



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Interviewer	Martin, Harry
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Description	Alan David Wickow as an Able Seaman, 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: ... the merchant seaman project. It is an interview with Alan Wickow recorded in Melbourne on 17th January 1990. This is tape one, side one and it begins in five seconds from now. (Interviewer: Harry Martin)

Alan Wickow, where and when were you born?

I was born in North Brighton on 23rd August 1923.

Tell us a bit about your family; what they did and how many in the family and so on?

Well, I have two sisters and they are eight and nine year older than myself. My father and mother was ... my father came from Estonia. He came out here in this Russian sailing ship when he was about eighteen and he came ashore in Melbourne and he married an Australian girl but he kept his life at sea. My mother died when I was two days old and from after that my aunty brought me up and she died when I was fourteen. But my father kept at sea all his life. He went to sea until he was about sixty when he retired. And he was also on the Australian coast.

Had he jumped ship?

He had jumped ship here, yes, in Melbourne and he became a nationalised Australian citizen though.

Well if he spent so much time away and then you were looked after by an aunt, did you know him very well?

Ah, no. He still had a very strong accent, though he was here all these years in Australia he still spoke in very broken English.

So what sort of childhood did you have then?

Well, I had a very good childhood. My aunty was very caring for me and I was sent to Brighton Grammar School where I used to play a lot of sport and that and I was well looked after as a child.

So your aunt was fairly well off if you went to Brighton Grammar?

Well, my father paid the fees in those days. But I know that during the depression he had to work hard, you know, to get the fees in those days.

So how often would you see him?

I'd see him about once every two months.

Would he talk to you about going to sea?

No. He was very ... he kept himself very quiet. He never used to tell us much at all even though a lot of people, Estonian people, have asked me did he ever teach the Estonian language. He never ever spoke to us that way.

It would be curious in a way growing up and having your father such a mystery figure. Over the years have you been able to piece him together as it were?

Ah, I've been able to find out a little bit about him. Some of his relatives came out from Estonia and I was able to find out a little bit of his background of his parents in those days.

So as you were a small boy what did you see yourself doing later on? Did you have visions of going to sea yourself?

Well, I've always wanted to go to sea but my father was always against it. But I was able to go when the outbreak of the war when ... in 1940. First when I left school I went to Athol Smith who was a photographer.

At what age was that?

I was about fifteen in those days. And I stayed with him for about twelve months but ...

What were you doing there?

I was helping to photograph models and all that type of thing. He was ... and I used to help with the developing of the films.

That must have seemed an extremely glamorous occupation to a lot of your young friends I would suppose at fifteen?

It was. We used to see a lot of, you know, glamorous women in those days. It was a quite interesting job to have.

So what made you leave it after twelve months?

Well, the out ... as I say, the war had broken out and it was 1940 and I just felt I wanted to join up. I tried to join the navy but I was too young at sixteen and so I knew you could get away in the merchant service so I asked my father permission, could I go to sea, and he gave me permission.

And where was your father at that time?

My father was in Melbourne at that time the ship ... he was on a Huddart Parker ship called the *Goulburn*. He was bo's'n on this one ship for over twenty years.

What were his views about the war?

He never used to speak much about it. He, as I say, he kept to himself and never told me much about ... he never expressed any views at all.

> To a lot of young Australians of your age at that time Gallipoli and the ANZACs had a very special meaning which it may not have had to you. How did you see the ANZAC and Gallipoli stories?

Well, I knew quite a ... a couple of people that had been to Gallipoli and I just felt that I wanted to go and do my bit, you know, for Australia.

> So you saw yourself as Australian?

I saw myself as Australian, yeah.

> So at sixteen then, how did you set about joining up?

(5.00) Well, I went to ... my father, as I say, was with Huddart Parker, a shipping company here in Melbourne, so he had ... knew one of the managers of the company who asked me to come in and they had a position as a deckboy on a ship called the *Nairana* which run across to Tasmania, much similar to the *Abel Tasman* today.

> Was there any concern about your age or was that not a problem at all?

No problem as you could go away to sea when you were about fourteen as I know some young boys did.

> So how did you start off? What were your very first days, can you remember them?

Yes. My first days I remember going done to *Nairana*. She was berthed at No. 7 North Wharf here in Melbourne and she was a passenger ship that used to go across to Tasmania, Devonport, Burnie three times a week. We made three voyages across the Bass Strait every week.

> What sort of conditions were there? Where did you stay; who were you with and those sort of things?

Well, as a deckboy you were amongst men who were of all ages. You were in the fo'c'sle which today, well, they don't have that type of conditions today.

> Describe it then in detail, what shape and size was it?

Yes. The fo'c'sle was at the stern of the ship and you had ... there was about twelve to fifteen bunks all around the wall of the ship - around the sides of the ship - and you had ... your job was to look after the crew mostly as the deckboy.

> So you just had a little bunk. Did you have a locker to put your gear and so on?

No. As I remember, you know, it's a long time ago, but we had no lockers. We used to have ... I remember I had a sea bag, what they call a sea bag, and I used to keep my gear in under the bunk.

Do you remember your very first trip, your very first outing to sea?

I know I was pretty seasick on the first voyage but I got over that after a couple of weeks.

So what were the hours; what were your duties?

My duty was mostly during the day. You used to have to scrub the mess room out - the seamen's mess room - and you would ... and also with the accommodation part where in the fo'c'sle you had to scrub the ... I can remember, they used to have benches right along in front of the bunks and they were white, just plain wood, and we used to have to scrub those every day and we used to keep the place spotless, you know.

What sort of bedding did you have?

Ah, well, we had very good. We had mattresses and they used to supply clean linen twice a week.

And with this scrubbing process, what was involved - a bucket, a brush and a plain soap or what?

No. A bucket, a brush and sandsoap in those days. So you had a cake of sandsoap and you used to have to ... I used to, well, make sure the place was nice and clean and we used to always mop the deck out. I can remember the deck was not wooden, it was kind of a stone surface and we used to mop that and it was painted red.

Would somebody come along, inspect it and if they were blemished tell you to do it again?

Yes, well, the bo's'n was the person that you used to be under and he'd come along and give you your daily chores, what you had to do each day. And also you had to look after the crew as a deckboy. You had to draw the rations everyday for the crew, like jams and different ... butter and all that type of thing and you'd bring it along. You'd draw this from the chief steward of the ship and you'd bring it along and put it in the crew's mess room and you used to make sure ... your job was to keep the stores up to the crew to make sure that they had everything, you know, for their eating habits.

So what sort of things were they eating?

Well, they used to have ... we used to get good meals and we used to have draw jams and sugar and all that type of thing that they'd need you to have, accessories, to have with their meal.

Plenty of fruit and vegetables?

Plenty of fruit and vegetables, yes. There was always quite a good supply of vegetables and fruit.

A lot of industries have a bit of tradition with young people when they start off to initiate them in various ways; either send them on silly errands or sometimes paint them and things like that. Did they do that in the merchant navy?

No. No, the older chaps used to look after the boys real well. You know, they used to make sure that we were ... though you were amongst a lot ... I found that a lot of the chaps in the older persons used to drink quite a lot even though they'd come aboard pretty drunk at times they used to respect you and, you know, take care of you as a young boy.

So were they a rough lot? Would they fight amongst themselves, that sort of thing?

In some ships, yes. I can remember a lot of the men were tattooed, had a lot of tattoos over them and they were a pretty rough lot some of them. All depends what parts they came from. But they used to respect us, I can tell you that.

The business of tattoos in itself is a particular sort of thing with seamen, isn't it? What did you make of tattoos?

Well, I didn't like them myself but I used to see ... oh, I just ... then there was one chap, I can always remember him in my memory, he was called 'Star' and he had this star tattooed on his forehead and it was most distinctive and he was a rough character - a rough diamond - but to a person he was most kind.

(10.00) It seems in some ways to be a process of showing a certain sort of toughness of tattoos indicate that you can look after yourself and those sort of things. Did it seem to have those elements about it?

Ah, no. I didn't think much about them but, myself, I never wanted to be tattooed; I never felt that I'd ever want a tattoo on me.

Did people try and encourage you to?

Ah, when I was out in India they did and some of the other foreign ports. You'd go and have a few drinks and they'd say: 'What about coming and getting a tattoo done?' but I always resented and I never wanted to have a tattoo on my body.

Did you ever know of young fellows being got into a fairly intoxicated state and, as it were, waking up and finding themselves with tattoos that they could barely remember, all that sort of thing?

No, I never come across that.

Well, with the *Nairana* then you were going to Tasmania, was it?

Tasmania, yes. We were running across to Tasmanian ports with passengers each ... three times a week.

How did the seamen react to you getting seasick, were they amused?

They were amused, quite amused, but as I say they were most ... you know, even let you stop in your bunk the first couple of days, you were that sick - and I can tell you across Bass Strait it got pretty rough and we used to roll a lot - but they used to take care and after a few days I could to it and do my duties.

Were there any remedies, any particular things that you could do to make it easier?

Well, the only thing was to try and get up on deck and get away from the smell of food. The food used to make you feel as though you want to vomit, you know.

How long did that take then before you really got over it?

About ... I'd say about a week to a fortnight before I was completely over it. But as I say, later on in some ships that we had very bad seas you could never ... you'd never get vomit or feel any seasickness.

What's a bad sea? How would you describe a bad sea?

Well, some of the worse seas I ever saw was in the iron ore boats when we used to carry iron ore from Whyalla to Newcastle. This was a dead weight in the ship and it used to be well down to their marks and you'd get some ... and these ships would roll terribly and she'd ship big seas aboard and they used to have to run lifelines up the forward and aft for you to get along the decks as otherwise you would have been washed overboard.

Did you ever think you were going to go down in those sort of seas?

Many a time. Yes, I always thought, especially when we were around some of the coastal when you were ... if you were in convoy and occasionally you'd come under attack. You'd quite often think that perhaps your number would be up.

So you've started off in the *Nairana*, how long were you in that?

Well, I spent about nine months in the *Nairana*, then I felt as though I wanted to go a bit further away as this ship was only on the Tasmanian runs. So I said to me - I knew the mate of a ship called the *Colac* which was my next ship and she was an old coaster that run coal between ... mostly between Newcastle and Melbourne and Adelaide and also was picking up iron ore and it would bring it back to Newcastle.

