



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	Pash, Martin Louis (First Grade Steward) Merchant Navy
Interviewer	Martin, Harry
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Description	Martin Louis Pash, as a First Grade Steward, Merchant Navy, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is tape one, side one of an interview about merchant seamen recorded with Martin Pash on 10th January 1990 and it begins in five seconds from now.

Martin Pash, where and when were you born?

I was born in Port Melbourne.

When was that?

In 1922 on 31st December.

Tell us a little bit about your family, what did your father do and a bit about your mother?

Well, me father was a stevedore up to the '28 strike and he went fish - hawking then from there on until the war broke and he went back to the waterfront then - you were meant to go back - and he more or less stopped there until his retirement days.

What sort of a person was your mother?

A very fine woman she was.

Were they religious people?

No. No, just everyday person that's all.

A large family?

No, I'm the only boy.

What about politics, was there an interest in the social issues of the time? The waterfront at Melbourne has long had a close involvement with social issues. Was your father concerned about the issues at the time?

Oh well, he was but he ... when the strike was on he just hopped away from the wharf - he wouldn't work with scabs.

So what sort of childhood was it for you? How do you remember it? Were they hard times?

Well, I think we had a better time then than what we have now. I was allowed to do what I wanted to do. As a matter of fact I used to go to the market with me father at half past five in the morning with fish from the fishermen then buy them back over the counter and come down back here and sell 'em.

How old were you then?

I was about eight years of age when me father used to do that.

Were they bread and dripping days?

Yes, correct. Fried bread; bread and dripping. Had to go out for susso hand-outs from the Government.

It was also a period, I think, when a lot of people were being evicted from homes because they just no longer had the money to pay the rent or keep their homes. Did you see that sort of thing happen around you?

Yes. Well, that happened to us. When the '28 strike come we was buying a house up in Esplanade East and we couldn't keep the payments up so we just got put out of the house.

What do you remember about that? How did it happen? What are your recollections of the event?

Well, because of the strike and then more or less things were getting a bit tough as regards to the start of the depression, the thin edge of the wedge of the depression, and we had to go and rent a house down here in Graham Street.

Do you recall the actual day of the eviction itself, what happened?

Yes. In 1931 when we was put out.

But tell us about it. How do you remember it happening? What happened?

Well the agent just told me mother and father that if you can't keep your payments up that we've got to evict you. And naturally we got a place, we rented a place and shifted out.

Just tell us about the day itself? Can you remember, did people come along, did police come along to suppose the bailiffs or how did it go?

Oh no, no. It was nothing like that. All I done is ... all we done is just got out when we could.

So you just took your own things out.

Yeah.

But there were families in those days being forcibly evicted.

That's correct.

Yeah. Did you have friends had that happen to them?

Yes, a couple of friends but I just can't think of their names at present.

Port Melbourne, it seems, has always had a very special sort of sense of community that's been quite a distinctive one. Do you recall was that sort of feeling? Was it a very supportive community?

It was. Everyone helped one another. Anyone in trouble someone else would come along and try and give you a help out or anything like that.

So where did you go to school?

I went to the little Albert Park School over here in Pickles Street, South Melbourne, and then I went from there, me mother took me out of that because of the headmistress because I never qualified for high enough in exams. I got about twelve cuts and she put me out and took me up to Nott Street School there and I finished me schooling there.

(5.00) What were the cuts for?

Well, because of not getting good results in exams, the yearly exam.

Was the strap used fairly liberally in those days?

Yes, they were.

Did you often get it?

I got it a few times. But this Miss Boddy she was ... any mother that had children down there always had complaints about of what they used to get for nothing.

What sort of things did you used to do in the area as a kid to get away and just enjoy yourself with the waterfront so close? Did you fish and that sort of thing?

No. [inaudible] I used to go out with a fisherman - they still exist. You used to go out long-lining for snapper and ...

They're a professional fishing family who lived quite close by aren't they?

Yeah. And I had a good boyhood day. I played a bit of cricket, football, whatever was going on at the time.

When you were going to school, what did you see yourself doing? Did you have any particular sort of sense of where you were going in life?

No, I thought that I might have been able to be a motor mechanic; that's what me mind was set for. And the baker I used to run around with delivering bread, I was down in *Aroona* one day and he said, 'How would you like a job here?'. I said, 'All right' and I took it on. And it was from then onwards is when I went to sea.

That was at a bakery, did you say? Sorry.

No, delivering bread to the ship like, he was in his bread cart and I used to go, you know, as a kid, go around and deliver the bread and that and we'd go down and do it to the ships and all.

So how long were you delivering bread?

Oh, on and off of a morning, trying to catch it more or less for the ride.

So your first actual job was working on the *Wyoona*, was it?

No, the *Aroona*.

Aroona, sorry.

A paddle boat she was.

How did that come about? What was the arrangement, what were you going to be doing and what was to be your pay and so on?

Well, I was cadet steward there. I had two jobs to do and me monthly pay was nine pound a month.

And how old were you?

I was thirteen and a half.

So as a cadet, what did that imply? Did you have to serve a certain period as a cadet and learn certain things or ...?

That's true. Just like an apprentice and come up through the ranks that way.

What were the sort of things that you began to do as a cadet?

I used to have to take teas up to the bridge - the officers, engineers - and any passengers on the deck want tea or coffee, that I used to have to get their money, take it d wn, get the ticket and take it back up to them.

What about accommodation? What sort of arrangements were there for you?

Oh well, the ship used to be in port every night and we'd just go home and then come back next morning.

Where was it sailing to then?

Down to Queenscliff, Sorrento, Portarlington which the picnickers would go to, and also Mornington.

Did you enjoy it?

