



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Identification: This is Edward Stokes recording with Bill Minty, Catalinas, Tape 1, Side 1.

Bill, just to go back to the beginning of the story, could you tell us please where you were born and also perhaps just very brief details of your childhood.

I was born in Sydney in 1921, moved to New Zealand with my family in '22 and stayed there seven years, during which period one of the highlights was, um, in 1928 it must have been, when my father took me out to Wigram Airport, Christchurch, to see Smithy land in the Southern Cross. Ah, I still remember seeing, firstly, three little biplanes take off from Wigram airport and disappear over the horizon, and then half an hour later they came back escorting what appeared to be this huge lumbering aircraft, which landed at the airport, and we all rushed out to the Southern Cross and milled around it, and they had mounted policemen to try and keep the crowd away from damaging the aircraft. That's one of my good memories in New Zealand.

You were saying that when you came back to Australia with your family - this is some long time before the war I think - that you were very keen on building model aircraft. Had flying taken hold of your imagination in some way, or not?

I guess that original visit to Wigram airport to see Smithy may have had an impact, but it was probably also the circumstances of having a model aircraft club that was very active near where I lived in the rural outskirts of Sydney. Ah, and we had a very strong leader there who really taught us a great deal about making model aircraft. Ah, indeed, we were making a ground trainer, which wasn't capable of actually flying, but if you got up enough speed and had a tail wind down hill, it might have moved into the air two or three feet. (Laughs).

Just turning to one other aspect of your early years. Of course the ANZACs had been a great tradition in the first war - Gallipoli and so on. Were you conscious of that tradition of the empire of sacrifice, if you like, of Australian military endeavour or not?

No I don't think I was. When the war first broke out, we went through that period which was known colloquially as the second Boer war. There wasn't very much going on, but my friends used to question whether everything we read in the paper was true and whether we should take this war seriously or not, but after that period of the second Boer war, it became quite obvious that these various countries were being overrun by Hitler and there was no stopping the man, and the only reasonable thing to do seemed to be to join up and make some sort of contribution.

Mm. Well I know you were saying that in the late '30s you completed your matriculation at school and then you were studying engineering - civil engineering I think - and it must have during 1940 I think that you wanted to enlist, but your father was against the idea. Could you explain why? What were his feelings to do with?

(5.00) I guess they were basically a father's concern for the possibility of losing his son at war. Ah, they were also related, I think, to the fact that my father had to leave school at the

age of fourteen in order to make an income for the family that - his father in turn had already died - and he was most insistent that I gain some qualifications, and I was into the second year of my engineering course, but he finally relented at the end of the second year and I enlisted in December of 1940.

> Yes, that's interesting. Well, those feeling would certainly be, I'm sure, understandable on your father's part, but also yours too. Um, so it's December 1940. Were you very conscious by this stage of what was going on in Europe? Of events in Europe?

Oh yes, very much so. Very much so. The papers carried nothing else almost but the war in Europe.

> And I think it was Bradfield where you went to do your first, well your induction into the air force, and by this stage it's August 1941. What's your recollection of Bradfield, both of the place and of the kind of training you had there?

I loved it. Perhaps I was frustrated in not being able to pursue my original love of flying. I had wanted to matriculate and then join the air force and become a pilot on regular public transport. The proposition was that after four years in the air force you went on the reserve list and flew regular public transport, and if a war came along then you probably joined up anyhow. But my father wouldn't have a bar of that. Flying was too dangerous, so I took up civil engineering instead. But back at Bradfield, I had been doing during those two years, it was a course where I worked five days a week full-time and then went to these night lectures four nights a week - sometimes five and sometimes Saturdays as well. It was a very heavy program and was mostly mental work. In contrast to that, at Bradfield we had a delightful combination of mental work and physical work which was very healthy and I really felt fit and just loved the life.

> Was parade ground drill much of an issue there? Did you do a lot of bashing parade ground squares?

Ah yes we did parade ground drill, but we also did a lot of ground studies. Ah, parade ground drill, yes, I was always embarrassed on parade ground drill because the sergeant chose me to be the leader at the head of the squad, and, but they also always chose the tall chaps for the front and the back of the squad and I wasn't tall so I felt all the more sawn off leading this group of tall fellas coming behind me.

> (Laughing). I know I could relate to that. We are just laughing about memories of other places, marching. More seriously though, Bill, do you think the kind of discipline that parade ground drill instils, do you think that had any carry over to the kind of discipline that you might have needed actually in the air or not? Were they related or quite separate?

I think that's a fundamental principle of service life, really, that in many respects one becomes an automaton, that you respond to orders without question and you respond to them quickly. If you have a job in hand then you see it through, no matter what the opposition is. I think parade ground drill is the lead into that sort of automatic discipline.

(10.00) Right. Well moving on a little bit, because I know Bradfield was just the very beginning of it all. I think it was at Narromine, out in the mid-west New South Wales, that you did your initial flying training - November '41. What are your memories of Narromine? Perhaps first of all just the base and the life there, then we might talk about flying after.

Again, I had a very happy period at Narromine. I'd love to go back there for a reunion. We flew the Tiger Moth and went solo after something to the order of eight hours. It was a delightful aircraft. It was almost fully aerobatic and the only thing we couldn't do with it was an outside loop - that is, instead of pulling the stick back and climbing up into the sky and coming down again, in the reverse loop you push the stick forward and do a circle in the other direction. But they were delightful aircraft and indeed it's a, I'd pay a great tribute to De Havilland for producing that aircraft that was used so universally in the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Do you remember anything else about your very early flying? Did it, for example, satisfy perhaps the hopes you'd had as to what flying might be like or not?

I really enjoyed it all. I enjoyed the aerobatics. I guess it did satisfy a lot of my needs. I didn't have anything in particular happen there as a highlight. One of our chaps lost a propeller while he was flying along in a Tiger Moth and I can still remember him going home on weekend leave with this propeller across his shoulder. But ...

Could you just elaborate on that? He, ... where? How did he lose the propeller?

He'd, perhaps the nuts came off the bolts that held it onto the engine. I can't understand how it came off. I didn't get to the bottom of that.

And he glided to safety?

He glided down and did a forced landing. That was, of course, one of our - particularly in a single engine aircraft - one of the things that was drilled into us - always be aware of the possibility of your engine suddenly failing and the need to put down somewhere, and you need to keep an eye out and peer over the side regularly, and say, `Well, if the engine stops now, there's a paddock there that looks as if I could put it down quite nicely'. Ah, there was one incident which stayed with me all my life which I think is very important, although you may like to edit this out if you don't think it's quite appropriate for this sort of tape.

Well I'm sure it's significant if you think it is.

But one day the chief flying instructor came into the hut where we were having lectures and gave us a pep talk about our attitude to flying and he said, um, `Gentlemen, flying is a dangerous business. I want you to have the right attitude towards it. I want you to get into the habit of checking things. You are flying along and you may have just checked your air speed, but you just check it again just in case. You just checked your oil pressure, you check it again just in case. You might have checked your altimeter, you check it again just in case'.

And he kept up this `just in case', `just in case' and he finally said, `It's a bit like the nipples on a man's chest. He's never likely to need them but they're there just in case'. Now, that message went home to those young fellas - as we all were in those days - and ever since then I've flown aircraft and driven motor cars with that attitude. If I'm overtaking a bus that's pulled up at the kerb, I slow down a bit just in case a child rushes out from the front of that bus.

> Well I'm sure with flying, obviously that's probably critical to it all Bill. Um, you were saying before about Tigers being single-engined aircraft. I think it was at, um, at Narromine that you decided to opt for multi-engined aircraft. Why was that? In that obviously, that I guess generally was the choice between going towards fighters or larger aircraft bombers and so on. What was your hope or intention there?

(15.00) I can't remember specific reasons why I made that choice. I guess perhaps it was related to my engineering background where I took a great interest in the technicalities of flying. Flying a larger aircraft with several engines, ah, and several crew members on board would call for a wide range of understanding of these various technicalities and probably this appealed to me more than flying as a single pilot in a single small aircraft where I would mostly be focusing on, ah, shooting down enemy aircraft.

> Mm. That's interesting and obviously, in a sense, more of a team effort with the number of people on those planes.

Yes.

> Well, I think from Bundaberg - or it was at Bundaberg - that you did your training on Ensigns. Moving from Tiger Moths to Ensigns must have been quite a change in terms of flying skills and so on. How do you remember that?