So how did you go about getting in that?

Well, I saw the mate of the *Colac* and he said there was a job for a deckboy, so I just transferred across from the *Nairana* to the *Colac* which was the same company.

Were there any difference in the duties?

Um, much similar ... oh yes, well being a collier I was more being able to do jobs around the ship which after you'd finished looking after the crew's mess room you'd be taught how to splice ropes and taught how to splice wire as this was a collier and carried no passengers.

So what was the routine with this particular ship? How many days at sea, how many days ashore and so on?

Well, this ship used to have ... you'd have quite a bit of time ashore and you'd have quite a bit of time at sea. Not like today where the ships load very quickly. If you're in Newcastle loading coal, you'd be there for about two days and you'd spend - if you were running across to Adelaide - you'd spend nearly a week at sea from Newcastle to ... it would be about seven days.

Did you enjoy those passages?

I used to enjoy them because the crew were real ... they used to teach you the art of seamanship because they were all ... different type of seamen to being on a passenger ship. They all knew their trade; they knew how to splice wires and all this type of thing which was good to learn, you know, in those days.

What would you do for recreation while you were at sea?

Well, mostly you'd do a lot of reading or ... well, I found also that during the day I'd be able to go up on the bridge. You'd get permission from the captain to learn to steer the ship as a young boy and he'd allow you up on the bridge for a couple of hours each day to take over the wheel and steer.

Were you beginning to think you'd like to go in further afield, travel the world a bit?

Well, yes, after a while I felt that I'd just like to have an opportunity to go overseas so I decided to leave this *Colac* after I'd done my ordinary seaman - I became an ordinary seaman. If you're on deck you spend a year as a deckboy, two years as an ordinary seaman and then you're qualified as an AB to service on any Australian ship. Well, after I left the *Colac* I already served some time and I became an ordinary seaman. So I decided the ... I saw the *Queen Elizabeth* which was in Sydney Harbour so I thought, 'Well, what a wonderful opportunity to try and get on board this ship', you know, as a member of the crew. So I was able to leave the *Colac* in Sydney and I went down to the shipping office which was in those days situated under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and I just happened to walk into the shipping company and the chief officer of the *Queen Elizabeth* was there. She was in Sydney Harbour and she'd just returned from an overseas trip and he was looking for a couple of seamen as some of the English crew had been returned to England because of sickness. And he said to me, well I was only an ordinary seaman in those days, and he said he was looking for seamen

and so I said, 'Look, is there any jobs going on the *Queen Elizabeth*?' and he said, 'Yes', and he signed me on as a member of the crew.

What was 'signing on'? What was involved?

Well, you had to have your discharges to show that you were, you know, qualified as a seaman - had served on ships - and you'd go along to the shipping office which was, as I say, was situated under Sydney Harbour Bridge, Mercantile Marine Office in Sydney which was situated under the bridge and you would sign ... they would sign you on as crew.

What was the paper? What did it say in effect?

Just the effect that you were qualified as a deckboy or ordinary seaman and you had to present that to ... but also you had to ... to be on an Australian ship you had to be a member of the Seamen's Union. You couldn't join an Australian ship unless you were a member of the Seamen's ... but this didn't apply to an English ship.

At this stage what sort of salary had you been getting on the Australian boats?

Well, I was on about, as a deckboy, a pound a week, was with my keep. But when I joined the *Queen Elizabeth* the rate of pay as a seaman was ten pound twelve and sixpence a month and that was the pay that I got. But I also, after being there a short time, I become quite ... I was put on as a lookout man which was a lookout AB they qualified me as and that was to spend two hours on the wing of the bridge each day and two hours in the crow's-nest. For that I received a rise of ten shillings a month.

How did the money seem to you at that time? Did it seem good money or just adequate or what?

Well, in those days it seemed quite good money, yes. It seemed to go a long way, not like today.

Just going back to when you first saw the *Queen Elizabeth*, what were your impressions of it?

Well, after being on a ship that was about 3,000 tons and then suddenly see a ship which is 85,000 tons, it was ... oh, it was mind-boggling actually. And to be able to get onto this ship. I remember the first day I joined it it was just ... I was signed on about the 29th December but I joined it on the 2nd January in 1942, was the day I joined the ship.

Was it exciting?

It was real exciting. I'll never forget; we had to meet this ... go down to the Man-of-War Steps just down where the Sydney Opera House is and one of the ship's boat came ashore and picked us up and took us out to the vessel.

So what was your introduction once you got into the ship, what happened on that particular day? How were you introduced around to the ship itself, to the crew, your duties and so on?

Well, we were introduced to the members of the crew. Most of them were English seamen that come out with the ship from England and the bo's'n he was - they had a bo's'n and three bo's'n mates in those days to look after the crew - and they met us, you know, introduced us all around to the ship and then you were put into what called ... mostly the ship stayed in Sydney Harbour for nearly a month and mostly we were just doing J duties - that was painting around the ship - and I think the greatest experience I ever had was to paint the *Queen Elizabeth*'s funnel. It was the most ... to think you were about fourteen decks up and then the funnel which was about some 85 feet high off the deck. You had to go up inside the funnel, this huge funnel, inside, and you had to lower yourself over the top of the funnel into the bo's'n's chair. And it took twenty-five men around the funnel of the *Queen Elizabeth* to paint it and which took about two hours to come down.

Were you nervous at all about the height?

I'll never forget, I was so nervous I didn't feel as though I'd make it but once I got into the chair I was ... I was ... it was the first time I'd ever been to any great height but I got over that.

It was a good view of the harbour, one would suppose?

Oh it was a wonderful harbour ... a wonderful view of the harbour. We used to ... every day there would be the ferries coming out to ... going across to Taronga Park where we were anchored, just off Taronga Park, and there'd be huge crowds on the ferry. It was such a wonderful sight to see this huge ship in Sydney Harbour.

What was the manner of the officers and the men compared to what you'd found in the Australian ships?

In the English ships you had very little to do .... The officers of the *Queen Elizabeth*, you didn't see them greatly. You mostly had to do with the bo's'n, he was the man that was in charge of the crew and you very ... only time you saw the officers was mostly if you went on the bridge you saw ... or they came around on inspection of the ship which was about once a day they'd come around and inspect the quarters and that to see they were clean.

(20.00) Was there a sense of aloofness then about the officers?

Yes there was, definitely, on English ships.

What about the relations then with the bo's'n? Was the bo's'n's role basically the same or were they more authoritarian on the British ship?

He had quite an authority. The bo's'n, he was the man in charge. His orders were given by the officers down to him and he was the person to see that they were carried out.

The sheer size of the boat and the number of crew preclude the kind of friendly informality that you'd get on a small ship?

No. I found that I made a lot of great friends on the *Queen Elizabeth*. As a matter of fact, after nearly fifty years I still have contact with two people in Sydney that were in the crew in those days with me.

Who were they? What were they?

Well, Russ Nugent, he was ... his job was the quartermaster on the ship. He used to steer it. And my other friend was Bill Morrier who was my wife's brother and unfortunately he died of cancer a couple of years ago.

Well, in those first days, as you'd arrived aboard, you were going to be leaving Australia, did you begin to have any sense of disquiet that, you know, that you feel a bit alone?

I did feel alone, that we were going to go away. We didn't know where we were going. We were anchored in Sydney Harbour for over one month before the ship left for Sydney ... left Sydney and we didn't know where we were going. We were told we were going to sail and we were just given orders to be on board the next day and to make sure that we had enough clothes to do us. You know, as we had to supply our own gear, we were never given any dungarees or anything. You used to have to buy all your own gear - sea boats ... oil skins and sea boats - you had to have your own gear. You were never given any payment to buy those sort of things.

Was there any uniform as such?

No, we mostly ... well, our uniform in those days was a blue shirt and dungarees, they were the main, being on deck, they were the main things we had to wear.

As you joined the crew was there a process with new people coming in that they'd be left while people sort of assessed them or were they generally pretty welcoming?

Oh, you were always welcomed; mostly you were just welcomed aboard the ship.

At this stage of your life as a young man had you started to go out with girls or was there any particular girl you were a bit unhappy about leaving behind?

No, in those days I hadn't met any certain person but I did ... the first time I ever met was when we were overseas I think in San Francisco. When the first voyage we made on the *Queen Elizabeth* we left Sydney Harbour and we went across to - light ship, we had no crew ... no passengers or anything - we went across to New Zealand and from there the ship rendezvoused in what they call the Marquisas Islands which was an island near Tahiti and I remember coming alongside this magnificent sight - we were out about two miles off the island - and all of a sudden there was a whistle and around the island came this oil tanker which - I can remember its name - it was called the *Bishopdale*. It was a British oil tanker

and it came alongside and refuelled us as we had to take on oil. It was a long voyage across to America. And from there we went - we were there about twenty-four hours and we took off - and the next stop was off the coast of Canada. We went to a place called British Columbia and this was the only - the ship had to be dry-docked - and this was the only place that could hold this huge ship was British Columbia in a place called Chemainns, this was the Canadian naval base. And we went into this port and they were able to get us into dry dock. She pulled all the bottom planks out of the dock and we had to come out and the ship had to back out and couldn't get in till the next day.

But we got to this point, I was asking you about young ladies and you started to tell us about your first ...

I think the first opportunity I ever had to meet a young lady was in British Columbia where I met a Canadian girl and she - through the Seamen's Mission which they used to put a lot of dances on at the Flying Angel's Mission - and this girl, lass I know, invited us and took us around. She had a car and she took us around and showed us British Columbia ... parts of British Columbia.

It didn't turn your head and make you wonder if you really wanted to be at sea?

No, no, it didn't. (laughs) But it was, I think it might have been the accent at the time, I remember this girl had a lovely accent.

After that delay in Sydney when you were preparing the *Queen Elizabeth* to leave, do you remember the first departure, the sense of power in such a huge vessel and going out through the heads and so on?