Yes, it was a good life.

So how long did you do that?

Well, she only used to run during the summer months and I was there five or six years on and off. But in the meantime I used to go to ... I got a job outside the edge and come back and rejoined the ship again.

What about in the winter months?

Well, I used to work in the hotels or the cafes in town. [Gibbie's?] Cafe was the most one. I worked in Hotel Australia. One year in the winter I, like what we used to call S and A [inaudible] down there, the biscuit factory. And then after that year on the *Aroona* I couldn't find work so me father got me selling fish ... going around fish, helping around them round the different ones.

You said something about you got a job going out through the Heads. What was that?

It was on the *Taroona*.

And what did you do on that?

I was a cadet there, cadet steward.

So where was that going?

Tasmania, to Launceston.

Right. So you were sleeping of course in the *Taroona* ... sorry, the ...

Taroona.

Taroona. You were sleeping in the *Taroona*?

That's right. We had our own accommodation.

What was the accommodation like?

Oh, it was all right where we were. She's a modern ship, she's only four year old, five year old then.

Well, how many to a cabin and so on?

Ah well, four, six, like of stewards. All the firemen and sailors slept aft. We slept forehead where the bosun was. The officers in the midship; engineers in the midship part.

How was the food?

All right. Very good.

So how did a day go? What was your routine? What time of the morning would you have to get up and start your day?

Well, the night-watchman come around and wake us up at half past five of a morning, just turn to at six o'clock.

And then do what?

Oh, if there's any shake ... what they call shakedowns when we get extra passengers they'd make up beds in the dining room and that and we'd have to clear them out ready to run breakfast.

(10.00) After breakfast?

Well, we had odds and end jobs, cleaning up toilets or things like that; anything that come under the heading of stewart we'd do.

You'd serve on the tables and so on?

That's correct.

Did you get tipped, were people tipping in those days?

Oh, not that much. You were lucky if you got a deener as the saying goes.

So what time would your day finish?

Well, ... you'd finish about seven o'clock at night. You'd have your hour off for breakfast and lunch and if you was on watch you'd go off at seven o'clock and come back at eight o'clock till ten o'clock at night.

What was the relationship like in those days between the captain and crew? Was it a very formal authoritarian manner or ... what was it like?

Oh it was all right. All depends on what ship you was on.

Well, on the *Taroona* in particular?

Yeah, he was all right, Captain Huntley. He was a gentleman.

What about relations between the crew and passengers, were you told that you oughtn't fraternise or were there any particular rules about that?

Yes. The crew weren't to mix with passengers or anything like that. The crew was just to keep to their own quarters and do their work.

What if a passenger just stopped you and engaged you in conversation, would you get into trouble?

Oh no, no. You'd just explain to them whatever they asked and if you could help 'em, you'd tell 'em.

And when you arrived at the other end, in Tasmania, how long would you spend there?

Oh, we might get there at eight o'clock in the morning and have to sail on the tide, say at one o'clock. It could be half past four at night, all depends on how the tide was.

So was it pretty tiring then with that sort of turnaround?

Oh no. You get used ... being young you get used to it. We used to have to do three trips a week during the summer months and two trips during the winter months.

Going out through the heads and then into Bass Strait it can be pretty really rough. Did you strike any rough weather?

Oh I've struck it, yes.

Did you get seasick at all?

No, I've never been sick in all the time I've been at sea.

What about passengers?

Oh yeah ... most of them were sick and you'd have to go and clean up after them.

Was there any remedy, I mean, was there anything you could offer to people that would sort of help them feel a bit better?

No, you just couldn't. They just had to more or less live with it.

What was the worse trip across Bass Strait can you recall any particularly bad one?

Oh, I've been ... yes, there's one where she was about two hours late getting in. We had to alter course to try and keep her steady.

How big were the seas?

Pretty high. They'd come right over the top of the ship when she put her head into it.

Was it bad enough that you felt a bit worried that maybe the ship would go under?

I know I had any of that ... worried about anything like that.

You said anyway after the *Aroona* there was hard time getting work and your father got you work again selling fish?

That's correct. I used to go down and serve all the Jews down in St Kilda and clean the fish for 'em and also round here. Go to hotels and raffle a crayfish or two to get a deener which strictly weren't like they are now.

What were the hotels like in Port Melbourne in those days?

They were very good.

There'd also been some fairly celebrated brawls and things at times?

Well, that was not actually Port Melbourne lads, it was the passenger ships from England, the crew like. They'd get drunk and start fighting amongst themselves on the waterfront.

Did you ever see any of those big brawls?

Yes, I've seen 'em.

Well, tell us about some of them?

Oh well, they'd punch one another till one dropped and so on.

Did you ever get caught up in any of these fracas?

No. I was always well away from ... all kids were told to keep well away from ... just watch from a distance.

So then how long were you selling fish again before you were able to get back to sea?

Ah, only for that week when I went back to ... the *Aroona* and then after that, that's when I ... the *Taroona* was the first ship outside the Heads.

So then you were going across Bass Strait. What was your next ship?

Oh, the next ship was the *Dundula* one of the Adelaide Company's ships.

What sort of ship was that?

Just a cargo ship.

Big? Small?

Ah, 5000 tonner, not a huge ship. It was built in the first war.

What were they like? Were they a clean ship or rather run down or ....

Oh well, they were getting run down but you could help that after the years that they've been going.

And where was that running to?

Oh, she went everywhere. To Western Australia with steel; we'd go to Whyalla for iron ore or Tasmania to get limestone; up north for sugar.

(15.00) How far up north?

Ah, as far as Cairns. And coming back on trip we come, it was good weather on the New South Wales side of the Gabo Island and when we come around Gabo we were still going past it the next day. You could still see the Gabo light.