The Anson was a very comfortable aircraft to fly. It really didn't have any vices. It reminded me in my model aircraft days when I used to read a magazine called *Flying Aces* that there was a report in the mid-1930s of a mysterious new bomber that had appeared in the Mediterranean scene and I'd noted all this detail in my mind, and there I was flying this mysterious new bomber, which of course, it was a very modest aircraft by world war two standards - two 300 horsepower Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah engines - with a crew of four, and a very small bomb carrying capacity.

> Just going on at Bundaberg, Bill, what are your other recollections of the training there? What were the other aspects of the kind of training you did at Bundaberg?

Oh, two or three things. We had a major flood in the river at Bundaberg and all the air force was called out and, ah, to rescue people in rowing boats. It was a huge flood, as they can be in Queensland. I still remember a little old lady who in her cottage there saying that, `Sonny, in 1900 the flood only came up to them there steps, so I'm not moving'. (Laughing). The flood, I guess the other memory is that at the end of the runway at Bundaberg there was a cemetery which meant that if you weren't in the air at the end of the runway you wound up in the cemetery whether you liked it or not. (Laughs). Ah, we did our night flying there and I

enjoyed night landings. I seemed to get the knack of these and, ah, no, again a very happy experience. Weekends, we did some fishing.

> Looking back on all the different training bases Bill, Bradfield, Narromine, Bundaberg, perhaps including Rathmines where I know you went later, how well equipped were they in terms of living facilities? How well or poorly do you think you were looked after?

Oh, I couldn't have asked for anything better in any of these places. We lived in long huts with, ah, oh, two or three dozen chaps sleeping on iron beds with hay palliasses and, um, but no, I couldn't have asked for anything better.

> Right. One other thing which is perhaps of interest in this training phase. You yourself were studying engineering and matriculated which I guess was probably not the average for the population in terms of educational achievement and so on. How much did that, your educational background benefit your training, and how representative or not do you think pilots were of the cross-section of the population, or was there the feeling of something of an elite group?

(20.00) I think in general that most of the Empire Air Training crews were young men who had not left school at the minimum age, but had pressed on with some sort of additional education. Anyone that had completed their tertiary education would have been diverted anyhow to their special area, although we did have a number of school teachers. The school teachers generally wound up as navigators.

> And was there any feeling of, as a member of the air force, of being a little bit different to the members of the other services - the navy, the army - or not?

There was a little inter-service rivalry. Um, the navy of course always claimed to be the senior service. I claimed I belonged to the most important service. Going back to the value of an engineering background, I believe it helped me a lot. One place where it did help me through was while I was at Bradfield there was an outbreak of mumps in the camp, and anyone that had mumps - which included me - was sent out to Prince Henry Hospital to be isolated from the rest of the camp. After two or three weeks out there, when I came back I was told that I would have to repeat the course at Bradfield because I'd missed out on so much. But I was able to point out that - actually I didn't mention this, but I had been, I had been a part-time tutor at Bradfield before I went into camp - and I was able to point out that I was teaching this stuff to these fellows. So it came in handy. They let me continue on with the course without having to repeat. So that was useful.

> Right. Well I know from Bundaberg you went to, went with a little bit of disappointment I think, to Mount Gambier, but the disappointment apparently was in fact misplaced because you had some very valuable experience there with navigators. Could you tell us about that?

Yes. The custom was at the time we got our wings that the top ten per cent in the course would be given a commission and the bottom two or three per cent would be sent as staff pilots somewhere. I got my commission, but I was sent as a staff pilot and I was quite

disgusted about this. However, I went to Mount Gambier and I flew Ensigns carrying trainee navigators around South Australia in the winter, and this was very good experience. The trainee navigators would often get lost and I would be on my own to bring them home. Ah, we had the help of a direction finding loop, but most times we were using what is called `pilot navigation'. Quite often we'd be out two hours in an Anson with a few trainee navigators on board and there'd be a signal from base saying, `The weather is closing in. All aircraft return to base'. Now that made it pretty hard for the trainee navigators to find base when they had to suddenly depart from their prepared plots. It was good experience that way.

So that really sharpened up your own navigational skills?

Yes.

Mm. Well I think you were saying that from there you got a further fillip to your navigation, because you went to Cressy in Victoria for a post-graduate navigation school. Tell us about that. That was obviously fairly high level, both navigation and I think training in reconnaissance.

Yes. It was essentially a course for pilots as distinct from navigators. It probably overlapped very much the navigation course that observers were doing. Ah, but with the expectation of going on to what was thought to be reconnaissance aircraft, this was an invaluable course. We did all the navigating and in subsequent operations as a captain - well as a second pilot I often functioned as the navigator - and then later as a captain I used to use my second pilot see, I used to use my navigator to get us to the target and then ten hours later, I'd use one of the second pilots to navigate us home.

(25.00) So all in all, on Catalinas, we needed a very close cooperation and understanding between the pilots and the navigators on all the sort of, not only navigational detail but technical detail - recognition of ships and aircraft. Very wide range of work like that. That was all covered in this course in Cressy.

I know you were keen to go to flying boats from some time before this and I might ask you about that in a moment. But when you went to the course at Cressy, do you think the air force had decided that you would go to flying boats? For example, were most of the other men in that course destined for flying boats, or did they go elsewhere?

Yes, most of them went on to flying boats. In fact, we had one chap there who had been a second pilot on flying boats and had not done this course and was therefore posted to this school to do this navigation course and then revert back to being a pilot on Catalinas. He was subsequently killed.

Oh, that's sad. The, um, ... I think it was a two or three month course?

Yes.

During that time there was no flying. It was purely, or you weren't flying yourself?

We weren't flying ourselves as pilots, but we were doing a lot of flying as navigators and doing such things as, well typical navigation work between Cressy in mid-Victoria down to Tasmania across the Bass Strait or doing reconnaissance jobs such as low flying over the Melbourne docks and coming back with detailed reports on what shipping we saw there.

> Mm. Did it, what I was going to ask was that, for a pilot, that two to three month gap in actual hands-on flying of an aircraft, was that a drawback or not? Did it make it harder to step back into ...? In other words, did your flying skills get a bit rusty during that period?

Oh not at all. Not at all. In fact, it was a very valuable course. I am so glad that I did that course and it proved very useful in subsequent operations on Catalinas, as I said, acting as a navigator sometimes, as a second pilot and subsequently functioning as a captain with the necessary very close liaison with our navigator.

> Well, turning to flying boats, Bill, and of course they are the focus of this story really, I think you'd always been keen - or for some time you'd been keen on them - why was that? What first sparked your interest in flying boats as against conventional aircraft?

I often describe the Catalina as the girl I loved. I think your question is like asking a person `Why did you fall in love with a particular girl?' No, they appealed to me. The wide range of activities that they undertook appealed to me. Ah, bombers - one joined a bomber squadron - I had the impression that one did nothing else but take off with a large load of bombs, go to a target, drop those bombs as accurately as you could and come back again. On flying boats, we certainly had our bombing missions, but we had such a wide range of other activities, all of which appealed to me.

> Yes, I can certainly see that, and I think it would to me too. They're more diverse and that's certainly, as you said, the picture of bombing missions. Just two questions Bill. How long had you in fact hankered for flying boats? Could you say when it dated back to or not?

I think my interest in flying boats in particular probably commenced with a friend of mine with whom I went through initial training, and training on Ensigns. In discussions there he, he'd done a fair bit of sailing and there's a close association between sailing a yacht and handling a flying boat on the water. Between us we developed an interest together.

> Mm. That's interesting, yes. Well, I can certainly see that connection between sailing and flying. Let's just pause here.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1.

START TAPE 1, SIDE 2.

> Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Bill Minty, Catalinas, Tape 1, Side 2.

The other thing I was going to ask related to this question of whether you were to fly fighters or bombers or, in this case, flying boats. Do you think there were different personal characteristics that made an individual a good fighter pilot, as against a good bomber pilot? Or in your case, um, a good flying boat pilot or not?

I guess there were. Ah, I guess the, um, there would be some personalities who would love the short intense activity of a fighter pilot. The very aggressive person would probably do well as a fighter pilot. I was never that sort of aggressive person, but I was an endurance person, and it's absolutely proved I needed to be that sort with, well I didn't ever exceed twenty-six hours between take-off and landing.

And what about the difference between a conventional bomber pilot and a flying boat pilot? Would you see any character traits there that would be relevant or not?

No I don't see any difference in character, but there is a, as I saw the situation, a big difference between a person in, on a bombing mission and a person - sorry, not on a bombing mission, a person in a bombing squadron - and a person in a flying boat squadron, and that is in the wide range of mission types handled in the flying boats.