(25.00)I can remember, even though it's supposed to be wartime and everything's supposed to be hush-up, I can remember the shore alongside the heads, going out each side of the heads, and around Taronga Park was crowded with people. How they found out the ship was sailing I don't know but every time the ship, the *Queen Elizabeth* went out or came into port there'd always be hundreds and hundreds of people lining the foreshore.

By this time it was being used as a troop ship?

Yes. We were mostly ... she'd been across to the Middle East but as America had come into the war the ship was implied in bringing Americans to Australia. So after we'd been in dry dock in British Columbia we came down to San Francisco and there the ship stayed a week before she loaded about 10,000 American soldiers and this was one of the first contingents of Americans brought to Australia to this part of the world.

What were your impressions of the Americans at that first meeting?

Well, they were great gamblers. Mostly on their way out they most played ... great gamblers. But I noticed the American dark people were kept apart from the whites; they were quite a bit of, you know, different ... they never mixed.

Was their standard of accommodation comparable?

Yes. Their standard of accommodation was comparable, yes. But there used to be just that difference between the soldiers, you know.

Did you get to talk to any of the black Americans?

Not a great deal, no, I didn't. They seemed to keep to themselves but they were very friendly but I didn't get the opportunity to speak to many of them.

Where were you quartered in the *Queen Elizabeth*?

The *Queen Elizabeth*, we were quartered in the ... what they call the fo'c'sle which was the front end of the ship and there were bunks. There was about twenty people in the one fo'c'sle - one room. But after I became ... after the first trip I became a lookout man and this job was like a petty officer's type of job. We had a two berth cabin and we were very well off. There was six of us in the lookout and we used to spend, as I say, two hours in the top of the ... up in the crow's-nest and two hours on the wing, or an hour and a half on the wing of the bridge.

How was the standard overall both of accommodation and food compared with that you'd had to that point in the Australian vessels?

Oh the standard of the food was really remarkable. On the *Queen Elizabeth* we were mostly on, I'd say ... when she went to Frisco she loaded mostly American rations and we had, well, chicken ... the food, you couldn't falter it, it was really marvellous the food. I've never seen like it; there was so much of it.

Did you pass under the Golden Gate as it's called?

Yes we did, we berthed alongside the wharf there in San Francisco.

That must have been pretty exciting for you also as a young man, your first time and finally getting to a ... well, you'd been to New Zealand which is almost like a cousin in a way, but finally getting to the other part of the world.

Yes, it was a wonderful sight. As a matter of fact, when I went to America I had an aunty who had left Australia when she was a young girl and went to live in America. She went across as a nanny to some big family here that lived in Melbourne years ago and I used to write to her for many, many years so when I arrived in San Francisco I sent word to her that I'd like to see, you know, seeing I was in San Francisco but unfortunately when I went to visit her she was away on holidays and she's now been dead a number of years and I never got that opportunity to meet her.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape one of the interview with Alan Wickow recorded in Melbourne on 17th January 1990 and it resumes in five seconds from now.

With the shore time you had in the United States, did you have any chance to get around and see anything at all of San Francisco?

Yeah, I was able to go to ... I remember we went across to Oakland, across the Oakland Bridge and ... but mostly our time was centred, well, we were working during the day and the only time we could get ashore was mostly during the night. At an evening you knock off about five o'clock and you wouldn't have to be back on board till about seven o'clock the next morning.

Did the seamen want to get ashore and live it up or what was the attitude?

Oh yes. Those days mostly you'd make for the bars even though you're ... I think I was about eighteen, getting on to eighteen in those days and, you know, we were mostly ... you'd go ashore and have a few drinks and, you know, just to meet the people.

Would you get any of the older hands who think, 'Oh, we'd better give him a few experiences and try and get you drunk'?

Oh yes, that was quite done in those days.

Did they succeed?

No. I was pretty moderate. I think I only got drunk, I can remember, once and that was out in India.

What happened then?

Um, well, I think if I remember rightly, it was on Gordon's gin. We were in this bar and someone said: 'Oh, you want to try this good stuff'. So ... and I can always remember the name, it was Gordon's gin.

What happened? You just got overly intoxicated and staggered home or were there any particular events?

That's right. No, I can remember they brought me back in a taxi and I was very sick the next day.

You were saying that there was something like 10,000 Americans taken into the *Queen Elizabeth* the first trip?

Yes. I think it was about ... approximately 10,000 soldiers we brought back to Australia and that was when we left San Francisco we came ... we had ... we were with a ship called the *President Coolidge* and the *Mariposa*, they were in a convoy with three vessels that brought ... were loaded in San Francisco and from there we came across to the Marquisas Islands

again which is a French island and again we met a tanker who came alongside and refuelled the three ships and from there - we were only there about twenty-four hours - and from there we made it directly to Sydney.

> What about the organisation of getting them into the vessel, did you see them being loaded and so on? How did they go about it?

Ah, well, they were mostly loaded overnight and I didn't see a great deal of the loading but as we had other duties to be done in those days.

> One might suppose having 10,000 servicemen aboard could be a fairly noisy, unruly affair. Was it or was there a pretty strict discipline?

Oh, there was very strict discipline. They had certain hours for their meals and I can also remember that when they came aboard they put anti-tank guns - the American soldiers - where they put anti-tank guns all along the foredeck in case of submarine attack. But coming across the Pacific we had no attack at all. The ship made it fully straight to Sydney.

> Did you run into any heavy weather at all?

In some occasions on the *Queen Elizabeth* we did where the weight of the seas damaged the railings but on this voyage from San Francisco it was quite uneventful.

> How did it seem to you to ride then as a big ship?

The ship could roll very heavily. I can remember when you used to try and go up to the lookout and the *Queen Elizabeth*, when she'd roll you used to have to run like billyo up the ladder inside. To get to the crow's-nest you had to go two decks down and you'd go into a small door and there'd be a ladder inside the mast and it would all be lit up and as you'd come up to let your person know up in the crow's-nest you'd knock on the decking to let them know that you were on your way up to relieve them.

> When you were on watch was there a sense of responsibility knowing that here it was loaded with so many men and if something were around and you didn't spot it it would be terrible?

Yes. I used to ... you know, you had a great responsibility when you're up in the top of the crow's-nest. You would be the person that had the best view of the ship and you had a pair of field glasses and you had a direct line to the bridge which, if you sighted any smoke on the horizon or anything like that, you would ring the bridge straightaway and notify them. But it was a great responsibility because you had all these people that were on the ship and you were responsible for their lives?

(5.00) Did you sight anything?

Ah, on a number of occasions. I can never forget on one voyage that we were coming into Fremantle and all of a sudden I'm sitting in the crow's-nest and all of a sudden I see this periscope come up, which was about quite a few hundred yards from the vessel and I couldn't

believe my eyes. Here is a submarine surfacing. But luckily they had been notified on the bridge that it was an American submarine.

What about other hours, did you find yourself sometimes not sure whether you'd seen something and you couldn't make up your mind whether you should call an alert and maybe it would be a false alarm and cause a lot of unnecessary upset?

No. Quite often you'd see ... anything I saw I would report straightaway because you'd never take that opportunity that perhaps it might be the real thing, that it might be a submarine or a raider or anything like that. But if you saw even a wisp of smoke on the horizon you'd report it.

What sort of armaments did you have aboard for protection?

Yes. The *Queen Elizabeth* was very heavily armed: it had a 6-inch gun on the stern; it had about five 3-inch guns around ... situated around the after part of the ship and all over the ship were Oerlikan machine guns, which I think there were about ... oh, a great number of pillar boxes and there was about, I'd say, twenty or thirty of these Oerlikan machine guns.

Was there a drill and if something was sighted that would call people to station?

Yes. As I say, on the *Queen Elizabeth*, I think we had about eighty-five gunners and they were mostly made up of British naval and English army gunners. They were ... and this was about once a week or twice a week they would have action stations which would, you know, they'd have the full gun crew running out.

Where would you go during an action station drill?

Well, on the *Queen Elizabeth* I hadn't become a seaman gunner in those days and my job was to be ... to be a fire drill at action stations in case there was a fire on. You'd have a certain spot to go to.

Did you feel you would have liked to have been one of the gun crew?

Well, ... I ... no, not in those days, I just hadn't had much to do with them but later on, as I say, on smaller ships I became active in the guns crews.

Were you the only Australian on board the *Queen Elizabeth*?

No, there was quite a few of us in Australia because a number of English seamen had become sick or wanted to be repatriated back to England after the ship had been away for so long and so they took on some Australian crew. Mostly down below in the engine room and in the catering staff and also on deck.

So how many trips did you make?

I made - I was on it just on twelve months - I made a number of trips on it. When we left Australia after bringing the Americans back to Australia from America we never ever came back to Australia. The ship left Australia and went across to Cape Town where we picked up about 7,000 German prisoners-of-war who had come out on another ship from the Middle East.

Tell us a bit about that because one again might suppose that you'd be very curious to see these people who were the enemy?

Yes. I can never forget those days. They were all young ... and a lot of them were young boys. They had very little to stand up in; they didn't have much clothes at all but they were very arrogant and a lot of them wouldn't believe that they were on the *Queen Elizabeth*, they always thought it had been sunk. And I can remember them, you know, they had ... The first trip we had Polish soldiers guarding them and these were young lads about sixteen and seventeen and they wouldn't stand any nonsense. They used to be armed with guns and all over the ship when they used to have exercise would have these soldiers with their guns ready - action, you know - just in case they would try and take over the ship.

What sort of conditions were they kept in?

They were kept in where we had the ... in the ordinary ... where the ship, if we ever carried troops, they were just put in the ordinary cabins and in bunks throughout the ship.

What about the food?

They had quite good food. The catering staff on the ship used to, you know, they were well looked after. From there when we picked them up in Cape Town they were taken across to Rio de Janeiro where we refuelled and but no-one could get ashore. And I also remember when we were in Rio de Janeiro there was German ships interned there, or in port and they were alongside the wharf. We could see the German flags and we were out at anchor about a ... it might be a mile off the thing, but these German ships were alongside and you could think to yourself: 'Well, there, we've got the enemy on board the ship, there's the enemy alongside the wharf and here we are out here', you know.

(10.00) Did you get to talk to any of them?

Ah, not a great deal. Not very many could speak English I found - the ones that I ...

