



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Identification: This is an interview recorded on the 16th of November 1989 with Henry Watson about the Catalinas. This is Side 1, Tape 1, and begins in five seconds from now.

Henry Watson, where and when were you born?

Born in Geelong on the 20th of October 1924.

And what sort of circumstances were the family?

Oh, my father was originally a seaman and after his service at sea - he was a Scotchman really - he returned, or came to Australia. Then I was born here but my older brother and sister were born in Scotland, and he then worked with the Geelong Harbour Trust.

How were you off? Where would you sort of put yourselves in terms of your economic position? Were you, um, reasonably well off, or poor, or ...?

Oh certainly not reasonably well off. I'd say, well, we didn't - parents didn't - own a home, so they'd be renting a home and the father worked, well, on the Harbour Trust. Um, he was great at fishing and I believe he was successful fishing - that's with nets. He would sell fish, which would, you know, to augment the income.

Was he the sort of man who took much interest in the politics of the time and social issues of the time?

Yes, yes.

Was he also a religious person?

No, not religious in that as much as attending church was concerned, but he had pretty strong religious beliefs nevertheless, you know.

Were you required to go to church and that as a small boy?

Oh yes, yes, pretty regular those days. In a place like North Geelong, every Sunday morning you'd be off to church, then you'd be off to bible class in the afternoon and reasonable chance you might even be at church again at seven o'clock on Sunday night. (Laughs).

What about your mother? What sort of person was she?

Oh, very nice lady. Ah, she was, on the religious side, she certainly lead us in that direction.

So, what about your schooling? Where did you go to school, and what were your aspirations?

Ah, I went to school at North Geelong State School, from then to the junior tech. in Geelong and, oh, in 1939 - which was funnily enough round about the just the start of the war - my father was, within the Harbour Trust, there was an accident where he finished up losing his right arm, so whatever predicament we may have been in previously, you know financially, it was well and truly enhanced by his incapacity.

With what sort of effect?

Oh, I was a lad at school of fifteen and I would imagine I - probably wouldn't have may have done another couple of years, but because of this particular problem I had to sort of get out of school straight away.

So, when you left school then, or at that point, what had you hoped to do until that calamity?

Well, I wouldn't know what my original ambition was, because the advent of war made such a dramatic change and I think my ambition almost immediately then was to go to sea.

Well, what sort of work had you begun to do?

Oh, I started off working for a grocer, but I finished up working at the draper in Geelong, company called Lindsay McKenzies, which eventually turned into - nowadays is known as Target stores - but that was the origin of it. That's where I started.

What were you doing?

I was a salesman.

So, with the outbreak of war, uh, what happened? What was the attitude in the family towards the war? Did they feel that you should or shouldn't join up?

Oh, I'd say, I wouldn't say I was forced upon it, it was just the natural thing to do. My father, right at the commencement of war, had gone to Customs House in Geelong to sign up with the navy straight away, you know, see, and he'd be a man in his fifties, then. My brother was in the army and, you know, it was just natural for me I would have gone in automatically at eighteen.

(5.00) Was your brother a regular army man? He'd joined up before that or ...?

Yes, he was in the militia beforehand.

But you said you wanted to go to sea, so how did you finish up in the air force?

Well, I think my mother wasn't too happy about me going to sea and I imagine because of those particular pressures I chose something else, so I went for the air force.

What was the process? I mean, what did you actually have to do? Did you write off or attend a recruiting centre or ...?

No, there were recruiting centres, well, generally, ah almost, I suppose at least be once a week you'd always see men marching from the drill hall in Geelong down to the railway station heading for Melbourne to - I think it was Royal Park, whatever, the army folk went - so there was all that wartime enlistment. It was just the natural thing to do. As soon as you turned eighteen you were off to one of the services.

These days Geelong is almost a suburb of Melbourne, but by then it would have been a very distinctly different sort of country town with its own identity ....

Oh absolutely.

Was there a different sort of mood perhaps in Geelong as the country place, than say compared with the city, which may have been a bit more cynical about the process?

I don't think so. It just seemed so natural to everyone really.

So, having gone off to the recruiting centre, what then?

Well, it'd be, from the recruiting centre I would have just, you know, signed up with the hope of getting into air crew. That was, you know, the obvious ambition and was the reason one had joined. Ah, I wasn't successful initially in getting into air crew and, but I believe, or I think it may be, that at that particular time, whatever the demands were for the services, that's where you went; you know, not so much what your particular skill may be, but whatever their needs were they just directed people into those particular areas.

Well, if you didn't start off with air crew, what did you start off doing?

I started off, ah, in what they call tech, technical trainee, which meant that I then went - I was in camp at the Exhibition buildings in Melbourne - and each, go by bus from there out to Brunswick Tech, which virtually was a refresher course of the things we'd finished off at ...

The technical school.

The technical school, a refresher course. And from there I was sent down, or allocated, to armament school.

Just before we go to armament school, what was the situation at the Exhibition? Were there tents set up in the grounds or ...?

No, no, it was amazing really, because, you know, it's quite a large floor area there, and I'd say that floor area would virtually be covered with old iron beds - you know the stretcher type of beds? And that'd be just packed with airmen.

About how many do you think may have been there? A couple of thousand perhaps?

Oh, dunno a couple ... certainly a thousand I would think.

How did they get on for toilet facilities and cooking facilities and so on?

Well the cooking, I never saw the cookhouse as such, but they, I imagine army style cooking facilities and toilet facilities. We didn't seem - no problem - so it was properly provided.

Did you start off drilling and so on at the grounds?

Oh no, it'd be parade first thing in the morning and parade then into the buses and out to Brunswick Tech.

So after Brunswick Tech. you then went to - where was it again?

Armament school, and that was down at Hamilton. Ah, and that was quite a scattered an arrangement too. Initially, I was billeted out in a private home - as were others - and ....

Did people have a choice? Those who were putting you up? Or were they told that they had to take somebody?

Oh no, I imagine they volunteered, because I think there were being rewarded for their efforts.

So, what kind of house did you find yourself in? Can you recall?

Very much. I wasn't too happy with it as a matter of fact. The, I think there was either two or three of us, we were all put into a great old double bed together. That was (laughing) ... which, that, and I wasn't too happy with the food, but fortunately I happened to know, by accident, one of the army officers down there who were handling the catering for air force personnel, so I went and complained to him about our particular problems and he said, `Oh, I'll soon fix that'. So he arranged that we then be fed by the air force, which was in the town hall, and also arranged for accommodation in a, oh, building, or I think it was an old brewery depot which was nothing more than, oh, it was a wooden floor and so on, but that's where we slept, there.

(10.00) During that period of billeting, did people get some sort of allowance for however many service people they took in?

I would imagine so. I just can't imagine too many of them doing it for nothing.

Can you recall what the problem was with the food? Was there simply not enough of it? Was it poor? Did it suggest that maybe they were trying to sort of save money by underfeeding you?

That's the way I saw it. I thought they were trying to be a little bit mean, you know, because being young fellas, we were pretty good on appetite, 'cause we were doing PT and quite a lot of long hours work, too - like, schooling was night and day.

One might suppose from the point of view of the people who were billeting you, they felt they were being eaten out of house and home. (Laughing).

(Laughing). That may have been so too.

So, how long did you spend at Hamilton?

Oh, it was only about a month I suppose, that the length of time for the course. But they were in all different buildings and, you know, you'd be anyhow one subject at the Presbyterian hall and another one at the back of the Church of England, and another one some other place down the street.

Were you doing drill and so on as well?

Not much, other than normal physical training. Usually probably some part of the day would be involved in that - usually first thing in the morning - the rest'd be schooling.

With this scattered nature of your course, was there a sense that everything was under control, or did you begin to wonder if the people who were in charge really knew what was going on?

Oh no, I was quite satisfied it was under control. See the thing you've got to remember, that in 1942 - tail end of '42 when I went in - we weren't winning the war. It was, things were a little, looking a bit dicey, and everything was pretty urgent.

Was there also a sense of urgency for young people like yourself to get to where the action was?

Oh yes.

So after Hamilton, what then?

Ah, Hamilton, ah. Then I was, well, as a young bloke, hoping to be posted far afield and lo and behold what happens? I get posted to North Geelong (laughs) to the International Harvester works out at North Geelong by Corio quay, and out there they were assembling Spitfires which had been brought out from England. We were assembling them and, oh, flown from the ... lost my track ....

Well, you were saying that they were assembled and then flown from there to somewhere.

Oh there, well, yeah, to Laverton, and eventually they were to join squadrons.

Were you impressed by the Spitfire as a young man?

Oh yes. That was the greatest thing that you could ever imagine to look at. We used to just gloat over that Rolls Royce engine, of the magnificent guns and everything about it looked absolutely magnificent to us.

Were you still hoping to get into air crew at this stage?

Yes.

What was the basis of your interest in flying? I mean, for somebody who'd started off wanting to go to sea, where did the flying interest develop?

Oh, I think because there was a war on and that was where you're supposed to be in the war.

So how long did you go on assembling Spitfires?

That was only for a couple of months. While I was there, ah, a screed came out calling for volunteers for flying boats and heavy bomber crews, so I grabbed a pen and filled in an application.

Did you know what a flying boat was?

No. (Laughs), nor had I seen what you'd call a heavy bomber either.

Had there been knowledge about the loss of British aircraft in the battle in Europe at that stage and the heavy loss of bomber crews and so on?

No, not enough to affect my thinking I don't think.

So after applying, what then?

Well, shortly after that I was obviously accepted and went down to Sale to do a air gunner's course. It was the air gunnery school at Sale.

What did that consist of? The course?

Oh, principally teaching you the theory of air gunnery which really smartened up one's knowledge from school of geometry, trigonometry and things of that nature.

Was it very detailed or was it a pretty simplified approach to what was involved, when you talk about the theory?

No, no. It was quite exacting. It was, oh, determining the relative speed of, you know, oncoming aircraft or aircraft attacking you from different angles; giving you some means of assessing the distance, the target is away from you. That was the principal of that ring and bead sight that you've possibly seen. That, with your knowledge of an aircraft - say it's got a wing span of forty feet - and it can be worked out mathematically, looking through that ring and bead, when that wing span covers the ring, you know precisely where it is in terms of distance.

