



Sponsored by News Limited



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00939
Title	(O35392/250774) Barr, Andrew William 'Nicky' (Squadron Leader)
Interviewer	Stokes, Edward
Place made	Not stated
Date made	3 July 1990
Description	Andrew William 'Nicky' Barr as a squadron leader, 3 Squadron RAAF, interviewed by Edward Stokes for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-1945.

Disclaimer

The Australian War Memorial is not responsible either for the accuracy of matters discussed or opinions expressed by speakers, which are for the reader to judge.

Transcript methodology

Please note that the printed word can never fully convey all the meaning of speech, and may lead to misinterpretation. Readers concerned with the expressive elements of speech should refer to the audio record. It is strongly recommended that readers listen to the sound recording whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. ‘world war two’ (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to ‘second world war’ (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. Three dots (...) or a double dash (- -) indicate an unfinished sentence.

Copyright

Copyright in this transcript, and the sound recording from which it was made, is usually owned by the Australian War Memorial, often jointly with the donors. Any request to use of the transcript, outside the purposes of research and study, should be addressed to:

Australian War Memorial
GPO Box 345
CANBERRA ACT 2601

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Nicky Barr, No. 3 Squadron, tape 1, side 1.

Nicky, could we perhaps begin just with your date of birth and place of birth?

I was born in New Zealand at a place called the Bay, Wellington on 10th December 1915.

And I think you were saying that you came to Australia very early on?

Yes, after a short term in primary school in Mount Eden in Auckland we came to Sydney and then on to Melbourne.

And I think you completed your schooling, did your matriculation and then became interested in the possibilities of wool classing?

Yes, I had been working with a Bradford wool buyer and he did a lot of reclassing work and I decided to do the course. Having done that I realised that there were more wool classers than sheep and at that time I was fortunate enough to use that small amount of knowledge to join the Australian Estates Company.

Right. Two other aspects of your early years. Memories of the first world war, of the involvement of Australians and of course New Zealanders too, in it, the general tradition of the ANZACs, was that a very conscious part of your boyhood, or not?

Yes. I found that a number of my schoolteachers had been members of the expeditionary force or elements of it, and their stories and their form of training had an impact on my thinking and on my life.

Right. Another aspect I think that's important to mention was your sport. I think you were quite a swimmer and of course later a rugby player, playing for Australia too. How much do you think did the attitudes that lay behind your sport feed into your work with the air force?

I pay a lot of tribute to my bodily and mental well-being as prime reasons for my survival. I have often looked back and thought that if I hadn't been as fit as I was, both mentally and physically, as I was at that time then my outcome from the war experiences would have been entirely different.

That's interesting. And what about the aggression that I suppose certainly lies behind being a rugby forward, was that part of it too?

Yes, I think the attitude to sport, whether I was boxing or playing football, was a desire to win, a desire to be number one, but behind it again I had always the wish to be able to do whatever I was doing tomorrow. In other words, I'd like to think that I was a born survivor.

The 'clouds of war', you used that phrase when we were talking. Of course they were gathering during the late '30s, were you particularly conscious of that, or not?

Not particularly about the clouds of war so much, my interest had been in the description of the Nazi regime in Germany and I resisted very much indeed the thought of being regimented. And the word 'regimentation' which seemed to be part of German philosophy was, etched a very marked impression on my mind.

Right. That's most interesting. It was in '39, I think, that you went to Britain to play for Australia as a rugby forward and I think you were actually in Britain when war broke out. Do you have any clear recollection of that event?

Yes, we were in a delightful place called Torquay in Devon in England and sitting around the radio listening to Neville Chamberlain's fateful words. Fateful for us in that all the team had worked terribly hard to be selected and been looking forward to the grand rugby tour of all times; it was to have lasted six months. And the air of depression and, more strongly, even resentment that prevailed was readily understood by everybody. The next impression was the desire to work such feelings off and we were asked to fill sandbags and protect the hotel called 'The Grand'. Well, the feelings must have been incredibly strong because that beach disappeared in one day, there was no sand left.

(5.00) Right. Is that a comment on your energy or English beaches?

I think it's more a feeling of the strength of our resentment.

Right. I do know that immediately after that you tried to enlist in the RAF, thinking you could then serve with Australian units. Could you just tell us that story briefly and the story of getting to Point Cook?