Were you briefed that you ought not become friendly with them or anything of that sort?

Yes, you were briefed that you shouldn't have anything to do with them. But I used to think to myself when I used to have to go up to the lookout, there would be all these German soldiers, they'd be - we were about two decks down - and especially at meal time, they'd be all along the passage ways and you used to have to walk amongst them, and I used to think to myself: 'Well, they could grab me or do anything' but there was never any ... they never did anything like that.

Who were guarding them?

We had ...

Oh, you had Polish the first time.

Yes, Polish soldiers on the first voyage and also at different other times we had South African soldiers guarding them.

You said that many of the German POWs were rather arrogant. You might suppose that some soldiers wouldn't feel very happy about that and try and show them their place. Did you ever get any guards who perhaps were unnecessarily violent or tough with the prisoners?

Yes, I found that mainly ... as I say, the Polish were very good but I found the persons that were most arrogant towards were the South African soldiers. They stood no nonsense at all.

Was there any actual brutality?

No, not brutality but they used to push them around and that type of thing.

You said you didn't get ashore in Rio de Janeiro?

No. We did no shore leave there because the ship was just refuelling and I think we were only given twenty-four hours to stay in the port.

So what other trips then did you make?

From there we went ... took them to New York. They were unloaded off ... we couldn't get ashore. I can remember we loaded off just off the Statue of Liberty. We stood out to sea there and the German prisoners-of-war were taken off there before we went alongside in Manhattan.

Was there a sense of relief to see them off the ship?

There was, yes, because, as I say, the ship had to be cleaned up and got ready for the next voyage. And the next voyage mostly we went ... we took the Americans across to England where we went to British ... to Gourock in Scotland. The ship would take about three and a half days to do a crossing, to cross the Atlantic.

So how many trips altogether did you make?

I did about four trips in the *Queen Elizabeth*. Another trip was out to the Middle East where we took the 8th Army.

Was there anything particularly memorable about the 8th Army or going out to the Middle East?

I remember going out to the Middle East we lost quite a few of the young British soldiers, especially in the Red Sea, where this ship wasn't for the real hot weather in the Red Sea - it was terrible hot - and a lot of them died from heat exhaustion and that type of thing. And they were buried at sea.

Just dehydration and so on?

Dehydration, yes. I can remember because we used to have to help the sail-maker get ready to sew up the bodies, you know, and put them ... and they were put in canvass and they ship was ... and they were put over the side.

Were there any other alerts at all during those voyages?

There was one alert when we were in the Middle East at Port Tewfik. This is where ... as far as we could go. We could never go in the canal because the ship was too large and we would anchor of that place called Port Tewfik and there was an air-raid alarm given there once and an enemy plane was sighted overhead but it never attacked. It was more just a reconnaissance type of thing. But we made ... we were loading prisoners-of-war at the time and the ship curtailed that and we were ... we got to sea, out of it, as soon as possible.

Were there any other particular events or memories you have of the *Queen Elizabeth* that stay with you?

Not a great deal. I think ... no, I think that was about all that mostly happened on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Did you ever get to meet the master?

No. I saw him a number of times. It was Captain Fall was at the present time. They used to change quite a lot. Sir James Bissett, he was one of the captains of the *Queen Elizabeth*. But while I was on it was a Captain Fall.

Were they regarded with a bit of awe as master of such a big ship?

They ... yes, they used to not mix with the crew or they very seldom spoke to you. They were mostly men that, well, a lonely type of man, I'd say.

It would almost would seem to be the equivalent of being an admiral in the navy or something, wouldn't it?

Yes, similar to that, yes.

So after your twelve months or so with the *Queen Elizabeth*, what then?

I then joined ... oh, when we left the ship in England we decided we wanted to come back to Australia because we had found out that a lot of ships were being sunk and they were getting short of seamen in Australia to man the Australian ships. So we thought we'd like to come back. So we, in Gourock, Scotland, we were able to come back to Australia as repatriated

seamen and there was about twenty of us decided to come home at the one time so they sent us to Liverpool to wait a ship to come back to Australia and while there I was able to go to a place called Salt House Docks and do a training course for about a month to become a gunner and that's where we learnt all types of guns - the 6-inch, 3-inch, Oerlikan machine guns - and how to work them.

(15.00) What was the manner there? Were you treated as if you were a regular member of the navy in terms of discipline and orders and that sort of thing, or ...

Yes, you were disciplined. But we used to go along every day and they were the Royal Navy that ran us through and for that they gave us a certificate after we'd qualified as a gunner.

Did you do ordinary physical drill and that as well?

No. Just ... just the learning of how to load and unload and the general maintenance of these guns.

Where did you stay and who, in effect, was responsible for you?

Well, we weren't responsible for anything. They put us up in a hotel in Liverpool and we used to have to report every few days to the Cunnard Shipping Company which was the owners of the *Queen Elizabeth*. And after being there about a month we were told that half of us would go on a ship called the *Rimutaka* which was a New Zealand shipping company as a passenger to be returned to Australia and the other half were to come on a ship called the *Ceramic*. But we were the first to leave and ... on the *Rimutaka* and we left Liverpool and we went across to Belfast Island. We were going to go in a convoy but there was a big submarine attacks outside near ... off England, so we laid in Belfast Harbour there for about a week before we proceeded to Australia.

And the other vessel ...

The vessel *Ceramic*, unfortunately the crew that ... parts of the crew that went on that, the *Ceramic* was torpedoed just after coming through the Panama Canal with a loss of 500 lives, one survivor and that was an English gunner that survived and he was the only one survived out of 500 people.

Did it make you wonder of the nature of things, that you might have been on that?

Well, we didn't know till we returned to Australia what had happened when we got word that the *Ceramic* had been torpedoed. There was quite a lot of sadness as a lot of us had made great friends amongst these people, you know, after being together for over a year.

Talking of convoys, did the *Queen Elizabeth* go in convoy or just go on its own because of its own because of its speed?

Very seldom that we went on our own. We'd usually go along just over twenty knots, about twenty-two knots, but if you ever sighted anything she could increase to thirty knots, I think

we got up to at one stage. And that would be equivalent to a motor car travelling at forty-five miles an hour. So you can just imagine how a ship of 85,000 ton, cutting through the water at something like thirty knots, which would be equivalent to forty-five miles an hour as a car.

So would it effectively expect to outrun most potential dangers?

Yes. Mostly nothing could stand up to it. But, I believe, in November 1942 a Japanese ... a British ... sorry, an English in this kind of attack that a German submarine did sight the *Queen Elizabeth* and fired a number of torpedoes at it but they all misfired and missed their target.

So when you got back to Australia did you have shore time; leave time in Australia?

Yes. When I got back we ... the ship came to Melbourne the *Rimutaka* as we were a passenger on board and from there we proceeded by train up to Sydney and I had about a couple of weeks leave. But as I say once you were paid off a ship you were never ... you weren't on any pay. Your pay finished in the Merchant Service. You weren't ... till you got another ship you weren't given any pay or any type of thing.

So you had to look for something pretty quickly?

Yes, yes. You were getting no pay at all.

What was the attitude towards merchant seamen at the time as far as, say, regular navy was concerned or servicemen and so on, was there any sense that you were seen as different, that you weren't part of the armed services as such?

I can remember being in a hotel. All you were given was a little silver badge which was MN and the Australian Merchant Navy had MN Australia underneath it. That was the only recognition that you got. I can remember I was in a hotel having a drink and a bloke came up and he said: 'Oh, why aren't you in uniform?', you know, and yet I'd seen more action and that type of thing than a lot of soldiers and it really made me hopping mad, you know, that there were these people going around saying, you know: 'Why aren't you in uniform?' when we were doing our bit.

So what did you say?

I just said, 'Well, look, I've seen more action than ...', you know, I can remember saying it, 'than a lot of people in the armed services'.

What was his reaction to that?

He just said: 'Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were a merchant seaman. I didn't recognise that you were, you know, a seaman'. I said: 'Well, this is our recognition, our badge', and that was the only recognition that we really had.

So it was from there then, was it, that you joined the *Hanyang*?

Yes. The next ship I joined was the *Hanyang* and this was a ship that had come off the China coast and it was ...

Describe it? What did it look like; how big and those sort of things?

(20.00) Well, she was about 3,000 ton but I can always remember it as ... when you walked on the deck it had - in those days when it was on the China coast they used to be frightened of pirates boarding it - and to stop they used to keep passengers and a lot of the decks, when you could go to another deck, would be all iron gates and ... or they'd have spikes on them to stop any pirates. A lot of ... in those days in the China coast a lot of the pirates would join a passengers and they would try and take over the ship. But they used to have these iron doors coming down from different decks where they could lock and keep the passengers confined.

That must have seemed a bit bazaar to you at the time, did it?

It did, yes. It was something, a different type of ship. But this ship had been taken over by the American Army and yet on deck we had British officers, we had ... and the crew down below were Australian and on deck were Australian but we had American Army gunners. They were, as the ship had been taken over by the American Army but we were running supplies for them.

How many in it?

Ah, well, there was about ... in the crew there was about thirty and there would be about ten American gunners on board.

What was it like, was it a run-down ship or well kept, or how did it look?

Ah, it was a well kept ship. It was painted grey and it was, I'd say, one of the nicest vessels that I'd been on. I suppose in those days she'd had Chinese crew and very cheap labour and they kept it at a very good standard.

So you had British, American, Australian and Chinese?

Quite a ... not Chinese. British, American, Australian and ...

Oh, you didn't have any Chinese?

No Chinese, they'd been taken off before the ship arrived in Australia.

How did you all get on?

Got on very well. The Americans were very nice to ... you know, we all seemed to be ... get on well together.

Now what sort of armaments did that have?

The ship only carried 3-inch on the stern and had some machine guns on the wings of the bridge. That was about all of the armament that we had. Yet we were right in the front-line as I will be able to tell you later on.

Well, as you now had a certificate as a gunner, did this mean that you were to man one of the guns in the event of anything happening?

Yes. I was ... when I went on board they asked me did I have a gunners certificate and I told them: 'Yes', and I was put in the guns crew of the 3-inch gun on the stern and my job was to pick up the ammunition out of the containers where it was stored and to place it into the bridge of the gun.