Yes. Well let's go on now to the flying boat period, Bill. Of course, to get on to you at Rathmines, a six week conversion course I think and this was with Sikorskys. What were they like to fly? How did the experience first strike you?

They were an awkward aircraft to fly because they had to be balanced on one central large float that was almost the size of the underfuselage of the aircraft. There were two little wing tip floats, but for take-off, you naturally started with one wing tip float touching the water and the idea was to pick up enough speed to lift that float out of the water and get the aircraft with its wings level as you accelerated for take-off.

I see. The wing tip floats weren't long enough to keep a horizontal ...

That's right.

... float. You floated with one wing tipped down.

That's right, yes. The same with Catalinas too. It was always one float in the water and the other one up in the air. Ah, they were awkward in that respect and we didn't do in our training any more than landings and take-offs and getting used to handling an aircraft on the water. You realise that in handling an aircraft on the water - unlike a land based aircraft - you have no brakes. You can't put the brakes on and stop. Even in Sikorsky, you had no drogues. So ....

(5.00) And there was no reverse thrust on the propeller.

That's right, no reverse thrust, so they were awkward to handle. On the flying boats later we got used to trailing a drogue fore or aft which helped. But in contrast to the fairly limited

operations we did on the Sikorsky just getting used to, oh, water based aircraft, the station commander - who is now Sir Richard Kingsland - believed that it gave vent to some of the latent feelings of the pilots to beat up the station from time to time in a Sikorsky and he was an expert in aerobatics and he would regularly take a Sikorsky up, together with a WAAAF out of the orderly room, and dive down on the station and swoop across the rooftops and head up into the ozone doing a climbing roll with this aircraft that we were only allowed to use for normal landings and take-offs.

> It's hard to believe as an outsider, Bill, that a plane like that with this great thing under the fuselage, which must have had enormous drag anyway, could do that kind of manoeuvre.

Yes. That was always our reaction too, but there were only, it was only the top echelon people at the station who did this sort of thing. Indeed, if I remember rightly, the station commander, instead of beating up the station at rooftop level one day, swooped down on the station and flew underneath the aerial on the station. Ah, I don't know what the chief of the air staff would have said about all this, but the station commander believed that it was good for the fighting spirit of the station, and I can understand his point of view on that. It was what he, he was such a wonderful aerobatic pilot that he could do these sort of things without danger.

> Right. Well, I do know also that during the period at Rathmines and the initial training on - well, later too - Scotty Allan was there. What's your recollection of the man? He was obviously quite a lot older than people such as yourself.

Yes. I must say a few words about Scotty, but before we go off Sir Richard Kingsland, in case I don't get the opportunity, I would also pay a tremendous tribute to Sir Richard Kingsland. He was a great station commander, a great pilot, he had been a great CO of 11 Squadron and indeed he had won his DFC in England as a Sunderland captain rescuing Lord Gort at gun point from the Germans - a wonderful man to know. But back on Scotty Allan. Scotty Allan was a very different style of man, very, had a very broad Scotch accent. He was a very strong personality, but he knew his engineering and he rammed the engineering into us and the proper way to care for engines. Indeed it wasn't just the engines; it was all the technical things about the flying boat that he really gave us first class instruction on, and the sort of instruction which helped tremendously to get the very high level of service that we did out of these aircraft and the engines in particular. Again, lest I forget to say this, I would pay a special tribute to the Pratt and Whitney engines in contrast to those on the Sunderlands in the early days, which I think were Pegasus motors, that burned oil and leaked oil and had all sorts of problems. The Pratt and Whitney twin-row Wasp was a first class engine. There were several cases of pilots having an aircraft - having an engine - shot out over the target and coming all the way back on one engine, which represents ten or eleven hours flying on one engine. Indeed, I was one of several people who took a Catalina off with one engine because we had a broken engine at a place where we couldn't change engines, and ....

(10.00) How difficult was that to do? To take a Catalina off with a single engine?

The first chap that I knew to do it was our CO, and he stripped the innards right out of the flying boat - even took out the auxiliary power unit ....

To lighten the boat?

To lighten the weight, and he apparently got away without any trouble. The second chap to do it didn't go to quite as much trouble and, again, seemed to get away with it all right. As I recall it, I was the third chap to do it and I did this at Cairns. I taxied well out towards the sea with the wind blowing off the shore, turned round and attempted to take off towards the shore. I was really not flying properly when I ran out of water and I just carried the aircraft across the mangroves and dropped it down into the river on the other side. The next time I tried I made sure I went well out to Green Island for plenty of run, and got into the air without any trouble and we enjoyed ourselves on the flight south, and indeed ended up taking the aircraft - instead of just taking it to Bowen we took it all the way to Rathmines.

Wouldn't there have been facilities at Cairns to replace or repair an engine?

No, we had no engine changing facilities. We had no ramp there to bring the flying boat up on the shore.

I see, right. Well, let's go on to the Cats themselves, Bill. I think your actual training on Cats at Rathmines lasted about two months. This was, of course, training as a second pilot. Tell us about the training generally, and then we might talk about Cats specifically. What did the training involve?

The basic training really was learning to handle that aircraft on the water and doing, ah, take-offs and - well, we didn't call them landings - we alighted on the water. We didn't land. Ah, um, getting to know the aircraft and its, um, it was such a big aircraft compared to the little baby two-place Sikorsky. Um, it had the same wing span as a Lancaster bomber and I would think it probably had a greater chord, so we probably had a greater wing area than a Lancaster bomber. Ah, ...

Tell us, um, when, we might just, let's talk about the plane for a moment, because obviously it's central to everything else that happens. Could you describe for me the, first of all, the interior of the plane - what it was like inside - and in particular the cockpit where you would have spent so many hours.

Yes, well you are talking of the girl I love. Ah, once you've been on a large number of operations on a Catalina, you become very attached to it, particularly when you've lost an engine and you've got home on one engine. Ah, inside the aircraft ... well, commencing at the bow, we had a window right in the bow of the aircraft with a roller shutter, which was wound down out of the way so that the bomb aimer could use that window for the bomb aiming. The bombsight was installed there. It, we also had, um, twin .303 machine-guns above that for defence. Um, back aft we had the cockpit for the two pilots which was a large and comfortable cockpit. Ah, we had, um, we had most of the instruments there, but as a compliment to our instruments in that cockpit, we had a flight engineer's cockpit, which was mounted high amidships, just under the wing, with a window out each side, which gave the flight engineer a very good view of where the aircraft was and could also see the underparts of the engine for oil leaks and other such things. Between the flight engineer and the pilots' cockpits, we had a large navigation compartment on the port side, and radar-come-radio compartment on the starboard side. (15.00) The radar was the original ASV type, which

indicated by blips on a single vertical scale the position of any object such as a ship. We could select from nought to ten miles and this was a great help in navigation, but it was also a great help in searching for ships in the ocean et cetera. The navigation compartment was quite large, but nevertheless was justified in that one of the great characteristics of the Cat was its ability to navigate anywhere at all and find a target, even a tiny coral atoll twelve hundred miles away from base. We had, um, - what do they call it - an astro, an astro facility for projecting astro shots on a chart on the table, but most navigators didn't like using those. They preferred to do it in the fundamental way. Ah, after the, oh, underneath the flight engineer, up in his high cockpit, there was, um, a galley in which we had several electric stove units and hot water facilities and, so that we could cook, have cooked meals, a wide variety of meals were available at any time. On the other side was the auxiliary power unit which was used for starting up the engine et cetera. Ah, then we had four, and sometimes six, bunks after that, ah, and these were very useful of course on flights that averaged some twenty - twenty-one hours. After that again there was the blister compartment with two .5 machine-guns. This was our primary defence. Most attacks expected to come from behind but even two 0.5 machine-guns really didn't represent much in the way of defence. After that again we had what was called, ah, the tunnel, with a hatch that opened underneath the aircraft aft of the second step and we had a single .303 machine-gun mounted in there to defend against attack from underneath. But this armament was really pretty insignificant compared to a Liberator bomber, and certainly insignificant compared to a Flying Fortress. But our primary defence really was the fact that we were painted black, we did most of our operations over enemy territory during the hours of darkness. We had flame dampers on the exhaust and blackout curtains on the windows - all the windows except the cockpit.

> Mm. You were making an interesting point before, just on this aspect of the Catalinas' defendability that Japanese ack-ack gunners might, at night, simply wouldn't get onto the Catalina because they couldn't believe it was flying so slowly. Could you elaborate on that?