I'd always had the desire if war was declared to be a pilot and preferably a fighter pilot, and with that in mind I had hoped to join the RAF, thinking I'd be physically fit and suitably qualified to get a commission. None of this eventuated simply because I was told in no uncertain terms that it would be a long time before I saw an aircraft, and I failed to comprehend this, and it was only many months later, or years later perhaps, when I found out the low strengths of the RAF were such that what they told me was in fact the truth.

So you, I think with the aid of some contact in Britain, got yourself back to Australia pretty sharply.

Yes. The thing then was to extricate myself from my enrolment in the RAF and I was aided there by a previous Governor of Victoria, Lord Somers, and I returned to Australia on the *Strathaird* with most of the players who were with us, although a number had remained in England to join up.

And on getting back to Australia I think you went fairly directly to Point Cook?

Yes, after a very brief period I was then sent to Essendon to do my *ab initio* training, and from there we were posted to Point Cook for completion of our course and the wings presentation.

Just a few points about your training generally, both at Essendon and at Point Cook. The discipline that no was doubt part of your initial training - parade ground bashing, et cetera - how much of that discipline do you believe carried over into flying?

I didn't think the form of discipline at Essendon or Point Cook was the type of discipline which had any marked effect on our flying discipline. I don't think the two were related, the disciplines needed for flying well and safely and preserve aircraft were another requirement.

Right. The actual training at Point Cook, I know you were flying Hawker Demons, and of course you gained your wings there, how much of your training was theoretical, how much of it was in the air - practical flying?

I felt that they were fairly well balanced between the two, although all of us there I believe would have enjoyed more some practical debates and talks about the application of flying to war. There was very little, if anything, done on my recollection on strategems and tactics, things of this. The nearest we got to it was that delightful word 'formation'.

That's most interesting, because other people have certainly pointed to that, that there was in many ways a great dearth of knowledge on tactics when people reached squadrons.

Yes, well, it seemed to me that far too much expectancy was placed on that further information given to you at another place. If it had happened that would have been all right, the sequence of learning would have been progressive and sensible, but it didn't happen that way.

Right. Besides the obvious thing of flying an aircraft, what were the other subjects you did cover?

We did armament and communications, administration, but administration was more countless lectures on the names of permanent officers of the air force and where they were at. It was an attempt obviously to establish communications between ourselves and those senior people who had gone before us.

Right. We must put on record here, I think it's a regrettable fact that you scored below average on bombing.

(10.00) Yes, it's a regrettable fact, though one doesn't normally like anything below average but the reasons were to ensure as best we could that in my case I was not assigned as a future bomber pilot. And to this end it was relatively easy to slew the bombs away from the target and get the desired rating.

Seriously, was that a common habit? Did the authorities not wake up?

I'm unsure how common it was, it was certainly a technique adopted quite successfully by three of us on the course who had no yen to be a bomber pilot.

Right. Well, we may not go into more detail here with the training because there is so much to cover later, but I think you left a pilot officer? Is that correct?

Yes.

And you were posted to the City of Brisbane Squadron - Wirraways and Hudsons. What's your recollection of that first posting?

I enjoyed the prospect of being converted on to Wirraways which were our front line fighter in those days, but didn't take too long to realise that the capacity of the Wirraway, compared with the types of planes that we were going to encounter, left much to be desired, so there was a major effort to increase our skills as a form of compensation.

How was that gone about?

Taking advantage of the plane's ability to spin quickly and sharply, so long as you had the desired height, and secondly by long periods at gunnery on the drogue and on air to ground ranges.

Right, so you were in a sense maximising whatever potential you could twist out of this plane?

Making the best of what we thought would be a disadvantage.

I think it was during, or shortly after, this posting that you went as aide-de-camp to the Governor of Queensland?

Yes, I was Honorary Aide to Sir Leslie Wilson for a short time and it seemed to me then that: hell, I thought this is going to be my sort of war, you know, standing one pace back and to the rear. And I had in those circumstances elected to tell my fiancée that we should proceed to get married. This seemed to be the trigger for those in power to decide that this sort of thing shouldn't be contemplated but I would be posted immediately as a replacement to 3 Squadron in the Western Desert.

