between - at least initially - between some of the desert pilots and ... just a second ... I'm sorry this was after 75 Squadron had come back from Port Moresby when there'd been very intense combat, when John Jackson had been killed ...

Yes.

Les Jackson had taken over, that in that changeover period there was a degree of acrimony between those New Guinea experienced men and some desert pilots who joined the squadron who were, I think, rather branded as know-alls by the New Guinea men. Do you remember anything of that, or not?

No I don't. I can, well of course, imagine incidents but I don't really think there would have been much unreasonable acrimony because, well, it's just too stupid to not try and squeeze somebody else's experience for your own benefit.

Sure.

If there was any such thing it's much more likely to be an isolated incident and, yes, there were some people who were I suppose shy or something and which is another way of saying ... or appearing like a know-all or a ... But if you switch that off I ...

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur, 75 Squadron.
Tape two, side two.

Wilfred, I was just going to ask you about John Jackson. Of course, I think you'd known him in the desert?

In 3 Squadron in the desert, yes.

What sort of a man was he and what sort of a leader was he?

Well, he was very easy, pleasant bloke to work with. I ... well, in the Middle East he really wasn't ... well, he was a minor leader I suppose in some ... It depends, I mean, if you'd ... the units that went out today would be slightly different from this morning's or yesterday's, so depending upon who was sick and who wasn't and who'd had the most flying time and so on. He was easy to get on with. I can remember that he had some troubles in Gladiators early on. Well, we were - I think I told you yesterday - we were always in the situation where the enemy had better aircraft and this meant that we were primarily staying close to the ground; that we were exercising our superior ability to get round corners.

I remember ... I remember in one combat seeing him pass ... well, he passed me going vertically downwards at an enormous speed when he'd obviously got into awkward trouble with some Italian aircraft. In fact he was going so steep, as I say almost vertically downwards, I thought he was already dead or something and just diving into the ground. He appeared back at the place, at our aerodrome.

What did you hear of his work with 75 Squadron in Port Moresby before he was killed? How was he regarded?

Well, I really don't think ... I don't think ... I can't remember what I'd heard. I would imagine he was well liked but I don't really know any more than that. Do you think there was any ... was there any sort of friction that you knew about from other people?

Oh, with John?

Yes.

No, no, no. There was the general picture as I remember it from all the interviews was one of very, very high regard. I was going to ask you about an incident which led to his death but I'd imagine you might not have the knowledge to comment on it.

No. I don't know anything about it; I don't remember anything about his I remember the time of course but I certainly knew none of the details.

Right. I'll just turn off just to tell Wilfred the story of the challenge of cowardice and the possible reason of his death that came from the interviews with Arthur Tucker and so on. This is just following on from the ... I just

described the general description of John Jackson's clash with the authorities as it's been told to me. Wilfred doesn't know anything about that but this is just a comment on the general point about Kittyhawks and Zeros.

Yes.

(5.00) What were you saying?

Well, in the main the Kittyhawks would have been inferior to the Zeros in altitude, ability to operate properly at height, and probably also less able to turn inside to ... inside the Zeros which were lighter and ... but had a lighter wing loading so that they would be difficult if you attempted to turn with them. Your combat technique would be more likely to be one of an attack and then a zoom and attack again.

And getting out of the area as quickly as possible.

Well ... no, getting ... zooming so that you've got the opportunity to turn around and make another attack.

I see, but not staying in close contact without ...

Not ... yes, you wouldn't turn inside anybody. You'd get down and up again to ... of course it's often, or sometimes the case that if you're in an aircraft that can't turn inside the other one it's quite probable that you can dive much faster than he can and that ... and at a speedy dive and then a zoom could easily get you in a position of advantage - height advantage - over the other one. It could be much more manoeuvrable in a steady turn.

Perhaps if I could just ask you about the Kittyhawk now, I was going to in a minute, Wilfred. Of course they were supposed to be very good at diving, they were really quite heavy with all their armour plating and so on. What would you recall as the main strengths and also the weaknesses of the Kittyhawk and what was it like to fly as a plane? Did you enjoy it?

Yes, yes. I enjoyed it. It wasn't as docile an aircraft as the Hurricane and Spitfire and other aircraft but it was ... you had good vision, you had good guns and quite good range and those factors were of course the very important ones in New Guinea where you did have a lot of advantage if you could stay in the air a fairly long time. Quite unlike, say, the combat must have been in England where it was speed off the ground and short ... the aircraft you'd be attacking would have to be attacked very quickly and the operation would be over in a short time.

Mmm. There's very little long distance flying to engage the enemy.

Yes. I mean, that's why any sort of flat comparisons which aircraft is the better are just not relevant unless you describe the particular situation. There is no doubt that under many ... many conditions the Kittyhawk was far better than the Spitfire and under the other conditions that is where a speedy take off is required because you had short intervals from when you knew the aircraft were coming and when they'd actually arrive. Then the speed off the ground of the Spitfire was very important, the ability to manoeuvre was very important, large amount

of ... large number of guns very important because perhaps the, you know, you'd be likely to have a short and furious fight.

Mmm. Of course the Kittyhawk was very robust. Do you think, for example, would Spitfires have stood up to the rough terrain of New Guinea airstrips?

I don't think they would have stood up quite as well and then they did also have another problem and that is that they had a big problem of overheating in New Guinea. This was in spite of the fact that they had bigger radiators than the ... I mean, they were equipped with bigger radiators after arriving in Australia, which of course made them slightly better in their ability to keep the temperatures right, but it also meant that it reduced their speed slightly because the radiator was bigger than the previous ones.

Was that the Kittyhawk or Spitfires you were talking about?

Spitfire.

Right.

Oh no, the Kittyhawk was pretty good from cooling. It didn't get into much trouble taxiing or doing the other things that some aircraft did.

(10.00) Could you just cast your mind back to the situation where you've got a Kittyhawk on the ground, you've got to get up in the air quickly, what happened? What was the routine? Could you imagine that from the point where you'd been briefed to when you actually got to your Kittyhawk and you got it up into the air?

Yes. Well, number one, what any ordinary person would do would be to prepare the harness in the aircraft very carefully to know where the straps were because you'd be immediate ... well, you'd have a very short interval of time between when you're alerted and when you'd have to be off the ground. So that you'd practice - everybody did - practice lashing yourself in and making sure that you'd jump in of course and prime and start the motor if possible. If ... well, and then very quickly get your parachute harness on followed by the harness to hold you in the aircraft. So a lot of practice doing that was a very good idea.

And what happened next?

Oh well, then taxi out at pretty high speed, usually again in pairs with the number one bloke leading and the other bloke taxiing alongside him. And then, certainly in 75, I had them always taking off in pairs very close to one another which was considered to be pretty dangerous but in my view was much more desirable than straggling off the ground which would extend the take off time a lot and also make it difficult for number twos to catch up with their number one. I know that my superior then didn't like that very much but after a very short time he was quite convinced because it did look a bit dangerous when you had aircraft sort of very close to one another.

When you say 'very close', what do you mean?

I mean about, say, five perhaps three metres further back and outwards maybe two metres, three metres or something - very close.

Three and two or three metres?

Yes.

So I mean ...

Well, the reason is that it's much easier to keep your position if you're very close to the man than it is if you're further away. Well, I mean, obviously if he turns away from you when you're close to him that's less of a problem than it is when ... if he's further away.

Oh right. Because if he turns away you've got a much ...

You've got a far bigger arch to go round and ... and also your judgment is much better apart from the fact that you do need more time and more energy out of the aircraft to get back into position. See, if you're very close you can easily change sides with him too - slide underneath and that's in fact what you'd do. I mean, you'd quite often, if this was your number one and that was your position, if you got into trouble you'd drop down and come out and come back up again.

Right. Wilfred was just using his hands to show how a number two could change sides from off to the starboard of the leader to the port of the leader.

That's right, yes. In order to turn inside the circle, to catch up with him. If you were stuck behind, like that, and you come down underneath you're turning in a circle with a much smaller radius.

Just going back to the take off then. I hadn't quite understood, but I do now, that these two planes are really, I mean, basically as close of they could be without touching. As they're speeding down the runway is the second plane ... I mean, I find this hard to imagine taking it's speed from the first plane or were they so highly tuned that the pilots knew that they could both reach the same speed. In other words, what was there to stop the second plane going that trifle faster and hitting the first one?

Well, first of all, he wasn't directly behind him and the second and third things are, that if you're close to the man it's easier to judge your distance and ...

So the second plane could throttle back a bit?

Yes. Well, yes, he'd throttle back a little bit. What was the other point?

(15.00)Um, just a minute.

We also used to do of course is have them coming, the pairs, very close behind one another. That is, a pair and then another pair very close behind to ... so that getting into formation was quick and the interval of time between when the squadron started to take off and the squadron having taken off is as short as possible and what we ... we had a specific arrangement and a rate of turn. I mean, the leaders would take off first and they'd turn sort of relatively slowly on a known direction and each succeeding pair would turn slightly more quickly inside, in

other words, so as to catch up. And after a short time, with practice, we could take off number ... the leader and somebody else and then the other and turn and then come back over the airstrip. By that time everybody would be in formation. It looked very good and, in fact, was very efficient.

Mmm. That sounds ...

We were doing the same thing every time and, of course, it became easier for people to ... and it was up to the leaders to make sure that they didn't go so fast or cut the corners so tightly that other people couldn't catch up with them.

Mmm. Just a moment, Wilfred. This is just a further sidelight on this issue of taking off and Wilfred, you were just describing about the desert routine.

Yes. In the desert where, in fact, there were few made airstrips we were taking off in the main more or less line abreast - not quite line abreast but a very sort of flat arrowhead. The object of this, of course, was to - so that you wouldn't be presented with a plume of dirt and dust to fly into and totally lose a horizon. So that it had the added advantage of course of being very easy then to get into formation after take off providing the leader did a reasonably gradual turn so that everybody on one side could turn more sharply and in doing so catch up with the leader.