(15.00) And were you getting to fire guns at this stage?

Oh yes, that, I suppose each flight - and there's only about ten flights I suppose - that would be with machine-guns, and these were old Lewis guns too mind you, and accompanying aircraft carrying, pulling a drogue.

What about your very first flight? It must have been something of some considerable moment to you perhaps, to actually be getting up in the air.

It certainly was, and there's quite a story attached to that. I think it was to the pilot also, because the aircraft was known as an Oxford. There were a pilot's seat and a copilot's seat and a gunner's turret. And on this particular flight I was sitting in the copilot's seat and we were just choofing along, flying along, and ....

Was that exciting in itself to actually get up off the ground for the first time?

Oh yes, it was quite a bit of wonder. I suppose a little bit of awe wouldn't, you know, completely au fait or confident to what was going on (laughing). And, however, we were flying along and the pilot - it's be a sergeant pilot - he said, `Would you like to have a go?'. I said, `Okay', so I grabbed the controls and what not and I'm flying along, just down a bit. He said, `Oh, lift it up a bit, and put it back a bit'. By this time I'm flying like this, and he said, he said `You're a scrubbo pilot aren't you?'. I said, `No'. I said, `This is the first time I've ever been in an aircraft'. He says, `Oh' and pulled back the controls. (Laughs).

Were you beginning to have visions of becoming a fighter pilot?

Oh, I thought this was magnificent.

So, when did you get your hands on a gun for the first time?

Oh, that'd be within days of getting to gunnery school I would say.

And this was shooting at a drone going past was it?

Drogue.

A drogue rather, yes.

Which is a thing just like a windsock that you see on the airfields.

Tell us about the weaponry. What sort of gun was it? How did it work and so on?

It was a machine-gun, a Lewis gun, which is similar to these hand guns you see now. There's a round cylinder on the top which ... that was the method of feeding the ammunition through.

Were you nervous at the time? Can you recall?

Oh no, I don't think so.

So, how did you fare in your first attempt at hitting a target?

Well, if I say so myself, I didn't go too bad on the first attempt, which was probably reasonably good luck, but I didn't get much better after that. (Small laugh).

So, what was expected of you and how were you to be assessed in terms of whether you were suitable as a gunner or not?

Well, with the ... each one that fired, say I was firing, well the bullets could be marked with a green paint, where a companion's gun would be with a yellow paint, somebody else's with red, and when the drogue came down, it was just a matter of counting how many red, yellow or green spots were on it. That would determine whether you'd hit the drogue or not.

So was it basically just if you could hit the target at least every time you were up, or what were the expectations as to whether ...?

Oh I think the percentage that you got in. Like, a stray bullet wasn't regarded as doing particularly good. It was just getting some sort of a percentage, ten per cent or something like that. Bursting would be regarded as you look like you could possibly hit an oncoming aircraft, you know.

So you said there were about ten of those flights.

Training flights, yes.

Mm. And what then?

Oh that was virtually the completion of the course.

Did you feel like you were now an air force gunner?

Oh I wouldn't say I felt that much that I was brilliant at it or not, but I knew what I was doing inasmuch as I'd done armament before.

So if the order had been, `Well now you're going up front' and you'd expect to be in a situation where you could be shooting at enemy aircraft, would you have felt, sort of, adequate or how would you have felt about it?

Well I felt that I'd been told what to do and why I should do it in terms of gunnery, and it was up to me then just how well I did the job. See, the knowledge was there to do it.

So, after the ten flights, where did you go then?

Oh, funnily enough at that point, we were then, because when we went to this air gunnery school - there was only about a dozen of us in the same category as myself, which were say ground personnel now doing air gunnery courses, which meant when we joined the air gunnery course we joined it with navigators and wireless operators and other air type gunners, air crew types, and we did the finish. That was the final of their particular service course, you know. So following that there was wings parade, whereby the navigators got their wings, the wireless operators got their wings and the observers, gunners and whatever there may be were there.

(20.00) So it was now settled that you were going to be air crew?

That's where ... not air crew in the technical sense. We did in fact get presented with a gun, ah, air gunner's badge, so we're now something quite unique because all these other chaps off course would either be off course get a commission or would at least have sergeant's rank, but we went off course as AC1s. So we were rather unique inasmuch as we were air craft but first class, which was the lowest rank, with the air gunner's badge.

But did this mean in effect you were definitely destined to finish up in aircraft, flying?

Oh yes.

Were you pleased with that?

Oh yes, delighted really to achieve something.

So where then?

Then up to Rathmines in New South Wales to what was known as operational training.

To this point had you seen a Catalina?

Nope. I had I think, to be fair, I was wrong when I said I hadn't seen a flying boat. I had really, because I'd seen the old Empire flying boats arrive in Geelong some years prior.

Had you heard anything about them or their reputation as to whether they were supposed to be a good, bad or indifferent plane?

No, I'd no idea at all what was coming.

So what were your impressions of this thing that you were to be flying in when you first saw it?

When I first saw it I was coming into Rathmines, and I was sort of coming down a bit of a hill and there'd be, oh I suppose half a dozen Catalinas on the harbour [inaudible] and I thought, `God, that [inaudible]. They just looked like half a dozen pelicans laying there. (Laughing). Rather odd looking aircraft, and the closer you got to them the more odd they looked.

Well how long before you actually got in one?

Oh, probably within a week I would imagine, wouldn't be too long.

You were doing things like rough water landings and those sort of things at Rathmines?

Yes, well I was, it consisted of airmanship, seamanship - they were the two elements - that's the training that we had to go through, and other. We had a general knowledge of the aircraft itself because the object was that you were going to form a crew or become part of a crew.

With the rough weather landings, just how rough could you land in safely? What were the expectations?

Oh I couldn't actually give to you the knowledge in measurements of the sea, but oh, you could say terribly rough. We did one rough water landing at Broken Bay and I thought we were goners.

Well tell us what happened. Why?

Well because virtually a rough water landing, if it's ... the nearest thing you can describe as to a crash landing under control, you know. Hell of a noise, you know, 'cause it's, you just, the aircraft - actually, you've just got to let it fall out of the sky. That's, you don't sort of fly it into rough water. They fly it to the point where it stalls - in other words, it loses its carry-way - and you've got to have it at a very precise spot there that it virtually just drops out of the sky.

Where were you seated in the aircraft?

In the blisters.

And from that position, you had a good view of your surroundings and so on?

Yes, but a rough water landing you wouldn't be in the blister. You'd be hanging in the bulkhead there somewhere, hangin' on like hell.

Do you have any sense as to how far you would drop when you reached the stall point as it were?

No. That would be entirely in the hands of the pilots. That's the flying part of it.

Well how far would it be would you suppose?

Oh I suppose you'd be, they'd be trying to get it down to five or ten feet, as close as they could get.

Do you know of people who had mishaps during those sorts of exercises?

Oh yes. There was one particular crew, I think it was a fella name of Tubby Higgins who was killed at Broken Bay on doing rough water landings.

Were you about at the time?

No, that was prior to my arriving at Rathmines.

Were you told of it? What was the attitude towards that experience? Was it something that people sort of joked about or was it ...?

Oh no, no. When you were doing rough water landings, I think the first thing that went into your mind would you'd be thinking of the crew that had, you know, a few months earlier, hadn't survived doing one of those exercises.

So how long did you spend at Rathmines?

Oh, couple of months.

Now at this stage, had you already been formed into a crew?

That's the whole object of that course was to, as a crew, you would train as, well first of all they used to fly as second crew. In other words, a passenger learning off the other fellow, you know what I mean, then you'd eventually fly as first crew, and then become a crew of your own, or a capable bunch of people of your own, and at the conclusion of that course it was up to then the skipper - or the pilot - to select a crew that would fly with him.
(25.00) Well now he had to virtually ask people to fly with him. It wasn't a command so much and in this case I was requested by that engineer, who had been selected by the skipper, to ask me would I fly with him. This skipper happened to be Damien Miller.

How well had you got to know the other members at that time?

Not terribly well I don't suppose. Really, in many senses, and there again I was - at that stage - I was AC1 rank. All the other people that I was flying with were sergeants and above, so

after a day's schooling or whatever it might be, I'd go to my airmen's hut and they would either go to the officers' mess or the sergeants' mess.

So the impressions that you formed then of the people that - the other members of the crew that you had joined - did they prove to be fairly accurate or did you find that as you got to know them you saw them differently?

Oh no. I think that the mere fact that you'd flown together and through various predicaments you either liked one another or you could say that we could all tolerate one another. There was no animosity or anything of that nature, you know.

Were there any in the group that you were doubtful about, or in fact had to be replaced, or sought replacement?

No, other than initially. There was one fellow - I wouldn't know his name - but this fellow I imagine was first allocated as possible navigator and we went for a trip. We flew down to, from Rathmines must have been down near Gabo Island or somewhere like that, and this fellow got us completely lost. Well, we really only got home because we could see the blast furnace stacks at Newcastle. That's what got us home, really, not the navigator.

In retrospect, was it incompetence on his part? Or was he a bit unlucky? Or how do you see it?

Well, it's hard to really say but, you know, the fellow just didn't get us home. That's what it amounts to, so ...

Didn't inspire you with confidence.

You'd just say incompetence I suppose really.

What would become of somebody like that? Would they just get more practice or would they shuffle them off somewhere else?

Probably get shuffled off somewhere else I imagine.

So the replacement? How did he turn out?

Oh first class. We finished up with a real star.

By this stage you would have been getting around in air force uniform and so on, and would have had weekend or recreational leave and so on. How did it feel to be in the air force for you as a young man?

Oh, good, particularly that I had my gunner's wing up. It made me feel a bit better still, you know.

Was it impressive for young ladies at the time? Was that, you know, something that was important?

Oh I hope it was. (Laughs). We possibly thought so at least.

Did air crew then see themselves in a different light, perhaps, to the rest of us? Was there a touch of, a sense of glamour and excitement about their particular role?

Oh I would say so, yes.

Did you swank around? I mean, ...

Oh no, but I suppose you always made sure you had your air gunner's badge on. That was, you know, it meant something to you.