Right. If that posting had come through before you'd agreed to marry, would you have?

I really don't know because the arguments for and against, particularly if you are going to a front line position, it makes it doubtful. But I've never regretted the fact that I did because it was a partnership which contributed to my survival.

Yes, I can imagine that. We might just bring in here, although it's slightly out of context chronologically your actual arrival at Sidi Haneish and Peter Jeffrey's reaction.

The commanding officer at 3 Squadron when we arrived was Peter Jeffrey and we were lined up to be introduced to him, and having done so he then asked which of us replacements were married and four, maybe five, of us stepped forward, and the CO then proclaimed to all and sundry that we'd be no use to him. I saw fit to observe that I felt that we had much more to

fight for, being married, than otherwise. And it transpired later on after many, many operations that those of us who had stepped forward that day were in fact amongst the senior people and the most successful in the squadron.

That's an interesting point. Do you think that was because you were married, or because perhaps reflecting that, you also happened to be older than some of the fresh young pilots?

I think the fact that we were older than others there was the major factor. Deferment of marriage had occurred with most of us two or three times. In my case because of the sporting activities and secondly the war and then thirdly my appointment as aide-de-camp. And it seemed that no further deferment was justified. I don't think I could have reached that decision had I been younger.

That's most interesting, Nicky. Just taking a slight sidetrack for a moment. The question of the allocation of men within the air force, I know you have some views on this. You were saying that, I think reflecting actual people you know, that there was an imbalance, for example the way a lawyer or an artist might be used within the air force. Could you elaborate on that?

(15.00) Yes, I felt that when any country goes to war one of the most important prerequisites is to make sure that all of that country's manpower is utilised to the best extent, so that the war effort can be maximised. And in our case I saw a number of people with excellent qualifications electing to enrol in the services in relatively mundane activities, the wrong people doing the wrong jobs - or wrong for them in the sense of their background - and in consequence a lot of people were being assessed and/or classified into positions which were not in the nation's interest. This was further aggravated of course by the lack of skilled attention to the selection of people as to whether they were going to be pilots or not: their make-up, their prospect and potential in the job that they were going to be trained for. There were people earmarked for fighter pilots because they had some cosmetic interest in it, and it meant that somewhere further down the track these things were found out and re-alignments were necessary, once again to the detriment of the war effort.

Just to bring some actual figures into it, I think you did quote some numbers - I forget them now - of men who, I think, trained with you, went to the Middle East but who in fact never flew actively?

Yes, this was a puzzle which remains unresolved, in that in this particular batch of replacements to 3 Squadron there were seven definitely and possibly an eighth member of that party who were sent to Khartoum with us to do the conversion and further training on the aircraft available there and they were all, they all seemed to be doing rather well, nonetheless when we returned to the squadron this particular group were not with us and didn't join us. At a later time in the squadron, particularly in the May and early June period when the squadron was desperately short of trained pilots, I inquired of Bill Duncan, the group captain in charge of RAAF personnel in the Middle East, where these people were, and they were untraceable, and even in the post-war year when I asked him again he said he'd spent some time on it and he doesn't know how it happened. There was no report from the squadron as to requesting why or where they were, and I was the first party who had shown any interest in their whereabouts. The net result or bottomline of this was that we were still short of pilots, and

some of these people had returned to Australia and actually received promotions. It is incomprehensible to me that that sort of thing could happen in a war.

Yes, that's most interesting and I imagine at the other end of the system, well, I've certainly heard accounts of how the great frustration of men coming back from the Middle East with the whole organisational aspect of the air force, for example, getting 75 Squadron together, where they appeared to be dealing with people who had no comprehension of combat.

Well, that was it. There were at that stage enough people around with experience, enough feel for what was needed, and yet these people weren't involved in the creation of the squadrons that were to go up into the Pacific.

Just to touch on a related thing, the attributes that you'd see an effective fighter pilot having and an effective bomber pilot, were they different, or not?

Basically I don't think so, but on the finer tuning of people I think there were elements there which had to be available to that person who wanted to fight, as distinct from the more phlegmatic type who could be an excellent bomber pilot. I feel that people can be assessed as to the extent that they can control their aggressiveness, that it doesn't necessarily mean that people are reckless, that they are people who can make a fast reflex judgement as to whether something is, not necessarily a bad risk or reckless, but a calculated risk that had been thoroughly thought out, the risks are known and mentally you are adjusted to combat them.