That's most interesting. Just going on now, Wilfred, to actually joining 75 Squadron which I know happened a little bit later when you joined it as squadron leader. This was in the period after the invasion of Milne Bay when the squadron was reforming in Cairns. Les Jackson, I think, had been the previous squadron leader although I think there was also perhaps one other squadron leader between yourself and him ...

There was, that bloke's name I cannot remember.

Was it Truscott?

No, not Truscott.

Well, anyway, there was, I know, another one.

Yes ... I don't think I've got anything in the log book that would tell me. I remember that he was a first world war I think - I'm not sure. I know that he had a huge great scar on his chest which looked like a map of Australia which, in fact, was because at some stage he'd had a tattoo that he obviously got to dislike.

That's interesting. Nationalistic tattoo.

That would probably identify him rather too well.

Yes, we might skate over that.

I think so, yes.

Just going back to Les Jackson. I know you weren't directly involved in it but there have been some fairly controversial comments about his character and leadership from other people.

Yes.

I was just wondering whether you'd be willing to say what you recall of the man and what you knew of him both as a man and as a leader?

I really ... the only knowledge I would have was just hearsay really.

Right.

I know he didn't ... some people used to complain but I don't know whether it was justified or not.

(20.00) Perhaps we'll leave that if it was only hearsay.

It was certainly hearsay as far as I was concerned and in all ... I mean, in all probability he was probably a bit anxious to catch up with big brother, you know. So he might ... and he was pretty difficult I think.

And there was, no doubt, a lot of trauma too following John Jackson's death.

Yes.

Well, let's go on a little bit. You joined 75 Squadron I think when it was reforming in Cairns and this was in February 1943. I assume by now you were a squadron leader?

Yes ... '43, was it?

I think we got that date ... well, we got that date from the note here.

Yes, all right, we've got that, yes.

What's your recollection of that period? What was the squadron like when you joined it and what did you see as the main job to be done?

The main job was certainly to ... to perfect our, well, determination to operate in pairs and operate in ... in units of four and operate so that these units of four could also help each other. Now there were some people who were complaining that I was being quite unrealistic about how ... how quickly you could get pairs operating and turning fairly sharp rates of turn without getting separated. And I remember when they were getting pretty cranky about it I volunteered ... I said that I'd go up with somebody and act as his number two and he could do whatever he liked providing he didn't exceed engine revs. And that I did. Now it doesn't sound too good. What he did, naturally, was make it very difficult for me but, in fact, what I did do was stay inside. I mean, the second he turned, for example, I didn't wait for him to get away in front of me at all, I'd whack underneath and get on the inside. When he'd do that, of course, I'd whack over the other side. In other words, when I got back the people who were

watching and we were doing it all over the top of the airstrip at Milne Bay and by the time I got back they were quite convinced that it was possible.

This was at Milne Bay, not at Cairns?

No, at Milne Bay.

That's most interesting because I have heard it said, in fact this has been basically a universal comment - it's not one or two people, basically a universal comment - that certainly in the period at Port Moresby, certainly in the first period at Milne Bay - although I'm not sure about ... I think there was a second period perhaps before you were squadron leader - but certainly in those early periods when I've asked other men about tactics there's generally been a laugh and they've said, 'Well, forget it. Tactics didn't exist'. Was that your impression? And they were quite critical of that that they were thrown into a situation without any grounding in tactics and so on. Was that how you saw it when you joined the squadron?

Well, I was certainly of the opinion that they were not ... not very well organised and that's why we set about running training ... training as quickly as we possibly could which, of course, wasn't very easy because there was ... not having any certain early warning you were not game to ... to risk having many aircraft in the air in case there was a raid or anything when you could easily have your aeroplanes in the air and just about running out of fuel when the enemy arrived.

Just going ... sorry.

That's all. You see, our main information of course was from spotters - aircraft spotters - and that was incredibly good. But the one factor of course that they could never determine, they always knew when and were very good at telling you when the aircraft left a particular area and in which direction they were going. But then they couldn't know how quickly they'd move from that point to Milne Bay.

(25.00) Now, one of the best ones was when we had a very big raid there at Milne Bay but our warning - our early warning - had in fact been far too efficient because by the time we ... by the time the actual very big unit - Japanese unit - arrived we were just almost at the end of our fuel supply. Now the reason this had happened is, of course, that the coast-watch people had advised the minute they took off but they didn't, they naturally didn't know how long they were going to be in coming down. And since they had a very big group of people they'd taken quite a long time to get down, in other words to form up. So that the awful situation we were in was by the time we were ... had been in the air at a stage when our fuel was nearly out but we were unable to land and get more - just insufficient time.

I was going to ask you some other things about forming up and I'll go back to those in a moment but since you've mentioned this incident, what was the outcome? How many Japanese planes were there? How many of your planes were in there?

Ah, a very big number of them; some ground low flying ones and some - quite a lot of Bettys at high altitude and they dropped a lot of bombs with not too much advantage really. We did

meet the main attack group on the way in at the right height but we were at that stage very low in fuel so that we had to attack and then get back quickly onto the ground otherwise we'd have been in trouble. I had a further problem too and that is that my guns had frozen up and I didn't have any guns at all.

Was that common for guns to freeze?

No, it was ... probably better to switch this off for the poor old fellow.

I might just add here that Wilfred was telling me about, in this case, an individual had not maintained the guns correctly. But you were saying the general picture of ground support was ...

Was Well, enormous responsibility and dedication and almost a sort of mother arrangement with the pilot. I can remember in the Middle East coming home from any operations you'd approach your own area and you could see groups of two men sitting at different places all the way down the edge of the airstrip, sitting like - to my mind - they always used to look like rabbits ... two rabbits that would have been the airframe bloke and the engine bloke just sitting on the side of the strip waiting for their guy to come home. And in many cases if a bloke didn't come home they'd damn well sit there till, sort of, you know, an hour later or two hours later which was sort of belying their intelligence because they knew damn well the aircraft, if it was still alive, would have run out of fuel by that time, but they'd still never leave until it was hopeless.

Was there a close - besides the professional responsibility and their bond in that sense - was there a close personal bond?

Oh a very close one. They, in the main sort of ... well, heavily mothered the pilots who were usually much, much younger of course than the armament and engine blokes - airframe and engine ...

Mmm.

So it's really quite interesting that.

Yes, that's interesting. I can imagine the ...

I can remember in the Middle East once coming home and I finally ... I didn't come home in my own aircraft. I had landed in Tobruk and the thing was ... the aircraft was badly damaged - I couldn't fly again - but I borrowed a Hurricane from somebody and flew back to my own ... own unit. They hadn't known I was coming but I arrived in maybe an hour and a half or something after I could possibly have been in my own aircraft and I remember these blokes coming round and apologising elaborately which was really very touching because they'd been sitting there till ages after they knew I couldn't get home anyway and then I did get home but in a different aeroplane.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

START OF TAPE THREE - SIDE ONE

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur. This is tape three, side one, side five of the whole lot.

Wilfred, I just thought I might begin by asking you just the story about the cloud you were just telling me on Goodenough, it was rather interesting. It gives an idea of the difficulties you faced.

Yes, well, while we were at Goodenough which is a mountain, primarily an island that's primarily a mountain, about 8,000 feet. It was ... and during most afternoons there'd be a heavy build up of cloud over the ... over the mountain and it became the habit after ... towards the end of work or by the time it was sort of so late in the day that we couldn't take off anyway, people would come in a group to watch the sun go down. The clouds over the mountain were very high and at that stage the met. book that we had referred to the highest clouds in the world as being the cirrus and cirrostratus I think at 30,000 feet. Well, I was pretty convinced that the clouds were a long, long way above that over Goodenough and one day took a P-40 that I'd emptied out ... emptied all the ammunition out of and I climbed as high as I possibly could until ... and eventually got to twenty-seven, twenty-eight or 30,000 feet - I really forget. I must have a look actually in the logbook, it's probably there. And then I flew away from the very big cloud over the island until I was well out and I could ... I was looking up at the top and down again and I was totally convinced that I was less than halfway up the cloud and, that is, that it was 60,000 feet.

That's most interesting.

But now, of course, they know quite well. But it was interesting.

It sounds like an awesome cloud. There was one other recollection that just sounded like it certainly had atmosphere, I think this was on Goodenough too, where you were describing how after these stressful days men would gather for the sunset.

Oh yes. It became the habit after the evening meal which of course was usually well before sunset to watch the sun go down and watch the reflections on the big clouds which was very ... well, there were few things to do but even if you had plenty of things to do it's still a very interesting exercise to watch the sunsets.

I was just going to ask you a little bit about living; I might do it now Wilfred. You were saying there wasn't much to do. During this period when you were moving fairly rapidly through different bases - I'll come to that in a moment - what were living conditions like and how much - was there scope for men to do other things; to unwind easily or not?

(5.00) Not ... not really much scope. I mean, apart from reading and playing cards that was ... that was a common practice. I, in fact, never played because I'd realised early on that if you ever start playing cards you're in a situation where you more or less have to keep on playing; if you lose you've got to keep on playing and if you're winning you've also got to keep on playing. So I, in fact, never played at all. This was partly as a result of a childhood when I had to play sometimes when I'd much prefer to read anyway.

You were a reader were you, during this period?

Oh yes. I've read all my life, since I could first read. In fact, I used to carry always inside my leggings I used to carry a dictionary or some other things in case I ever got shot down just to have something in the dinghy to look at. Fortunately I didn't ever have to so ...

That's most interesting; something to while away the time. While you were squadron leader of 75, Wilfred, was the squadron ever visited by entertainers? Did you ever have film shows, that kind of thing?

No, never had any there. I think the first entertainer I ever saw was much later than that, maybe two years or more later than that, and that was a very famous American - Brown, was it?

I'm not sure.

At all events this was a most amusing thing because he had a huge great group of audience of course but it was sort of four o'clock in the afternoon, just a most ... with no props at all - no anything - in other words, a situation where you can't imagine that the bloke could entertain and this guy just had everybody in absolutely fits of laughter for maybe two hours or something. A tremendous triumph. I've forgotten his name, one of the really famous world ... but no ... no decor, no ... no anything.