Well, we used to do our mining operations from treetop height at a speed of perhaps eighty-five knots and we often joked that the Jap ack-ack gunners didn't believe we were going so slow and hence kept firing in front of us. I've sometimes checked this story with ack-ack gunners in the Australian army who assured me that there could well be some truth in this, that there was an enemy aircraft speed setting on the ack-ack guns and this could well have helped us.

> Mm, that's interesting. Just while we're here, Bill, there were two rather lovely jokes you were telling me before which I'm sure are worth putting down, and one's about the bird strike and the curvature of the earth. Could you tell us those?

Yes, on those - a bird strike, of course, is a phenomena which has occurred in more recent years with jet aircraft where a jet aircraft flying so fast hits a bird and the bird becomes ingested in the engine doing a lot of damage and causing the engine to fail, and this is a constant worry with airports near the sea. But it has been said that the Catalina is the only aircraft in the sky that's encountered a bird strike from behind.
(20.00) The second one, oh, I have a friend who didn't fly Catalinas - or had flown in them once or twice - but he was always having a go at me about how slow these aircraft were, and

he says the only reason we got these heavily laden aircraft into the air was that we took advantage of the curvature of the earth.

> Well yes. Going on to the actual flying of the plane then itself, um, you might like to take it through as a sequence from beginning the run up to a typical take-off, ah, to actually getting into the air to flying it. What was it like to handle and to fly? How do you remember that?

We first went out in a small motor boat to the aircraft and entered the aircraft through the blister. Each crew member checked their particular station to see everything was right. A man climbed through the forehead gun turret and stood on the outside of the bow to release the buoy when the engines were started up. When the aircraft were all parked, you know, close together in a line as they were at Cairns, it was always a bit of a worry to get the aircraft away from the line of other aircraft without hitting the aircraft in front. Sometimes when conditions were adverse, we'd in fact trail a bof... - trail a drogue, that's a canvas bucket - from either the blister of the aircraft or even from the bow of the aircraft, and this would help to give us a sharper turn. As I said, there were no brakes on these aircraft and whilst we did use the over-runs to give us a little bit of additional turning, they weren't terribly effective.

> Can I just pause to ask one thing. When conventional aircraft are getting their engines going, and they've often got chocks under their wheels to hold them still, and if they can't feather their propellers, how, when you were starting up the engines of a Catalina and obviously going through the testing routines, could you feather them so there was no actual thrust from the engines, or what?

Oh no, no, we didn't feather them. No, we moved away from the buoy and the engines had a, um, an exceptionally high oil pressure that, um, that lubricated the engines during the initial start-up period, and this was okay at low revs, but you had to wait until the, ah, a certain thermostat operated to cut down the oil pressure from this very high value back to a normal operating pressure. If you opened up the throttles at, ah, during this period of low temperature and hence very high oil pressure, then the oil pressure would go right off the clock and probably burst an oil line. So, first off, you had to, you taxied out and waited for the tempera... the engine temperature to move up to the appropriate level when the thermostat would cut in and the oil pressure would drop. At that stage you could test the engines for rev. drop with switching off one of the twin magnetos, and then switch off, er, restore that one and switch off the other one and check it for rev drop. Ah, but this procedure wasn't carried out against chocks or while being tied to a buoy. It was carried out on the water while you were actually taxiing forward. There was no need to feather the engines for that operation.

> Right. Once you're taking off in a Catalina, Bill, what was that like? Exhilarating? Or scary?

Ah ....

> I imagine in some conditions there must have been quite a lot of water coming right over the cockpit.

Well, there were two fundamental things which affected the, ah, the take-off. First off, there was the condition of the water and the second was the load you were carrying. When you're taking off with a full load, and that is maximum petrol and maximum bomb or mine load, which of course are carried out under the wings, then the aircraft is low down in the water, and when you first open the throttles for take-off, ah, water goes everywhere, you know. You are virtually blind, there's so much spray around the place, until you climb up on the step. Now once you climb up on the step you get better visibility, or just before you get up on the step, you know, the visibility is starting to improve. Once you're up on the step and you're then starting to accelerate, and the condition of the water becomes a pretty important factor there.

(25.00) For glassy water, I have never encountered the phenomena where the aircraft refused to come unstuck from glassy water. Um, for normal water with a reasonable amount of chop, it was just a matter of accelerating - even though you had a full load on board - you were accelerating until you had flying speed and then lifted away gently and climb away. For rough water, ah, you normally had a shorter take-off run. There was less water resistance, perhaps, and, but there was a tendency for heavy waves to throw the aircraft into the air before it had flying speed, so it was necessary to, as you saw, ah, biggish waves coming to you, to just ease the stick forward a little bit to make sure you're not thrown into the air prematurely. One of our captains had a technique for rough water which, when I first saw him demonstrate it, I was staggered, because I was on the crash boat at Cairns and this aircraft moved up onto the step in take-off and he was only half-way through his take-off run and he suddenly leapt into the air. Apparently the pilot had pushed the yoke forward and then hauled it back into his chest and the aircraft leapt into the air, was sitting there in mid-air without sufficient flying speed, hanging on the engines and he gradually dropped down again. He just kissed the water once and - maybe twice - and he was away. But that was his technique for taking off in rough water. Ah, rough water was difficult. These aircraft were just not designed for rough water conditions, and the only way an aircraft will fly is to reach flying speed. Now, when you have a wall of water coming at your aircraft, um, before you've hit flying speed, there's no way that you're going to bore through that wall of water, you just get knocked about by it. So it's, that is the, the single, I think, most difficult aspect of handling a flying boat - the rough water situation.

> Mm. That's most interesting Bill. That was very, very clearly put, that whole sequence of events. When you were up in the air, how manoeuvrable were Catalinas and just a specific question, because it ties in with something another person was saying ... could you conceivably fly a Catalina upside down?

I couldn't conceive of it, but I would like to - just to extend a little bit on the rough water situation if I may, because I'm reminded of an operation that was carried out. One night at Cairns we had a message that a ship was sinking, ah, out at sea, and he needed a large pump. So Geoff Coventry - a close friend of mine who'd just been appointed as CO - ah, took on the job of taking this pump to this ship. It was a huge pump which they could only just get into the blister, which meant that the centre of gravity was badly astray with this huge weight so far aft. Geoff took the aircraft a few hundred miles out to sea to this ship. He alighted in the rough water - and it's much easier to put an aircraft down in rough water than it is to take off ....

> When you say `rough water', what strength of wind and what size of wave are you talking about?

I can't give you details of that, but it must have been, it must have been on the strong side and it must have been a pretty rough sea ...

Mm, this is open ocean sea of course.

Open ocean sea.

Full swells.

Yes.

Mm.

But, ah, the story is that he landed the aircraft in the open sea alongside the ship, they took the pump on board, but in attempting to take off from the open sea the aircraft was so damaged that in fact the whole fuselage was bent in two just at the point of the cockpit where Geoff was sitting, and he lost his life. He was caught in the hinge, as it were, as the bow of the aircraft folded round to port. The rest of the crew got out of the aircraft and were saved, but Geoff lost his life in this situation. I've often thought of that particular operation and wondered if there wasn't an alternative to lowering that pump by winch, such as they do with helicopters these days, because we could have got down to quite a slow speed and in the headwind that was probably prevailing, there may have been an alternative to that.

Yes, or packing it in some sort of floating case that could have been dropped.

Yes.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Bill Minty, Tape 2, Side 1, Side 3 of the whole lot.

Mm?

The other difficult thing about taking a flying boat off in the open sea was handling a swell. Um, ah, sometimes if there was a light wind, one could do a curved take-off by attempting to stay on the crest of a swell. The take-off time for our flying boats averaged about fifty seconds. Indeed, I used to time my take-off runs regularly so I had some sort of an idea of the performance of the engines. In swell conditions where you tend to lower the nose a bit if you see a swell that would tend to throw you in the air prematurely, then the take-off run can be - I once took two minutes ten seconds to get an aircraft into the air. This is in considerable contrast to the quite short take-off times that land-based aircraft have.

Mm. Mm. That's most interesting. Well, moving on a little bit, Bill, I know it was December '42 that you graduated from Rathmines and went to 11 Squadron in Cairns as a second pilot. What were the main operational duties of the squadron at that time?