(20.00)Right. One final question on this issue of the allocation of people. In your recollection of your general experience, I don't mean just the first period but later in Australia, how much were you able to push your own interests to get to the places and to do the things you thought, despite the wishes of this administrative machine?

I was, I felt rather frustrated in that everyone seemed to be, naturally enough, so preoccupied with their own wheelbarrow that looking into someone else's was not important. I felt disappointed too because I felt that I had, with my strange experiences, something I could contribute. I'd learnt I'd thought quite a lot that was different to normal air force training, and no-one had even suggested that this could be applied or utilised in some way in my new position.

And this is after you came back to Australia?

That's right. Yes.

Well, moving on to actually leaving Australia, Nicky, I'd imagine there must have been some sadness on leaving your wife and other people. What other recollections do you have of leaving Australia?

Yes, there was a sadness because I had hoped that everything would have settled down and that I would - with the depression years gradually being eased - that I would start to make my way in the world and live what the world war one people thought would be a normal life for a much longer time in this world without war. So to be leaving Australia and to fight wasn't the happiest moment of my life.

Right. The voyage over I think we might skate over, I think you were with a general collection of air force replacements, but lost in a much larger army contingent.

Yes, that was the situation.

Any particular memories of the voyage?

Yes, the air force team trying to beat the army team at volley ball.

Who won?

My pride prevents me from boasting.

I thought perhaps crying gave it away there. Well, after arriving in the Middle East, I think it was at Sidi Haneish, September '41 that you joined the squadron, and we've had this story of the marriage line-up. I think you were only there for a few days before going to Khartoum?

Yes, it was thought then with the war being quite static at that time after Syria, the Germans hadn't mounted any offensive and all the reconnaissance information was that things were quiet, and Pete Jeffrey decided then that with a course available to us in Khartoum at an operational training unit, that we go down there and complete a conversion course and further experience on the type.

I imagine in that you were rather fortunate to arrive at a kind of lull in the fighting that allowed that to happen.

Oh yes, we looked back on that as a most fortuitous circumstance in that it gave us a breathing time, an assimilation period to adapt and instead of going into squadron formation cold on a new aircraft, we had sufficient hours in it to feel comfortable.

I think you were saying that at Khartoum you gained about forty hours in Mohawks and Tomahawks. What's your recollection of that conversion training?

It was very thorough and highly enjoyable, except in respect to the Mohawk, most of the aircraft that were taken up in that period fell out of the sky, and it was found in later years that the piston rings on the aircraft had been sabotaged in America. The aircraft were originally designed to go against a French order and they were then sent through the Takorati Ferry run through Khartoum in the hope that they might be used in front line combat. But the Tomahawk conversion was the most delightful experience for me, I enjoyed the aircraft, so much so that even the conversion later on to Kittyhawks left me more enchanted with the Tomahawks than with the Kittyhawks.

The Tomahawk was a much more powerful plane than others you'd flown, I imagine.

Oh yes, it was two or three times the horsepower, it had manoeuvrability. The thing I liked most of all about it though was it had two guns firing from the cockpit and four - two in each wing - to augment it. And I liked very much indeed the loading of the guns when one took off. There was a closeness to combat which seemed to help me with my make-up, the smell of cordite in the cockpit was particularly helpful to me; I really felt that I was at a war.

(25.00) That's most interesting. Was there other training there that filled some of the gaps in Australia, in particular in tactics?

Yes, we were fortunate to have a person who'd done a tour already, Squadron Leader Greg - I've forgotten his name now. He was the CFR, an Australian who'd been on loan duties with the RAF, and he had some skills and for those days a big experience in tactical flying and operations themselves.

That's most interesting.

That man's name was Graham, incidentally, Greg Graham.

Great. Any other recollections of that period? What was life at the base camp like? Did you get around Khartoum at all?

Yes. The aerodrome was at a place called Gordon's Tree and Khartoum was a little distance away, as was Omdurman which was the other side of the Nile River, and as wars go we thought things were rather nice because Gordon's Tree was an established RAF air force base in peace-time with a very nice officers' mess, terraced swimming pool and staff highly trained in the requirements of the English.