Mmm. That sounds interesting.

Except an audience would be pretty easy to please of course but to say that would be making quite unnecessarily derogatory implication because in fact it was very amusing. Just story telling with the timing and so on that nearly nobody's got.

Mmm. Sounds wonderful. Going back to your ...

Joey Brown, that's a name now?

I'm not very good with entertainers, I'm afraid.

This was a ... yes, a film bloke I know ... Joey Brown. Anyway ...

What were living conditions like? I imagine you're mostly living in tented camps, did you have ... how comfortable or not were they with the weather and so on?

Oh mostly ... mostly rainproof and so on. Food was very crude indeed. I mean, I can remember in ... I can remember say, well, one of the things we didn't have were eggs and I can ... or used to have eggs but that was in a dried form - dried yolk and separately a dried egg - which is ... which is a ... the result is a very unpleasant food and I can remember on one occasion being given two boiled eggs and I never tasted anything. It was four months or something since I'd ever seen an egg because our ... well, the supplies were very, very bad at that stage.

Mmm. Do you remember anything - this is just a sidelight on food but it's something somebody else said - problems with that kind of food and being in

the air and having a gassy stomach, for example, from baked beans and having problems at high altitude when the gas expanded?

Oh yes. That was very common, of course, very common and sometimes very uncomfortable because, well, when you take off of course by the time you'd got to 12,000 feet you'd be well under a half atmospheric pressure on the ground so that you were certainly going to be farting like fury which is sort of not all that unpleasant I suppose. (laughs)

(10.00) Perhaps better than it being kept in. Better without it at all though. Going on to something different. Your role as a squadron leader, this was your first command of a squadron, what did you perceive as your role as a squadron leader? What was your most ... what was the most important thing for you to contribute to the squadron?

Certainly keeping people alive was what ... was what ... my object was to make sure that nobody ever ... was ever killed if we could possibly help it and the way to achieve that as I saw it was to have plenty of training and train and keep training and also if, when you found somebody that was not responding to training to get rid of them and get rid of them no matter what. I mean, not accept the fact that they wanted to stay on or they wished to stay on and they were pleasant people and so on. To my mind it was ... that was no reason at all for keeping people and the second you start accepting people because they want to be there, because they're good and so on and don't fly very well, then that's a terrible injustice.

You're talking more of pilots than ground crew, are you? Or of both?

No, talking of pilots really.

How many - without names of course, that might be inappropriate - but in how many instances did you then make the decision that pilots were best somewhere else?

Oh, probably only three or four because by that stage, that was happening at the operational training unit in ... well, Mildura it was then.

Just going back to this issue of pilots who you judged were not measuring up to your standards of skill and discipline in the air, I suppose, was their inability to do that based on their character as men or on the fact that they'd flown successfully in other situations and for some reason were unwilling to learn?

I think probably both those reasons for, you know, for different people. I think there certainly were people who wanted to fly and wanted to get into combat who were excused quite often for not flying very safely or accurately just because they were so keen to ... to fight and to get on with the job which, to my mind, was a terrible mistake on the part of the training organisation. When the Fighter Operational Training Unit was set up at Mallala and then at Mildura almost immediately afterwards, Peter Jeffrey was running the place ...

If I could just interpose. This was shortly after you came back from Britain and you yourself were involved in setting up those organisations with Peter?

Yes, that's right. Three of us were most involved. Peter was the boss and after him Alan Rawlinson and myself further down the line and we set about in setting up that operation we were determined to ... to weed out any people who had any problems with flying no matter how keen they were to get to the war; no matter what pleasant people they were. The reason for this being of course, well, you're just going to kill people unnecessarily. Now as a means - this sounds easy to think of, it's not very easy to do, to give effect to because in the end it's a particular instructor that's training the bloke whose judgment you're asking him to exercise to the disadvantage of his pupil. So what in fact we did was we broke down nearly all exercises into about six characters ... six categories. Say, imagine one to six, I mean, ability to take off and land, aerobatic ability, and gunnery ability, navigation, and for all of those we listed each one with a list of ten points - I think it was ten - at all events so that the person giving the ... having checked the pupil was giving him a rating out of ten ...

(15.00) That's fairly objective ...

For this particular one, yes. But then what we were doing was we were in fact when we got that back to ourselves we were putting a multiplier in to some parts of it. For example, ability to take off and land; that one had a multiplier of sort of six whereas gunnery might have one of five and aerobatic ability one of one or something like that. In other words, what we were doing was making ... trying to make it easy to weed out people without the decision having to be made by the person intimately associated with him. In other words, you were trying to make him ... make a judgment out of ten is quite easy. To make a judgment knowing that if he's a little bit wrong the man's going to lose his job is very difficult. So we were separating them and that turned out to be a very efficient way indeed of weeding out the ...

Mmm.

Some people, you see in many training organisations and it happened in the air force, when I was CO at Mildura for example I had to ... I had one day to, in fact I saw a man crash on the ... on his way in, bringing a P-40 in, killed himself. A couple of days later I had to meet his father at the ... at the railway station - Gadsden, you know, very famous wealthy people - and I had to meet him to - he'd come up for the funeral and at that stage he had to come by train, we didn't have petrol or anything - I had to meet him and the trouble was that I already knew about six months before his daughter had been killed in the snow in Melbourne. I had to meet this guy, I was, I don't know, twenty ... twenty-three or something, or twenty-four I suppose ... twenty-three to ...

To say his son had died unnecessarily.

Well, I didn't say that but it certainly activated me to make damn sure that in the future nothing would ever happen like that before [sic]. On a previous occasion, actually in Milne Bay, I had a man killed one night doing night flying and when I went carefully back through his logbook I found that he'd ... they'd had so-called training in night flying, in fact, on the particular evening he was going on two occasions, he didn't go and, you know, a training organisation can quite easily have sort of things in it that somebody unavoidably can't fulfil but that element doesn't sort of dominate the results. I remember this broken, smashed up bloke, of course, burning like mad and when I got back, after that, every single person that came, I went through their logbooks very, very carefully to see if there was any See, the situation should be by the time people go to a squadron that they've gone through all the screens and so on.

But in reality they often haven't.

Well, they haven't, yes.

That's really, really most interesting because it ties in so clearly with what other people have said, in particular, in the early stages of the war about the very, very high level of crash rates in the training squadrons. I wondered if I could ask you a question associated with this: At the beginning of the war obviously the senior officers in the air force were by and large first world war men or men who'd never flown in combat ...

Yes.

They had to be.

Yes. There wouldn't have been many first world war but there were some, yes.

Right. Well, if not them ...

It was quite a short time before of course as you remember.

Sure, men who'd never flown in combat situations but I guess as I perceive it in that intervening period there must have been some carry over from the first war when flying was a much simpler affair, it was just a totally different game. Was that part of the problem, that the air force at the beginning of the war was dominated by a kind of first world war mentality that hadn't advanced with the technology of the aircraft?

(20.00) I'm not completely agreeing with you. I did ... I can remember at that stage there were quite a number of ex world war one pilots and I had also read quite a lot of combat stories. I found that there was a very considerable sort of duplication on ... if you read through them, quite a lot of duplication. You know, the problems were noticed. The ability to ... well, the ability to shoot of course is a ... that's a very difficult thing to do. It is largely a gift really. I mean you're dealing in three dimensions and that's a judgment which some people are good at and some people are not like some are natural gun shots and ...

But are you saying, Wilfred, that you believe that kind of much looser, less disciplined, less penetrating attitude, for instance, the attitude that men have described of the disorganisation of 75 Squadron at the beginning, was that a kind of flow over from some ... an age when flying was different or simply that there was just such pressure of time and such lack of time to in fact train people?

Yeah, I think the last one, plus people who didn't really know what they were ... what they were doing. And, I mean, I'm sure ... I'm sure, well, Jackson and Turnbull no doubt they knew what they were doing - they did - but there was certainly other people, as we were talking about before, who didn't really know what they were doing and ... so you've got to have very tough demanding training and until Mildura was set up it was ... that wasn't the case. See, before we'd always said, provocatively, we'd always said, 'We're going to kill

people in training and we're going to kill them ' - and we used to belligerently say - 'We'll kill them in cheaper aeroplanes; it's much better to kill them at Mildura than it is to kill them up in Milne Bay'. Now this was to emphasise the point, of course, it wasn't stupidity or anything, we were just pointing out that unless people are skilled they're not only a disadvantage to themselves, they're a disadvantage to the people they're working with and it's no real hardship on scrubbing somebody. It might hurt his feelings or something but it's ... you're surely doing much worse if you let somebody try and do double somersaults, break his neck or ... instead of saying you're fouling it up.

Just going onto the situation when you're actually with 75 and there were a number of pilots who you felt had to be rejected ...

Yes.

Did they resist strongly and did the ... did officers above you ever try to countermine your decision?

No. I ... they didn't. I did get rid of a number of people there at very short notice and my ... fortunately I had a very good connection with my immediate boss who'd been squadron commander in 3 Squadron when I went away. Now he was ... I got to know him very well really.

What was his name?

That was McLachlan - Dougal McLachlan. He's still around too.

Right, so he gave you the support.

Oh yeah, he did then, yes. Now, you see, there were people killed in 3 Squadron. In fact, one of my instructors was actually killed in ... very soon after we arrived in Egypt, on the first flight we ever had, he was killed in that and the facts of life are that he should never have been ... should never have been flying. In fact, a very short time before at a place called Helwan near Cairo where we were training, I actually saw him coming in to land - you can't see this of course - coming into land and I saw him touch, actually touch the ground before he got onto the airstrip.

(25.00) The same guy was killed in the first operation and, I mean, he was just somewhere and he was a senior bloke. By that stage he was a squadron leader and a squadron leader in peacetime air force was of course four or five years into a flying career.

That's interesting.

So that the very obvious things that you get rid of the people who are not doing well. Isn't very obvious ... it isn't very obvious. If you've got people who want to operate with a good personality, a good attitude, it's pretty hard to not go their way.