At that time it was bombing primarily. We carried an average of 4,000 pounds of bombs, mostly out under the wings, although we did carry a few hundred pounds of incendiaries and smaller bombs and even beer bottles in the blisters, and these were thrown out by hand. Um, the, ah, another very important aspect of our work was we had an aircraft out every night doing what was known as the milk run. Now this was a run up from Cairns to New Britain and a reconnaissance right along the Japanese bases, ah, and we would, we would be looking for shipping with radar, but we'd also be bombing the bases. In fact, the tendency was not to drop all the bombs on one base but to drop the odd bomb on a base like, um, Gasmata and then push on to Finschhafen and drop a bomb there and when you thought the Japs at Gasmata were back in their sleeping-bags again, then you went back to Gasmata and dropped another bomb and pulled 'em out of bed again.

Just to keep them generally stirred up.

Yeah. We kept them stirred up all night and indeed when we ran out of bombs, we dropped beer bottles which, from our height of 6-7,000 feet, went off with quite a bang and indeed we found by putting razor blades in the beer bottles that they made an eery whine on the way down, which we thought was helpful also.

Mm. Could we just perhaps go into that in a little detail. The, by beer bottles, do you mean empty beer bottles or ...?

Yes, empty beer bottles.

And what's the story about razor blades?

The razor blades were introduced into the beer bottles, ah, and the wind effect in some way made this eery sound as the beer bottle was falling down through the sky. I don't know who found this out, but that was one of the practices that we had. But those operations were reconnaissance and nuisance raids.

(5.00) I think one of my first operations was on one of those sort of jobs in which we encountered parts of the Jap fleet. We were flying along in the blackness of the night and, indeed, I think it's the first time also I encountered St Elmo's fire, and all of a sudden we were getting these great explosions alongside the aircraft and realised that we were being shot at by these, ah, ship or ships of the Japs just south of New Britain.

> How did that feel like, that first moment when you really were in, you know, fairly dangerous situation? How much fear was there?

I don't remember feeling fear. I remember feeling frustration because at that stage they had these dreadful throat microphones, and as soon as we realised we were being shot at, the captain was giving orders and there was a lot of speech on the intercom, and there was so much going on. Well, these dreadful throat microphones, you couldn't hear distinctly what was being said. There were no teeth being used to bite off the words. Hence it was hard to understand what was happening. So I was more concerned about not being able to follow this speech on the intercom than I was about the explosions taking place of the ack-ack all around us.

> Do you, just going back to bombing for a moment, do you remember any particular bombing mission, for example, one where you came against a base that was fairly significantly defended and where you had a rough time of it or not?

Yes. I was never actually hit, but we certainly encountered plenty of ack-ack and, ah, but we also encountered searchlights, and if you're asking for feelings, I guess my strongest feeling was a feeling of, it used to remind me as a small boy playing marbles for keeps. When you're over a target and there are searchlights waving around everywhere looking for you, and you're only at a height like 7,000 feet, then, ah, you're playing for keeps. If those searchlights cone you, then you don't stand much chance of getting out from that coning.

> Were you ever coned, either as a second pilot or captain?

No, I was never coned that I can remember, but my technique in, when the searchlights were on, as far as possible was to keep that wing pointed at the ground and resume normal flight once the aircraft started searching in some other place.

> Could you just explain that? You said you'd keep the wing pointed at the ground. What do you mean?

We had a huge wing - 104 foot wing span, fifteen foot chord if I remember rightly - and this gave a very large area to expose to a searchlight. If you have the wing pointed at the ground, and there's only the fuselage and the wing tip float, ah, exposed for the searchlight Japs looking up vertically towards the aircraft, the object becomes much smaller.

> I see. So, and you could fly Catalina, in other words, banked ...

Very steeply banked.

> ... right over on one side, and yet keeping a straight course?

Oh no, no, no. You're going around in circles, but at the time when you feel the searchlights are getting close, then that was the particular tactic that I used. It wasn't something that, well we used to have searchlight evasion practice at Rathmines - between Rathmines and Newcastle - but it was a technique that I had. I forget whether I dreamt it up or whether I was trained to do that.

> That's most interesting Bill. Well I note one of the other uses of the Catalinas which became increasingly important was mine laying, and I think you were saying that you were involved on the first ever mine laying operation. Where was that and ...?

Yes. I was second pilot to, ah, to Norm Fraser, a captain whom I greatly admired, a very skilful pilot and they introduced these mines. They were known as popsies and we mined Kavieng harbour. Now Kavieng harbour was a very strongly defended place.... (10.00) But the proposition on a mining mission was basically to - well, at the briefing, the intelligence officer would say, `Well look, here's the harbour that you need to mine. Here's where we need the two mines to be placed. We suggest that you use this particular wharf as a datum and fly out from that the appropriate distance, drop one mine and then ten seconds later drop the next mine, or whatever you think is the appropriate time. Here are the searchlights there, there, there and there, um, that we expect you will encounter. We think there is ack-ack there, there, there and there.' And then we would have the job then of working out our detailed navigation in terms of coming, finding this wharf, flying over it at treetop height, flying straight and level despite ack-ack and searchlights, for something like fifty seconds, dropping one mine, another ten seconds on the average dropping the second mine, and then getting out of the place. But often, we had a second job then, ah, oh, dropping leaflets.

> Mm. Propaganda leaflets?

Propaganda leaflets, yes.

> Who was bringing that pretty precise information about locations of searchlights, ack-ack installations et cetera?

I'm not sure where it came from. The intelligence officer gave us this data. It could obviously have come from previous missions to that particular Jap base.

> Was it generally fairly reliable or not?

It was useful. I don't remember ever having questioned the accuracy of the data, but it gave you an assessment of the sort of conditions that you had to contend with. I don't know if it ever varied my tactics. I guess, um, I used different tactics depending upon the, um, the conditions. I remember at Kendari - and I think you mentioned you knew Kendari in the Celebes - I think it was Kendari or Macassar - ah, where I had a technique which instead of coming in from the open sea from the direction of Borneo into the Japanese harbour, I found the alternative of coming in from the land where just above the tops of the mountains where I figured that it would be hard to be picked up by radar and indeed by acoustic methods. As soon as I passed the last of the mountain I'd pull off the engines and glide down towards the harbour and the wharf, so that I'm making minimum noise, and then by the time you reached

rooftop, treetop height of course, you had to open up the engines and fly straight and level. But by that time you hoped you'd get away with your fifty seconds before the ack-ack started flying.

> Mm, before they woke up. Switching off engines like that, was that dangerous in that you might not, they might be hard to start again, or not?

Oh we didn't switch them off, we only throttled right back to a full glide. They were still ticking over as they do in a car at a traffic signals. You may be interested to know of one little thing that happened. I went through and was commissioned with a close friend of mine, who had this interest in sailing yachts, and our paths departed when we were commissioned, and about two years later I ran across my friend by accident at Darwin. And naturally, we exchanged questions and answers on what we were doing and I was flying Catalinas and my friend John Rush was flying Lightnings. Two aircraft of greater difference you couldn't imagine, and he wanted to know what I was doing in these Catalinas and I said, `Oh, we got a job on tonight. We often take a second, a third second pilot. Would you like to come along?', and he said, `Yeah, I'd love to'. So I took him and I think the job was laying mines in Macassar and I said, `Okay John, we've got half a ton of leaflets to drop out. I'll make you officer in charge of leaflets'. Anyhow, we, when we were laying our mines and there was ack-ack flying in all directions, and poor old John was in the blister there looking at all those ack-ack coming straight at us and waiting to, his turn to fly over the town and drop the leaflets, and he knew we were doing only about eighty-five knots, and he normally went over a target in a Lightening at about 400 knots. Anyhow, after we'd laid the mines we went back over the town and John heaved out his leaflets and he didn't want to go on any more missions in a Catalina after that.

(15.00) Mm. That's interesting. With that kind of ... we'd better move on a bit Bill, but just on the leafletting. That kind of thing where you were going back again over a target and obviously exposing yourself to greater danger, given that the whole defence system was more keyed up, did people ever object to that in that perhaps the actual operation was of dubious benefit? I mean the propaganda work, or not? I don't mean objected in the sense of refusing to do it, but did you ever doubt it was a ....

Never questioned it. Never questioned. Just automatic, follow orders.

> Mm mm. Right. Well I know one of those, some of the other duties of the Catalinas during this period were convoy escorts and supply drops. I think they were a fairly routine - or certainly compared to mine laying and bombing. You did also, or there was also some work in air-sea rescue, and I think you yourself were involved in one incident near the Trobriands. Could you tell us about that?