Did you ever then get the impression that you were in a situation where when people realised that you were air crew, that suddenly the manner improved towards you or they were obviously impressed?

Yes, well we never felt ourselves uncomfortable anywhere we went. We, you know, I suppose we felt we were soldiers as much as anybody.

Well, soldiers as much as anybody, but did it make it easier to get dates, as it were, with young women, the fact that you were in the air force?

Oh, I hope so. (Laughs). That may have been the reason, I don't know. We used to have plenty of fun.

Well, by the time you had finished your course at Rathmines, the war was going on. Was there a sense of anxiety to get to where things were happening by then?

Yes. I think that was pretty constant all the way through. It was, you know, the troop trains and things like that. Everything was sort of heading north, 'cause there was something big going on up north, and that's where you had to be, you know.

At the same time, was there information about Catalinas in action that were being lost and early on when they were involved in some day flights, being shot down and so on?

Very little information in that regard.

Was that held back?

Oh I don't think so. It wasn't the sort of thing that was, you know, the natural thing to be bandied around I don't think.

So after the period of Rathmines, what then?

Well, from Rathmines we completed the course, we became a crew. As far as we were concerned, we were number 55 crew - that was presumably the 55th crew that had been through 3 OTU and were then posted to 43 Squadron.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1.

START TAPE 1, SIDE 2.

Identification: This is Side 2 of Tape 1. An interview recorded on the 16th of November 1989 with Henry Watson about Catalinas and it resumes in five seconds from now.

So, where did you go with 43 Squadron?

43 Squadron was based at Karumba, which is at the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria, which used to be an old flying boat, or refuelling or staging depot, for the Empire flying boats between Sydney and London.

How did you go up there?

Well, I left ... after 3 OTU I was sent home on final leave. I then caught a train from I suppose you'd say North Geelong to Melbourne, Melbourne to Sydney, Sydney to Brisbane by train, up to Townsville by train, out to Cloncurry by train. There we stopped, 'cause that being the end of the line, and we was to stay there two or three but a couple of trucks came down from Karumba and picked us up. By this stage there were four crews being posted there together, so you're talking about forty-odd blokes.

Was this the general ... the trains were general civilian trains, were they?

Oh yes, just the normal trains, but they were troop trains really. You travelled as a, oh, transport up there was a troop train, other than say from Townsville out to Cloncurry. That might be just an ordinary passenger run that was going out there.

It's a pretty long train journey with a lot of time on your hands, and all the time heading north to where the Japanese were. Did you begin to wonder what was to become of you, and perhaps have too much time to think about it?

Oh I don't think so. We were all pretty young blokes you know and, you know, you can make fun anywhere ever, any situation.

Had you begun to hear by then stories about the atrocities of the Japanese?

No, no. No, other than I think we always pretty confident that if you were captured there wasn't much chance of you being a survivor. That wasn't something to look forward to. There was a good chance you'd get bumped off.

So, having got into the trucks, what sort of journey was that? How far did you go by truck?

Oh it was over ... from Cloncurry up through the scrub I suppose you'd call it. I know we slept one night out under the trucks.

Pretty hot?

Yes, and like we were drinking the water. It was just out of a dam or something like that, and by hell it didn't look too good at all. So it must have taken us about two days to get out and get there overland by trucks I'd say.

Were you being given malarial tablets and that sort of thing for the tropics by then?

No, no, no medication at all.

So, when you arrived, where did you find yourself?

At Karumba which was an old - well, it was an established base then, because 43 Squadron had been there a couple of months - it used to be an old meatworks there. That's where the dining room was. Oh, I suppose you call it the dining - or the mess - and the aircraft were just anchored out on the river and that's where we flew from.

What sort of accommodation arrangements and so on were there?

Just tents. Just all army tent type accommodation.

Was it dry or wet then?

Dry, it wasn't wet. That was November too.

So it was a comfortable existence? Or pretty crude? Or how was it?

Oh it was pretty oppressive weather and the water for bathing was bore water. It wasn't too good, you know, quite sort of oily, and we used to get a ration of fresh water in a, you know, the ordinary army water can. That's what you'd call your drinking water for the day.

What about food? How was the food?

Oh it was alright. It was all army type food, like M and V. There was no fresh vegetables or anything like that at that stage.

(5.00) Any civilians in the area at all?

No, other than one person who was at the - he must have been ports and harbours officer - at the head of the river. He and his wife and daughter were there.

Was there any sort of Aboriginal community about?

Never saw one Aboriginal there at all.

When you talk of the wife and daughter, how old was the daughter?

Very interesting. She was about twenty-one or twenty-two.

And the subject of some attention one might suppose, with a lot of young men there?

Oh yes, you could suppose that quite correctly. (Laughs).

Did you enter into the competition?

Oh no, no, no. No, it wasn't a competition in that regard. It was just an interesting subject to talk about.

So what was your very first operation then?

Ah, it was a bombing raid to Babo in Dutch New Guinea.

Where were you, and when did you first get to know well finally you were going to go off somewhere that would involve action, and can you recall what your feelings were?

Yes. Ah, I had a, I was pre-warned I suppose a little bit, because one of my friends who was on another aircraft, he'd been out on a raid the night before and naturally when he came back, you know, those obvious question was, `What was it like'? you know. He says, `Well, I can tell ya', he says, `they're bloody dinkum'. That, what he meant by that is there's plenty of searchlights and ack-acks, so they were really trying to shoot you down, they weren't playing, you know.

They weren't hit though?

No, no, no.

What sort of briefing did you have about your first flight?

Oh, nothing really. We just went straight out on a raid. Maybe the skipper may have gone out the night before or something like that, or a couple of nights before he may have gone out in company as a passenger on another aircraft.

So what was involved? When you went out on the tarmac, oh sorry, the water to your aircraft, what was the procedure? Did you set about a series of checks to see that everything was functional as far as each individual crew member was concerned, or was it assumed that everything was shipshape or what?

Oh, you'd have the normal checks that you'd carry out, but maintenance personnel would have attended to those things. They were very competent and very dedicated people.

You would be a gunner on the flight?

Yes.

So, how did you feel heading off on that first flight? Did it suddenly seem as though, well, `this was it'?

Yes. Obviously very apprehensive and, oh, I imagine everything about it was pretty damn scary I suppose, because you're sort of thundering on into the night wondering whether someone's chasing you, watching you and particularly flying over New Guinea and those places looking down below on those snake like rivers and creeks and so on and such.

What time did you actually head off?

Oh, we set off about two o'clock in the afternoon, I imagine, from there. I could soon check it out of course, but ....

And what was the objective of that particular flight?

To bomb the airfield at Babo.

And how many hours flying?

Probably twenty.

Well, on the way, what was the order of things? If you set off at two, did you begin to have something to eat and drink and that shortly along the way, or ...?

Oh, not a great deal. That wasn't a major concern. Mainly, once you started getting yourself into an area where you imagined enemy aircraft could be, your main job then was to keep your eyes open, which was constantly searching for anything that maybe in the sky, that you were hoping wouldn't be there.

Was that a strain as such, for such a long period?

Yes I'd say so, because to do it properly you just don't sort of stand there glaring. You've got to ... you go through a pattern of going across an area horizontally with your eyes, then up and down, then horizontally and up and down, just constantly looking for anything that may appear.

And by the time you got near your objective, was it still light, or dark?

Oh no, it'd be dark by then.

Mm. So, did you get a sight ... what was your first alert to the fact that you were near the target? Did you spot it or you were told over the intercom, or ...?

Oh no. We'd be, well you know, we'd have had a bit of an idea we're gonn - just say we reckon we'll be there about midnight - so round about half past eleven or eleven o'clock or something like that, we'd be checking to see we had our parachute harnesses on and, you

know, Mae West, and all those sorts of things and getting the guns ready and, you know, getting yourself involved in an action stations position, you know.

(10.00) I gather some crews would actually take small hand bombs, as it were, they could drop from the blisters as like a personal sort of touch that they could feel a bit more involved. Did your crew do that?

Oh yes, well it was more than just a bit of fun, because practically all those bombing raids where you'd take in the blister, you'd take - I can't remember how many now - but it'd be, oh, a dozen I suppose, twenty pounds of pragnatation [sic] bombs, and just as you got over the target, the navigator was actually the bomb aimer - and you could see the bomb racks - and we'd be standin' there poised with, just hanging on the tails of these twenty pounders, and as soon as we saw the bomb racks, soon as the main bombs went, we'd start pelting these twenty pounders out through the blister.

Some crew, I gather, also took beer bottles in which they put razor blades as a means of ....

Oh yeah.

Did you do that on the first run?

Nope, no, no.

Did your crew ever use those?

No, no. After a while, it got frowned upon after a while. Must've though they were acting the fool a bit or something. The powers that be weren't over happy with that sort of caper.

But you would have heard of it. Why did your troops choose not to do that in the first place?

Oh, I think there was more important things to be doing at that time than playing around, you know.

Well, as you arrived then on the first run, and about to drop your first load surrounded by bombs, was it disconcerting to think, `Well, what if something came up through from below and hit the bombs?'

Well the bomb generally is pretty safe while it's in your rack. For instance, those twenty pounders I was talking about, just prior to getting to the target, you know, you see, what you said before, you know, before you get there what do you do? Well, round about that time there's a what they called an arming fork. It goes into a pistol of the bomb. You'd remove that arming fork, but there's nevertheless there's still a metal cap over the top of the pistol just the same, so it's still safe, and soon as you throw it overboard or, in the case of the major bombs, as soon as they leave the rack, the arming fork remains, the head on the pistol has vanes on and it spins off, and once that spins off then the thing is completely armed. It will go off just like a ....

Were you able to see the results of what happened as you dropped the first loaded bombs?

Oh yes. Well, matter of fact I can recall one night throwing these twenty pounders out the side and, you see, you just lean over and grab the tail of two of 'em and just pelt, pelt, pelt you know, 'cause I was in a hurry, and the last two I just threw them over and I leant on the rail there just to watch them go, and as they fell to the ground they both went together. They looked as though they were gonna kiss and I thought, `Hell, I'm gone; we're all gone' you know, and then they just parted again. I was glad to see that.

Well with that first drop, did you actually see the explosions or could you feel, were you low enough that you would feel the sense of the impact?