Did you have practise drills to ensure all the guns were operating properly and so on?

A number of practise runs. Yes. We used to ... while we were at sea we'd fire off a few shells, you know, just to see how we went.

So where did you start to go?

From the ... the first trip we made out was to - under the American Army - we went to Norfolk Island. We took a lot of supplies out there as a number of American troops were situated there and ...

Part of a convoy?

No. Went on our own, out to there, and we could never get alongside because the ... there was no landing or piers there so they loaded us into barges, mostly supplies there.

Anything untoward on that trip?

No, nothing untoward there. We just made regular trips to ... And then the next voyage was made to Noumea. We took ... being an army ship, I don't know why, but we took a load of coke out there to the furnaces out at Noumea. I think the zinc works is what they ...

This is stoking coke, not the white stuff that's snorted around?

No, just stoking coke. So we took a load out there. But the next voyage when we came back to Sydney, we were ... the ship ... things were going a bit bad up in New Guinea in those stages and we were loaded with a full load of ammunition and mostly drums of high octane petrol.

Did that make you feel just a little bit apprehensive, the sense that, you know, well, things are getting different now?

Well, we didn't know where ... we knew we were going to ... Well, it had been reported that we were going to go to the Philippines but the Philippines had fallen so we were diverted to

New Guinea and I can never forget, after seeing all this stuff come on board, I thought: 'Oh well, if anything ever happens I don't think we'll be seeing Australia again', you know.

You were saying you all got on very well. The British on the one hand have a bit of a tradition of aloofness with the officers and can be rather off-hand and authoritarian in their manner. How did the Australians and Americans sort of take to direction from British officers?

They didn't take too well as they mostly wanted to do their own thing, the Americans, you know. They didn't take ... like getting taken orders taken from British men.

Was there a bit of friction then in that respect?

There was at times, yes. There was a bit of friction but the captain, he was a very British chap and he was a very nice type of person. But I can remember the chief officer, he was a bit aloof.

(25.00) Were there any particular incidents or things that sort of became things where people actually felt it? Can you remember any particular thing?

I can remember ... No, well, one of the - I can never forget - one of the American gunners played up in Sydney before you we left port and he was whisked off the ship and because he'd ... he was drunk and had played up, that he was sent to ... to the front-lines and, as a matter of fact, when we arrived in Oro Bay in New Guinea, he was ashore there. He'd already been sent up to the front-lines and he was there before the ship arrived as a matter of fact.

Did you regret it? Did you say he wished he were back or ...

Ah, well he was there ... well, he came aboard after the action that we'd been in and I think that he was glad that he wasn't sitting out on the ship with us when we were attacked.

Did the Australians rankle at all under this sort of British authority as it were?

Ah, no they didn't. No. We got along well together.

So, anyway, you set off on this voyage not quite knowing where you were going but feeling that you were going somewhere, that it could be a little bit hot.

Yes. We thought: 'Well, you know, we've got all this ammunition, we must be going somewhere'. So our first port was Townsville - we went across to Townsville. We took on the full load of cargo in Sydney and we went up to Townsville and from there we went across to Milne Bay and we stayed there for a few days. We had ... there was no attacks there but from there we left Milne Bay and proceeded up the coast of New Guinea and our destination was Oro Bay which was right in near Wewak and near the front-lines of where ... not far from where the Japanese were.

What was the feeling aboard? Was there a sense of anxiety?

Ah, no. We knew we had a job to be done and we were there to do it.

So where did you first sight Japanese?

Well, we were about ... it was a Sunday morning on 11th April 1943 about one o'clock in the afternoon. We were proceeding up the coast and all of a sudden, I'll never forget that 'action stations' went, we knew there was planes overhead and ... but we thought they were the Americans' or Australians' planes but all of a sudden we could hear this noise and these dive-bombers came at us - they were Japanese dive-bombers - and they came at the ship machine gunning and ... just dive-bombing and dropping their bombs. The first bomb they dropped - we had an escort with us called the *Piri*, it was a corvette, an Australian corvette - and the first bomb they dropped on us was a direct hit on the guns crew of the corvette and by all reports the whole of the crew were - guns crew - was wiped out by the first bomb.

Did you see the hit?

Ah, it wasn't far away. Actually I was too busy helping to load the gun. We were getting off as many rounds as we could at these planes as they were coming very low and I can still see in my mind today as the planes came that low, they pulled out of their dive and you could see the bombs leave the planes and you could even see the Japanese pilots' faces through the perspex of the plane - cockpit.

Were you on a gun at the time?

I was ... my job was on the after gun of the *Hanyang* and it was to load it. I was picking up the ammunition, putting it into the breach.

Did you have any impression that you were getting close, or hitting any of the aircraft?

Well, I don't think we hit any but after ... I think it was about ... estimated about fifteen planes were attacking us and ...

What flag were you flying by the way?

We were flying the Australian flag. And ... but we just ... they got three direct hits on us. The first bomb they dropped and the *Hanyang* ... it went down the engine room skylight and the flight of the bomb came out and hit the midships which quite a number of people were on fire duty there and they were either killed or wounded by shrapnel.

What was the sense of that for you? I mean, it's one thing to have the notion of being under fire but the sheer concussion and the impact of things close by must ... can you recall your feelings?

I didn't feel anything. I just, you know, there was this sound ... this terrible sound of ... as it's reported, that they were machine gunning us as they come down and just I ... I didn't feel anything. My action was just ... I was putting the ... I was actually in a daze. I remember just

grabbing the shells and just putting them into the breach of the gun, you know. But they also ... another bomb they dropped it hit the railing of the ship and instead of bursting on the deck, it burst out into the sea which was lucky for us also. But they ... number three hold, one of the holds that was damaged and all the bombs ... the three bombs that landed on the ship all hit amidships actually and the four holds where all the ammunition and the petrol was stored, it didn't hit that, yet the water got into number three hold and it half filled with water.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape two of an interview recorded with Alan Wickow about merchant seamen. Recorded in Melbourne on 17th January 1990 and begins in five seconds from now.

Well, with these number of strikes and the ship filling up with water, what happened?

Well, we were able to run it in close to the shore. We thought we were going to lose the ship as she was taking water fast but we were able to put her in close to the shore and ...

Were the Japanese still attacking or had they gone off by then?

Just after that what they call the P-38s which were American fighter planes, they came over and really chased them off which we were lucky that way.

Did you have casualties at this time?

Yes. We'd lost ... there was a number of American soldiers that we had on board, mostly in what they call the catering staff, who were looking after some of the passengers ... some of the American soldiers that we had as passengers. A few of those were killed and also a young boy who - we'd just had that aftern ... morning, we'd just celebrated his twenty-first birthday. He was a trimmer which was a chap, in those days, the *Hanyang* was a coal burner and he was the person that would keep the coal up to the firemen. He just celebrated his twenty-first birthday but he was killed.

Did you see any of the wounded or those who'd been killed?

Yes, after the action we had to go along and pick up some of the bodies that were ... that were around the deck.

Was it a shock to you or were you so preoccupied with the totality of everything that it didn't really strike you?

I think I was more preoccupied. Also a good friend of mine, Tommy Rees, he was riddled in shrapnel and bleeding all over and we had to pick them up and the Americans ... we took them ashore to the base ashore.

Were they in a lot of pain?

Oh, they were in a lot of pain, yes they were.

Screaming or ...

Screaming out and, you know ... and still, to this day, I still recall that type of thing that happened.

So you started to run for the shallows, what happened then?

Ah ... we were able to get her into the shallows and we thought: 'Oh, well, this night they're going to come off and finish us off' and they knew they had us there, you know, the Japanese and ... But something happened and they never came back and they worked ... we were ...

Could you sleep?

Well, half of us were put ashore that night and half of us were kept on board just in case ... you know, to help with the unloading. The Americans unloaded the ship into barges and they were able to get the whole of the ammunition and the petrol out of the ship. But the Japanese never came back that night and ...

Were you in the ship or ashore?

I was in the ship at my guns. I think we drew lots or something to stay on board, you know, and it was my turn to stay on board. But ...

Did you sleep?

I don't think I did. I think I slept out on deck that night. But ... the ship was ... and they were able to patch the side of the ship up where she'd had a big hole in her and they were able to put in a big concrete pillar type of thing with - I just can't remember - with canvas and the ship was unloaded in about two days and, as I say, there was no further attack but the next day at Milne Bay there was a huge planes ... the Japanese planes attacked Milne Bay the next day and they sunk a number of ships in there but they never came back to Oro Bay which was most unusual.

So was the ship ... could it be made seaworthy again?

The ship was made seaworthy after a few days and we proceeded back to Milne Bay and from there we got the ship back to Townsville and back into Sydney and I'll never forget coming up Sydney Harbour, there was us with all the midships blown off and all the people on the ferries, you know, yelling out and horns being tooted and that type of thing. But we just received no recognition at all.

As you were coming back was there a feeling at all: well, perhaps the damage may have been worse than appreciated, that it could go down?

Well, it could have. Yes, the ship could have sunk on its way down but we came very slowly and, you know, we were without any cargo or anything; the ship was light and she was well out of the water. As when we had the cargo the ship was well down into the water. But being light ship ...

> Did that affect your state of mind at the time? I mean, it's a fairly long voyage. Having been under attack and the sense either the ship could go down or perhaps you might be attacked again, did it unnerve you at all?

(5.00) No. I suppose I was young in those days and ... but it didn't unnerve me. It just ... the thought of being ... you know, having been in action, it was ... well, I'd been right amongst it, you know.

> And you said you'd had a friend who'd been riddled with shrapnel.

Yes.

> What happened to him?

Well, I saw him about a month later. I happened to be ashore when we got back to Sydney, I went to visit him, and his whole face and his whole body was just riddled in shrapnel and ... from where he'd been ... this bomb had ... As a matter of fact, after the attack I walked along the deck of the *Hanyang* and lying on the deck was a piece of shrapnel which I picked up and brought home and I have it now mounted on the wall at home and that was a piece of the shrapnel of the bomb that ... it was only about fifty yards from where I was. And these bombs that they dropped were shrapnel piercing type of bomb and once they'd hit they'd just break up into small pieces and just scatter.