So this was the comfortable war.

It wasn't a bad life and most of us wondered how long it would last.

Right. Well, November of course you rejoined the squadron and I think you in fact flew the same day.

Yes, things had warmed up in our absence and my first operation was the afternoon of our arrival; a fairly nondescript operation but just as well because to go back straight into air to air combat might have been a bit of a shock to the system, whereas an escort duty suited us fine.

Well, still, I think it was true that in the subsequent weeks, three or four weeks, exact time perhaps doesn't matter, there were some definite engagements and in fact the army confirmed two kills on your behalf. What was the general nature of those operations?

Both of those were general sweeps into enemy territory, mainly to ascertain and test the enemy strength both on the ground and anything that we met in the air, and also to observe if we could any ground movements and report back to the army, because there was still, even at that time, some legacy of requirement from 3 Squadron to act as a sort of army co-operative unit. So we had these multiple duties at that time which made the exercise very interesting.

On those first flights into what was a complete combat situation, or with that potential, what's your emotional recollection? How did you cope with the tension and so on?

I can't remember feeling tense. I had a natural expectancy that something was going to happen and one could almost wish that something was going to happen, so when an enemy aircraft was sighted the bewilderment aspect of my approach to it was gone and in its place I had substance.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Nicky Barr, No. 3 Squadron, tape 1, side 2.

What was life like with the squadron when you first arrived?

It was very comfortable, most of the people there had some experience and were willing to share it with us. Most of the time was spent in trying to obtain this knowledge and skill from those that had been engaged in operations. Some of the people that were there were being posted back to Australia and so there was an air of happiness and pleasure on their part, and good wishes by them for our own future. It was a pleasant, happy squadron with a nice atmosphere augmented by Pete Jeffrey who was efficient and popular with not just the people in the officers' mess, which was not officers', it was a pilots' mess due to Pete's efforts, and the other members of the squadron. It was a family ambience which I think contributed to the standard of the squadron.

Yes, that's interesting. A lot of people all the way through these interviews have commented on the morale of the squadron. You were saying before that in No. 3 particularly there appeared to be a group as against an individual ethos, so you were suggesting that the squadron never produced any so-called aces. Could you talk about that?

Yes, I think that's interesting that although, as most people know, 3 Squadron itself as a fighting unit enjoyed a top position throughout the time it was in the Middle East, yet in all that period the best that we could produce was a chap like myself with about twelve and a bit killed, whereas other squadrons had individuals with much larger scores. In 3 Squadron we were trained and we had a sensitivity about flying as a squadron and not as individuals. I can't remember for example, any person haring off on their own to do some daring deed of some sort. And I think this had an impact on the security in which the squadron flew, and a reduced level of deaths and failures because we flew this way. Those squadrons who became disorganised in the air for one reason or another but particularly those who weakened the squadron by flying off somewhere on their own, shows that their losses were significantly larger than 3 Squadron for the same amount of fighting.

That's an interesting point that - I'm not sure about this myself - statistically the squadrons who were producing the high ace figures were also producing the greatest percentage of casualties, were they?

It's hard to generalise. I know of two squadrons in that category, but I think the pattern for those two would have spread into the other squadrons, particularly one South African squadron which had been flying with us at that time.

Just to pick up on a point you made there about having no recollection of individuals flying off on their own. Of course I guess the lone pilot was also, perhaps, the most vulnerable pilot, is what you're saying that in situations where two, three or four planes were flying together, one would never, in No. 3 Squadron, go off on a single-handed mission?

(5.00) Well, yes, that generally was the case. Naturally enough if you saw an enemy aircraft and you were in a group of, say, four, you would let them know. You'd point out where the enemy aircraft was, there'd be communication about it and you might elect to go down. They would then know to stay around and you could rejoin them so that the Also, if you got into trouble they'd be there, and I think this is what impelled a number of us to go down on different times, like Pete, and with 'Tiny' Cameron and others, trying to rescue one of our chaps who had missed out.

That's an interesting point, the rescues: were they particularly common, or as common, in other squadrons, do you know?