Oh no, no. We'd be dropping them at about 9,000 feet.

Was there any defence from the ground on the very first flight?

Yes, yes. Well, as a matter of fact I, you know, the only way I could describe it at that time when I looked at it was, `Hell, that looks like Luna Park down there' and that was gunfire lights and God knows what having a go at us.

Did it get close at all?

Oh yes. Well we used to endeavour to fly around about over targets - that type of target, bombing - at around about the 9,000 feet mark, and our theory being that up to 7 or 8,000 it'd be the light ack-ack that would be having a go at you and probably at 10,000 feet it'd be the heavy stuff, and we just hoped to Hell we were clever enough to try and get in between it somewhere, you know.

Were you, do you think?

No, because I can, there again, watching the blister there I can recall one night just watching at the blister, just doing what you have suggested - looking to see the bomb burst - and this ack-ack was coming up and quite often there'd be tracer with it as well. And I could see this ack-ack come up a tracer. You could see it sort of falling away underneath you. But I knew he's feeling quite comfortable that they're not getting there, and all of a sudden one went straight up, straight up - I even pulled my head back - straight up between the tail plane and the main plane - one tracer just went straight through - must have been a super one.

Did you get illuminated by searchlight on that first run?

No, no. We weren't caught.

So with the bombs dropped, and turning away from it, what was the feeling?

Oh, just glad to get away from the damn joint I suppose, really.

Well when you're in a car and it, you know, looks like there's some slight possibility that the driver might collide, one has a feeling that you're trying to

steer the car as well. Was there that feeling as you could see where the tracer was coming from, that you wish you could turn it this way or that?

No, not really. It's a, oh, it's frustrating and a bit fatalistic I suppose. Oh, they're coming, you know, you're just watching them come at you. When you see them not getting so far you feel comfortable, you know.

(15.00) Well, as you turned round to go home, you've still got had a long flight in front of you. Was there a sense of elation that lasted for some while? What was the mood?

Oh, well for quite a while you'd be still under pressure because you'd want to be at least an hour away from the target before you'd feel that you could start to relax a wee bit, because like if the searchlights and the ack-ack are not having a go at you, you imagine the night fighters must be up there trying to track you down in any case, so you're constantly still on the alert that you could be followed.

How long did you maintain that for?

Oh I imagine it'd be half an hour or an hour.

And after that?

Oh then you feel pretty contented then, and get down to ... still maintaining searches and so on. In my case I used to swap with the engineers. I'd go up in the engineers' panel, which we more or less watching the instruments there, and the engineers'd get down and do my job.

Did you have a break for a meal or snacks or ...?

Oh might, cup a tea, it was never real important part of the exercise.

Incidentally, on that first flight, were you fully loaded? Was there a sense of heaviness in the plane? I mean, would you have any doubt about the plane getting off?

No, because as it turned out, we, well you wouldn't say they were overloaded - big difference between well-loaded and overloaded, you know. Incidentally, on those first trip too, as a group, you may recall I told you we were AC1s, and on the first trip or two, we as armourers, we had to go out and assist in the arming of the aircraft - that's loading it with bombs - before we flew it. So we'd be out there at six in the morning, say, loading the aircraft with bombs, go back and have a feed and then go and fly for twenty hours.

So when you returned and touched down, was it still light or dark, or, I mean, was it still dark or turning light?

Oh no, it'd be morning by the time we got home, about 10 o'clock in the morning, something like that.

Was it a good feeling to touch down?

Oh yes, great.

What then? Did you have a briefing?

Oh no, oh the skipper would, bit of a report there, but I'd be, we'd be straight onto the bunk and out like a light.

How long before, then, you were to have your next flight after that first one?

Oh it would depend a lot of things on how urgent it was, the weather, a variety of things, but you know, might have been a week, could've been another few days, no particular pattern.

How many air crew were operating out there?

Out of that par...? Oh I suppose there was, gee whiz, a bit hard to tell. Oh, be about ten crews I suppose.

So how long did you spend there?

Uh, when did I go there, about November. We were there till about April.

And did you do a variety of different sorts of missions out of there?

Mainly at that stage it was all bombing, bombing raids, bombing airfields, Ambon.

Were there any particular missions where you were able to find that it had been particularly effective, or you'd had a very good result? How would you get to evaluate the worth of what you were doing?

Oh, we'd never really know. We just presumed, you know, we reckon we were ... you think you hit the target, you watch it, you see the explosion and so on and you'd be quite confident you'd done the right job, but you could've missed him by quite an amount. You wouldn't really know. The reconnaissance aircraft were the only ones who could tell that.

Were any of the other aircraft hit during your time up there at that particular place?

Ah, no, no-one was hit there, not at Karumba, no.

I notice in your log that one of your flights refers to photography. Was that while you were at Karumba?

Yes. We did a special exercise on photography which was these chaps who'd come up from air board with a new camera and flare, and we were given the task of, on a particular raid - I just can't recall which one it was now - that this camera and the flash could all coordinate with the explosion of the bomb, or immediately after it, thereby determine whether you'd hit the target or not. We went on this raid and we were the crew selected to carry out this particular exercise, and matter of fact these fellas from air board reckoned that if we made everything work successfully, we were on a dozen of beer. We would have done it

successfully in any case, but nevertheless it was a bit of a bait for us and we did it on this raid, and when we came back they said, `How did it go?'. We said, `Very good'. We said, `Look, you won't need your cameras. We blew hell out of that joint. Give us the beer now' you know. They said, `Oh, wait till we develop the film' which they eventually did and they showed it to us. Now we were quite confident we'd blown hell out of this target. They were quite confident that by our own photograph that we didn't.

(20.00) Well what was your assessment after seeing the photograph?

What do you mean ...?

Did you see the photograph that they'd taken?

Yeah, yeah.

So, did you share their analysis of it?

Oh yeah. Well, that was the evidence, you know. That was the whole idea of proving it because you're not telling lies. You honestly believe that's what you saw, but the reality is from, you know, 9,000 feet, you're got to be pretty good to be able to be absolutely sure that you did it precisely.

Did you get your dozen bottles of beer?

Oh yes. (Laughs).

So was it from there you went to Yampi Sound?

Oh from there the squadron moved to Darwin and we took up initially a residence down on the beach at Doctors Gully. There again, we were living in tents and then we were moved into what they call the RAAF drome, so we were now living in the old huts at the aerodrome. Those huts are still there in Darwin, of course.

What was the mood in Darwin at the time? I mean, they'd had the bombing raids, they'd had the panic and so on. What was the feeling? Was there a different sort of feeling about the place?

Yes, well, oh look 'cause there was no civilian population there at all. It was a military town. You could see the results of the bombing, but it was purely a military town. There was no town to go into as such, you know what I mean? There was no point ... you wouldn't say, `Well, we'll go into town'. There was nothing to do.

So what did you begin to do from there?

That's where we started on the mine laying.

What about your first mine laying flight? You'd had practice operations when you were at Rathmines, I suppose, had you?

No, no, no. This was all initial. Oh, just one thing I forgot when I was talking about Karumba, and you said, `Was anyone hit?'. Well, when, on a flight from, still whilst we were based at Karumba, at one stage we were sent down to Lake Boga to pick up an aircraft and bring it back to the squadron, and when we got to Cairns with the aircraft to refuel and so on before going across to Karumba - this was round about Christmas 1943, which was about the time of the Cape Gloucester landing - so instead of getting to our, returning to our squadron, they said, `Well you better get the, go and have a bit of a sleep. You're gonna get bombed up'. So, we were sent out on a bombing raid to bomb Kavieng and from Kavieng - Cairns rather - we flew to Port Moresby and refuelled there, round up to Kavieng and we arrived there round about midnight, and this was quite a target - a big target - and it had been under constant bombardment for quite some days by air forces, our air forces. The idea is to keep the Japanese air force grounded as much as was practical. The idea with the aircraft there was to drop bombs sort of one by one, not just go in at a normal raid as you'd dump the whole damn lot and off. And we flew round for, must have been a couple of times I suppose - can't remember how many - in a circuit watching another one of our aircraft in there caught in the searchlights, trying to carry out his bombing, which was a bit like, you know, out on a picnic, that part of it - just driving around just watching what was going on. Well, after he'd finished his job, it was then our turn to go in, and the first time we went in we were caught in a light straight away ....

Was that frightening?

Oh yeah, hell yeah. You could read the *Herald* inside the aircraft, that's .... We'd be at about 10,000 feet and just like daylight inside, and you know you're caught, well you, you know, that's the nasty feeling about it and ... 'cause they had a what they called a, well it is a sort of an orangey colour searchlight which we believe was radar controlled. This was the master searchlight and that's the one that would pick you up and immediately that picked you up the other manually operated ones'd just latch onto you, with the result that in a raid like this, where there's, really, you're only having one aircraft over the target at any given time, meant that all the guns and all the searchlights can concentrate on that one aircraft. So we did all the things that you can do in an aeroplane and eventually got out of the lights ...

(25.00) What do you mean by that? Slipping and rolling and ...?

Yeah, every, you know, just throwing the aircraft in all directions just hoping you can get the hell out of it, you know, which we did, and I think we did that twice - got out of the lights - then on the third time we came down again ....

Was there fire coming up from the ground during those ...?

Oh yes, yeah.

Getting close?

Mm? Yes, well it was just heaps of it, you know, and of all types because, you know, I suppose as far as the Japs were concerned there was one aircraft that `all of us can have a go at him', you know.

As a gunner, were you firing down? Or, I mean, there wouldn't have been much point at that
height ...?

No, no, nothing to be achieved by that. All you'd be doing was giving yourself away, really, and so when we, on this next run, there was a hell of a bang, and that's when the shell hit the, what was it, the starboard, starboard motor. So, it was a hell of a panic - well, not a panic - we, the aircraft had to be, the engine had to be feathered because col...

Just before you go on from there. When it first hit, what were your immediate thoughts? Did you suppose that maybe the pilot and so on may have been hit? Or ...?

Oh I dunno. I just, all you can say to yourself, `Hell, we've been hit', you know. Then the next thing was to try and find out where. But inasmuch as there was no fire, there'd be, really you'd just start inquiring, you know what I mean? I remember the fellow opposite me. He says, `I think it's the motor', you know. However, we soon discovered it was the motor and started dumping fuel and whatnot, then decided to throw all the guns out except one, which was the bow gun, but the big .5s and all the ammunition, threw that over the side and everything you could think of.