Well, why did it take so long?

Well, we was into a head stiff breeze - westerly - and the ship more or less couldn't battle it's way through the seas because of the force.

So what were you at this time, what sort of jobs did you have?

I was second steward, like, second grade steward then.

Which meant what? What did you do?

Well, I looked after the engineers, waited on the table or in the pantry washing up, or helping the chief steward to dish out the required meals for them.

What was a fairly standard fare? What would they get for breakfast?

Oh bacon and eggs, lamb's fry or chops plus cereal ... porridge or cereal.

And lunch?

Lunch, well, that was just you'd get an entree of all different, what do you call it, cold meat and a sweet.

And dinner?

Well, dinner, they had any sort of roast that was going by the cook like it might be roast beef, it might be roast pork.

So it sounds like the food overall wasn't too bad?

No, not as far as I was concerned all the ships that I was in.

What type of accommodation did you have in that ship?

Oh, it was all right but, as I say, she was an old ship and you just had to put up with the conditions.

What were the conditions? What were you putting up with?

Oh well, she was an old ship and she was all right, clean and everything, just that you had to put up with the conditions of the quarters and that.

What were the quarters like? How many to a ...?

Only two of us: first grade steward and meself, second grade.

How old were you by this time?

Ah, I'd be about fourteen after fifteen then.

Had you formed ... got any particular mates or was it a bit lonely as a young boy?

No, oh no. We all mixed together. Go ashore together. Go up the pub, well, the pub didn't worry me about drinking. As a matter of fact they used to give me their money to look after till next morning.

Did you drink at that age?

No. Only sarsaparilla or lemonade, that's all.

There has been a bit of tradition in many industries of initiating young boys in one way or another, were there any processes of initiation for you?

Not was far as me. I was never told to do this or do that, like, as a fool because I was more or less a wake up to all of these sort of things. But there was ... they'd send down for the left-handed spanner or something like that and different things like that, the young ones.

Was it all a bit of an adventure for you then at that age, sailing to these different ports that you hadn't been before?

Oh no. I liked the life at sea and wherever the ship went to.

So how long did you stay on that ship then?

I was in that ship for about, oh, about six months. She laid up ... we board down and she laid up in Sydney and I come back to Melbourne and there was a ship going on the ... a job going on the *Age*. She used to cart coal to the West Melbourne gas works.

From where?

From Newcastle. Her nickname was the '*Smith's Weekly*' because there was a paper at that time called the *Smith's Weekly* and she wanted a steward and I took her away. I thought, 'Well, if I take her up to Newcastle I haven't got far to go to Sydney to join my own ship again'.

Why had you missed your own ship?

No. Like, I mean, she was laid up.

Oh, I see.

And by me going there was a shorter distance and coming from Melbourne to Sydney to join the ship again.

As a young boy in a ship how would you be addressed if people wanted you? Would they call you by your name or was there ...?

No, they'd just call you steward.

Steward.

Yeah. And when we was getting near Newcastle I gave me notice to say that I was leaving the ship and Captain Jones, his name was, a really old tower of salt he was in the sailing ship days, I had to go up to the bridge to see the captain and he read me the, more or less, the riot act of what had happened and all this, that you can't do this and can't do that if anything happened when you went ashore. I told him, 'I knew all that, Captain'.

What sort of things weren't you allowed to do when you went ashore?

Well, no, this is when you get someone off a ship, see. They weren't ... if they sacked you well they had to send you back to your own port but if you left the ship you had to find your own way back or stop where you was. Well, I was prepared to go from Newcastle down to Sydney to rejoin the *Dundula*.

(20.00) He was a bit concerned then that as a young boy, if there was any trouble, he might be blamed, was that it?

Yeah. Well, he just more or less told me that, you know, that the company has got no jurisdiction if anything happened to you.

You said as a young boy going with other seamen to hotels that they'd give you their money to look after it, does that suggest some of them were pretty hard drinkers?

Yeah. Oh, they'd just throw their money away as, you know, drinking and that and that just say, 'Keep this for me for next morning'.

Did any of them have trouble making it back to the ship or were there ever any problems about crew not turning up because they were lost somewhere or a bit hung-over?

Oh, no, no. They was always back on the ship. It might be midnight or something like that but they'd all come back in time to first thing in the morning do their work as usual.

What about the police, what was their attitude towards fellows who were a bit inebriated?

Oh, they was pretty good with us. They'd say, 'Well, right ho, you'd better go back to the ship and sleep it off'.

So they weren't in the habit of picking you up and running people in and that sort of thing?

Oh no, not with us. It might have been with overseas seamen but not with the interstate seamen.

Had you begun to wonder by then about the possibility of getting out and seeing more of the world, of joining an overseas ship?

Oh, well, I couldn't do that because I'd have to sign on their conditions which if I signed off one of the ships in England I'd have to find me own way back. It was always advised that if you take an overseas ship to sign on Australian conditions. That means to say that they had to provide for different things that the Australian seamen were.

Evidently conditions for British seamen were a lot inferior. Had you learnt anything about the sort of conditions in which they were expected to work?

Oh yeah. I heard a lot about it. They used to stand up to eat and it was only in the later years that they had like what we had; tables to sit down on and had their regular meals.

Did you go on board any of the other foreign ships when they were in port at all?

Yes. When I was in the Navy League sea cadets down on the old town pier it used to be and we used to go aboard what they used to call the mail boats, like the *Canberra* and all them. We used to call 'em ... they used to call 'em mail boats because of carrying the mail. And we'd go down there and board the ship, all over the ship, down the engine room. Never used to get into any trouble and that and go to the seaman's mission which is just down near the old

one on the corner of Nott Street and Bay Street - see the films there. Sometimes we'd go to the ... the navy building in Bay Street.