Oh, that was, I think my first ever mission, um, as a second pilot with Tubby Higgins, who was later killed. We got back from bombing Kavieng, I think it was, landed at Milne Bay to refuel and was told that there was an American bomber crash landed on the Trobriand Islands, which is north-east of Milne Bay, I guess 100 to 150 miles north-east of Milne Bay. Would we go there and pick up the crew, which we did. We took off again and went to the Trobriands, found the crashed aircraft and the crew, landed amongst the reefs, which was a

dangerous business. Reefs were a, reefs and flying boats just don't mix. Ah, we landed there, took on the American crew ....

Did you have a precise chart of the reef?

Oh, no way. No, it was a case of fly over, pick out what appeared to be the best place to put down, and we had the engineer out with a long boathook constantly prodding into the water to see that we had ample depth for the flying boat, but we didn't have reef trouble there. And we took this crew on, and the captain of the American aircraft turned out to be named Higgins, the same as that Tubby who was my captain.

Hm. Strange coincidence. How common was that kind of air-sea rescue? Was it a regular thing for the squadron to be doing, or were they fairly exceptional?

No, it wasn't particularly common. Later in the war, after I'd come south, I understand they did a bit more of this. They used flying boats with wheels fitted to them which had the advantage of a faster take-off when you learned that an aircraft was down somewhere, but it had the disadvantage of trying to take the aircraft off in the open sea with these huge wheel wells all full of seawater and the whole aircraft felt waterlogged until you got into the air and all this seawater drained out.

Right, that's most interesting. Well I know that during this period with, ah, as second pilot with 11 Squadron, you flew I think about twenty operations over about five months, generally moving between crews, getting a wide experience of tactics, flying, crew management and so on with different skippers. Um, and you did say that on one occasion you were very fortunate because I think a crew you had been flying with didn't return. What was the story of that?

Yes. Ah, the story there was that we had to do a supply drop to the Solomon Islands direct from Cairns, which meant taking off just after lunch - well it meant, first off, loading up the aircraft with these huge bundles of supplies, basically for coastwatchers. Well when I say coastwatchers, they were very brave men that stayed in Jap territory, generally hid on the top of the mountains where they could see aircraft movements and ship movements and stay away from the Japs down at the coast, and they .... We had several of these operations to carry out from time to time. On this one I went down to the aircraft before lunch and supervised the loading of about four tons of supplies on board the aircraft and when I went back to the mess to have lunch just before take-off, the CO said to me, `Oh look Bill, I've decided to transfer you out of that crew and put you with another crew. I'll be sending so and so on this trip'. Well now the trip involved taking off just after lunch, flying about ten hours or so to the Solomons.
(20.00) The coastwatchers there would light three fires in an equilateral triangle and the idea was - quite a widespread triangle - the idea was to drop these supplies right in the centre of the triangle amongst the mountains, and Bill Clarke must have come down too low. Any rate, he hit a mountain in the darkness, which would be very easy to do, and most of the crew were progressively caught by the Japs. One or two were rescued many months later by a submarine and brought home, but of the crew of ten, eight of them would have lost their lives.

That's a very sad story. Um, how did people feel, or perhaps more specifically yourself, in that kind of situation Bill where you, you know, by sheer fate had, or, the decision, the whim of a commanding officer, had steered you away from that mission. Was it easy to get over or not?

My thoughts weren't on myself and my luck so much as on the, on my friends who hadn't come back. Um, but in the total time, the two years that the two squadrons operated out of Cairns, there were 320 lives lost. Um, that 320 I think was through most of the war on flying boat operations. Now, the squadrons were at Cairns for two years, so there were probably less than 320 lost their lives there.

Actually, when I asked that question Bill, I think I was, I didn't make myself clear. What I was trying to say was did you, did men generally brood on people who didn't come back? Or did you somehow steel yourself and just get on with the job in hand?

I think there was a certain amount of steeling, and there was a certain amount of also the .... There was so much posting to other places that went on in the air force that, oh, one tended to, if a chap was no longer there, you sometimes I suspected that we mentally thought of him as being posted elsewhere, which you took in your stride. But one of my very close friends up there, Michael Henstridge, was killed and I think the greatest emotional experience I had was in writing to his mother and trying to help her to come to terms with this loss. And that was, dealing with his mother was more of an emotional experience than .... I was emotionally upset too, I'd come back from leave and found that he'd been killed and I went out to his grave and ... but, oh no, it was part of war I guess.

That was interesting, the point you made about men moving on so much and I suppose sometimes in moving on yourself you were distanced perhaps from some of the grief. Now I know at the end of, well at the end of the period as second pilot, you went back to Rathmines for a captain's course about four months.

Mm.

This involved, amongst other things, night flying and in particular night landings. Our time is a little bit short on the tape and I do want to move on to the period when you go back as a captain. Could you just perhaps tell us about night landing in a sea plane. I'd imagine it's a fairly delicate operation.

I used to enjoy night landings in a flying boat. When I was first taught to do night landings, the particular captain had a technique which I didn't seem to be able to cotton onto, and then I had a change of instructor and he had a technique which I found was really first class and night landings didn't ever worry me. Indeed, I could put a flying boat down on the water. In smooth water, you weren't sure whether or not you'd actually touched the water, um, um, because the um, the noise of the water contacting the keel would initially be quite well aft, and then as you slowly sank down you'd hear it more coming forward.

(25.00) Did you have lights shining ahead to help you see the actual water or not?

No, we didn't use landing lights. We were taught to land by flare path only. We had landing lights fitted to the aircraft, but the solenoids had a tendency to jam on and indeed we were instructed to get them off by putting the engines into the vibration period, which I never liked. (Laughs). But no, we didn't use landing lights.

> Mm. Well moving on from Rathmines where obviously you were, I guess, building on the experience you'd already had as a second pilot Bill. You returned to Cairns and I think, as a flying officer to 20 Squadron, September '43, and over a period of about ten months there were forty operations ....

Something ... roughly forty.

> Mm. Just beginning with your crew, I know you had a few different navigators to begin with, but then you settled down with one crew. When the command people talk about bomber crews being incredibly close, almost beyond the closeness of the family, how did members of a Catalina crew relate to one another? Was there that very deep bond or not?

I think there was a good relationship in most of the crews. Apart from two navigators that stayed with me for short periods, I really maintained the one crew for the entire ten months. Indeed, even when I came south I retained ... those that stayed with me were members of my original crew. Ah, there was a good relationship there. I had a particularly close relationship with my navigator and we used to share the astro work together. I'd do the sextant work while he was doing the calculations, ah, and we always discussed basic navigational tactics, depending upon the job in hand.

> Mm. Did Catalina crews spend a lot of time together when you weren't on operations socially? Doing whatever you did?

Ah, we did from time to time. I remember our navigator taking us to a ballet, and I don't any of us had ever been to a ballet before. Ah, and the first of this set of four ballet presentations was very poor and we let the navigator know that in no uncertain terms. (Laughs).

> (Laughing). The highlights of Cairns culture. The actual selection of the crew, how was that done? Was that a process of looking round for men who you felt were proficient at what they were doing? Or was it just the attraction of different individuals because of personalities? Or was it just who happened to be around at the time?

As I remember it, there were six captains went through the captain's course with me. Ah, my crew was just allotted to me. I suspect that some of the other captains had moved behind the scenes and sought particular people to be in their crew, but I left it entirely to the authorities.

> Right, well during this period, I know mine laying became increasingly important, more important than bombing. What were some of the ... do you remember some of the places you went to? I know some of the flights were particularly long ones.

Most of the flights were averaged about twenty hours. We'd take off just after lunch one day and get back just before lunch the next day. Ah, most of them were of the standard type that I've already spoken of. There was one job that, ah, became quite different from the rest. I think there were ten of us operating out of Darwin that particular night, and when we finished the mine laying, when we got back to Darwin, there was particularly violent weather and only two of the ten aircraft were able to land in Darwin. The rest of us put down somewhere to ride out the storm. I put down in a place called Snake Bay, and ah, layered anchor there ...

Excuse me Bill, can I just pause. We're about to run out of tape.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1,

START TAPE 2, SIDE 2.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Bill Minty, Catalinas, Tape 2, Side 2, or Side 4 of the whole lot.

Sorry.