Had you unloaded all your bombs by that stage?

Oh yes. Oh we dropped our bombs onto the target and so on. That part was alright, but just unlucky at getting hit. Oh, it was a matter then of anything we could find in the aircraft that we usefully fly without, you know, for example even the bombsight - now that's a very precious bit of an instrument, you know, - you just picked it up and normally you'd be carrying it along in a box, so that it'd be, you know, you wouldn't ... it was fragile. We didn't give a damn, just give it a whack on the side of the aircraft and throw it over the side.

How heavy was that?

Oh gee, not much heavier than a, you know, the old clock or something of that nature - not a very heavy thing.

As you'd thrown all this stuff out, did it appear to make any difference to the aircraft?

Oh not that you would notice, but it's not what you notice, it's what you know, that you've unloaded a lot of weight.

How long before the pilot was able to get some sense as to the condition of the aircraft and the possibility of getting back or having to put down somewhere?

Oh I think that had come onto him pretty well immediately. Ah, was the quick decision was between the pilot and the engineer was just to how much fuel should be unloaded. As it turned out, whatever, whoever made the decision, it turned out to be just precise.

By then, had the reputation of the Catalina as a reliable aircraft been well established?

Oh I think so, yes.

So did you, how did you feel about the prospect of getting back? I mean, was there a sense of a lot of doubt or once the pilot had said, `Well I think we can get there', did you feel confident about it?

Oh I don't know about confident. I think it was purely a matter of hope and pray, that's what it was, you know, being confident wasn't going to make much difference. It was, you know, really, you're onto a praying job from now on, you know.

But you still had quite a long flight in front of you?

Oh yes, because from Kavieng, amongst other things - we got into a storm, monsoonal storm, round about dawn, where ....

Well, tell us about the storm. How did that come? What ... was there any warning of it? Did you have any knowledge of the possibility?

No, it was just one of those things we had to encounter. We could just work out that we were just getting nowhere in terms of distance, you know.

You were just flying straight into the wind, were you?

Virtually, yes.

Rain as well?

Wind, rain and, ah, oh, just sort of hanging there, you know.

How long did that last?

Oh right through till dawn. Ah, it was still pretty rugged even at dawn, 'cause round about dawn we were over some islands called the Witu islands and anywhere we could see friendship we would have hopped in very quickly, you know, but we got greeted with ack-ack fire from there too.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2.

START TAPE 2, SIDE 1.

Identification: This is Tape 2, Side 1, of an interview recorded on the 16th of November 1989 with Henry Watson about Catalinas and it begins in five seconds.

So there you were with dawn, and further anti-aircraft fire, were you beginning to wonder whether you were going to make it back?

Oh yes, we were getting quite worried. We really moved into the praying bits. (Laughs).

Were you actually in fact religious at that time? Did you have a sort of particular view about life and a hereafter and God?

No, not really, but your superstition and all those things, I think I had a reasonable dose of those in me system somewhere. I think we all did in those days.

So what, do you have any recollection as to the nature of your prayer? Did you ...?

No, no. I can't recall, but if the Lord's about, he wouldn't have had any trouble hearing me. (Laughing).

So how long then, before the storm abated, and it seemed then you had a chance of getting back?

Oh it was quite some time because - that's right - as I recall now, even after leaving those islands, we then saw three - well, we reckon they were destroyers, but we didn't know whether they were Japs or American or whoever - and we sort of flew towards them and started flashing letters to them, with no response, and I think we sort of felt we were wasting our time, because it was pretty wild down below - I don't think we could have landed in any case, you know what I mean - and so we just decided just to keep pressing on, you know, virtually flying south and hoped to hell we'd get to New Guinea by some manner of means.

How far out were you before you realised, well, it really looked like you'd make it?

Well, I can't give you the exact time, but we must've been getting somewhere round about nine o'clock in the morning, I imagine, and we could see .... By this time we struck land again and we reckoned it was New Guinea, because we went to [inaudible] - that's no reflection on the navigator, because the difficulties were great - and we could, in this inlet, or bay, and we went down and we were going to land there, and just as we were making an approach to land we could see the Japanese invasion type barge starting to move out from the jungle - the coastline, you know what I mean. So we very quickly woke up to ourselves we weren't in the right part of the world, you know. We were up near Madang somewhere, so it was only one thing for us to do. However, at least we were pretty confident. We were, well we got to New Guinea. We were just gonna fly on until we ran out of juice.

Was there an unpleasant feeling, then, heading out over the water again, away from land?

No, because we didn't go out too far. We were, you know, we'd only a few mile off the coast really. That's strange, now you bring that to mind ... as we were flying along and, by this stage, inasmuch as we only had one gun - and I was the armourer - my job was to take control of the bow gun - the one gun - when I was there, just, you know, which is like an open cockpit, just out in the open air, and right in the front there with this one single machine-gun. And we could see from the coast, if you could imagine it, flying along say a mile out and against the shrubbery you can see an aircraft flying, which obviously is a fighter, and we didn't know whose fighter it was. And he eventually came round us and it turned out to be an American Airacobra. And he, we weren't certain that he knew who we were - we knew who he was, but we weren't too certain about whether he can ... we were - on his side or not. But he circled around and I, the arrangement was that I'd keep him in the sights and everybody else till all the recog... aircraft recognition and all that sort of thing, you know, with the result that, if you've seen an Airacobra - that's the one that has the cannon firing straight through the boss of the propeller - well, I was in an aircraft flying around with this thing sort of virtually (laughing) not exactly pointing at me, but it's the only thing I could see was virtually - what you really call lookin' down the barrel of an Airacobra's gun, you know.

(5.00) So, did he indicate that he'd seen you and ...?

No, he just sort of flew around and flew away and left us, which didn't make us too happy, and - what else did he do - that's right, he, well he, that's right, no recognition, no help at all from him, so we kept flying along and then we come to a, eventually got, we saw another bay and we could see a ship there which we thought was a Liberty ship but, you know, you're not absolutely certain. But what we did see, just alongside the coast there, was the Union Jack, which we thought, `That'll do us'. Well, we virtually landed on top of that Union Jack and happened to be the Australian navy, little survey craft and so on, so we just landed on this bay at Langemak Bay.

Was there a cheer as you touched down, or ...?

No, no 'cause we were, even though we saw the Union Jack, we still weren't certain, and, as to where we were or what sort of company we were in, and off this Liberty ship a lifeboat came out. We pulled up against the coast - or the shore, the beach - and a lifeboat from this Liberty ship came over to see us. They could see we were in trouble and we didn't know whether they were Japs or not. Now, the stern of the aircraft was, or the bow was facing straight to the shore, and I had the bow gun and I had a hell of a job trying to get that round at an angle that could keep this lifeboat in my gun sights all the time, and the first engineer, Alan Carman, had my Thompson machine-gun, and he was greeting them from the, as they approached the blister, and I think he called out to them, `Are you Australians' or whatever - something or rather of that nature. And as they turned out, they're Yanks, but the engineer, that fella happened to be an Australian, so fortunately we were able to recognise their English as friendly and so nobody pulled a trigger, but if they'd stuttered or indicated - you know, if, I suppose if they acted the fool, something like, we could've given them a lot of a flash because we were, we weren't certain where we were.

Did you celebrate then, when you finally found that you were in safe hands?

Yes, oh what really happened, the fellas, these Americans, crew off the Liberty ship, they took us aboard. We left the aircraft anchored; they assured us, but by this time we're satisfied we got home, you know, and they took us aboard the ship and, oh, we had a mighty meal, a feast, a cigar and bottles of beer and a great celebration.

Had you been in radio communication with your base at Karumba?

No, because, well we couldn't. We'd thrown most of the radio equipment out in any case, which we had to do, but once we'd got ashore, we went over to the navy then, and that's where we started making communications and letting Karumba know that we, ah, we were still about.

At that point, had they supposed then that you'd been lost?

Yeah, we were written off I'd say.

How long before you got back to base then?

Oh, well I suppose it would have been, don't know but it probably would be midday or something or other like that. I wouldn't know how long it'd take like to get the communication right through, you know.

Did you have another celebration again when you got back to base?

No, no, because we stayed, we were about a fortnight at Langemak bay, which is near Finschhafen, and nearby there there was a lot of American Liberators who had same type of motor as we had, and we went over there and got spare parts off a couple of crashed Liberators, fixed our motor and went, you know, refuelled and then flew it back to Cairns. When we got to Cairns - oh, I wouldn't say a celebration - everybody was quite happy to see you and a photographer was out. That photograph I showed you there, they took our photograph and all that sort of thing and I suppose we just went home and off to bed. Well, I think it was the next day I wasn't feeling too bright at all and I went down to the MO to complain that there was something wrong with me and, so he decided I'd, you know, had dengue or malaria. He said, `I think you better go to hospital', so up I go to, into the Cairns hospital and I get in there, and three of the other crew are in there before me with the same thing. So we, most of us got a dose of either dengue or malaria out of it.

(10.00) How long were you in hospital?

Don't know really. Well, can't recall.

Days or weeks?

Oh no, it'd only be days I imagine, probably a week.

So, how long before you were out on another mission then?

Oh, well after that just, well take a guess, I reckon probably had a week or so in hospital and after that they said, `Well you better go home and have some leave', so we went home ....

Where? Back to Melbourne you mean?

Yeah, or Geelong.

How did you come down? By train and so on? Or did you get a flight?

No, got a flight. We'd just go out to the airport, you know, just, we used to call it `bum a ride' somewhere along the track. You know, air force aircraft, and that was a quick way to get down, and the same getting back much the same way, you know.

Well, when you were back in Melbourne on leave, were there many Americans on recreational leave, or many Americans around the city and so on?

Oh no, not a great lot.

Well, what was the attitude towards the Americans in Melbourne at the time?

Oh I think, well, different people'd had different attitudes. Ah, a lot of them, because they were well uniformed, they had plenty of money and a few things like that, and obviously be a lot of people who'd be pretty jealous about that.