Were you going to dances as a young boy?

No. I was a shoe-destroyer.

A what?

A shoe-destroyer. I stood on more toes than what I could ... it never sort of interested me, the dancing.

Did you have a girlfriend at that age?

Oh yes.

So did it bother you that ... did it get to you at all that you'd have to go away to sea all the time?

Oh no. I more or less thought, well, if I was to get married I'd sooner be ashore rather than be at sea because I thought: well, what's the use of getting married if you're going to be away three or four months at a time.

So having gone back to rejoin your old ship the *Dundula* what then? How long were in that?

Well, I was in her for about six months and I signed off her in Melbourne.

Why did you sign off?

Oh well I wanted, you know, a bit of a spell which a lot of seamen and that would do. I went back to the *Taroona* ...

Tell me about that. Why would fellas take time off? Was there a feeling that they were sort of losing ... not enjoying enough of life, they needed to spend some time ashore or what?

Oh no, just I think they wanted a time ashore with their wives and so forth and then they'd stand up for another job if there was another job going when they was ready to go back to sea well they'd had their holidays.

So how long did you spend ashore on this occasion?

Oh, I only spent about a week or so and then I joined the *Taroona* again. I was in the second class end as a first grade steward then.

What was the difference in duties?

Well, a second grade steward is still more or less, he's in the cold pantry. He looked after the cold meats and salads and do the washing up with the machine, the liquid machine - dishwasher.

And then after that, after your period in that ship?

Well, I went to the *Naroona*.

What was the *Naroona*?

The *Naroona,* she was on the same run. She went to Burnie and Devonport her run was.

Passengers?

Passenger ship, yes.

(25.00) Any particularly interesting things about that ship or your time with it?

Oh no, no different to any other ship that ... she's a good sea boat. Only just that in bad weather she'd open the hatch there and down come the water into the quarters and you'd see your cases all floating around the ... what we used to call the glory hole where we slept.

What was the glory hole?

Where we had quarters for sleeping.

Would that happen often, that water would come in the hatch if it were left open? As soon as you got any sea, was it, or ...?

Oh no. Once you was in bad weather.

Were there any particular ships who had masters who had a reputation as being hard to get along with? Would fellows sort of warn each other and say, 'Look, don't join the such-and-such'?

Yes, there was a lot of that.

What were some of the ships that had poor reputations?

Oh, that I can't recall now but you'd get the whisper along the line what - especially with a seaman and a fireman - when the mate or the second engineer would come up to pick up men they'd just more or less walk away from the roster if they didn't like the ship or the engineer or the officer.

What would it usually be, the conditions in the ship or the way the officers or the captain ran the ship?

Oh, conditions in the way the ship was and also sometimes the officer, the way they, you know, worked you hard or anything like that.

What sort of reputation then did the ships that you'd been in have?

Oh, they had a pretty good name. Like in the ... joined the ... *Duntroon*, I done a trip from Melbourne to Western Australia, back to Melbourne and got out of her because she stopped in the ... she was a ship that they didn't know too much about the diesel engines at that time and she'd stopped, breaked [sic] down, right across the Bight and that where, you know, some of the subs were.

Did you ever sight submarines at all?

Only the one that torpedoed us. He surfaced the same time next morning.

The trip across to Western Australia, how do you remember Perth in those days?

Oh, very quiet place it was; not like it is now. Adelaide, well that was always known as pubs and churches.

At the point where you broke down in this ship, was there a feeling of anxiety? Was there a worry that, you know, it was just a matter of time before a sub found you?

No. We just had to cool our heels and the engineers had to get it under way and come onto Adelaide or Melbourne.

How long did that voyage take, there and back?

Ah, she'd leave Monday and she'd be back in Melbourne on the following Friday.

So, after that, what then?

Well, I went back to the *Naroona* and I was in the first class then and me mate - [Foulks?] his name was - he was a printer and he never had anyone to relieve him for his holidays. So I said, 'Well, what about if I ... if you teach me the game to ... how to print' and he said, 'Right'. I said, 'Because when you come back from your holidays I'll be able to go on mine'. So he ... I followed him around what had to be done and that and then after a week or so I started printing meself then and he just kept an eye on it. And when I left the *Naroona* to go onto holidays, when he come back, I was on holidays and the *Centaur* was getting picked up for picking up a crew and I was more or less contented to go back to the *Naroona*. But the shipping master, that's where you sign on and off a ship, at this particular time in the western market. And the shipping master sent for me, like through the union, to take her away as printer otherwise she would have been stopped because she was an important ship. She couldn't stop in port too long.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape one of the interview recorded about merchant seamen with Martin Pash on January 10th 1990 and it resumes in five seconds.

What was the mood during the war years? I mean, do you recall what the expectations were? Was there much anxiety or worry that Australia might be occupied?

Oh I don't think seamen, you know, like regards us we knew the subs were there and all that and when they attacked Darwin and people were a bit concerned then. But around the Australian coast on the south-east side of Australia there was about seventeen ships sunk there.

Had you begun to see anything of American servicemen on leave?

Oh, in the street we did when we went ashore.

Had you met any?

No. They'd just walked past. You might say 'G'day'.

How were they regarded? What was the attitude towards them that you recall?

Well, I give 'em all the praise in the world for what they done for us when we was torpedoed.

But before that, I mean before that incident, how did you tend to regard American servicemen?

As one of our own, that's how they were.

Did you ever see any fights in the streets?

No.

Was there any resentment that they had more money and could get off with Australian girls and all that sort of thing, and seemed more exciting to be with?