Sure, I can really understand that. Let me ask a question which I feel must be associated with this. When you were the squadron leader of 75 you were really young - a very young man - although you'd experienced a lot. Twenty-three, twenty-four, it doesn't really matter. Did you ever have difficulties with men

who were slightly older in your squadron, for example, older ground crew or people who were a bit older just by virtue of your age - was that ever an issue?

I don't remember having any ... I mean, it was a small organisation and we used to have ... I used to have regular meetings and I did see everybody. Of course, there were only, what, 300 or something like that - 280 people - I forget how many really. So it was pretty easy to get to ... to get to know people and I say that that many people of course includes aerodrome defence people and everything else.

And you made an attempt to know all those men and what they were doing and so on?

I did meet them all; of course I met them all but I've been equipped with a very lousy memory, very lousy recognition so But we used to have very frequent sort of meetings at which very short ones I remember which we'd, you know, discussed what had happened. In other words, to try and make them feel like a family, and it was. They did work; they were a very, you know, happy mob compared with the next one up the road which was ... had a bloke who was a bit of a ... I don't know but there was a lot of ill feeling and it was just personality stuff really, it wasn't as much ...

Perhaps just to ask as a final thing connected with this, Wilfred: In your view as a leader of that squadron, you obviously - as I seem to read the situation - had some success and certainly had, as you say, a happy mob, was that from learnt skills or was that just a basic character trait that some people know how to relate to others and some people don't?

I think it's largely the latter. I ... and I've no doubt also of course that if you were trained you'd get better. But I think it's largely a ... well, an attitude I suppose. I don't really know. It's very difficult to work out - according to me - it's very difficult to know who's a good leader because in my view I've seen people who do nearly nothing and they're superb leaders and that really is the - according to me - is the way you ought to run things. You ought to have an organisation that's running itself. Not so as you can duck out but that means you're getting good communication, good cooperation. There are some people that run it by checking every detail, well that's ... they're both probably good ways but I personally prefer the first one. I mean, it's the same in most businesses, there are some bosses who do everything and very well and there are some people who do nothing and I think and that - everybody's doing, and that latter one according to me is the better one really.

Mmm. Just a moment.

END OF TAPE THREE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE THREE - SIDE B

Just turning to a different aspect of 75 now, Wilfred. Once you've gone to Milne Bay, of course the invasion of Milne Bay has been - happened some six months before, in a general sense the Japanese - the tide's been turned. Not perhaps to the extent it happened later but the Japanese gradually are losing ground. How did that affect the overall strategy of the squadron? What were the most typical kinds of operations during that period?

Well, there were really very few sort of attacks on the place. We were ... and we were too far from any enemy areas to make - I mean from Milne Bay we were - to make any attacks from where we were. I mean, if you're talking of going west in New Guinea or north to the islands then, of course, they're all out of range for a P-40.

So what was the most common use of the squadron?

Well, the common use really was just training and ... for the final sort of quite big Japanese attack on the place and that was, I think I mentioned yesterday, was a situation where when we actually met the Japanese aircraft we were in severe shortage of fuel having taken off, as it turned out, too early. I mean we, of course, couldn't have known that - we were warned by coast-watchers that this very big group of aircraft were coming south and - but we didn't know of course that they would be very slow at coming south because, in fact, they were waiting for other people to take off and join them and so on.

Yes, we have talked about that.

Yes, we've got that one fixed.

Well, moving on beyond that. I know, I mean, the subsequent period, the squadron, I think, moved on through a whole succession of airstrips.

Yes. Well, from there to Goodenough and from Goodenough to the Trobriand's. That's where I got burnt there so I was out of operation for quite a long time after that.

Well, I was just going to come to that. Perhaps just before though, comparing Milne Bay, Goodenough and the Trobriand Islands ...

Yes.

How did the airstrips compare? Did flying conditions alter very much or not?

Not really. The ... Milne Bay was the most difficult of the three from the flying point of view. That is because it's between ... close up to high mountains and since it's the bottom of a narrow bay you in fact could really only take off and land one way. You had to sort of ... you had to take off the way the strip was oriented rather than take too much notice of which way the wind was blowing. We only had ... you only had this way or that way of course but quite often you in fact did land downwind just because it was ... well, you could get in that way easily whereas the other was rather difficult.

(5.00) And the others were somewhat easier to work from?

Oh, Goodenough was very easy access and usually clear of cloud and so on and in the Trobriand's, of course, you're dealing with a ... there a coral ... in other words, it's only one point five metres above sea level or something like that.

At Goodenough and the Trobriand Islands was the use ... the uses the squadron was put to, were they very different or not?

Ah, well, largely one of waiting and so on. While we were at the Trobriand's another bloke and I set out to ... to drop some bombs at Rabaul ...

Was this the night flight when there was the accident?

Yes.

Could I perhaps just ask you about that in a moment?

Sure, yeah.

It might just be in better context.

Yeah.

I did just want to ask you first: Some It has been written by some people that there was a certain element of resentment by the Australian air force pilots that the Americans really were getting the action and the Australians were being left behind, did you ever feel that, or not?

Ah, I knew that there was some feeling like that but I'd always had the view that, well, the Australian set-up was a sort of a toothless poodle business really so that we weren't in the position of doing anything other than cooperating with the Americans at their invitation rather than ...

Just given the great power of the ...

Yes. I didn't see any ... I mean, it's quite true, of course, that in some cases there would have been less experience than some of the Australian ones but then there were more of them so it's not a ... it's not a sort of valid comparison to make.

Sure. And one other thing I did just want to ask you before we perhaps talk about the incident in the Trobriand Islands. I know at Milne Bay, or during this period, you were credited with shooting down a number of planes, do you recall any of those incidents in detail, or not?

Only the big one and that ... really nearly nothing at Milne Bay apart from that damn big ... sort of approach of the, you know, the bombing set-up which we mucked up thoroughly by being in the air too early as I told you about.

Just for the record, I do know you were awarded the DSO I think?

Oh yes. That was for the attack on the ... when we ... there was a big attack on Milne Bay. As we made a head on attack with the group as they came in and I found that I had no - guns weren't operating at all and so what I attempted to do was handover to somebody to take the squadron and intended diving back down onto the ground to grab another aircraft which was a bit optimistic really. But at all events, as soon as I did find that my guns weren't working I tried to break off only to find that people were following me. So what I did was, of course, just stay there and we made an attack - a head-on attack - on them and then later cut the corner and made a side-on attack. But I just had no guns at all because ...

Which must have put you, I presume, in a very - an extremely vulnerable situation?

Oh well, it's sort of awkward. Fortunately nobody else would know except me. So it was ... it was bad luck but ...

Did the citation for the DSO reflect that your ...

Yes.

... your sticking with the attack even though you had no armaments?

I suppose so and that and the, I suppose, the organisation and so on. I don't really know what went into it.

Just pausing. Just one other thing too, you did mention yesterday a flight with Damien Parer. Given his reputation, what happened?

Oh that was a ... oh, where in the hell were we when we did that?

(10.00) I'll just pause if you like. Well, perhaps if you could just tell us was that to take ...

I'll look up the logbook afterwards, I must be able to find it there again.

Okay, fine, we'll come back to that. Let's go on then to this incident at the Trobriand Islands that you began telling me about. It was obviously a horrific situation. What happened?

Oh, well, we'd been operating from the Trobriand's which was, of course, was a long way from where the Japanese mainly were in Rabaul. In fact Rabaul, for the type of aircraft we had, was impossibly far away. But what I wanted to do was go up myself with a number two and try and get to Rabaul and take some quite big bombs because we had both much bigger bombs on than were ordinarily fitted to the aircraft. And what I suggested that we did do that job and got permission to do it. My aim ...

Could I just clarify this; this is to bomb an airstrip, was it?

Yeah, to bomb whatever looked most attractive when we got to Rabaul. What I wanted to do was get there just at first light. That is, so what we did was ... what I did decide to do was take off very ... sort of one hour or forty-five minutes, I forget what it was before sunrise in the pitch dark ...

Wilfred could I just pause a minute?

Mmm.

You said, 'In pitch dark'? I think there might just be a problem with the tape, I just want to look at something. Okay, I think ... we had a strange noise, that's gone. Right. So, it was darkness ...

Yes. With just myself and one other bloke who's my number two and I'd got to know him very well and what we'd fitted our aircraft with a fair bit bigger bomb than we'd been using in ... in that area. My The reason that I only wanted to do it with only two people is that it was the extreme range of our aircraft anyway and what two people can do in two aircraft can do, of course, you can't do with ten or fifteen because of course you've got to wait for people to take off and form up and on the way back and so on you've got to do the ... stretch out the period of landing so that ... Anyhow I got permission to do this and we ...

Could I just interpose a question here: If you were operating to such an extreme limit with your fuel capability, given the point you just said about taking off and landing, what was the position, if for example, you faced adverse winds on the way?

Well, early in the morning in the tropics that's going to be pretty unlikely and also you'd notice it pretty soon after you started. I mean, your ordinary ... you know where you ought to be at the rate your air speed is operating and if you're not there well then it's easy to work out which way the wind's blowing so that at any sort of reasonable stage you could come back again. Anyhow, so we land ... we taxied around - this was pitch dark - and I got a ... asked permission to take off and got it which meant, you know, a flicking of a light and then an answering green light or a red light if ... I in fact got the green light.

This is a fairly important point I think, the quality of the light. Could you explain that?

(15.00) Yes. The aerodrome control system there where we were was run by Americans and two or three days before I had been to see the aerodrome control people complaining about the type of light that they had because the light was a very non-directional type of light. The type of light that we normally had ourselves was a thing called an Aldis lamp which is a signalling lamp and a signalling lamp is - to get the intensity of the beam - is usually a very directional type of gadget. I'd The American one was one that had a wide beam and, in fact, I had gone round to see the aerodrome control people because on the strip we were operating from there was a little bit of a hump right up near one end of the strip and they'd used that hump as the place to put their tower on, but it was near the end of the strip and I was objecting because it was sort of three quarters or more of the way up the strip and I was objecting that with a non-directional lamp and they were shooting down in all this sort of direction, they were covering a far bigger area than ... In other words, there was a danger of - and the ...