> Well, that particular piece, which is quite a sculptural thing mounted on a bit of board is about eight inches long and about - in its widest section - about two and a half inches wide. That's actually a part of one of the bombs?

A part of one of the bombs and it's very sharp and those pieces were just flying around the deck. So ...

> Did you friend survive?

I never saw him after I'd seen him in Sydney. I don't know what happened to him but it would be very hard to say how he got on. I don't know.

> So after you got back to Sydney, what did they do with the ship? Did they decide it was beyond salvage or ...

No. The ship was paid off; the crew was paid off and as I say our pay stopped from that day we signed off and she was taken across to a repair place in Sydney and I believe it did survive the war after ... she was broken up in about 1960 I think.

> So from that you went to a ship called the *Wanalla* was it?

No. Before that I went into a hospital ship - something different - to a ship that was all floodlit. It was something different. It was a ship called the *Wanganella*. The *Wanganella* used to run across to New Zealand during peacetime but she was taken over as a hospital ship and this was ...

How did you come to join that?

Well, as I say, in those days to get a job all you had to go ... when you left a ship you had to go down and you ... to what they call the seamen's pick-up and the chief officer would come in and say: 'I want ten ABs for the *Wanganella*' or something like that. So you would get in line and you would line up on the floor and if the chief officer liked the look of you you'd get picked for the ship. If he didn't, he'd just pass you by. So I just ... the *Wanganella* came up and I thought: 'Oh well, it's a hospital ship, it'll be something different'. So I lined up and I was selected as a member of the crew.

As you were preparing to go aboard you said that you, as a merchant seaman, you had to take on most ships your own clothing and so on. But what would you take with you as the sort of things that you thought were necessary for your own use, whether it's books or razors and those kinds of ...

Oh well, at that time I was starting to become an officer. I thought I'd like to be ... my father always wanted me to become an officer so you had to do quite a bit of navigation study and that type of thing and I bought all these navigation books and I was studying and I used to get the officer of the ship to help me out on, you know, navigation type of things and that.

But what about other things. If one's going camping one sort of prepares a list: I'm going to take band aides, scissors ... What sort of things would you take?

No. You'd just take mostly your couple of sets of dungarees and shirts and always a photo of your girlfriend.

You had a girlfriend by this time?

Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, one of the chaps on the *Queen Elizabeth*, he was ... I was looking for him and I went out to Sydney, this place where he lived in Sydney, and he wasn't there and this young girl, who was sixteen at the time, answered the door and I just asked her if she'd like to go out to the pictures that night and after that she became my permanent girlfriend and I married her.

Did you correspond regularly?

Yes. I used to write about once a week to her, you know, and I used to get regular correspondence to her.

How would the letters reach? What would be the turn-around time as it were if you're at sea and travelling around before you would get a letter from when it was posted?

Oh, sometimes about a month. It all depends how ... you know, and I'll never forget I wrote to her one letter and I happened to put in something that ... where we were going and she got this letter and was just about cut to pieces. The censor had opened it and they thought there was a bit of information that I'd put in that shouldn't be read and the letter had been cut to pieces. You know.

Were you able to recognise later what it was that they'd deleted?

I think I'd told her that we should be sailing very shortly and I wouldn't be able to see her again for some time.

Did this affect your attitude towards the sea? Did it make you sort of think, oh, maybe you should be ashore?

Ah, no. I think I was young and I just, you know, wanted to be like all other young blokes being right in the action.

(10.00) So what was this ship like, this hospital ship?

The hospital ship, well, she was a well-kept ship. She was spotless because we were carry ... we going out to the Middle East to bring back the Australian wounded.

What was it called by the way?

The *Wanganella*.

Oh, this was the one ... sorry.

Yeah, the *Wanganella*. And it was something to be at sea where, although the ships I'd been on the blackout was very strict that at night time you had to have everything covered up. There was no lights to be shown. But here we were on the *Wanganella* we were flood lit with all the funnels flood lit and the sides of the ship flood lit and you could leave your portholes open at night time and smoke on deck or do anything you wanted to.

What was it's capacity?

Ah ... capacity in ...

In terms of taking a number of people aboard?

Well, we used to bring, I think, it'd be a couple of thousand you'd bring back wounded.

You were mentioning that you could do as you liked and smoke and not worry about lights. It raises the question about the sort of measures you'd take on

other ships to ensure that you were travelling in darkness. What was the general drill?

Well, in most of the ships the portholes were blacked out; were painted out and we used to have curtains at the doors. They used to ... that's right, they used to have a - when you opened the door - there was an automatic switch with the lights would go out when the door opened and when they closed the door the light would come on again.

And were you not allowed to smoke on deck because of the cigarette glow or ...

Well, no, because the glow because the submarines or anyone could pick up a light. But as I say I was on the *Wanganella* but it didn't make any difference to the other hospital ship that was torpedoed off Brisbane which was the same as the *Wanganella*, flood lit but she was still torpedoed.

That happened after you'd gone on board the *Wanganella*, though, did it?

Yes. It happened before. I was on the ... Yes. She had been torpedoed about five months before.

Did that make you wonder then about the wisdom of the exercise?

It did, yes. Well, you know, I thought, well, you know, even though you're flood lit you could still be under attack.

It now seems the *Centaur* had uniformed men on board which may or may not have been relevant to the fact that it was attacked but did that make you wonder about the whole ... Did you know or hear anything about that at the time?

No. Well, we still had ... on the *Wanganella*, we had uniformed men on as well because a lot of the sick-bay attendants were all Australian Army personnel and they were in uniform. But it didn't make any difference.

So, what was the morale like?

Morale was very good in the ... we had very good morale in those days on the hospital ship, and we had nurses as well.

Where did you take your first wounded aboard?

Well, we went over ... the first trip we made was to the Middle East. We went to Colombo, we picked ... went to Colombo which is Sri Lanka now and from there we went to Port Tewfik, the entrance to the canal and we loaded Australian wounded there and we brought them back to Sydney ... Melbourne and Sydney.

What was the loading method? How would they bring them aboard?

Ah, they were brought out in boats because the ship couldn't go alongside and they were put onto this, like barges, which were moored alongside the ship and they were then carried on board by stretchers.

Was it an awkward process? Would men be jolted and sort of bumped around as though ....

Well, they would be but as they had to get them up the gangways, you know, but they were very caring, the sickbay attendants, they were very caring type of blokes.

Was it the full range of injuries - lost legs, mutilation ...

Oh yes. A full range of, you know, people who'd been wounded out in the desert and that type of thing.

Did it touch you at all?

Yeah, it really did, to see these chaps .... We didn't have a great deal to do with them. Once they were on board we didn't seem to have much to do with them at all, you know, as we had our duties to carry out and our duties were to keep the ship clean, the decks clean - washed down every day - and go round our duties of maintenance of the ship.

Were there men travelling in pain? Would you hear people crying out and all that sort of thing?

No, I didn't. No, you wouldn't hear them because, as I say, they had nurses and good medical attention, doctors and everything on board.

So how many of these trips did you make?

I made only one trip on that and from there I joined a couple of iron ore ships which were bringing ... general cargo ships and they were ... we used to load .... There was a ship called the *Barossa* and the *Barwon* and they mostly be going out to the steel works at Whyalla and bringing iron ore around to Newcastle.

How was it that you made just the one trip on the hospital ship?

Ah ... oh I ... oh, that's right, my future brother-in-law, he - I tried to get him on the ship also but unfortunately he didn't get the job as one of the crew - so we thought we'd like to get a ship together so I left the *Wanganella* and was able to join a ship together with him.

And then on these iron ore ships, how long were you at that?

I suppose it must have been twelve months I was on the iron ore ships and they were very dangerous type of ship. If anything happened you had very little chance of getting out of them as the ... a couple of iron boats had been torpedoed around the coast here and they were sunk

within about two minutes and they went straight to the bottom because as you realise iron ore is so heavy, it just ... they had no chance of getting out of it at all.

(15.0)) Where abouts along the coast were they under attack?

Mostly the ships ... there was a great number of ships attacked off Eden or Wilson's Promontory and around Gabo Island. That's where most of the Japanese would have their submarines attacking.

About how many vessels were lost around that area, do you know?

Well, I'd say there was roughly about twenty altogether, were either attacked or sunk. And we ... mostly the ... you would be ... have corvettes escorting you but when the attack would take place they'd either try and pick one. Most of the ships coming around the coast in those days were in convoy and you'd have Australian corvettes with you but when they attacked you would disperse and the ships would make off in their own directions but the submarines would usually try and pick off the slowest ship that they could.

So you were in some convoys then that had to disperse because of attack?

That were dispersed, yes. And we'd just take off and try and make our own way back to port.

Were there any anxious moments where you thought that maybe you were being picked for attention?

Oh, there was, but we had ... you just didn't give that thought your mind. You know, you used to think: 'Well, we've just got to get out of it', you know.

Presumably you didn't have any scanners or sonar or anything of that sort to check them?

Nothing like that at all. And, as I say, mostly in those ships, the iron ore ships and that, we had either one or two naval ratings and the guns crew were made out of mostly the seamen on deck.

So you were on a gun ... one of those ....

I've been mostly ... because they knew I had a gunners ticket you would always be selected for the guns crew of most of the ships that you joined.

So how long would you be on a watch in that sort of circumstance?

Well, you be .... We'd do our normal duties like four on and eight off. You'd be working ... being on deck you'd do mostly lookout or two hours on the wheel.

Would it catch up with you? Would you get to a stage where you'd find it hard to stay awake when it was just quiet and dark?

Yeah. Well, you used to get eight hours sleep so, you know, you could have a good rest. But when you're ... mostly if you're in waters where you thought you were going to be attacked, you were pretty nervy and that type of thing.

Were there vessels went down on some of these occasions when you were part of a convoy?

We were in convoy with the *Rossina*, it was a Yugoslav ship and that was attacked about ... it would have been some distance from us. But all we saw was a cloud of red dust and she was gone in a couple of minutes.

During the day or night?

During the day, yes.

What was the rule, if a ship were attacked was it acceptable to go back and try and pick up survivors or was that ...