No, I think 3 Squadron led in that area. They initiated it, they showed that it could be done even with quite big men, which 'Tiny' Cameron was. And it wasn't that common in, even in 3 Squadron, nonetheless others attempted it and the fact that it didn't come off was for other reasons than that.

Right. One other point on this general group ethos. When new pilots as yourself did arrive was the sharing of knowledge a very open or perhaps organised affair? Or was it more a question of new pilots approaching the experienced pilots and in a sense wheedling the information out of them?

It was more the latter. There was, to me, a surprising reticence on the part of those people who'd got this experience. I think it was mainly though a wish on their part to present themselves as low-key operators. Once you got talking with them there was very little real resistance to imparting to you what they knew, but it wasn't easily or automatically.

In that there was a humbleness in their approach?

Yes, and it was more a genuine humbleness about They didn't want in other words to bung it on, we used to say, and sort of talk down to those that hadn't done what they'd had the opportunity of doing. And so instead of a easy, free gain exchange, it was a bit more belaboured.

Right, that's interesting. Were there ever - besides obviously with briefings before particular operations - were there ever times when the squadron's pilots would sit down together to thrash out, in a sense, the theory of tactics and so on?

Yes, and this occurred particularly when the newer people, which I represented resisted very much the tactics of the day, which was a defensive circle. If we got into trouble this defensive

circle seemed to be the only ploy that we could use, and the attitude was that the P-40 had little chance against the 109. And after two or three experiences in this defensive circle, none of which were really successful, we sat around and expressed our views, and a number of us indicated that we'd have very little likelihood of joining one again. The commanding officer said, 'Well, if you didn't like it so much, why didn't one of you lead off?', which to me is hardly the answer, simply because discipline was a strong component of our flying, and it wouldn't have been proper for any junior, especially a new junior officer to lead off from a defensive circle; it had to be the flight commander. So I found that if you believe that you had an inferior aircraft there was more reason, stronger logic, to support being aggressive, and a defensive role just played into the Germans' hands, and I feel that contributed to so many of the early losses. The problem was that the P-40 was being used for a purpose it was never designed to be used for. It was a magnificent, solid aircraft, get you out of a lot of trouble most times. It was built for air to ground army support operations. It handled all right of course against the Macchi 200 and the CR-42s and aircraft of that ilk, we were superior to them, but the 109 strength in the desert at that time and their tactics were vastly superior to ours, and were the main cause for the severe losses that 3 experienced at that time.

(10.00) We are going to talk shortly about the Kittyhawks as a plane, but perhaps we could just bring in now the Kittyhawk as a plane in comparison to, for example, the 109s, did that very much change the balance, or not?

No, the Kittyhawk first of all couldn't fly efficiently at the ceiling that was rated for the 109F, which meant that almost every time the 109 formations were above the Allied aircraft. This was always a serious disadvantage whether you were on a fighter sweep or bomber escort, and even on reconnaissance. It meant that one's first defence was vision. Our radar wasn't operating successfully, we had to keep watching for the enemy all the time wherever he was, and this can be a major distraction spread over, as it was, many of the operations of that time being in excess of one hour.

That's most interesting, Nicky. Just turning to the actual re-equipping with Kittyhawks - and this is looking at that period of December '41 - how easy or how difficult was the conversion, and what's your estimation of the Kittyhawk as a plane, besides those comparative points?

The conversion to Kittyhawks was relatively easy for all of those people who joined the squadron as a replacement. Most had had the skills of landing that type of plane taught to them from the Wirraway days, where we did power landings on two wheels, not three-pointers. And so it was quite easy to adapt, the only main requirement being to increase the landing speed. The second part of the question: I feel that we were all thrilled to have such firepower available to us. Also as it transpired a little later on, the ability to carry bombs of a damaging size made us all very proud to feel that, although focus was attentioned mainly on air to air combat and a situation augmented by the media who felt that only those people who killed somebody on air to air combat were worth anything, we had a realisation in 3 Squadron because our multiple role that dropping bombs and strafing, reconnaissance and escort duties were equally as important, and there were many pilots who never knocked out an enemy aircraft but did incredible work in the categories I've just mentioned.

Right. Just briefly perhaps, if we could build up a picture of the Kittyhawk as a plane - if you could imagine getting into the cockpit, the routines you went

through immediately prior to take-off and take-off - could you talk us through that kind of thing?