No. I always ... never used to notice that sort of thing. We used to just go our way and they went their way.

So was it this time you joined the *Centaur* then, was it?

That's right. When I was on leave from the *Naroona* I was called upon by the shipping master to take the ship away.

How did the ship look to you, was it a large ship? Can you describe it?

Ah, she was a 2,000 tonne ship and because she used to carry cattle to Singapore and that all the decks were all open underneath. She had a lower roll, 'tween decks and shelter deck and it was all open.

Had it been converted into a Red Cross ship at that time, or a hospital ship?

Well, the navy took her over and brought her across here to Melbourne to be fitted out as a hospital ship.

And was that fitting out going on as you joined was it?

No, the fitting out was nearly finished. But they found that she wasn't sitting far enough in the water with the loose ballast that they put in, like blue metal, and they had to put another 800 tonne in her. So they put the blue metal into 44-gallon drums and then put the top back on and welded them back and put 'em into the ship. But they stowed the ship the wrong way. Instead of stowing the barrels fore and aft, they stowed them across the ship and that's the cause of her going down so quick.

Was that an obvious mistake? I mean, was it the sort of thing that any sensible person stowing a ship ought not have done?

Well, if the wharfies doing it, they know how to stow it.

So who did it?

I think it was the dock hands I think, like the ones that had her fixing her up and that to hand her over to the navy and the Red Cross.

So anyway, joining the ship, what kind of accommodation did you find yourself in there?

I was all right. I was in a room on me own with the printing machine.

Your bunk was in where the printing machine was?

Yeah.

(5.00) And what were your duties?

Printing menus for the tables and that.

Do you recall a typical menu?

Oh, just the ordinary cereal, there was bacon and eggs, fish, entree and things like that. Cold meats for lunch and an entree, soup, sweets and dinner at night would be a roast with soup, entree, and sweets.

After you joined, how long before she put to sea?

Oh, about a week.

With what kind of people on board?

With Australian crew but English officers.

And what about passengers?

No passengers; she wasn't allowed to carry passengers because she become under the Geneva Red Cross Convention that she was a Red Cross ship and that's all she had to do was just carry wounded and that.

But did it not have a complement of medical staff?

Yes.

How many were in that?

Oh, that I wouldn't know because, you know, the crew kept to themselves and they kept to theirselves [sic].

So where did you sail to?

Well, we just run up and down the coast like on trial runs and that and went across to Moresby, Port Moresby, and brought back wounded soldiers or airmen, whatever it may be back.

Had you been to Port Moresby before?

No, that was the first time.

So can you recall the day you arrived? What your impressions of Port Moresby were, how it looked and so on?

Oh well, it's only just a small place then.

Hot?

Oh yes, hot and sultry and all that.

How were the wounded taken aboard?

Ah well, they was brought aboard by stretchers, some were walking patients.

Were you affected by seeing these wounded men?

No. We even had a Jap on there, they sent a Jap back to Australia as a wounded Japanese.

Were you curious about him? This would have been the first Japanese you might have seen, was it?

Yeah. Well, he was in his ... in his ward in his bed and he used to do a lot of sketching.

Was he able to talk English at all?

Well, that I never ... you know, inquired of that because we'd just go about our own business. I never used to talk much to the patients at all.

So how many wounded went aboard?

Ah, about 200-odd.

And how long did that take to bring them on?

Ah, we brought them back to Brisbane. They was transferred then ashore.

Were then men in pain and they had difficulty in moving them and so on?

Yes. Bandaged, arms in slings and all that.

Any mishaps where people slipped or small accidents or anything?

No, not on the ship as far as I know at any rate there was nothing.

And then after Brisbane?

We come down to Sydney and on our way down to Sydney there was ship's sunk around the coast there by the same sub that sunk us. He seen us coming down but he never had a go at us empty. But when we sailed we sailed with the ... an ambulance corps and we just sailed out there, like for a troops ship, with green uniforms on and just with a band, a Red Cross band, around their arm.

How many men went aboard?

Oh, I think it was about 200 I think of ambulance.

Were they all ambulance people?

Well, they're supposed to be ambulance people.

Was there some doubt about that?

Yes, there was.

Even at the time?

At the time, yes.

Was there any discussion amongst the crew? Was there any feeling that, oh, maybe this wasn't the right thing to do?

Yes. We, the seamen and that, had a meeting and the delegates of each department ...

Tell us ... go through it in a bit of detail. Tell us about the meeting. How did events come to pass that it was decided that a meeting was even necessary? Where did the concern first arise?

Well, in the different departments. Like the stewards had their delegate, the seamen had theirs, the greasers had theirs, and they didn't like the way things were.

Who first called for a meeting?

Well, being young I never ... you know, as a boy you don't take notice of them sort of things.

So what was said at the meeting then?

Oh, I was ashore at the time. I'd always looked at it as though I was a boy, well, it's a man's job to see what was to be done, the right way or the wrong way.

Did you hear people talking about the meeting and so on?

No.

So what did you hear about the nature of these concerns then?

Well, of the men being aboard the ship and the way they come aboard.

(10.00) How did they go aboard? What do you mean by that?

Well, the way the uniforms they was dressed in and the delegates went to Captain Murray, to his room, to say that we're not sailing in the ship and with that, next day, the drafts from the [pre-services?] come down. The delegates had to go back into Captain Murray's room to explain things and they said, 'Well, if youse don't take the ship away we'll put the navy in to take her away'. So we just ... they come back, told the men what was said, what wasn't said and they said, 'Right, we'll take the ship to see rather than let the navy have it'. But as it turned out we nearly lost our life over it.

Well, from when you went to sea, how long were you ... were under steam as it were before there was any thought of trouble?