And the danger was, I think, that a number of planes ...

Could see the same light.

And assume they were being given the 'okay' to take off.

Yeah, yes. Now on this particular morning I, in fact, didn't know that there was anybody else there at all and I, in fact, taxied out towards the strip before getting on the strip is when you ask permission - you get yourself into a position where you're ready to operate - you've done your run-up and whatever else you want to do, and then you ask permission. And we asked permission and got a response. We came out side by side and away I went at full throttle. I

mean, what he was going to be doing was following from just behind me and when I rolled up, which would have meant at about 110 miles an hour I suppose, and as I rolled up I could see a Spitfire in front of me about sixty metres away, which I ran into of course. There was nothing that I could do about and there was a ... well, a tremendous sort of smash and I felt an explosion and I felt my face sort of, you know, close and my arms ... I could feel the skin tighten and everything.

Were you still on the ground at this point?

Oh yes. Mmm. On the ground and I just rammed into ... into the bloke who was killed. He was in a Spit. And ...

This wasn't your second; your offsider, this was somebody else?

No, no. Another bloke further up the strip in What had actually happened was they'd shot the light down in that general direction and two of us had read it which was the sort of problem that I'd been trying to draw his attention to before. But they'd ... and as I said, I was complaining about the location of the control tower as well as the sort of non-beam-type type of light they had.

So as you were rushing up towards this plane, you say you couldn't stop it ...

Oh no. Well when I ... You see, when you're in a P-40 you're doing about ninety-five or a hundred miles an hour before you're game to roll level and until you roll level you can't see in front of you. I mean, up to that stage you're judging your position only by watching the row of ... the row of lights or, if it's daytime, the edge of the strip. That's a very precise way of doing things of course. I mean, if you ...

So how many seconds warning did you have that you were going to plough into this plane?

Oh, a part of one second probably because he was immediately in front and I, I ...

Did anything go through your mind or was it too fast?

Oh, yes. Well, I knew that I had no chance of doing anything but, I mean, the interval of time was tiny of course, as I say and I ... when ... especially in a P-40 you don't roll up until you've got real control because naturally you've got to have high wind speed going over the elevators and the tail, the rudder and everything before you've got control so that you run along with your nose in the air so that you can slot back down onto the ground again by pulling the throttle off.

(20.00) So in that split second of time when you saw that plane ...

Yeah.

Did you think you'd live?

Oh, I don't think I really ... I don't think I can really remember that but I could with that other time. I remember very clearly ... I just saw it and pushed one rudder very hard but I knew very well that I was going to hit the bloke.

So you were saying then that there was this feeling of tightness on your face and your arm.

Oh yes, and then ... a flame. Of course, a flame as high as I could see with a little bit of a hole and by that time I'd skidded to a stop and all of a sudden the flame dropped down a bit and I shot out of the aircraft as fast as I could and ran, you know, off to one side because I had flames going up off my jacket and everything because it was saturated with fuel.

Your clothing was on fire?

The cold clothing and, yes, my back and arms and, as I say, I felt my hands disappear, felt my face go but the rest of my body was ... was just flames on the thing. And then all of a sudden the flames dropped down a bit and I got out and went like mad and I was running away from the aircraft and trying to guess how far I could go before I'd try to put the flames out and how, you know, how ... if I'd be far enough away from the next explosion when, all of a sudden, I saw a puddle of water - actually it was water and oil - on the edge of the strip. So I dived into that and covered it all ... water all over myself and put the fire out and then raced back to the other aeroplane that the young bloke was in and told him to, you know, to go back ... he didn't need much telling I guess. And by that time the ... an ambulance had got there - the aerodrome ambulance.

What sort of pain were you in?

Oh, a P-40. He was in a ... the Spitfire; I mean, the other bloke I ran into was in a Spitfire.

Sorry. That was ... I didn't say that clearly. Wilfred, I asked what kind of pain? Could you describe the pain?

Oh well, only ... well, fairly tremendous sort of tightening of the skin all round my face and arms and hands and chest and everything. Very ... I mean and a terrible smell of course of burnt - burning meat. Anyhow, I got out and raced over to what's-his-name and told him to go and then by that time the ambulance was in and they came up and I got into the thing. They wanted me to lie down I remember but I was cranky about that so I didn't lie down because I felt that I was so filthy dirty with this oil and water and stuff all over the place. And they raced up to ... off the aerodrome and stopped at one place and it was a doctor and he opened the door and I was sitting there and I can remember saying, 'Well, good morning doctor, how are you', or something and he looked at me and looked at me like that and slammed the door and went away and didn't say one word. He thought I was ... plus I was stinking, of course, stinking like mad with burning meat noise ... smell because I was sort of in the last stages or something.

Mmm. Could I just ask you - it's a hard question perhaps - of all the men I have spoken to they've always spoken of the horror of being burnt, being a far greater horror than smacking into the ground and being killed outright. You know, the idea of living on with totally disfiguring burns; being a kind of grotesque travesty of a human being. While ... in those few minutes after this

had happened, you were still conscious, you obviously knew you'd been burnt - no doubt you didn't know how badly ...

No.

(20.00)What was going through your mind?

I ... I don't think I can remember. I can, as I say, can remember the doctor opening ... stopping the ambulance. The next thing, very clearly, I was sitting up in the ambulance and then we arrived at the medical centre - which just meant a couple of tents of course - and the I can remember that I got out the back a dog attacking me and that was the first time that I sort of ... he smelt the terrible smell I suppose and I remember feeling pretty bloody excited about that. I wanted to rip that dog to pieces but that soon died down and then I went into the ... into the hospital which was just a tent of course and spent the next two hours, I suppose, going in and out of consciousness because they were ... they had me in bed.

This is just continuing after a slight interruption. That was in a ...

In a bath sitting on the ... an ordinary bath tub. You know, a long bath tub and they set to work to ... to sort of wash me down a bit for a start and then to removing all the skin from my face and arms with ... actually they were just using ordinary table knives which ... so that you could sort of scrape with the side of it and then put your thumb on the piece of skin and tear the skin off which was ... you know, quite painful of course because I think under those circumstances they ... I mean, they had some anaesthetic but they were afraid to have too much. So I spent a lot of time there just going in and out of consciousness which is always very - well, very frightening. You ... everything just goes black and then you end up in the bottom sort of (puffing sounds) nearly like ... sort of crying it sounds like and you draw in enormous breath, plus you can feel your heart sort of (panting sounds) stuff which was very uncomfortable of course. And then, anyhow, they worked over that. With my face they tore off all the skin there and everything and down here and then when they got down to the arms they didn't bother too much because, well, I was pretty close up to pegging out I suppose. And, so, they didn't bother about that too much. And then I spent the next six or eight or ten ... ten days there and, you know, I was just completely covered with bandages over the whole of the face and the whole of my arms and all of my body down to here ...

Down to your waist.

Yes, down to my waist and about the third day I remember waking up in the night time Oh no, one of the curious things that happened, used to happen several times, about twelve or one o'clock in the morning, after I'd been in bed a long time - because I couldn't move, the extraordinary thing was the ache of lying in one position was greater than any of the other pain until you could get somebody to roll you over because, of course, I couldn't sit up or roll or do any damn thing. Then a couple of days later it gave me a terrible fright because I woke up in the morning and I could hear people talking but everything was absolutely ... absolutely black like you can perhaps remember as a child if you'd ever walked out of a brightly lit room into the darkness, everything is unbelievably black. Well, this was just like that. And, in the end I said to a bloke, you know, 'Poke your finger in my eyes, the bandages have slipped over my eyes' and he did and I can remember him, I think he said, 'It's quite all right' and 'Was I frightened?'. I knew my eyes were unobstructed but I couldn't see anything at all, just black, black, black.

And you thought you might have gone blind?

Oh yeah, I thought I'd gone blind. Well, I had of course ... had gone blind because one of the second last things the body does when you're short of blood is it keeps it up to your eyes but in the end the last thing it let's down on is your brain. So, in fact, it had cut the system at that stage and about sort of ten hours later it came back and I kept asking the bloke to poke me. And then after a while I could see ...

END OF TAPE THREE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE FOUR - SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur. Tape four, side one.

You were saying you began to see a tunnel, I think.

Yes. See, like looking down a small tunnel with just a little bit of ... a little bit of light; no peripheral vision at all. And that, of course, made me a bit more cheerful because I'd been, you know, asking the bloke to keep the bandages away from my eye which they, in fact, weren't on. I mean, there were little holes like that because I was swathed all over.

Could I just ask you, I think you said you were there for about ten days?

Yes.

In a situation as extreme as this, why were you not evacuated to a proper hospital sooner?

Oh, I think because they thought I was pegging out anyway. Actually it would be quite easy to find the interval, right now I don't remember, but I could look it up in one minute between then and when I got taken away because I was taken away by a friend of mine who persuaded the doctor to let me go and it was in a Beaufighter I think. And the doctor said I couldn't go, I was too sick to travel but the bloke insisted that he had the system and persuaded the doctor to come down and look at the aircraft and they had a bloke on a stretcher and they said, 'Well, this is what we are going to do with him'. And, actually, he was going to put me in the ammunition bins and lift me up from underneath. I remember going down on the - very well - on the stretcher and they pushed me under the aircraft like that and a bloke put a rope on one end - both handles - an ambulance stretcher, you know, with the two sets of handles, one each end. And in about a second I was sort of right up inside the aircraft into the, through the bomb bay at the bottom, up into the top where the ammunition bins were and they had me there and away they went down from there down to - one hop - to Cairns or somewhere and then to Townsville I remember.

And solely to take you to Australia?

Took me straight down to plastic surgery place in Concord in Sydney. I arrived there about five or six o'clock at night; I can't remember.

Could I just ask you again: By this stage, say at the point when you were being loaded onto the plane, you probably knew, I guess, that you would survive ...

Oh yes. At that stage I was pretty comfortable really.

But you still had these terrible burns?