What about up north? What sort of view before you'd had this experience with the Liberty ship, what was your estimation of the Americans to that point? What sort of reputation did they have?

Oh I think they were pretty good. Well, any that I'd met were damn nice people.

There were some celebrated brawls involving Americans and Australians and one incident involving a couple of trains alongside each other where shots were exchanged and it became very, very willing and I think there may have even been some people wounded and killed, but were there, did you see any brawls or get involved in any hostilities with Americans?

No, no. No, because, see, I suppose our association with them they were, well eventually when we got onto mine laying, ah, we kept very close with them. I had a couple of good pals amongst them. But even when we were at Finschhafen there gathering the, ah, these spare parts and so on, they were all good co-operative sorts of fellows, helpful to us.

So, how did your family react when you ... were they expecting you? Had you been able to tell them you were coming down?

I doubt it. I was pretty, ah, anxious to make sure my mother wasn't worried and, because I think when I came home with a wing which, in general terms, I'd sort of jumped the gun a bit in terms of time, because see I went into the air force at eighteen, but before I was nineteen I was gettin' round with a half-wing and I'm an acting sergeant and all this sorts of things, you know, and when I was posted north, I know I convinced mum. I said, `Oh, don't worry about

me', I said, `I won't be doing anything that's dangerous or anything like that', mainly to, you know, put her at ease. And, 'cause, next thing, there's a photograph in the paper and the whole story is (laughing heartily) burst out everywhere saying [inaudible]. Probably worried mum a lot I imagine.

Was it an emotional return?

Oh no, no. No, that's right, 'cause I don't think I told them I was coming home, 'cause I wouldn't know when I'd be actually getting there. You'd just sort of set off, I think, and, 'cause I remember I'd got off the train and I was just in Geelong standing at the, waiting for a tram to take me back out North Geelong, and dad and another fella went past in a car and dad must've said, `That's Henry there' and they pulled up and took me home, so I hadn't told them I was coming home.

What was the reaction at the time? Was your father and your mother excited to see you, or was there that sort of traditional cultural thing that you had to be a good comic as an Australian and say, `Oh hello Henry. Would you like a cup of tea?'

That's about what it'd be. There was nothing, nothing, you know, no flag waving or any of that sort of thing. It was just a nice quiet homecoming, just come home and just go back to your unit, you know.

So when you went back, what then?

Ah, well, before you go, the, probably the only time I was a little bit, feeling a bit scared about going back, was then, which must have been arising from that particular experience, like you sort of get the feeling whether you'll be doing this sort of thing again, you know, coming back. Any case, we eventually went back and the unit, the squadron, was transferred to Darwin. That's what we were talking about and then we, that's where we start moving on this mine laying operations.

If you were feeling anxious about leaving, by that time did you know any people who had been lost on the Catalinas?

Ah, no, we hadn't lost any. No, certainly out of the group that I'd flown with, we'd all survived up to that point, yes.

(15.00) Where had your brother gone in this meantime, as a member of the armed forces?

Oh he'd been in the Middle East and back, but he was, he was up on Kokoda Trail. Matter of fact, whilst I was at Finschhafen - and I think it was the 21st Brigade, they were 9th Division people - er, we spoke to them. Well, that's where we got clothing and things off, the 9th Division, because when we, on that particular raid, we didn't have proper flying gear. I was in shoes and shorts, more like a fella goin' down Collins Street than in flying rig, 'cause all our flyin' gear was still at the squadron, because this was an emergency bombing raid that we went on, you know, with the result we had to get a lot of equipment off the - clothing rather - off the 9th Division, and whilst I was there I made inquiries about where the 2/14th Battalion would be and someone said, `Well, they should be with the 21st Brigade in there somewhere

or other', but I never tracked him down but we wouldn't have been, presumably, too far away from one another at that stage.

But you said he went on to Kokoda?

He had been up to Kokoda, he'd been on the Kokoda Trail.

Had you, by then, got a sense as to just how bad the conditions had been on the Kokoda Trail?

No, because I was still skirting the coastline really. You know, we're a flying boat, we never really got involved inland.

But what I mean, was the knowledge about what the fighting had been like on the Kokoda Trail generally around? Did people really understand how bad it had been?

Yes, because, see at Finschhafen, 'cause when we arrived there we were only seven miles this side of the front line. The Scarlet Beach battle had not long been over and we arrived seven miles on our side of the front line with enough fuel for another fifteen minutes - that's how close we were to not getting there - and with the result that the whole area there was still under, you know, military alert. Like, while we were there, we got raided a couple of times by the Japs, like bombing raids, though we counted a couple of those as well.

Did they get close to where you were? The bombs?

Oh hell yeah. Actually it was just across the bay there, what was it called...? There was an air strip there and that's what the Jap was bombing, and he just shot straight over the top of us. You could saw him go, you know. We thought, `Oh, hell, that's what we've been doing. Now they're doin' it to us'. (Laughs).

So when you went off now to get involved in mine laying, how much training did you do then before your first actual run?

Well it was virtually no training as such, because the mine laying operation basically is much the same as anything else. Other than the height factor, you're dropping these things at about 4 or 500 feet, but they're just things that just get strapped under the wings and just like a, to look at it'd be like a couple of torpedos, you know, to describe, to look at, and it's purely a matter of, for positioning them really. Ah, for example, at Balikpapan, er, the datum point was right at the end of the airstrip at Balikpapan, and right on the end of that airstrip was a gun emplacement, and that's where we had to get to fly - I can't give you the exact figures - but just say it was at 100 knots for, you know, ten seconds at so and so direction and then you press the button and drop your two mines.

What height were you doing this?

Oh, be about 4 or 500 feet.

And presumably the anti-aircraft gun would have been keen to try and turn you away from your run?

Yeah, well I'd say, at that stage anti-aircraft guns probably wouldn't be our main concern, it'd be ground guns, you know, that sort of low ranging of machine-guns would do more damage to you possibly.

Were you apprehensive about your first mine laying run? To be doing something different like that?

Oh yes, you really, mainly because I think it was so long. You, you seem to be flying into eternity, you know, to this place and I suppose it's like anything - the further you fly out you know you've got a hell of a long way to get back home - like you, I think that's the thing that gets you more than anything else really.

And you were having to keep an eye out just in case, for aircraft, through this?

Yeah. Well, even at Balikpapan, on one particular night just as we flew in to pick up our datum point, we got a hell of a fright. The whole airstrip lights went on and what happened, at that precise moment as we were making our, picking up our datum point, a Japanese fighter was coming in to land. They put on the lights for their fighter, so, that's what's known as getting rather close! (Laughing).

(20.00) Um, well, again as far as getting rather close with the ground fire, did you get struck at all by stray bullets, even if not ...?

No, no, we were lucky. We missed out. Just might have been the target we had, you know, but other aircraft - one of them in particular, Don Eddie's - was shot down over Balikpapan.

Did you know the crew of that particular aircraft?

Oh, you know, they were one of the crews that we'd went to Karumba with. We were on course together at Rathmines.

Did that make it all, the possibility of going down seem a lot more real? Did it put the wind up you at all?

Oh yes, yes. That became absolutely real then.

So how many mine laying runs did you do?

Oh, half a dozen or more, might have been more, might have been eight. I don't know, I'd have to have a look.

Were you pleased, was it the sort of job you were pleased not to be doing? Or how would you feel about it?

Oh no. It was no worse job than the others, probably even thought it may have, if anything, may have been a bit safer.

Why is that?

Well, unless you're over a target, particularly after a place like Kavieng, when you know that you can get caught with a, you know, you might have got 100 - not 100, but twenty - ack-ack guns all having a go at you, whereas at low level you've just got a chance, better chance of getting out of the way quicker.

Your log makes reference to low level bombing and air gunnery. What were those sort of missions about?

Oh I think possibly you may have been looking at the training side of it rather than the actual, 'cause most of the bombing would be that reasonable high level, each like bomb site bombing, you know.

So, did you ever have occasion where you were actually using your gun and shooting at targets on the ground?

No. The, well the point is, it is a thing you avoided. Unless you could usefully employ yourself, there's no point in giving yourself away with gunfire.

Well, by this time, you'd now had quite a number of flights. You'd had an aircraft that had been damaged. Were you back in the same aircraft?

Had flown in that one again, yes.

Did you feel a sense of attachment towards it? Was it as if it was almost, well one can tend to have to almost attribute a personality to an old car. Did you tend to do that?

Oh exactly that, yes.

Did you have a nickname for it?

No, no. It's own name, or sign name, was the squadron numbers, were OX and that particular one was OXA, and A24-40 was its number. It was really what's known as the CO's kite, it was his aircraft in terms of who owns what, you know. So that was the one he was supposed to love.

Would you, or did you have any superstitions about it? I mean, at the end of a flight would you give it a pat and say, `Well done', or ...?

Oh no, no, never spoke to it that much. (Laughing).

Um, what about air trouble, or motor trouble, on any of the flights? Did you have to abort at any time?

No, no, it was very ... no, we got out of it very well. Poss..., the only biggest trouble would be coming on a long drag back from, well say Balikpapan to Yampi Sound, and you strike a head

wind or something like that, and then it starts to get a bit scary, because you're just out in the middle of the ocean and it's just a matter of whether you're gonna make the distance or not, you know, fuel wise.

What about targets at sea? Did you ever have occasion to attack enemy shipping?

Yes, we did one particular attack which was - well, it may have even been successful. This was a place called [Sulanangole ?] and our instructions were to be there or - not to be there - but a convoy was to pull up there round about 11 o'clock that night. This would be our spy people that were telling us this, and we were to find this convoy and bomb them on, you know, round about midnight or something or other like that, but wait till about, you know, after eleven at night. Any case, off we went - and I can still see this one quite clearly, 'cause you're looking down from about 10,000 feet at night, you know, trying to recognise something - and we're flying over and we can see 'em and we said, `That's them'. We all felt - the whole lot of us had a look - quite convinced we'd found them. So we just gently floated away, you know, and we turned around and we came back then, got ourselves ready, like `give this lot a good old plaster'. Well, hell, they were asleep when we went over the first time. They were all up and active by the time we got there. They let everything fly at us and because we'd dropped our bombs, ah, we think we hit one, but we're not certain, and .... But one of the main traps was that one of the ships that was there was a destroyer or cruiser, and that's the one, he was right alongside the coast, you know what I mean? We didn't see him. We just thought we had, oh I think it was about ten, er freighters, you know, which ....