Well, we sailed out of Sydney at twelve o'clock on the Wednesday and at eighteen minutes past four on the Friday morning was when we was torpedoed.

Where were you?

I was asleep in my room at the time. And we had to get up.

What's your recollection? Can you recall what your first thoughts were? How did you ...

Well, ... the mind thought was to get to the boat stations to get the boats away.

You were woken by the bang were you?

Yes, and ...

What did you think had happened?

Oh, we knew what had happened when she was hit.

Was that the first thing that occurred to you, that a torpedo?

A torpedo, yeah. Or it could have been a mine for all we knew. But we put our - one fellow by the name of [Grano?], he was the first out of the glory hole and he said, 'Don't forget your Mae Wests' and that's the last time I ever seen him. I never seen him from that minute onwards.

Did you have time to get dressed or anything yourself?

No, I just had the time to put a life jacket on and try and get up to the boat stations.

Did you have pyjamas?

Yeah.

Footwear?

No. No footwear. And we could ....

Was it dark? I mean, could you see what you were doing and where you were going?

Oh, it was about day ... starting to break day ....

What about as you were getting from inside the ship up on deck, was it dark below?

Oh, no. We just come out of our glory hole and went straight along the deck. We had to go up the companion way to where the boat stations were but we couldn't get up there because of where she was hit. The flames were coming right across to the starboard side of the ship. So ...

Sorry.

So we had to just come back and try and get the rafts away and we couldn't even get them away.

Why was that?

Well, the pin where you knock out the raft just goes straight into the water but we ... oh, a few seconds trying to bang at it and she wouldn't release.

Was that because of the angle of the ship or was it because it wasn't in good order?

I think it was because it wasn't seen to when she was getting overhauled and I said to the men, 'Oh you better grab something safe until after the ship goes down the suction and pull yourself away'. Oh well, seeing I was only a boy they just thought, 'Oh, what would he know'. So I moved up a few feet. I was going to put a ... grab the rail like a monkey grip around the rails and put me head between me arms for when she finished sucking the water, I'd be able to pull away. I just got me hand on the rail when she took me straight down below - the suction. But it was lucky that the lights were still on on the red crosses. I could see what I was doing. But where I left me other mates, they'd be ... the suction'd knock them up against the winch hinge or even around the housing of the mast.

Where had you got that idea from, that you should hold onto something? How did you know to do that?

Well, I've had experience from down around Port Melbourne knocking around with boats and that all me life and I thought that was the only thing was to try and hold something. I mean, it's no use just taking the risk of where the water was going to take you. I wanted to grab ... my idea was to grab the rail and when I thought that she had enough ... taken ... suction had been finished, I was going to pull meself away and go up.

Had you been on a ship that had gone down or a boat that had gone down?

No, oh no.

It was just that people had told you about this, had they?

No, I knew it meself. I mean, I done a lot of swimming underwater and that and what we used to do.

So you'd taken a big breath as you went down.

I did. Well, when she ... when she took me I put me arm across me Mae West to try and hold the air in there, if there was any, and take a deep breath. And then ....

How long did it seem that you were under? Did it seem a long time?

Oh well, it would be, yes.

(15.00) Were the thoughts going through your mind as you were underwater or was it just a confusion?

No, I kept me mind that ... to see which way I was going. Just that the lights on the side of the ship lit the water up as she was going down I could see what I was doing and I had to come up. The ship went down by the head, or by the bow, and I come up on an angle to the surface.

Was there any drag? Could you feel with the shipping going that there was any drag pulling?

No, no. She'd finished up taking in the water she wanted to take like to go down.

How far down do you think you went before you let go?

Oh, about thirty feet.

And when you bobbed up to the surface?

Oh I just stopped for a minute to get me breath because I'd ... the old heart was just about ready to give out. But as I hit the surface and turned around I could just see the stern of the ship going under.

Were there other people near you?

No, no-one. I got me wits and then had to swim about 100 yards to get onto a raft.

Was there a noise as the stern went under? Was there a noise as the stern went under?

No. She just went straight down. There was no noise or anything. So I had to swim about 100 yards or 200 yards to a raft.

It was getting reasonably light by this time?

Yeah. And, oh, there's a few others. The medical staff was on the raft. The deck boy brought Sister Savage along and we had ...

I gather she didn't have any clothes at this stage and a number of people were in this position?

Oh no, she had her nightwear on. And the deck boy brought her on. We had four rafts tied together. And two badly burnt chaps, burnt from top to bottom. One of them died so we just had to bury him the next morning.

What was the feeling in the rafts? Were people calling out or can you recall the ...?

Yes, oh yes. There was a lot of people calling out, the nurses and all. And no-one could do nothing about it.

Calling for help?

Help.

Mmm.

Even me mate he was the same, Donnie. He was on his own on a raft with oil over him.

Could you see him?

Oh, you'd see him in the distance but he was the last one to be picked up.

Were there any sharks around at all at this stage?

Yes, sharks everywhere.

When did you first see a shark?

Oh well, as soon as we got on the raft. They could smell the ... and swam around the rafts all the time - never left us.

Was it frightening? Was there a feeling that perhaps the raft mightn't be safe?

Oh yes, I was frightened of 'em, well, anyone would with a shark around. But when we buried the chap who had died, the sharks just grabbed him and pulled him to pieces.

You saw the sharks take the body?

Yes. But the planes that flew over our head, they flew over about nine o'clock, about six planes, to look for subs or anything like that and instead of flying low so they could see anyone, they flew above the clouds otherwise they would have seen us if they flew below the clouds.

Had anybody assumed command as it were in the raft at this time?