Oh yeah, I couldn't ... I mean, yeah. It was six months or more before the burn ... well, I mean, when you're burnt like that, the hands are all sort of ... I couldn't eat or cut things or ...

Really like claws?

... do up buttons. Yeah, just locked in.

What went through your mind, given the possibility that plastic surgery and so on might not work; that you might always have that scar?

Oh, I don't think I ... I don't think I remember. I can remember, say, before I went in the ... I was taken away from the hospital, a friend whom I'd know in Mildura actually - was in the air force - he'd caught some fish for me and he said he'd asked the doctor if I was eating, which I was a little bit, and he persuaded him to let me ... to let him feed me which he did. He had boiled fish, it was very good, in tiny little bits and he'd poke 'em down with his finger, down my throat which was ... and I can remember I ate and ate and ate till it seemed I felt I was as tight as a bloody drum. It was the first real meal I'd had. I don't know how long that was.

(5.00) This was on the Trobriand Islands?

Yeah, in the hospital.

I'd imagine your wife came to see you fairly soon after you got to Sydney?

Oh yes, she was ... well, when we arrived there, I think was - soon as I got there I asked them if they could give me a telephone and I rang her up and she probably came the following morning I suppose.

And how did you face that long period of recovery and with, I guess, the uncertainty of the quality of your recovery?

No ... well, no. One ... The really big day was about the, probably the next morning or the morning after - I can't remember - when I woke up and the girl came in and she said, 'Well, you're getting some blood today' and somebody came in with, you know, two jars of blood, two quart ones, on their hand like that and I said, 'For God's sake, that much blood?'. She said, 'Oh, no. It's not that much, there are two more' and these four quarts of somebody else's blood and ... and I can remember them putting it in after a while and then all of a sudden I can remember yelling at them, saying, you know, 'Quick, grab me, I'm ...' and what had happened was the bed was going up like that and rolling and doing all sorts of things. I could see that it wasn't happening but I could feel that it was happening and the nurse shot in and over to the thing and tightened up the screw. I can remember I was trying to hold onto things and I couldn't hold onto anything to stop myself falling out of that bloody bed. But, again, it wasn't ... it was no surprise to her. Apparently it's sort of like, well, the mad stages of inebriation or

something probably. And, after that, the next ... I don't know how long I was there, they started doing things to me like taking a ... you know, taking bits of skin from various places and ... my legs and so on and sticking them on and that, you know, that used to hurt. In fact, in a mad way it hurt a lot more where they'd taken the bloody skin from than from where the ... 'cause they were tiny bits. And in the main it came on very well. Up here is part of it, it didn't do ... it didn't take on very well for a while and then they kept taking thinner and thinner bits of skin and these ones were the ones that were the big ones. But the ones on my face were ... were thin, very, very thin layers. They didn't want 'em humped up or anything. That was good.

Mmm. So, it must have been, well obviously, a very hard time to go through but obviously there was steady progress.

Yes, quite quick and then after ... I was in, as I say, a plastic surgery ward where there were just so many people of ... you know, were far worse than me. Incredible. Some of the incredible ones of ... oh, one guy I remember very well, he was a - he'd had a bullet had gone through here and knocked out the ... I think it's the tibia, isn't it - in front - taken it out completely and there was a huge great, just great big hole in there like that.

In his leg?

In his leg. And they wanted a whole lot of meat to put in it. So where they'd taken the meat from was a loose sort of bit up here and they had a bit, oh, fully as long as that and about that size round and it was like a sausage. But at that stage they could only do these transplants by sort of direct means and they'd undone one end of this bloody sausage and they'd tucked it into the skin here and then, sort of four weeks later, they were going to cut the top one and transplant it down there but by that time it had taken so long and the bloke was getting so cranky about it, they decided that what they were going to do was attach it to his arm.

(10.00) And what they ... they sat him up in bed like this so that his arm was locked down there onto his ... and there was a piece of meat sort of attached to his arm here and then ... and then went over onto his leg here and then, sort of a month later or so, it went round the corner into this great big hole. The last time I saw him at that stage was ... was this coiled up sausage thing in his Poor bugger. And even with that, the thing that would get him down in the middle of the night - I could hear him yelling for people - was just the agony of lying in one position. And though he'd sort of had got used to it.

Mmm. I can really imagine that.

Yeah. And some people, oh, one ... The plastic surgery things, some of them are horrifying. I remember in Ismailia we had a ... the chief flying instructor was walking around the place in a, in a great leather jacket up here and then over his head and everything and a huge great sort of mask around his face like a ... like a diver's except it was twice as big and I of course knew that he'd been burnt but And then a few days after we'd arrived there, three of us had been sent down there as instructors, and he called me up - told me to come to his office - and I went down to his office where he'd told me to find that there were just a whole lot of blankets sort of nailed onto the outside of the wall and he shouted at me from inside. He said, 'Well, feel your way down between the blankets' and I sort of got to this row of blankets and lifted one and walked up and then back through a trap. In other words, it was a double trap cutting out the light. And when I ...

Was this because his eyes couldn't stand any light?

Yes, and I opened the door and I couldn't see anything. It was just absolutely black and he said, 'Walk forwards. Put your hand out', and then I was sitting down. And then after a while I could see this horrible bugger. He ... all I could see was a huge great hole in here with ... you know, a black hole ...

Wilfred was pointing to the nose area.

Yes, where it had gone. And that looked terrible and then ... but sitting up here on his forehead was a great big heap of meat which, when he was talking like that, the things was going ... bobbling around, which was pretty sort of awkward looking. And then, a few minutes later, when my eyes got better - 'cause it takes your eyes in the darkness, it takes up to sixty minutes before you can ... you've got proper real vision and this was nothing like that but it was five minutes or something - and I ... then I suddenly ... I saw something else made me forget about his bloody hole 'cause he had no eyelids here, no eyelids there and just teaming sort of tears running down his face like that. And what he told me about it was bloody nothing. He said, 'You're in 3 Squadron. What are they ... What are they doing? What are their plans? What are the rules of the game?', you know ... not ...

Mmm. Incredible. But he was still coping with a job and ...

Not only coping with it, he was squeezing every bloody little bit out to try and build up the training and ... tough. Very good.

Mmm. Remarkable. Well, we might end there.

Well, this is just continuing after lunch. Wilfred, oh, just a moment. Wilfred, I know after this ... the long period you spent recuperating in Concord you went back to active service with the air force, where did you go first?

Well, first of all, they were running at ... south from Melbourne a shortened course for senior officers. I forget what the longer one is but I went to ... I was put on that School of Pacific ... School of ... it wasn't big in those days, I really forget what it was called. It was a senior ...

(15.00) Kind of a staff course.

A staff course, yes, but a staff course shortened down to, I think it was probably two months, I can't remember, and I went there which was a, you know, a very welcome because, well, I still had my arm in, I suppose, in slings, at all events I couldn't do things very well with it and it was a good opportunity to practice doing things and also a very interesting course.

And I know after that you did spend a brief time, a few months, as a station commander at Mildura.

Yes, a very ... a quite short time. I was expecting to be there quite a long time but then the way the cards fell, well, it was really only a very short time.

Mmm. And by this stage, I think you were a group captain.

Oh yes. Well, I went to ... I must have gone to Mildura as a group captain I think.

And just for the record, I think you were then and may still be the youngest group captain in the air force?

Oh, well, probably - I really don't know. I see that recent books says that but I don't know.

Right. Anyway, you were still, I mean, very young. Anyway, it was after this, I think, that ... well, you'd had your first child and in December '44, according to the dates we worked out yesterday, you went ... you arrived at - I'm not sure how the pronunciation of this - Noemfoor, in the Pacific.

Noemfoor?

Noemfoor, that you went there as a group captain of 81 Wing ...

Yes.

... which was 75 Squadron and a couple of other squadrons and ...

Yes.

... occasionally US squadron. What was the general ... your general role? How do you recollect that - the early months as a group captain there?

Uh ... well, I was in overall control of the training and the ... and the actual operations. Like I used to go on all the operations mostly with whichever squadrons were doing the job.

You flew with the squadrons?

Yes.

Was that common for a group captain to participate actively?

I ... I suppose I really don't know but ... well, I wanted to anyway because I really couldn't believe that unless you actually go that you're not ... I feel if you don't actually go then you're not giving yourself the opportunity to see things. You know, once removed, once handled information and so on. Plus, even then, I was already pretty bothered about some of the operations we were doing. It just didn't seem to me to be profitable; it didn't seem to me to be good bookkeeping.

Perhaps if we could just come to those in a moment.

Yeah.

After the horrors of the crash was there a barrier that you had to overcome before you could get in a plane with ease and fly it yourself? I mean, a psychological barrier?

No, I don't remember any one. I remember still having impaired strength in my hands and things. I don't remember feeling very ... I don't remember feeling concerned about it, no. I do remember - well, even in plastic surgery, even in that place where I was - a big part of the so-called treatment - or it wasn't so-called, it was treatment - was actually getting your hands and things moving again and that was ... I was still a bit weak, I suppose.

The One other thing I did just want to ask you before we come to this very important issue of strategy and so on: You're a group captain now and still very, very young obviously commanding now even more men than you did as a squadron leader ...

Oh yes.

Was age ever an issue; a difficult barrier with commanding men who were perhaps older than you and didn't necessarily agree with you?

Well, I don't think there was. Maybe there was ... maybe there was feeling but really I don't think so. Well, I was flying all the time so I don't think anybody was sniping at me or anything and if they had I don't think it would have been very successful.

(20.00)I was also just going to ask you about your flying. You said it was partly to be at first hand to get the clear information.

Yes.

Was there also an element of motivation of setting an example there to younger men - to younger or less experienced pilots - being there yourself?

Ah, maybe. Really ... really what I really felt that there's only one way to know what you're doing if you're leading people and that is to not only seem to be ... to know what's happening but to know what's happening and you just do see things differently if you're actually doing them. You see aspects that you mightn't see in a report originating information.