Yes. In the desert there was always the desire for as many aircraft to take off simultaneously as the landing ground permitted. The problem about that was that the dust created by so much horsepower created a storm in its own right. It was necessary therefore for formation take-offs to be virtually line abreast, and this was achieved time and time again with sixes, tens and even twelve aircraft. In fact there's a photograph over there of a twelve, I'll show you. But it seemed to me that a number of the pilots had a different requirement on becoming airborne and whereas mine, my first instinct was that soon as it was convenient I would take the catch off my guns and fire them. And I always felt there was very little merit at all in going to war in a plane if my guns weren't working. I could let myself down and those people who were flying with me, and that technique I maintained from the time I was flying in a box as a number four until I commanded the squadron.

Right. In the actual climb up, were you at that time generally climbing in some kind of spiral formation or were you flying out long distances and back on a line? And also, what's the merit in those two approaches?

(15.00) The procedure varied with the individual assignments, as I recall, in that with bomber escort duties we Each plane sought to take up its position with the bomber group, not as a squadron but on an individual basis as quickly as possible, mainly to be the least amount of time in the air that the bombers could be kept there. Also there were missions which placed some requirement on the endurance of the aeroplane itself in terms of petrol consumption. And so in those circumstances the long climb, usually in a slightly different direction to the target, sometimes as a zig-zag, was the technique that was adopted by myself and other COs. And so we also avoided being stereotyped in what we did from take-offs because there were quite a considerable number of attacks on aircraft right over the 'dromes during take-off operations. So this was done in order to make sure that the Germans or Italians didn't have a known picture in their minds of what would transpire.

That's most interesting. Just to touch on a more human aspect; the question of fear, both ongoing anxiety if it existed during a tour, and the more specific tension either prior to or perhaps during an operation. What's your recollection of that, in your own experience?

Yes, I had my share of fear, but fear seemed to me, in talking it through with other people, to come in different forms. My own form of fear was very deep and internal. I aimed never to show it, but I'm not certain whether I succeeded, but I always had the feeling that I could handle it, but until you actually experience the situation you don't know, and so it was the finding out that I could handle it that made it easier in subsequent flights. Fear and how to handle it was my main unknown, and until I knew where I stood with it I was uncomfortable.

But having discovered that ...

Discovered that, yes.

... it was easier?

Yes, I was then very much at ease and by the time I came to command a squadron the knowledge of fear was there but also my experience in handling it had taken over.

With particular operations, in your case, was the tension greatest some time before an operation? Immediately prior to take-off? During the operation?

The worst situation that occurred to me was being on standby. The time seemed to pass so slowly. There was not a great deal to occupy one's mind other than what was at hand, and in those conditions of standby, ready for the phone to ring, and when it did and it wasn't the call to get airborne, then in those situations the tension was high.

That's most interesting. So in a sense it was the unknown rather than the known that was ...

Yes, well, once you got into the plane and you were doing, you were on with the job, everything disappeared; you know, the shadows became the substance.

Right. Moving on to your actual flying, Nicky, this is from the booklet you showed me, I think in your first thirty-five operational hours, twenty-two missions were flown therefore averaging out at a little over an hour I guess, or something of that order, there were sixteen combats and in that very early period you were credited with eight confirmed planes shot down. What was the general pattern of those operations? What was the most common kind of operation?

Well, we were mainly involved then on sweeps, aerial sweeps, hoping to encounter the enemy and knock some planes out of the sky; they were predominantly that. The squadron in that time did an incredible number of operations, and yet there were some people on the squadron who had not yet been in aerial combat. And I think it was just the nature of the beast in that, yes, I think it was Pete, or it might have been Bobby, said to me, 'You know every time you get airborne something happens'. And yet, well, take a better analogy is look at the fellows who'd done thousands of hours in the flying boat service for example, never had any enemy encounter, it isn't that they didn't want to, it didn't happen to them; and this was very much the case in the desert where out of those operations it was unusual to have so many combats in that period of time.

(20.00) And you simply put that down to fate, do you?