(25.00) Well what would be the approach with something like that? Would you try and ... was it possible to even contemplate picking out a particular ship, or was the height such you'd try and concentrate on the middle sections, hoping you'd hit something?

No, what you'd call sort of pattern bomb 'em. It's a 'hope to hell' exercise, really, but you know, you got er, I dunno, probably only got about eight bombs on board I suppose of the type needed and so you'd pattern them - they used to call it the Mickey Mouse - they'd just sort of go one after the other, you know, just went bang, bang, like that ... and hope to hell you get them. And on that particular night there was three aircraft sent out. Well, we were the ones that found them first, and this other aircraft - I don't know who it was; one of the engineers' name was Bill Skinner. They were out there looking for it and all of a s... they saw hell breaking loose along the coast there a bit, and they said, `Oh hell, that must be them', so up they went and they found them also, you know. And they hopped into them the same way as we did.

You said there was a destroyer that at first you hadn't spotted.

Mm. Oh, we didn't recognise it as a destroyer, right over the side, you know what I mean. Not that it would have made any difference, but that's where most of this gunfire was coming from, you know, 'cause we went in pretty low - I forget what height we went in at, wouldn't be too high - and that's right, 'cause damn it all, that's right, you could virtually see them on the decks, those gun crews, you know what I mean?

What time in the ... this is near midnight?

Yeah.

How illuminated would the ships be with the aircraft fire and so on?

Not greatly. It's, you know yourself, sometimes you can go out of an evening or night-time and you think it's dawn. You don't have ... for some reason your visibility, or your ability to see things, is amazing really - even though it is dark.

So after you'd delivered that one load of bombs, it was off and away then was it?

Mm.

And you did convoy escorts?

I did one of those. That was out from Cairns. Must've been that time we were over there - that's right, I think it was when we came back from Finschhafen back to Cairns. It must have been there, so they keep you busy and they say get us out on a convoy.

Well, what were the expectations? What were you supposed to do?

Well that was a ... you're searching for submarines, that's the objective of the thing, keeping well away from the convoy - keeping it in sight, you know what I mean - but trying to keep them covered and with any luck let 'em know of a submarine or surface vessels.

And if you spotted a submarine? What would you, what could you conceivably do?

Oh well. We would either, we'd possibly armed with depth charges or bombs. Depths charges preferably, but ....

Did you have practice runs at letting go of depth charges?

No, for no other reason than that would be just wasting depth charges, you know, but we'd know what to do with them. They were just like a bomb, just, ah, bombs, well you can have time bombs, all those sort ... there are all sorts of varieties of things that you can, you can have.

What was the supposition then about effectively how deep you could have a submarine and still spot it?

I don't know, because it's very difficult to tell. The depth of water can make a hell of a difference, even the nature of the water. You know, I've seen, even at a place like Rathmines, I've seen sharks - you can see them swim - and they look like a submarine; and even in Macquarie Harbour - or is it Macquarie Harbour, er Lake Macquarie - you could see them and then on this particular convoy we did the sea was so wild and rough there'd be hardly an opportunity for a submarine to operate, even if you did find him, you know what I mean?

And how effective would depth charges be, again in terms of how far down they might go?

Oh well, there again, it's just a matter of your setting, that you, 'cause depth charges are certainly sub-killers. It's just a matter of getting close enough to them. You don't have to hit them, you've just got to get close enough.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1.

START TAPE 2, SIDE 2.

Identification: This is Side 2, Tape 2, of the interview recorded on the 16th of November 1989 with Henry Watson about Catalinas and resumes in five seconds from now.

So, where did you fit the depth charges and how were they handled? In what way were they different to looking after bombs as ...?

Oh they'd be on the bomb racks just the same.

What did they look like?

Just like a forty-four gallon drum type of thing, you know.

And they were primed as they fell out of the aircraft, in the same way as the bombs?

Yes. Well, they worked on, you know, I guess hydro-static pressure, you know water pressure. That's, they seemed a pretty complicated sort of an arrangement, the depth charge firing mechanism, but it was purely a matter of water pressure.

Was there any apprehension about carrying them? That air pressure might in some way inadvertently trigger them or anything?

No, no. The only thing that I was ever a bit apprehensive about carrying would be the mines. They were the only thing that would probably really be a worry.

Why? What was the worry about them?

Well, they were very very sensitive. They were two types; there was magnetic operation and acoustic. The magnetic side of it was so touchy and precise. I can remember these fellas tell if you walked past one that was set with a spanner in your pocket it'd go. That's how sensitive they were, you know.

Were there ever any accidents involving them?

No, but the main thing about them was in an aircraft that - oh the mine itself, it was kept unarmed by a thing known as a salt washer. It just held a pin out, as I say, like a salt washer behind it. That's like a life saver. You know the candy with a hole in it? Well it's just made

of salt, and that was that washer there and this pin would be all spring-loaded, and when the mine got into the water the salt washer'd dissolve, the spring'd take over and it'd then become armed.

Was there any concern that in humid climates the salt might dissolve or ...?

There was no conc... not concern as much, but if you, it's the sort of thing, just as you say, that'd go through your mind, you know - could moisture get in, or an aircraft in rough landing and things like that splash around and, you know, moisture get into the thing. And we'd be choofing along there and all of a sudden this thing becomes armed - unknown to us - 'cause it's too far, it's out on the wing. There's nothing you can do about it once it's out there.

What was the convoy you were escorting?

I think it was just a supply convoy. It was accompanied by a couple of navy frigates, but oh only about half a dozen or so ships.

Was there any prospect that you mightn't find it as you set out to cover it?

The convoy?

Mm.

Oh no, there'd be no doubt about finding the convoy. That's easy enough.

And so how long would you effectively keep in track with the convoy?

Oh I'd imagine it'd keep us there all day long I would think.

(5.00) Was that the sort of flight that you didn't relish, or was it again just a different sort of challenge?

Oh no. That'd be one of the worst types of flights really, because, well, you've got to be alert all the time because if there is a sub, and you missed it, you wouldn't feel too happy about it and it's just a thing. It can only just pop up. It's not, they're not gonna appear on the horizon like the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth* and stay there for half a day. It'd be just a, you're trying to find a periscope, or maybe a coning tower.

Were there any false alarms? Did you ever hear of people who though they'd found a submarine and they'd bombed, depth charged a whale or anything of that sort?

Not that I've heard of, but I could well imagine it happening.

Your log also makes mention of secret missions. What were they?

Well they were principally things carried out to, in conjunction with the army, in, oh I suppose you'd call 'em spies, coastwatchers and chaps like that, that were out in these islands and the squadron's jobs was to either pick them up or deliver them as required.

Well in your case, you had a couple of those missions. What was involved?

Well, I think there was only one that I actually went onto, and our - the exercise - we were to go to this island, which I can't recall where now, and at a certain time there'd be three fires would be lit and if the three fires were lit we were to land and pick up personnel, by some manner of means - they'd get out to us in the aircraft - and bring them back to base.

Well, the fire suggested it'd be at night. What was supposed, would be the means by which they'd be able to find you if you did land on the water?

Oh they would be, it would be just like on a point or something like that. You wouldn't be, these fires wouldn't be miles apart. We'd almost land as near as we could to where these three fires were, you know.

One might suppose there'd be a bit of anxiety with that. I mean, it sounds as though obviously there could be Japanese in the area and when you're on the water ....

Well it'd be a hairy exercise for no reason at all, just landing at night without the aid of a flare path. That in itself is a, you know, fraught with all sorts of difficulties.

How would you assess the sea in that sort of circumstance? A matter of flying down as close as possible and looking at it?

You look at it, that's right.

But in this case you didn't land?

No, because the fires were never lit, which means that the people either didn't get to the agreed spot or, you know, your imagination can go anywhere from there on really, but they didn't turn up.

Do you know of any crews who went out on those sort of flights and didn't come back?

No, no. We all survived.

Or any particular stories of crews who did go out and pick up people of any particular interest on that?

No. I can remember bringing back an army captain one time to Darwin. We had a hell of a party - for him - which was (laughing) a super party.

In what way?

Oh I think somebody got on to a barrel of rum from somewhere and this army fellow presumably had been in the jungle for quite some time, and he was in a real party mood. (Laughs).

Did you ever get to find out what it was that he was doing? Or was it just taken that you wouldn't talk about it?

No, no, no. Well, you just didn't inquire. That was doin' the right thing, you know.

To this point, there must have been some consideration of the possibility, due to aircraft failure, or that you were hit, that you may be picked up by the Japanese. Um, were you briefed at all about what may happen, or what would be expected of you?

No, not at all. No, I think it was just once you got there it was up to yourself, you know.

Did the crew ever discuss it?

No. We must have presumed we weren't gonna get caught.

Well, would you imagine that if such an event had occurred that you would try and destroy the aircraft, or what would you suppose you'd do?

I think - and it's, you know, it's all in retrospect now - certainly anything on the aircraft that would, ah, conceivably of any use to the enemy, you'd certainly make sure you'd do your best to destroy that. But as far as trying to be taken prisoner, I don't think we had any intention of bein' taken prisoner. You'd be tryin' like hell, by some manner of means, to avoid that, which would be just going bush I imagine.

Well, human nature being what it is, we all have good and bad days with crew often together in, you know, arduous circumstances for very long periods. Were there any fallings out? Any fights or arguments or bitterness?

No, no. no. We were pretty disciplined in that regard I think.

(10.00) Well, were there some potential fallings out and people just recognised that had to put it aside them? Or did you generally get on pretty well?

No, we got on pretty well together, really. We ....

Were there crews did fall out? Were there any ...?

Oh there'd be no doubt that you'd have to have that problem somewhere. We were just happened to be very lucky. Well even as a crew now, that ten men that were involved, just recently we had a reunion - crew reunion - up in Alice Springs where we all turned up for that and with our wives. We reckon it was, reckon they're all great people.

You also had the potential, I suppose, in any groups of people, to develop an us and them mentality. There's us, and where it's happening, and we know what needs to be done; and they, who are either the ground crew or the people who draw up the missions, really don't understand. Was there any of that?