Mmm. Sure. Perhaps if we could turn then to this other issue because I'm sure it's connected. I think from late 1944 there was some disquiet, certainly amongst some RAAF officers, about the way their planes and pilots were being put to use.

Yes.

How did that situation first strike you when you arrived as group captain?

Well, I'd been ... as a wing commander I'd been very critical of a lot of the things that we were doing. In fact I had set up an arrangement for monthly reports - I really can't remember whether they were monthly or how frequently they were - where I was setting down what I saw that we'd achieved and what I saw that we'd cost the air force.

And this is going back to that period on the Trobriand Islands?

Yes, that's right. Going right back, going right back. I was getting ... I felt that it was bad arithmetic and ... and I kept ... I'd been making these points but I was also, at that stage, I knew that I was also being cunning, I suppose, and not talking to too many people because, oh well, I knew it would be very easy to say, 'Well, Arthur's got a bit fatigued or something. Flog him home', and so I was a bit careful about it. But I was sort of very ... well, very concerned because I felt that we were ... that the air force was sort of running a bad arithmetic set up and I see now that there is actually a book on *The Unnecessary War* which refers to us as thinking that what the Government was doing was wrong. Now, that's the absolute reverse of what I was saying. I was saying, at that time, that they didn't know who was originating these unnecessary and expensive, to my mind, bad arithmetic operations but I thought it was the air force, not the Government. And my view then was: if the Government chose to do that then that's probably all right because - well, there are other factors. Whereas, if it's the air force doing it, then it's totally wrong because if you've got people under complete control without losing any of your people to keep them there then that was the, surely, the better thing to do.

The figures are quite striking, I know, from this report and this, incidentally, is *The Age* of Friday October 4th, 1957, an article called, 'New Light on Air War against Japan'. There was one incident recalled there where the loss was eleven men, fifteen planes versus twelve barges and six motor transport.

Oh yes.

Do you remember that particular operation? I mean, the statistics there are quite stunning.

I don't think that's a ... I think it's probably several operations but I certainly do remember exactly these type of operation and ...

(25.00) You were saying before that you kept fairly quiet about it - we'll come to the incident of the resignation in a moment - how long before that were you talking openly about this with your senior colleagues?

Well, I was making periodic reports. I can't remember whether they were weekly or monthly or what they were in which I was drawing attention to what I called the costs and the benefits. And in them I was making the point that we appeared to be losing more than we were gaining. I also mentioned that I couldn't see that even the figures were very relevant because so long as we left them alone the Japanese were entirely unable to do anything.

In terms of supplying themselves?

In terms of fighting anybody else or supplying themselves. They were cut off from the sea and the air; less permanently from the air. But still they were in situations where they could do nothing to support Hirohito and that if we attacked them we were, in fact, doing them a service because it was making them appear to be and in fact was furthering their war effort in the sense that it was using up some of our war effort.

These official reports you made to your superiors, what response did they get?

Well, nearly - to my knowledge - nearly no response.

Do you mean a contradictory response or simply no response?

No. Now towards the end, as I think I mentioned before, after I'd done this several times I got a little more devious; a little more cunning or something and didn't make quite so much noise about it. But I ... well, in the beginning I was astonished when I didn't get a response to the reports that I thought we were going downhill and towards the end, then I was getting suspicious or

What were the motives of the people in the authorities in the air force if these people were being ... if planes were lost and lives were lost too, did they simply want to appear to be doing something for some kind of PR game? What was the motive in continuing a fairly obviously stupid course of action?

I don't know. I mean, one ... it could be one of those and it could be another one too, of course, and the other one would be the people have got to stay there so let's not just let them do nothing. That's a ... that's one that I think is sort of plausible but not quite - not much more than that in that I think you could make sure you had enough activity to keep up training skills without the final risk of losing people. I can't remember the intervals of the reports but I know that I was putting in a 'this is what we've gained' and 'this is what we've lost' type of report.

Were living conditions an issue that you felt men were just getting sick of awful living conditions or was it really this issue of loss of lives for minimal gain?

No, it was not ... The living conditions were not, not too bad, yes. Food was monotonous and so on but that wasn't something that was ever a, to my knowledge, anything like a big issue. People were just putting up with it or not putting up with it and groaning and putting up with it but they weren't saying they liked it either but it still wasn't, wasn't bad or anything; it wasn't prison camp stuff or anything.

Right. I might just turn it over. I think we are about to run out.

END OF TAPE FOUR - SIDE A

START OF TAPE FOUR - SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Wilfred Arthur, 75 Squadron.
Tape four, side two.

Well, I do know that from the report in the newspaper here and from what you've said, a crisis developed in, I think it was, April '45.

Yes.

Could you describe the events immediately preceding that?

Yes. I was ... I was operating from - it wasn't Morotai, it was east of there a long way; 500 miles away ... I'm a bit sunk there.

Just a moment. Just continuing.

I went up to Morotai with the intention of making a complaint about what I considered to be bad arithmetic, bad accounting in our ... in what we were expending and what we were actually getting returned to us. And I did talk to a number, to a whole lot of people about it and the end result of that was that in fact we ... a number of us did resign. And we did resign carefully making no clear statement as to why we were resigning ...

But it was generally known?

Oh I suppose it was but I don't really know. I mean, you see what we were on about was that if we stated what was wrong we'd probably just be posted for ... some of us would be posted for medical reasons or some other thing like that and - or a case of battle fatigue or some other damn thing would be trumped up. And since I'd been putting in reports and getting no response, I was getting very suspicious that In retrospect, I was probably wrong, but probably a lot of the reports were not sort of looked at and rejected. They probably weren't looked at and understood. Now I thought I was making it very clear that we were involved in bad arithmetic and I think I mentioned yesterday that Bougainville story afterwards, which I knew nothing at all about of course. It was a clear understanding on the Japanese part that the hold up up there that they were doing nothing for the organisation and couldn't understand why anybody was attacking them.

Just to add for the record here, this is - according to this report in *The Age* quoted before, if I can just read this out, Wilfred, the people involved in this group resignation were Group Captain Clive Caldwell, Wing Commanders R.H.M. Gibbes and K. Ranger and Squadron Leaders J.L. Waddy, B.A. Grace, R.D. Vanderfield and S.R. Harpham. And the resignation stated:

'I hereby respectfully make application that I be permitted to resign my commission as an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force, forthwith.'

You, yourself, were a senior officer and obviously a very successful officer - no doubt some of these others were too - this was a strong, a very, very strong thing to do. How was it greeted?

(5.00) Well, with surprise would be ... that was certain. I did get, one day, accused by one of them of saying, 'Well, you're just wrecking us' - meaning himself and the other people that were in command there. Why we did it was, of course, we didn't want any subtle disposal of us which would have been very hard to ... hard to complain about.

Was it hard, incidentally, to get the unity within that group of men to make that resignation, or not?

No, it wasn't very hard. I went up there especially to do that. It's also true that I didn't know at that stage that there was any other problem around the place like this so-called grog marketing stuff. I don't think it was so-called, I think it was probably real but what scale it was at I don't know.

This was where some moderately senior officers were running ...

Oh yes. Well, very senior officers were at least, if not running it, they were knowing about it and not doing anything about it.

So, at least conniving.

Yes, at least conniving.

And who was the grog bought from and who was it sold to?

Oh it was ... probably arranged just to come up in aircraft from Australia, I suppose. I really don't know where they got the ... whether there was any other grog.

And who was it being sold to?

To - largely to Americans and, I suppose, probably entirely to Americans. And of course there were a lot of them around and they'd have had the sort of surplus money that other people wouldn't have had.

So it was obviously a reasonably profitable black market?

Well, yes. Whether the scale was big enough to make it mean anything or not, I don't know. I mean part of it could have been just, you know, nearly boredom. In other words, it could easily have been fairly bloody foolish and not ... I don't ... I've got no idea what sort of money they made but I would think it's probably nothing very big.

So an activity to fulfil a void rather than to fill a bank balance.

Yes, that's right. That's the sort of ... I mean, they were perhaps bored and, the reason, I keep saying, I was only up there to check up on this business and so that I ... well I didn't know anything about it. It wasn't that I had refused to go into the other business which, well, I would have refused anyway, I know that, but it is of course no good saying that afterwards. But it was just unknown anyway; unknown to me.

If we can go back to the key issue. I mean, fairly obviously you were willing to risk your reputation on the [inaudible] ...

... Oh, I knew ... yes, I knew I'd wreck any air force career, yes.

And that didn't trouble you?

Well, it did, but I couldn't face up to people getting killed when there was no bloody reason to. We'd seen enough people get killed again and again and again. There's nothing wrong with that because, in fact, it was for a reason. But unnecessary ones are quite different. Nobody should ... I mean if they're killed in training that's sort of totally acceptable as far as I'm concerned providing it wasn't stupid training or something. But, sort of to attack people that were defenceless and lose people doing it wasn't ... there was no logic; no morals, no logic.

Was there also concern for, not only for losing Australian airmen but attacking Japanese who had very little chance of defending themselves?

I don't ... I don't think so. I ... well, I mean, it seemed pointless. I'm not too sure whether I can remember bothering about ... about their ... I mean your main defence in an air attack, if you are on the ground, an established one is just to hide and to stay in the slit trench and so on. In other words, apart from the first time, you're not likely to get killed if your discipline's good.

(10.00)Mmm, and you disappear. Going back to the central issue, having made this principle stand I understand the authorities tried to persuade you all to withdraw your resignations.

Yes.

What happened?

We just clammed up and said we would not do that and produced no reason, as far as I know.

Was there pressure put on you to return to Australia or did you stay where you were?

Well, I think I thought in the beginning that it was going to be pretty difficult for them to make people ... big numbers return. So that I think we did, if not in a written form, at least we said we'd move when it was convenient to move rather than move straightaway.

Was any attempt made to relieve you of your command as group captain?

No. I mean, there was an approach to me about, you know: What are you doing and what are you on about? And you are destroying us. But we've got no ... nothing further to say. See, we had said and had been advised to say and we did say as little as possible - be good and unspecific.

I do understand at some point the one concession you and your ...

Yeah, at the end of it.