I landed in this Snake Bay on the north side of Melville Island and layered anchor riding out the, waiting for the storm to abate. When I was there, a lugger had chugged up nearby and dropped anchor alongside and a chap dived overboard from this lugger and swam across to our aircraft and the boys pulled him into the aircraft, and he came up to the cockpit and said, `What's the trouble? Are you out of petrol?' And I said, `No, we thought it prudent to ride out this storm. We're low in petrol, but we think we've just about got enough to get back to Darwin'. So he said, `Well look, there's a petrol dump down the other end of the bay. If you're short of petrol, why don't you come and get some'. So I called up the engineer and asked him for a check on our dreadful petrol gauges, and it was again rather short, so I decided to play it safe and go down and get this petrol. So he said, `All right, follow me'. So this chap dived overboard, swam back to his lugger, and the lugger headed off north down Snake Bay and after about ten-twenty minutes he started waving and pointing into the jungle and there were forty-four gallon drums everywhere, and it was a sandy beach so I ran the flying boat up those, onto the bow, ran the bow up on to this sandy beach and got the troops rolling forty-four gallon drums down to the bow of the aircraft. We had a bilge pump on board which we'd been taught on course was suitable for pumping petrol in jungle situations, so we used, we broke out the bilge pump and we emptied one forty-four gallon drum into our petrol tanks and we got to the stage of being half way through the second forty-four gallon drum, and one thing they had taught us on course was to always hold the nozzle of the petrol, um pipe, against the edge of the, of the opening of the petrol tank in case there's any tendency for a spark to jump. Anyhow, I had a chap conscientiously doing this, and he complained of getting a cramp in the knees, so I waved to another fellow to take over, and as one handed over to the other, they lost contact with the nozzle on the side and a spark jumped and up went the flames in the petrol tank - 1,460 gallons. The chap holding the nozzle pulled it out of the petrol tank and waved it back to the leading edge - er, the trailing edge - of the aircraft. The main plane of a Catalina consists of a forehead, two-thirds of metal and the aft one-third of doped fabric, and all this flaming petrol got onto the doped fabric and the flames went from end to end very quickly.

(5.00) And what happened to the person who was feeding the fuel in? Did he escape being badly burnt?

Ah, yes, he wasn't, none of us were burnt. There were three of us standing on the top of the - at least three of us - standing on the top of the petrol tanks at the time. No-one was burnt, but as soon as this happened I ordered the stopping of the pump and the evacuation of the aircraft, and we all stood off the shore. One expected these burning petrol tanks to suddenly blow up in front of us, but it didn't blow up, so after the flames had been goin' there for five minutes or so, I managed to find a wet bag, and I went back on cornsack - I don't know where it came from to this day, you know, where it came from. But I went back on board and put the flames out and I leapt off the thing. I thought that as I muffled the flames out of the petrol tank that that would induce an explosion, so I leapt off the aircraft in a bit of a hurry and we stood off waiting for the whole thing to cool down and, ah, there seemed to be no further signs of flame, so .... There was a ship in the, um, Australian navy vessel, anchored in another part of the bay and, well to cut a long story short, we, it was leaving the next morning for Darwin so we hitched a tow with it and we arranged that. The captain said, `Look, I'm leaving at dawn. I'll up anchor and head out to sea and I'll trail a line and you pick it up'. So at dawn we up anchored too and ....

The wing was obviously damaged beyond ....

Well we couldn't fly, no. So we taxied out to sea - we could use our engines - and we taxied out to sea following this ship and then we saw him throw a line over the stern and we, I had a man on the bow of the flying boat who picked up the line and then he started to complain it was heavy. And when we looked at the ship about a thousand yards ahead, that was only a heaving line he'd thrown over, there was a steel hawser coming over (laughing) and it weighed a ton. The only way we could make fast was to taxi up underneath the stern of this great ship and get the steel hawser caught over our vertical bollard between the bollard and the bow of the aircraft, and then fall back on it to an appropriate distance and make fast. So twenty-four hours later we arrived in Darwin Harbour.

Mm. Sounds a very slow ....

But the interesting thing is - I don't know whether you've time for all this - but the squadron was based back at Cairns. I was operating remotely from Darwin and the, I said to the engineer officer there, `Look, that main plane's had it'. Sorry, he started off telling me that the main plane'd be right, they'd fly up some new trailing edges and fit them in no time, and I said, `That main plane ... look I saw that fire. That main plane's had it. It's a write-off', and `No trouble at all mate, she'll be right'. So he, um, he got up the replacement trailing edges and we said, `She's right, she's all yours. Take her away', and I said, `Look, I just refuse to take that aircraft into the air. It's unsafe'. Anyway the argument proceeded and finally I said, `Tell you what. I'll get a skeleton crew and take that aircraft up to 10,000 feet, with our parachutes on, and I'll throw it violently around the sky. If the wing doesn't break off, okay you win the argument.' And I did this. I got a butcher's scale, weighing scale from the mess, hung it to the roof of the cockpit and put on about a four pound weight on it and tried to make the four pound weight read eight pounds by violent movement of the aircraft and everything worked out all right and then, ah, so the wing didn't break, so we loaded the aircraft up, full load of petrol and mines, we did another job and when we got to base there was a signal up from Melbourne saying the wing had been condemned. And later there was a signal up to say

that they'd examined the bilge pump, and they'd found that it'd never been properly earthed, ah, and the practice of holding the nozzle against the petrol tank has been replaced since by a cable with an alligator clip, and before you start up any pump you put this alligator clip on with a cable and then switch on the pump.

(10.00) Mm. That's a very interesting story Bill, and obviously there are a couple of points in it of fairly good fortune I'd imagine, certainly when the petrol went up. Now just incidentally, if that ship hadn't been there, could a Catalina have taxied that distance back across open sea, or wouldn't you have had the fuel to get there?

Ah, I'm not sure about that. Well, I think we wouldn't have had the fuel to get there. Ah, um, if we had a full, if we had had full tanks - see we had pretty empty tanks to start with - um, I, these aircraft did so many things that they weren't designed for. If you asked me to taxi one from Snake Bay to Darwin with an adequate supply of petrol in the contingency, in the - sorry, the conditions of war - you would certainly not have turned down the project. If that had to be done, you would have done it, but not to be recommended.

Well I was actually going to ask you about that next. Um, you were saying before that there were many things the Cats did that they were not designed to do. What would see as the chief things in that category?

They were designed basically as a reconnaissance aircraft operating from sheltered waters. Um, I told you of Geoff Coventry landing his aircraft in mid-ocean to rescue a ship. They were certainly not designed for that. Um, indeed, when they were produced, they were painted like the colour of the cloudy sky for daylight operations. We were painted black. They were designed to carry some bombs, but not to carry 4,000 pounds over the sort of distances we carried. They weren't designed for air-sea rescue on the open sea. They were designed to have bulletproof tanks and had an armour-plating around the pilots and the crew. To improve performance we removed the bulletproofing from the tanks and we removed the armour-plating - gave us additional weight to carry. They were even used as dive bombers. Now, at one stage, we heard some Americans at Cairns who said, `Oh, you ought to have one of our lovely Norden bombsights', and I finally borrowed one of these bombsights. I had to go and sign for this thing, and we fitted it to the aircraft and we had to bomb some place up out in the Solomons. When we got there the navigator at night-time couldn't see a thing through those bombsight. They had all sorts of lenses and things instead of the very simple little arrangement we had of the English Mark 9 bombsight where just had a ring and bead sort of arrangement. He just couldn't see the target. Well we ended up - you can actually get an aircraft, get a, fly a Cat into a fairly vertical position by doing a stall turn. You get it up vertically and you drop a wing so that you're pointed straight down, but you're not, you haven't built up speed, and at that stage you can release your bombs with some sort of an idea as to where they're going to hit. Indeed, Sir Richard Kingsland, of whom I spoke earlier, actually chose to dive bomb - Rabaul harbour I think it was - ah, so they were used for dive bombing if you like.

Was there ever any resentment on the part of crews that they felt the authorities were trying to use their planes in ways that simply weren't, well as you were saying, they weren't designed to do?

Not at all, not at all. There was a war on and we were doing our best to implement that war.

> Sure. I do know that with some of the other units of the air force, in particular the fighter squadrons, that island-hopped up through the Pacific that in the later - or through the islands - that in the later part of the war there was some, if not resentment certainly low morale through people feeling they were, planes and men, were being expended on worthless targets. Was there ever that feeling in the Cats or not?

Oh I'm aware that that did exist, particularly in the later stages of the war where the Americans were providing the primary drive and the Australians were being used for just mopping up operations, ah, but I didn't encounter that personally at any stage. Morale was always of the highest. Indeed, I'd like to take this opportunity to pay a tribute to the various commanding officers we had in those squadrons. They were, they were young men. They were in their mid-twenties. You know, Scotty Allan who wasn't up in the islands but he was down at Rathmines, was twenty years older than the rest of us, but they were young men and they were wonderful men. Five of them were lost on operations, ah, and normally the mess was closed when word came through that someone was missing.