No, because, I think the air force might be a bit unique, but the CO would be, well he was obviously the boss. He would be out on flights as much as anyone else. It wasn't a matter of sitting on his bottom sending people. He'd be one of the people involved in the raid and, generally speaking, those secret missions, it was usually the CO's crew that did that.

> Well what about the supply side of it? Did you ever have occasions where due to the nature of bureaucracy within the forces you wouldn't get equipment that you needed, or whether it was clothing or replacement parts or this or that?

No, mainly because things changed very very dramatically when I got to Karumba first and went out on the first raid. We were issued with a revolver and twelve rounds of ammunition which was, I reckon, in the event of bein' shot down, that was our personal armament protection, and when you came back off the raid you had to hand in the revolver and the twelve rounds of ammunition. If there was eleven, you'd have to `Please explain' you know. By the time - where would I be, oh, no, even by the time we got on to Karum... ah, Kavieng raid, that's right - things had changed so much then that I'd been issued with a Tommy gun and about a dozen rounds of ammunition, and as much ammunition as you wanted, you know what I mean? So, all of a sudden, what was, you know, very meagre supplies just being turned into an avalanche of materials so there was tons of it.

> Just before the end of the war, what was the general sort of sense about where the war was going and the expectations as to ...? Was there a feeling it could get dragged on or, because of the successes in the Pacific, that it was felt, `Well, it won't be long now'?

No, I think by the time I was just about ready to leave the squadron, the big raid had taken place in Europe - I think this is, you know, these thousand bomber raids and so on - in other words, we were starting to win the war in Europe - certainly the air war - and seemed to have a general feeling that we were winning the air war against the Japs. They, instead of, they weren't being as aggressive as they were initially. You know, you'd go to target and you never really thought that much that you'd be encountering aircraft, of the anti-aircraft, that had been your main worry, you know.

> In Europe the experience had been, particularly with bomber crews, that after a certain number of flights it was expected that, you know, you wouldn't be there any more. Was that sort of information getting back? I mean, was there any sense that, you know, you could only expect to reasonably survive a certain number of flights with the Catalinas?

No, although when we, er, commenced our mining operations, the - that's right, that was in Darwin - and we were, a whole lot, there was all crews, were all put in this great mess hall, and we had a lecture by what we're going about - what it was all about - this mine laying operations and what its purpose was and they told us then that they expected to lose a third of us. That was expected, that's what they expected out of those particular missions, you know. But they were measuring it up. Say, well, a third of us, if we do the job properly, we could probably save a division of AIF, you know. So, that's the way it was said to us really.

> Did a third seem to allow you a pretty large safety measure? Or was it a fairly sobering thought?

Oh no. It sort of frightens hell out of your nerve, 'cause you'd just try to work out which third you think you're gonna be in, you know. (Laughs). And, well see, even to ours, see four crews, we left 3 OTU together - Rathmines - and went to the squadron. Now one of our crew, one crew was cleaned up. Well it's ten - you lose twenty-five per cent of our forty you know, in that alone.

(15.00) How did you get to hear what happened to them?

Our fellas?

Mm.

Oh I was in a hut the night the other crews came back. We weren't on that raid. We were going out the next night, and couple of fellas - oh, a bloke that slept opposite me - he'd been on there. He reckoned he saw 'em go down in flames. He was pretty upset, you know, 'cause he'd actually witnessed his friends' aircraft going down in flames, you know.

Would that leave you with the sense that suddenly it's all more real, and you may go? Or would you feel that, `well, now there's that percentage gone. The chances for us are better'?

No, no. I don't think you'd mention it that way. It was - funny, we were just talking about that particular crew too - 'cause one of a good friend of mine went down with that crew, a fella named Doug Hoffman, and he was so close a friend that, ah, I and another fella allotted the task of goin' through his kit bag and so on, prior to returning the personal things to his parents, you know. So, you know, it's pretty touching when you get that closely involved with someone, you know.

Did it affect you emotionally at the time? Or was there a matter of, because there was a war on, somehow or other putting things away and just getting on with it?

Oh it does. You put it aside for some reason, I don't know. It's got to be something to do with youth, you know, things that you tolerate if you like when you're a youngster. You know, when you get forty or fifty, you'd be weighing this up quite differently, you know.

So where were you when you heard that the war had ended?

Oh, by that I was up in Lake Boga by then. That was a long way from the war.

What were you doing there?

That was a flying boat repair depot, up in, near Swan Hill. That was Number 1 Flying Boat Repair Depot, used to repair the aircraft there.

What had taken you there? Had it been decided you'd flown enough missions? Or ...?

Yes, that's right. Once I'd finished what they call a tour - that means that you're finished as far as flying's concerned.

How did you feel about that? Was it sort of reassuring, or in a way were you sorry to leave it?

Oh no, God, soon as I got sent up to Nhill, then to do a fitter's course, soon as I got to Nhill I went round to ... I wanted to get back up north flying. Wanted to know what the hell could be done about it, you know. I remember the old - he wasn't the CO - he was the station administrative officer, and he was an old first world war pilot - a nice old fella - and he did everything he possibly could, 'cause he knew what I was about, to get me back into the flying game again. But by that time they'd virtually started to stop training air crews and so on. That was they had more than they wanted so that was virtually at an end, you know, even the training.

So, what were you actually doing at the moment ...? How did the news get to you?

Oh. I've got no idea, can't recall.

Was there a celebration, can you recall?

Yes. We, er, we finished up in Melbourne. They've loaded trucks and God knows what in these trucks and headed down to, you know, back of semis, from Lake Boga to Melbourne. We had a, bit of actin' the fool there. Then, I don't know ...

Bit of a party in the truck? (Laughing).

(Laughing). General fun and games, you know.

How, well what about your very last flight in the Catalina. When was that, do you recall?

That would be, last time I was in a Catalina flying would be from Darwin probably out to, on a bombing raid or something of that nature.

Did you know it was to be your last flight?

No, although I knew that I had my twenty-one raids up, and twenty-one raids or nine months was the usual pattern, you know.

Was there any feeling that, `Oh, this is the last one. My luck could change'? Did you feel almost home and hosed?

Yeah, I reckon I sorta felt that way, but I'll be a little bit superstitious. All those sorts of silly things'd be goin' through your mind, you know.

Did you carry a charm? Did people, were they superstitious to the point of maybe taking a rabbit's paw or any of those sort of things that you, fellows you knew?

No, although I will admit myself on, I think it was the first raid I went out, I left me with the square dead meat tickets behind. You know, used to have 'em round your neck?

The metal tags?

Yeah. For some reason - I didn't realise I'd left them behind - but after that I wouldn't fly with the damn things on again.

Were people generally a little bit superstitious like that, do you think?

Oh yes, some of them, you know, had a good dose of it, yes.

Well, with the war's end, how long before members started to make contact and there was the sense, well maybe you had something there that was worth keeping and that you'd get together again in some sort of club or association?

Oh, it was almost immediately, really, because the Catalinas, there was ... I was up at Lake Boga and there was some fellas they called a club. They called it the Bogaphobians, which was the old Catalina people. Then others formed a Catalina Club and that was almost straight after the war. Somebody got cracking and, well, I've been a member of the Club all the way through.

(20.00) So how active is it? How often is there something happening that you're involved with?

Oh it'd be at least twice a year now. There's always the ANZAC reunion. We invariably have a reunion at Point Cook, a memorial service and we've, each state has got a club - a Catalina Club group - and we've even formed a national committee and have, ah, we've put up a memorial at Lake Boga, Cairns, Rathmines, oh and a couple of other places that, you know, as a club, a memorial to our fellas.

Apart from the friendship involved with people who were in a very particular form of activity, is there a sense of sentiment about the nature of the Catalina itself?

Oh yes. We, er, I don't know how to put it. I think the unique thing about us, compared with, possibly a lot of other air force personnel, is that if you sort of got on to Catalinas, you stayed there. Now, in my case I started off with, say with Spitfires, then I went on to Catalinas, then flew in Catalinas, then went into maintenance on Catalinas, so I never ever left them, know what I mean? And it got that way if you pulled into any Catalina station, you'd find somebody that you knew. They all seemed to, you know, stick.

Incidentally, talking of maintenance, having been a member of an air crew where the importance of maintenance would be very real to you, did you ever

find with ground crew who'd not flown that occasionally you'd have to, you'd feel the need to say, `Look', you know, `this is really very serious stuff'.

Oh, you get, well you would, you'd get a couple of absolute idiots. I can remember one bloke there I bloody near donged him because of his attitude towards his job, you know what I mean? He just didn't care. Like, as far as I was concerned, he was damn stupid, but ninety-nine point nine per cent of them were dinkum, you know, in the quality of their work and so on, and particularly their officers, leaders were all top class, engineering types.

Well, with all that, when did you last actually see a Catalina?

Truly one? (Laughs). Only a couple of years ago. There's one out at Essendon, a Catalina, it's still there.

Did you go out to see it or was it just chance?

No, just cha... oh, well, I'd heard about it, I'd seen it there. But I understand now - this is only just current - that that aircraft has now been acquired either by the air force or by some manner of means, and it will be moved from Essendon to Point Cook and will form part of the core at Point Cook museum - aircraft museum.

When you went out to see it, did it give you a charge? Was there something sort of happened there?

Oh it is. Well, there was another one incidentally. Up at Lake Boga there's a, some fellas up there, they've found bits and pieces and they've put an aircraft together. It's missing the motor, but the hull, the main plane and tail plane, all those parts are still there, and just recently we had a, you know, dedication service.

Well when you went back and saw that first one again at Essendon after a stretch, did it sort of bring it all back a bit?

Oh it is. You just look at them and, you know, you just see the magnificence of the machine, particularly the one when you look at up at Lake Boga. That hasn't got the motors as yet, but you can see where the motors would be attached, you know, to the mountings, and I think there's only about eight engine bolts hold that engine on. When I looked at that, and I can see those eight bolts, and I thought, `And we flew for eleven hours with one engine hangin' on by eight engine bolts'. That was the difference between us bein' around for - talkin' to you now and not talking.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2.

END OF INTERVIEW