No. We just ... we all just made our mind up that Sister Savage would be in charge of rationing because we didn't know how long we was going to be there and ....

What sort of rations did you find you had?

Well, there was biscuits, chocolate and condensed milk.

Water? .... Water?

Yeah, water too.

Were these already actually in the raft?

They were already in the raft and she looked after everything. Just supplied everything to us until next ... until the next day was when the Yankee destroyer picked us up, the *Mugford* picked us up.

Do you remember when you first spotted a ship coming?

Well, we seen a convoy coming out of Brisbane escorted by a plane but it never come down to see us. We couldn't even get in contact, couldn't even send a flare up to her.

What was the feeling? Was there a feeling at all that you might be lost or were you all pretty confident they'd send out search parties?

Oh well, we looked at the idea that we could be here for sometime before we'd be picked up and that's why we gave the sister the charge of the ... biscuits and all that.

She had an injured eye of some sort I gather?

That's right. She had a fractured jaw.

Was she in a bad way?

Well, the way she was on the raft you wouldn't think there was anything wrong with her but she suffered very badly. She had broken ribs and bruised and one of the fellas on the raft gave her his overcoat to put over her. Well, I shared it with her until we was picked up. But then ....

Had people begun to sing or do anything to raise their spirits?

Yeah, they sung to take their mind off things and that.

Do you remember any of the songs that were sung?

Oh, some of the old songs: *Roll out the Barrel* and things like that.

(20.00) Had you been injured at all or had oil in your eyes or anything of that sort?

Yes, I even swallowed oil and I had some on my arms but I was lucky to wash it off with me ... I took me pyjama coat off and washed it off that way.

Did you feel sick from the oil inside you?

I did. I could still feel ... taste the oil for months after inside of me, when you'd belch or anything like that.

Anyway, you said then a ship came?

The *Mugford*, the destroyer. The plane escort no doubt with another ship seen us before we had a chance to send up flares and then he got the indication that the sub was still there and he surfaced around but the sub dived to the bottom and couldn't pick it up any more. The sub surfaced at the same time as ... on a Saturday morning, as when he torpedoed us, quarter past four in the morning.

Did you see it at all yourself?

Yes. You see it on the outlay of his lights and that. We was going to send flares and one of the sailors said, 'Just hang on a minute, I don't think it's a plane' and then we could see the outline of the conning tower and the rest of the sub.

Where you worried that it might come back and strafe you?

No, nothing like that. She just went down below and that was it. We just had to wait our chance to ... hoping that we'd get picked up.

What was the feeling then when the ship was seen coming to your rescue?

Oh, all joy and that that someone'd seen us at last.

Did people cheer or ...?

Yeah. They put down a scramble net. The Yanks got down to pick up the wounded, like they had to be helped up.

I gather when it first came alongside it did go off because it heard the sub was in the area and it went off and came back again?

No, the sub ... the plane went chasing the sub and he lost, you know, contact with him but the destroyer stopped to pick us up and just told him to go ahead and take the convoy out further that they were fetching out. And the *Mugford* then went and picked up all survivors. To my mind there'd be about two miles between say us and the furthest away raft.

Did you stay on deck and watch other people being picked up?

No, the Yanks took us straight down below to put warm clothes on us and blankets. Gave us ... as soon as we got up on deck they gave us a nobble of whisky and gave us warm clothes to put on to warm ourselves up with.

Could they do anything to offer you anything with the oil that you'd swallowed or were there doctors in attendance?

Well, they had nothing to wipe the oil off, that's how gone he is, you use solvent to take the oil off and that's how he finished up.

What, the effect of that killed him, are you saying?

Yeah.

Were you there at the time?

Yeah.

Was it a painful business trying to remove all this solvent?

I wasn't actually there when they were doing the solvent but I'd been around seeing how he was and that. But he's suffered ever since with it.

Did you see other people being picked up then, after you came back up on deck?

Oh yeah. We seen a couple of them picked up but the Yanks wanted to get us down below and get into bed and have a bit of sleep.

And what then?

Oh, they fed us and the destroyer went straight back to Brisbane. We arrived there at one-thirty on the Saturday morning. The army and doctors went their way and we was put into a private ... at least a public hospital where I think meself that we should have went to the military hospital too to be treated because as the ship was under Red Cross orders and navy, different to any other merchant ship, it's where we should have been taken to the military hospital to be treated.

Why did that matter? What was the point of that?

Well, it was class distinction I think, that we were seamen and they was army.

Was there any difference in the nature of the facilities that were provided?

Oh yes. They had their quarters and ....

They were better off. You feel you got better attention, or would have, at the military ...?

At the military. We was put into a public hospital and nothing was done and they tried to ... Monday morning couldn't come quick enough for 'em to send us down south by train. And they wouldn't put an extra sleeper on for us to have a sleep and that. And the local member up there and the padre here at the seaman's mission and the union went a bit higher and they put on a sleep for us to come down.

(25.00) How many of you were there coming down?

Oh, there was about thirty. Seventy-five of the crew including Captain Murray and there was over half of the crew lost their lives.

And ... but with the people coming down on the train, what sort of condition were they in?

Oh they were pretty shook up, the same as meself.

What effect did it have? Were you ... was there a sort of delayed shock effect?

Yes. We'd have nightmares and I still even have 'em.

What do you dream?

Oh, of what happened, like it comes back to your mind what happened and all that. As a matter of fact, a couple of time, unknown, I've pushed me wife out of bed.

Is there a sense of fear in the dream?

Yes.

Do you feel you're drowning or ...?

Yeah. It's a thing that you've actually got to be there yourself and you've got to live with it. Whatever happened you've got to live with it for the rest of your life.

So how long did it take to get back down to ... where did you go, Sydney or Melbourne or ...?