The other resignees made was to ...

At the end of current operations or something.

Right, to take out the word 'forthwith'.

Yes. That's right, yeah, we did. Because, well, we could see that it just wouldn't be possible for people to grab somebody to replace us. I don't mean that you're irreplaceable but I do mean that in any ordinary replacement arrangement you ... there's a handover takeover period and if it's forthwith, it's forthwith. So we did ... we did put in that end of ... agree to the end of current operations which again was another loose term of course.

Did you know while you were up there if any of this became public knowledge in the press in Australia or not? I mean, of course it did later, but at the time?

No, I didn't know; I didn't know whether it had or not. No, I didn't know ... I didn't even know. I did speak to a friend of mine who was a medical officer back in Sydney or Melbourne - Melbourne he would have been.

It must have been regarded most seriously because I do ... well, according to this report at least and perhaps you could confirm it. General George Kenney, the American commander ...

Yes.

Flew down from Manila to Morotai to twist your arms.

That's right.

Were you present at that meeting?

Oh yes and I said ...

What was the mood? What happened?

We just said, 'We don't want to discuss anything', but, in fact, I went to see him afterwards at night time and told him what it was all about - with nobody there - and said that I'd ... you know, and he straightaway said, 'I know what you're doing. I know it's a chart war', which a good, you know, is a good expression really.

Referring to the island hopping?

No, referring to ... what to the Australian Air Force one where it was to be seen to be doing something is more ... is as important or pretty bloody important anyway compared to what you are actually doing.

To the senior officers at least.

Yes, and we had ... I mean, we'd talked about that before and we'd always said that we would go along with any government decision to do that and not if it was an air force one. I mean, if the Government sees fit to establish their position for negotiations with ... that's sort of their affair, but we couldn't see - I couldn't anyway - that just the straight arithmetic of what we as an air force were doing and what they as a Japanese air force were doing was making sense.

So, I guess what you're saying was that you were willing for the Government to use the air force in a propaganda sense if that was the political judgment ...

Yes. That's right; that's right, yes.

... but not if it was within the air force as a profession.

(15.00) That's right. And the other one, we also, at the same time, pointed out that in fact if you wanted to use it as a propaganda way then you can have it both ways quite easily. You can not hurt the ... the air force very much. I mean, after all if you make a token attack on some place, that's bloody good for propaganda and not very dangerous anyway but ... but we were, of course, nervous to give any information out that would result in people just being sent out for, you know, two or three ... see, there was only, what, five or six of us though that two or three of those that went out for medical reasons or something would make it look like a, oh, battle fatigue of course or something or another.

Well, rather than yourself leaving Morotai, again, according to this article, Air Commander Cobby who was the air commander on the spot and I also underst... he was the commander of the first TAF.

That's right.

TAF ...

Tactical Air Force.

Right. And two of his senior officers, Group Captains W.N. Gibson and R.H. Simms - and just for the record W.N. Gibson is probably the Gibson that is referred to in a previous tape where there's the issue of John Jackson's death at Port Moresby - they were removed.

Yes.

Why, do you know?

Well, because they were involved in it and perhaps ... well, that's the only reason I would know of that. I mean, the other one that I could guess is, that perhaps Cobby was suddenly conscious too of the fact that they were being a bit slack.

Mmm. But they ...

Where I was certainly wrong is that some of my earlier and even the fairly late complaints about it were more not understood than just ignored. I mean, I think. How come I don't know? Because, as I say, for a long time I'd been giving this arithmetic basis and there were plenty of people that knew they were doing jobs that weren't important and knew that they were losing people and, I mean, that hurts of course.

Well, continuing the story on a little further, it was a Sir John Barry, a prominent lawyer, who, I think, was sent up - actually sent to the area ...

Yeap.

... partly to look into this issue of sly grog but also this mass resignation. What actually happened when he arrived? Do you remember the hearings or whatever press proceedings went on?

I don't ... I don't think I ... I don't think I was at any hearings. See I would have gone back to my own, back to where my own unit was, say 500 miles away. I don't think I ...

You didn't meet him yourself up there?

I don't think so. I met him later, of course, when the inquiry was ... after he was given the inquiry. But I don't think I ever set eyes on him until after. Afterwards I got to know him extremely well of course.

I think the general tone of his report was really to vindicate you, is that correct?

Oh yes. No doubts. It wasn't See, the Government was good and cunning like as I'd mentioned before, to put the two things together: to put the sly grog ... the grog thing and the other one together. See, that's not ... well, I didn't like it at all at the time. Of course, I could see the ... naturally you could see that now it's got a good plausibility of course but it's still wrong. I mean, if he had two completely separate issues, that would have been one thing. To have two issues together, they get sort of mixed in with one another in people's minds and there were people that thought that I was probably involved too just because of what they'd read in the paper, not from anything they'd ever thought about.

If we can just press on a little because the tape is running on. His Barry's report vindicated yourself and the other resignees.

Yes.

(20.00) You then continued as a group captain, did you? I mean, to the end of the war?

Yes, and then resigned immediately the ... well, immediately afterwards; immediately the war ... I was in Tarakan, see, because even ... even for exactly what reason, I don't know, but they did keep me on there and I, in fact, went to Tarakan with Cobby and went on the American command ship with him when they were landing at Tarakan. And because at that stage there was the intention of putting in a fighter squadron at Tarakan to do ... to do partial support for the landing at - at Balikpapan, is it, probably.

Mmm.

Now, I knew about that but didn't like the idea and didn't think it was a strictly honest one because the distance between Tarakan and Balikpapan is so great that we couldn't have effectively done anything anyway. In other words, it looked like - to my mind - it looked very like a political thing rather than an operational one.

I think it was at Tarakan that the end of the war came.

Yes.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How did that sudden end of all this horror affect you? What's your recollection of that?

Oh, a tremendous relief of course and, I mean, the first one was pretty marvellous - the European one - and the Japanese one, of course - I was in Tarakan, I think, I was certainly in that area for both of them but I even forget how far apart they are. Only three weeks or something, is it or ...

No, a number of months I think.

Was it? Oh yes. Well, anyway, well, relief.

Looking back on it all, you'd, in a very, very short time, gone from a young man who could ... well, for a start couldn't fly, to a very able flier and combat flier and been promoted to really a high rank ...

Yes.

Looking back on it all, how did that seem as a phase in your life? What did it do to you?

Well, it was ... it was exciting; it was also ... well, I was quite conscious of the fact that one hell of a lot of it was just sheer - I mean, the early promotion and so on - was just sheer luck. I mean, if you happened to be in an organisation like even - like in 3 Squadron and a lot of people ... a whole lot of people get killed then you've got a glorious opportunity of getting ... So that any idea that there isn't a huge great heap of luck involved in those sorts of things is just silly. Of course it's a very big factor. Now after, I mean, you do get cunning and naturally you're not stupid, you learn, but the biggest factor of all in surviving in an air force or any assault sort of thing is the luck one - not to be where the bloody bullet hits.

Mmm. Sure. You were obviously very committed in many different ways. Did the war affect your political or religious beliefs?

No, not any ... I think not any political ones and not any ... not any religious ones. No.

I know after the ... just a moment. I better try and keep within this tape I think. I do know after the war, Wilfred, you've had a very full and varied life. I know there was the decision that there'd be no more flying. You worked in a school; then there was the School of Pacific Administration; dairy farming; going to Vietnam as a Colombo Plan dairy farmer; managing Jabiru Mine; and now, here - very varied career. How much of that ...

Jabiru Mine ... involved in the Jabiru exploration unit. Of course, I was, you know, running the administrative side of the exploration organisation - Geopeko - because it didn't become Ranger until, well, quite a while after that.

(25.00) Right.

There was a long drawn out Fox Hearing on the implications and so on.

Thanks for clarifying that. But looking at your life, there has been a very ... it has been a very varied career. How much of that would you put to your experiences in the air force and what it taught you generally?

Well, I really don't think I can - I don't think I can answer that one. I don't know. I mean, most of the ... most of the decisions were made rather with more chance than consideration and weighing up the alternatives and so on. Like the ... the going to Vietnam was really a direct consequence of a fouled up farming career.

One final thing I would like to ask and I say to anybody: Is there anything you feel should be said, you would like to say, that we haven't covered regarding the war; regarding your involvement in it?

I, I don't think so except the I am now and then very surprised and very shocked at some comments made by younger people and so on that equate some of the things that happened in the war to ... they equate them with sort of Gaddafi-like ... what I am referring to there is big emphasis always on the Hiroshima stuff which, of course, had the Americans not done that then somebody should have been shot for not doing it. That is, the situation then was that there was only one consideration and that is: save the lives of other people and destroy the Japanese. You get now, in Darwin especially - perhaps not especially but I know about it more - candle burning for Hiroshima. And you get items in the paper now and then that refer to the sort of strong moral position the Allies were in until the destruction of Dresden. Well, that's the most terrible thing I've ever heard of, of course, the Dresden attack was of course done with the intention of demonstrating what would happen to Germany itself if they didn't pull out. In other words, it was a perfectly clear, nothing terrorist about it, nothing but a determination to avoid the mad loss of life there would have been with a determined army fighting. You demonstrate in one go - not to the army - to the nation to do something that's understandable, horrifying and probably you get the same bloody thing happening. The Americans demonstrated what they could do to Japan itself - they did it in cities that were not the very biggest cities, not the ...

Mmm. I understand what you're saying.

Nowadays the history has been rewritten by people with ... I don't know what motivation there is.

Right, well we might perhaps end there.

That's it, eh.

Unless there's something you wanted to add.

No, nothing at all.

I would just like to say, Wilfred, this is the last - at this stage anyway - of many 75 Squadron stories and I really feel that's tied up a lot of loose ends that other people have referred to but haven't been ... but you've really tied things together. So thank you.

Very good. Thank you. It's certainly much longer than I thought but much, much more carefully done and so on. I am most interested.

Well, it's certainly a lot longer than I thought but I felt it had to be done.

No, well that's very good. I hope it turns out ...

END OF TAPE FOUR - SIDE B