Ah, well, mostly that was done by the corvettes if they were ... or naval vessels that were in ... escorting you. You would ... see, some of the ships were so slow that you'd just have to get away, you know, you wouldn't have time to go back to any of them.

Was there any set rule about it? I mean, if you're immediately adjacent to a ship that you saw went down and there were survivors, is it possible you might go and pick them up or was it just ...

No, you would just disperse and you'd get out ... just make off so the naval vessels, if they were around, they'd ... which were mostly all timed. The corvettes would be dropping depth charges, all that type of thing and they were ones that were left to pick up any survivors.

Were there any accidents with mines? Did any come adrift and hit ships or ....

No. We used to have what they call paravanes which we used to string ... when we left port - mostly in the cargo ships - you'd have these paravanes and they would be on the bow of the ship and they would be lowered down and they would have two wires strung out on each side of the vessel to what they call paravanes and they would be ... if a mine was floating on the surface or just under the surface, this would hit the wire and slide down into the cutters which were on each side of the ship and what they call the paravane and they would cut the wire of the mine.

Did you ever see mines or know that happened on ships you were on?

Yeah. Well, later on I did when I was on this air force supply ship. We were in a minefield around off Borneo and they were floating around on the surface and we had to try and shoot them. I didn't personally, but the guns crew - the naval gunners - tried to shoot them off, explode them.

Did it work?

It did, yes, on a couple of occasions.

But were any of the ships actually harmed by mines then?

Ah, a number were around the coast here because just after the start of the war there was a German raider around which laid a number of mines in Bass Strait and the *City of Rayville* American ship and a British ship called the *Cambridge* was sunk by mines just off Gabo Island.

Did mines ever occasionally drift ashore that you know of?

Umm, they had been reported, yes, but I never saw them myself.

Presumably when there were these attacks and ships sank, it wouldn't be reported in the newspapers because that would give information I suppose to the enemy. Was there a grapevine, would you get to know what had gone down?

(20.00)We used to get to know. Mostly if you were in the shipping industry you would get to know, you know, that certain ships had been sunk but there was very little in the paper in those days.

So how long did you spend on these iron ore ships?

I spent nearly twelve months on those and by this time it was getting near ... the end of ... beginning of 1945 and I had the opportunity of joining a ship called the *Wanaka*. She was about a 3,000 ton ship but she was taken over by the air force and previously, before joining it, it had been in a cyclone and had been wrecked ashore in Cooktown with a loss of about twelve lives when the cyclone struck. But I joined it after it had been recommissioned in Sydney. And on board it had ... it flew ... we had an Australian crew of merchant seamen but we flew the Australian Air Force flag.

Why did you fly the Australian Air Force flag?

Well, she was taken over by the air force to carry air force supplies and we had ... our mostly duty was to take up air force ... like petrol and that type of thing to the forward bases.

Incidentally, with the ore ship, apart from the worry of submarines, they sound like the sort of vessel that in heavy seas they mightn't be the nicest boat to be in?

No, they would roll terribly and you'd ship a lot of seas aboard. And also, in those days, when you'd load iron ore you would be covered in red dust, not like today, the conveyor type of belts. We used to have a big conveyor belt, it would just come out from shore and this belt would just drop the stuff into the holds of the ship and the dust would fly everywhere and the whole of your bedding would be covered in red dust and your whole body, you'd be just caked

in red dust. And I can remember you can never get it out of your bags or out of your clothes but these were the jobs you just had to do. You know.

What was the accommodation and food like on those boats?

Accommodation was ... still the same fo'c'sle type of thing where you had about eight or nine men in the one area sleeping. But the food was quite good; the Australians were always well accommodated that way.

In relative terms, if one were going from one port to another and taking iron ore backwards and forwards, it sounds like it could have got pretty boring. Did that affect the morale and attitude of crews? Did people drink more on those sort of ships?

Yes they did, they used to drink pretty well, mostly pretty heavily. Because of a lot of these ships, iron ore ships, no-one wanted to go in them because they were like death traps, you know, and ... but they used to get a more rougher type of blokes in those type of ships because, as I say, the chief officer - when the ship would pick up a crew a lot of people wouldn't stand up to go in these crews - so they had to take the ones that couldn't hardly get a ship because they, you know, hard, difficult to get a ship so they would be the ones that would ... well, they know that they'd want some money, so to live that had to take any job that they could get so they used to ... well, the chief officer or chief engineer had to pick this type of crew.

Did that mean tougher captains or tougher bo's'ns or chief officers or ....

No. Just the crew itself, the ABs and that, would be a rougher type of person.

So with the *Wanalla*, where did you start to go from there?

The *Wanaka* ...

Sorry, the ... the *Wanaka*.

The *Wanaka*, yeah. So we ... mostly our ... we were sent to ... our main base was Madang in New Guinea. We'd take - this is where the air force had a lot of their main station and we were stationed in Madang - from there we'd run to the islands, Middleburg Island and all islands that were off New Guinea, Morotai, and the islands situated around New Guinea.

Were you apprehensive of heading up that way again?

I ... well, it was a couple of years after that I'd been on the ship that was attacked and ... I was a bit apprehensive at the time because I remember going back to Oro Bay and it was kind of reliving this situation that I'd be in, you know, the time before.

Ah, was it there that you took Japanese ... or you had Japanese POWs loading supplies and so on?

Yes. Mostly ... when we'd load, they'd bring the Japanese prisoners on board who'd work the winches and that type of thing, loading the ship. And I spoke to a couple of them - some of them could speak English - and, you know, they'd come along the deck and they'd talk to you.

With the knowledge about Japanese atrocities that would have been by then pretty well-known, were there people who felt angry and bitter towards them and would take the opportunity to give them something back?

Ah, no. I think, you know, they were soldiers and they were just doing their duty as far as we were concerned. We didn't have any reports of atrocities, I'd never, you know, heard about this till later on when I come ashore.

So how did they seem to work? Did they work willingly or hard or ...

(25.00) No, they were very hard workers. From what I can remember they did their job and they just went along. If they could get a couple of cigarettes - we used to, you know, give them a couple of cigarettes - and they'd just ... they'd ask you for a cigarette and you wouldn't mind giving them because, well, they were just doing their duty I suppose.

Who would supervise them?

Ah, the Australian Army or air force personnel would be there to supervise the loadings.

With guns?

They would be armed, yeah, because they would have ... carry guns with them, yeah.

So how long were you doing this, going up and down to New Guinea?

I was on, I suppose, the last twelve months of the war.

You went to Borneo as well?

Yes, we went to Borneo and we brought back - the war had just finished then - and, as I say, I can always remember going through this minefield and it was daylight luckily and there was all these mines floating around and the gunners I know, I can remember them quite plainly trying to hit the knobs and to set the mines off which they did on a couple. But we went quite close to these mines as we threaded our way through ... we went to Labuan in Borneo and there we loaded ... brought some personnel, air force personnel back to Australia.

Did you bring back at any time any former Australian or British prisoners-of-war?

Yes. As a matter of fact another ship I forgot I was on, I forgot to tell you, it was a captured ship called the *Remo*. She was an Italian ship captured in Fremantle and after they'd captured it it was renamed the *Reynella* and it was a prize job to get on this ship as she was an ex-Italian passenger ship - it used to carry passengers and cargo - and it was ... Australian seamen

always wanted to get on this ship because she was running out to India and to ... it was a real good job as we said in those days.

Why, what made it a good job?

Well, she was about 10,000 tons and the accommodation was very good on it and it was just people wanted to get on this ship because she was running overseas and you didn't know where you were going actually. But it was just a good ship is what we classed it as.

So you went to India?

Yes. I joined this ship in Sydney, another ship, and from there we went out to India, Bombay and Calcutta on two different voyages. But this ...

What was the purpose of those voyages? What were they doing?

Well, we were taking bagged wheat - in those days the famine was on in India - and I can never forget we left Melbourne and we were halfway across the Indian Ocean and when the ... before the ship was captured the Italians had put sand in the engine and she used to breakdown on quite occasions. So I'll never forget one occasion we were broke down in the Indian Ocean for three days, just ... no escort or anything, we were just floating around. And there was this smoke belching out of her - it was a motor ship - but she was throwing out this kind of fumes and we were just floating. They couldn't start the engine for three days and there was us, loaded with about 10,000 tons of bagged wheat just floating around and it was a really dangerous spot in the Indian Ocean in those days.

Were you resigned to not getting past it, that you'd get hit or ....

Well, I know I used to have my stuff all ready to take off and I looked at where the raft was situated just in case we had an emergency any time, I'd know where to go to and get away.

Did you sleep on deck?

Well, we mostly did in ... going through the tropics we'd sleep on deck because it was so hot in those days. This ship wasn't fitted for, you know, really tropical weather.

So which parts of India did you go?

Ah, we went to Bombay and I can recall in those days, in 19 ... in the forties, early forties, that the famine was on in India and if you walked along the streets of Bombay and there'd just be the dead laying in the gutters and they'd just ... young children just, you know, no food, just laying dead in the gutters and the dead ... carts coming along picking up the bodies out of the street.

What did you make of that? I mean, did you feel that it was something that should have been better handled or ...

I felt frustrated we could do nothing, you know, that at least we were bringing them some food into the country, trying to help the people but whether it ever got to them, I don't know, because, as I say, we saw a lot of dying and that type of thing in those days.

You said you also picked up prisoners-of-war?

(30.00) Yes. When we were in Bombay we picked up prisoners-of-war and they were ... more of the Indian Sikh type ... that's Sikhs they were that tribe, that's right, but they were Sikhs but they were just skin and bones and they'd been liberated from prisoner-of-war camp and we brought them back to Australia.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

Identification: This is side two or tape two of the interview recorded with Alan Wickow in Melbourne on 17th January 1990 about merchant seamen and continues in five seconds from now.

Why would Indian prisoners-of-war or former prisoners-of-war be brought to Australia?

Oh, I just think that they were, you know, they were liberated and they would have been repatriated back to their own country after but ....

So where had you picked them up from?

From Bombay and we brought them back to Australia. As I say, this ship carried a few passengers and had that accommodation to bring them out.

Did you pick up any allied former prisoners-of-war?