Ah, we come down to Sydney. Well, then we caught the night train from Sydney back to Melbourne. So we was back in Melbourne on the Tuesday morning ...

Did you have sleeping accommodation over night on the train?

Yeah, on the ... oh we wasn't in Sydney overnight.

No, I mean on the train as you were travelling down?

Oh yeah. Well, that's what I said there that that's when we told them we wanted a sleeping berth when they reckoned they wouldn't go put it on and they finished up putting it on for us because we refused to go sitting up all night. And we had to wait till Tuesday night to pick up the Melbourne train to come through to Melbourne.

Where did you wait?

Oh we just went around the city or someone might have went to have a drink or something like that just to fill the time in.

How were you feeling by then?

Oh, I was well shook up. I just didn't know where I was sort of business but you just had to manage yourself, take your time, and battle around the best way you could.

Was the press interest? Was it covered much in the press?

Oh yes. We had to give an interview in Brisbane when we was brought ashore by the *Mugford*, they had a press conference. But ... the seamen were never ever interviewed afterwards. Anything that was put in the paper after was put in by the orderlies of the ship. They never ever asked the seamen what conditions or anything like that, you had to put up with it.

So I presume it was reported that it was a hospital ship and this was the savage, vicious attack by the Japanese and so on.

Right.

Yeah. Was there ever any questions raised about the fact that men were in uniform and so on?

No, never. Not as far as we know.

How did that seem to the seamen? Did that seem wrong?

Well, we thought it was. When I say 'we', like the rest of the crew on that and that's why they went to Captain Mowie and told him that we weren't going to sail in the ship.

But did it also seem wrong the way the news was reported?

Well, they ....

Or weren't you concerned about it at that time?

Oh, I wasn't concerned about it that much then but just anxious to get home and recover.

So when you got back to Melbourne, what then?

Well, I had ... I couldn't do much because I was that nervous and all that, I never went outside the joint.

Were you given leave or were you assessed in some way? Did somebody say, 'Well, we better have a look at this fellow and see how fit he is'?

No, no-one. When we was in hospital no-one come near us. We were just put into beds ....

Which hospital was it?

Oh, I think it would be the Brisbane hospital I should think.

No, but I mean when you came back to Melbourne, was there any further check or anything?

No, we just got off the train. You met your wife or mother and that was all. And they never interviewed us like regards sickness or anything like that in the hospital. We were just more or less taking up a bed, we were no-one it seemed. Even today there's a saying that seamen are no-one.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: This is tape two of side one of an interview about merchant seamen recorded with Martin Pash on January 10 1990 and it begins in five seconds.

So here you were back in Melbourne. What happened to you then?

Oh we got met with our wives and mothers and that and come back home. I had a rest there for a while. I couldn't do anything. I used to just go and stand by a ship where the stewards used to want the day off just to fill in the time till I felt better.

How long did that take?

Oh, about a month or so before I went back to sea but I was still frightened after that. It knocked the stuffing out of me.

Did people talk to you about it or did you feel inclined to talk about it?

Oh, there wasn't too many that spoke about it. Only mostly with neighbours and our own relatives.

And so how long were you out of work in effect?

Oh about a month or so.

And after that?

Well, I went back to sea and I stopped there then.

What was the ship that you next joined?

Oh, I went back to the ship that I was the leading printer on, the *Naroona*.

And where was that going then?

She was running ... still running to Tasmania, to Launceston.

What were you by this time?

First grade steward.

And how long did you do that?

Oh, I done that for over twelve months and used to have to wait on the tables. You'd go down aft, two or three sittings down in the second class and then you'd have to come up to first class and then run another three or four sittings up there.

Was there an inquiry about the *Centaur*?

Yes. There was a marine inquiry but I read one report where the Government releases information.

Where was it held?

Oh, it would be in Sydney I should think.

So you didn't go up at all?

Oh no. It only concerned the officers and say engineers. But I read the report after the Government released it but the second mate said that the ship rolled over. Well, she didn't. 'Cause if she rolled over I wouldn't have been here today 'cause I would have had to go that way to ... sideways to get out.

Anyway, you were saying that you'd come back to Melbourne then you continued with the *Nayoona* for a year?

I was in the *Naroona*.

Naroona, I beg your pardon, for a year?

The *Taroona* you mean?

After you came back to Melbourne, after you ....

Had a spell then went back to the *Naroona*.

Yeah, for a year.

Naroona, yeah, for a year or so.

And then after that?

Well, I come ashore and then went back to the *Taroona* and me last ship to sea was the [*Waniora*].

What year was that?

That was in '45.

What was the Waniora like?

Oh, she, what we used to call submarines, when they go outside the heads they never come up until they get to the other side. They're that low in the water, the water just used to wash over the top of you.

Did it make it uncomfortable to sail in?

Oh, at times it did.

In what way?

Oh well, with the water, especially with us, the galley was aft and the mess room was forehead under the bridge. You'd have to dash between waves to take the tucker up there.

Where was that going to?

Across to Tassie, Davenport.

And how long were you doing that?

I was relieving the steward there, Freddie [inaudible], for two months and then I thought well it's time to get out of it now. I can get on the wharf. I joined the union in 1943, just after I was torpedoed, and went back to the wharf then after. The manpower wouldn't let me go on the wharf although I was in the union so I just had to go back to sea.

So how long did you stay at sea then?

Until the war was finished.

And then after that?

I went on the wharf then till ... until 1951 and I went out on me own in business in transport as a carrier.

How old were then at the end of the war?

Ah, ... you mean like ... about twenty-two.

How did you feel about your years at sea, had you enjoyed it?

I did. I thought it was a great life.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

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