(15.00) Mm. Yes, well I knew you did want to say something about the commanding officers. What do you think were the key qualities ...?

Can I mention their names? I arrived up there and Chappie was the CO of 11 Squadron and in fact, you know, if you've got time, I'll just tell you my introduction to the Catalina squadrons. I arrived at Cairns, I reported to the CO's office and I was asked to wait outside. There was someone with the CO. And as I sat there quietly I could hear a hell of a row going on in the CO's office. There was a tremendous exchange of words and finally a very irate looking man came out of the CO's office and the CO himself came out and apologised for the delay and the bit of a shemozzle going on in his office and invited me in. And he told me the story, that the previous night one of the Catalinas had been across and bombed the Solomons and had had a good night. They'd started fires and so forth, and they'd got back and revelling in their safe return they had encountered a lugger between Green Island and Cairns, and instead of shooting it up in the usual way of diving down on it and pulling up just above its mast, this Catalina had dived down on the lugger, slightly to one side, and attempted to lift a wing over the mast. But the wing of the old Cat was a bit sluggish and the result was the wing chopped off half the mast of the lugger. And this man in the CO's office was the owner of the lugger (laughing) expressing his displeasure.

> And this was an Australian lugger?

Yes.

> And why were they diving down on it at all?

Oh, just youthful exuberance ...

> Bit of fun.

... just to, when the boys came back they often did these sort of things to celebrate a completed mission.

> Sounds like they were pretty lucky - if they had knicked their wing there. Right. Well going on Bill, I know that after your period flying as a captain, you went back down to Rathmines and, I think, ferried a Cat across the Pacific.

Yes.

> Just tell us briefly ...

Have we got time for just one more series of jobs which were typical of the, the more interesting jobs of the, in the Catalinas, and that was we, based in Moresby we did a series of jobs taking troops and supplies in behind the Jap lines at Wewak, landing in the billabongs of the Sepik River, which were held by the, all that area was held by the Japs, but this very good organisation of ANGAU were taking these troops into the jungle and coming in behind the Japs and we would take about four tons of, well, native troops and kerosene tins full of supplies, land on the billabongs and ... which was a dicey business. At one stage on one of these trips, one of the ANGUA fellas rushed out of the jungle and called out to me, `Look, take off immediately, there's strong Japanese force about to come into this area'. And `take off immediately' happened to coincide with one of the heaviest tropical downpours that I've ever encountered, but I took off and into this tropical downpour and we had another base a few miles away, and by continuous circling with my head out the cockpit - you know, conventional navigation was no good - continuous circling with my head out of the cockpit, I was able to find my way back to this other base and put down on this other billabong. But that was a very interesting series of jobs.

> Mm. And how many of those operations would there have been during that period Bill?

I did two series of them, one fairly early in my period as a captain and another series of them later on. Ah, other captains did similar sorts of jobs too.

> That's most interesting. Um, the flight across the Pacific in a Catalina, after operational flying, did that present any unusual challenges or not?

Oh not at all. There were no Japs trying to bar our way. There was no ack-ack, no searchlights. It was a picnic really. Indeed, I often think of the privilege we had. In San Diego I was given a letter addressed to Flight Lieutenant Minty saying, `Herewith flying boat number such and such. Proceed to Australia in the shortest time consistent with safety'. Um, and at that stage the war was progressing very favourably and we felt consistent with safety that we ought to have a short rest up at places like Honolulu and Samoa and (laughing) Fiji.

(20.00) Mm. That must have been a rather lovely experience. Well I do know that after that you stayed for some time at Rathmines in charge of the co-ordination of ferrying planes from the States to Australia and then to the different squadrons.

Yes.

> Are there any particular recollections of that work? Or was it largely a matter of co-ordinating people and planes to ...?

Ah, it was mostly a matter of deploying crews. It was a pretty routine sort of an operation. There was the odd problems to contend with. Ah, one of our chaps got drunk while a guest of the United States Navy's officers' mess and I had to pour oil on troubled waters and, but it was mostly a matter of deploying crews when required, where required, and then the flying boats were adjusted at Lake Boga and, ah, then delivered up to the squadrons. There was also a bit of a problem with Customs. In the early part of the war there, Customs thought it reasonable for the boys to bring back some nylon stockings for their sweethearts and wives, but as the war proceeded they found it necessary to tighten up more and more, and, um, I had the odd problem to contend with there, inspection panels being taken off the main planes (laughing) and nylons being stuffed in said places.

> Mm. That's interesting. Well just going on Bill, I do know that after the war you were demobilised fairly quickly and went back to your previous work as a civil engineer.

Yes.

> Looking back on this whole period, quite a large chunk out of your life and great diverse experiences and danger and all the rest of that. Looking back on it at the end of the war, how did it seem to you? What were your feelings about it all?

Oh, basically how crazy mankind can become having to indulge in these sort of activities. Um, regret at the human loss of life, ah, at the same time, tremendously appreciative of the, of the teamwork, how we worked together and achieved things, despite the difficulties, great respect - as I said earlier - for the COs that we had and a respect for those that, who were very quickly moved out of civvy street into these sort of operations and carrying responsibilities that in civil life we would never have taken. The characteristic of the Catalina operations was one of individual initiative, in contrast to what I gather bomber command had in Europe of tremendous fleets of bombers all operating together.

> Do you think those experiences, or your experiences, with Catalinas, affected your later life and what you did and so on, or not?

I suppose the whole operation was very maturing. Ah, I was, ah, I was twenty years of age when I entered air force camp, and I guess I was, ah, not much more than twenty... oh, I probably wasn't even twenty-two when I was captain of a Catalina. We carried a lot of responsibilities and it was all very maturing.

> Mm. That's most interesting. Well just to end up with Bill, is there anything that you feel hasn't been covered or that you would like to say on the tape to complete this record?

Well I'd like the record to contain a tribute to the aircraft. It's been called the finest flying boat ever built. It's been called one of the most versatile aircraft ever built, and I called it earlier `the girl I love'. Ah, I would like the record to contain a tribute to that aircraft and its

engines in particular. Ah, I would like the record to contain a tribute to the young commanding officers. In my time, five of them gave their lives on operations. (25.00) Um, ah, I would like the record to contain a tribute to the, not just to the crews that manned the aircraft and tended to get - well the captains in particular - who tended to get the credit for the successful operations, but they couldn't have functioned without the crew to support them, and they couldn't have functioned without the ground staff, ah, to support them. Now, we had two squadrons initially containing nine aircraft each - eighteen aircraft. Later on we set up 42 Squadron and 43 Squadron which doubled the strength of Catalinas, but it was a very small force. I think the other thing I'd like to see put down on the record, I think there's a limited number of Australians who really appreciate how close the Japanese were to moving onto the Australian mainland. Um, they were five miles from Moresby before they were turned back and at Cairns there were abandoned plantations everywhere. Ah, ah, the Coral Sea battle was fought in the seas off the coast of Australia between Cairns and New Guinea, and few people would appreciate just how close that Coral Sea battle was to the mainland of Australia. Ah, now, I think the Catalinas as an aircraft, although they were never designed for defensive and offensive operations, were a wonderful aircraft. They should be ranked with those three Wirraways that took off from Rabaul to try and defend Rabaul against about 100 Zeroes. We were using pretty crude equipment but we were making the best use of it.

> Mm. That's very interesting and very, well very movingly put Bill. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial, well, for making this tape which is really valuable, thank you very much.

Thank you Ed.

> Just adding a couple of words Bill wants to add on.

I would like the record to contain a tribute to some of these COs. It's not possible to mention them all, but in my particular time I had a close association with several outstanding people. There was Frank Chapman, loved by all. He was lost on a mission soon after I arrived in the squadrons. There was Keith Bolitho, who was a giant of a man, both physically and in terms of his character, and the way he carried out his responsibilities firstly as flight commander and subsequently as a commanding officer of one of the squadrons. Keith at one stage amassed 300 flying hours in one month as part of his responsibilities as a flight commander to not only carry out missions, but to fly with the various crews in the squadron to check on their standards et cetera. And of course, Scotty Allan, that I've mentioned previously and Sir Richard Kingsland, who I've mentioned previously. The other COs were of first class quality too, but I particularly wanted to name those that I was more closely associated with.

> Oh, that's really good Bill, thank you very much. Okay?

Yep, fine. That's all.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2.