No, we didn't. No, we just had these Indians I can remember that. And they were ... they had been badly treated because they were just like ... you saw photos of people from Changi and that type of thing.

So where were you when war ended?

Ah, I was ... yes, I was in, as I say, my last ship the *Wanaka* and we were up off the coast of New Guinea and I'll never forget the gunners hadn't fired a few guns for a few days so they let fly a few shells onto the coast of New Guinea. We just fired a few rounds and they said the war was over so we then proceeded, I think it was back to ... we went to Borneo from there to pick up ....

Did you party? Did you drink and have a celebration?

Yes. There was always a good beer ration, you could always, you know, we had quite a few rounds of beer.

Any sore heads the next day?

Ah, we hadn't ... we couldn't because we were on duty and the ship was at sea and we had responsibility.

So how long then before you, as it were, finished your service in that respect?

Ah, well, I stayed on the *Wanaka*. She was then ... after the war she was put back into civilian duty and we ... she became ... they took down the ... she was passed over from the air force back to the Australian merchant marine and she was laid up for some time as we had landing barges on this ship where they took out some of the special fitments and they put these landing barges, so when we went ashore, take any supplies ashore, they had the landing barges they could send out, you know, and carry quite a few things, especially at ports we'd go to where there was no wharf facilities. And these were all taken off and I stayed with the ship while it was being refitted in Sydney and then we were put on the Tasmania trade and running between Sydney ... Sydney, Hobart, Melbourne and Launceston and I stayed there for some time.

Given that presumably all shipping in one way or another related to wartime activities that any shipping would have to be first of all be considered for how it would fit into the needs of the country at war. How did that process end as it were when it was felt: 'Well, now it's no long necessary to deploy ships for running supplies and so on', was there ... did it continue on for a while?

It did. It took a while for the ships, you know, to be put back into general service and the guns had to be taken off them and ... but mostly they all kind of fitted back into the general trade ... on the coastal trade.

And what about seamen? Were seamen effectively as it were requisitioned during the period and then with the war ended and the need removed that you were then told: 'Well, okay, you can now go your own way without having to report to any particular authority'? Was there a control of that sort?

Ah, no. There was no control at all. All I can remember they issued you with a seaman's permit, you know, after the war and you could carry on your trade. But that was all that happened. We were given no gratuity or anything like that. There was no payments made or anything to us at all.

How long then did you continue as a merchant seaman?

(5.00) I continued for about twelve months after that. But, after the war, they ... decided ... we were ... at least they gave us medals. So for the service that I'd done I got the Atlantic Star, the Pacific Star, the 1939 Star and the General Service Medal and the Australian Service Medal. So ...

Now were those medals different to the sorts of medals that were given to regular servicemen as it were?

No. They were the same thing as given to the regular servicemen - army and navy and air force personnel.

And then you later applied to join the Returned Servicemen's League?

Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, they accepted me in the RSL in 1943 as I'd been in action and I showed them that ... told them when I come back ... after being attacked in Oro Bay by these Japanese planes and that that they said: 'Well, you're a returned serviceman' and they accepted me but the Government didn't accept us as returned servicemen until ... not returned servicemen but as being part of the war effort till 1980, about 1980.

Well, essentially, that difference means that you weren't eligible for whatever benefits that most servicemen had, whether it was pensions or other special educational opportunities.

That's right. They said we were getting well paid in those days and, as I think I told you earlier in the interview, my pay was ten pound twelve and six a month which was about two pound something a week.

And do you know off-hand how that compared with the pay service people were getting?

Well, we've had some of our ... we have a submission now into the Government and I believe that after they worked it out it was less pay than what they were ... some of the army personnel were receiving. And what made me really hopping mad was to think that an army personnel or anything that had travelled on a ship from Sydney to Melbourne or from around to Fremantle and the coast on a coastal vessel, if they'd been a passenger, they were classed as being in war ... in dangerous waters and they would claim as returned service person.

What ordinary passengers could make a claim for war service benefits?

Well, if they were in the army and they were just ... done a voyage on a ship, they were classed as being on active service.

So with this attempt then to claim some recognition and to get access to the sorts of benefits that were available to regular servicemen, how was that gone about? How did the campaign develop?

Well, we have a chap called Len Blease who has been a great fighter for us here in Melbourne and they got together with different people from all different States who belonged to the merchant navy, what we call the Merchant Navy War Service League, and they are made up of people that served in ships during the war, they got together and made a submission to the Government which has now been in, I suppose, for the past four or five months but so far the Government hasn't done anything about it. But we have been told that it should be when the parliament comes up, they are considering it.

What do you expect you might get?

Well, we did get the pension, a service pension. They gave us that from the Veteran Affairs but we never got ...

When did that begin?

That came in 1980 approximately. We are classed as ordinary service personnel from ... but we have no medical benefits. We are just on, as an old aged pensioner, we're just on ... qualified as ordinary medical benefits ....

So with this submission you'd hope you'd get access to the sorts of medical benefits that other servicemen ...

The same as ordinary ... any, you know, people that have served in the war.

Are there any other benefits you'd hope to get?

Well, yeah, also hearing or age or glasses which, glasses now, we have to pay for anything like that. If we want glasses we have to pay for them. But if you were a service personnel you get those free. But these are the types of things that we're trying to get.

One of the other interests you've had has been to go back and try and get access to wartime documents about some of the voyages that you were on. What started off that interest? How did you go about that?

Well, as a matter of fact, what started it off about the chap who was in ... a couple of our chaps who were survivor in the *Centaur*, they didn't ... they were trying to get a pension and one of our personnel has been classed as really, you know, as a person who was entitled to benefits like a returned serviceman. He was about the first one that was ever classed as that but he had a long battle and he asked me about different things. And I thought to myself, well, the archives here in Brighton where I live so I'll see if I can go through and find out anything about the sinking of the *Centaur*. So I got permission to go ... I wrote a letter to the archives here in Brighton and they gave me permission to ...

Sorry, what are the archives? Whose archives?

Well, they're the government papers that have been kept for over ... any of the secret papers that were kept during the war on shipping and all that type of thing.

And where are they actually kept?

(10.00) They are situated here in Brighton and quite a big place and they have it all on photocopies and they also have all the records of ships that were attacked.

Which department looks after it?

The Federal Government I believe. And I went down and they gave me this kind of dossier that any things that ships that had been attacked or anything to do with shipping. You know,

naval and all that. So I just happened to spend a ... got permission to go there and I spent the day there and I happened to see the *Hanyang*, you know, and the *Centaur* and all this type of thing. So I asked them, 'Can I get the access to these papers?' which was now over thirty years which is access which you are not able to get access to. So I had to send in ... I had to fill in a special form and they sent to Canberra and they then wrote me a letter and told me to come down, and I had access to these papers. So I was able to read up all about the attack of the *Hanyang* and the sinking of the *Centaur* which my friend didn't know about.

What sort of things? What kind of things did you learn from that?

Well, it told completely about the action of the *Centaur*. There was something about the *Centaur* which was not published which I found in these things that this ship was seventy-eight miles off it's course approximately. The captain had been given a course to proceed on by the Navy but he himself changed the course and was seventy-eight miles off ... or approximately seventy-eight miles off the set course in shore where this ship should have been and that's he struck the submarine.

And with the *Hanyang*, did you pick up any information that you were unaware of?

I found out a lot about, you know, it gave a list of the names of the people that had been killed on the corvette and told about the whole action that took place on that day.

You've also been compiling lists of ships that have been sunk around the coast and the number of personnel and so on.

As a matter of fact, I've been vice president of the Merchant Navy War Service League for nearly ... over twenty years and I've been a life member for over twenty years itself. I became a member just after ... about 1950 and I've been a great active member of the War Service League. Then after that I also joined the Ship Society which I take a great interest in shipping, you know, and mostly older type of shipping. I don't like the newer type of vessels but ... And I was able to compile a list of ... which had been compiled by the Merchant Navy War Service League of ships that ... where they were sunk and where they were attacked around the coast.

About how many then were attacked around the coast?

Oh, well, as I say, there was a great number. I have a list of about thirty or forty that were attacked around the coast and also in New Guinea waters.

And how many casualties?

Well, they ... it was said that one in eight survived in the Merchant Service: there was one killed out of every eight survivors.

So at war's end you said you spent another twelve months as a merchant seaman?

Yes. I still kept at sea but I decided to get married. My father who had been at sea also during the war, the whole of the war, he was basically on the coastal trade and I met him once in New Guinea as a matter of fact in Milne Bay during the conflict and ... but he was on a ship that just carried general cargo around the Australian coast. But he took sick in ... no, I was going for my officer's ticket at that time, and he took sick with a heart complaint and the doctor told me he only had a short time to live. So I decided to come ashore and in that time I also decided to get married. So I thought, well, I'd seen ... or heard how my mother in the days when she was married to a seaman how lonely she was and I decided that I would get a job ashore. So I happened to get a job with G.J. Coles and I became - started as a storeman - became a store manager and I was with them for nearly twenty years and I managed a number of their stores throughout Australia and after that they wanted to send me interstate and my children were just at the stage of doing Intermediate in those days and they didn't want to travel around. So I left then and then became a supervisor with the Myer stores here in Melbourne and I was with them for nearly twenty years also - nineteen years. So that's my career.

How do you see your years at sea, and look back on it, were they good years or would you rather have perhaps in retrospect done something else?

No. I think it was a great eye-opener for me. It taught me a lot as a young boy, you know, in those days and I learnt to rough it and I really saw the different types of, you know, people that you grew up with.

How do you feel then about the difficulty that merchant seamen have had who saw active service but then to get access to the benefits? Do you feel bitter about it or disappointed? What's your feeling?

(15.00)Well, I feel disappointed because, as I say, we did our bit throughout Australia. You know, we served in ... every overseas and all around and just because that they said we were well paid. They gave us a bit of a war bonus on top of our wages which might have been twenty-five per cent of your wage you might have got but we never, as I said in the interview, we never ever received any. Once we left a ship we never received any continuation of pay or anything like that and if your ship was torpedoed your pay stopped immediately and a lot of people had to try and find their own way back to their own home after they were put ashore from different ports.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B