Yes, because no-one really knew what was on, we didn't have a brief on what to expect either in size or shape of aircraft or anything. When I say, we didn't know whether it was going to be Italians or a mixture, or the Germans, the Luftwaffe, up there against us. And so it's got to be fate when a high proportion of your briefing about an operation is unknown; it's just described as an aerial sweep.

What about aspects such as particularly keen eyesight, where one might imagine a particular pilot might have just a highly developed physical sense to pick up aircraft in the sky?

Yes, and there was no-one with a higher skill in that area than Bobby Gibbes, and my admiration for him because, as you would know, we flew a lot of combats together, and with

his vision and reaction he was invariably the first person to pick up enemy aircraft and advise the squadron and so we were alerted. My own eyesight was, although thought to be good, was not good on sighting aircraft. I think my vision was much better in combat I seemed to have a flair for shooting and gathering the range, those sorts of things which are specifically employed for the actual combat itself. I don't think Bobby's was quite as good, just to make a comparison, but his strength - his great strength - was in this awareness and early sighting of enemy aircraft, and he was superb at that.

That's most interesting. Of that first period, we'll come on to some specific engagements later, but of that first period would there be any particular combat that would stand out in your mind particularly vividly?

No. It wasn't that I'm inarticulate on that, it's just that I wanted to balance two or three. It would be very hard for me to differentiate between three scraps, two of which in which we were seriously outnumbered.

Would you like to describe those?

Well, as most people are aware now, air to air combat rarely lasts more than a minute or a couple of minutes, your firepower if you're firing your guns all that time anyway sees to that in any case. But this one scrap in particular was quite long and made more so by attempts to get away when the ammunition had run out. And in those circumstances to have two 109s forming on you a bit above you; and the scrap would have lasted in excess of ten minutes. I remember it well, because some time later I landed back on our airfield and I have never perspired and I've never been so weak physically and it just sapped me so much. That one is memorable in my mind to think that it lasted that long.

Right. Were you in that encounter fighting alone against these two or were you with other No. 3 pilots?

(25.00) We had started off as a formation of four and we lost one in the initial attack, yes, he was David Rutter and we were then three. I then had two number twos, if you like, and then we were attacked and in evading them I lost both - lost sight and contact with the other number twos who then formed on themselves and got back to base and I was alone then. I wasn't left there, it just happened to transpire, I was left with these particular two 109s. In later years I met the man who led that operation and he remembered it well, and he said it was quite interesting to see how every time I was working them back over our lines but I was totally unaware of that. We ended up virtually back over our strip.

You were just flying for your life?

I had some idea in the end that if I was going to come down I wanted to be on our side of the dividing line.

How difficult was it having flown some distance from base, and as I understand it from other people generally, by dead reckoning and a sort of visual awareness of where you were rather than plotting anything on maps, and then having become involved in very intense combat and all the kinds of manoeuvring involved - I would assume constantly changing direction and so

on - how was it easy to then re-orientate yourself geographically to know where home was?

Well, the desert for many reasons was an ideal place to fight a war, and we always knew that if we were flying home that the Mediterranean would be on our port, our left side, and if you were going to war, well, the reverse applied. And so if you, if the combat ceased and you were over land you invariably headed north to find out, or as soon as you sighted the ocean, and you could do that from some distance away, you got your initial bearings, then it was simply a matter of picking out some land point on the ocean coastline itself against your map and getting your bearing in that way.

I guess in other ways too, the desert was a good place to fight and fly in that if there were problems there was generally flat terrain?

Yes, the prospect of survival there after being hit or damaged was measurably better than elsewhere like, say, the English Channel or built-up areas. And it also had the warm feeling that this was a war between two people whose men were at war and it had virtually no impact at ground level on other people, particularly innocent bystanders of any conflict.

Sure. Dust of course was a great problem, certainly for aircraft engines; I'd imagine living was sometimes a bit rugged. What's your recollection of that?

Yes, we certainly had our peck of sand or salt or mud in our diet in those days. Quite often someone would quip that we should all be fitted with a Vokes aircleaner because this is the only thing that helped aircraft engine to survive, although in protecting the engine from sand it reduced its effectiveness in terms of horsepower. It was a problem which was, you couldn't avoid so you became phlegmatic about it and accepted it as part of living in the desert.

Would it be pushing things too far to suggest that at least for some men there may have been a kind of spiritual aspect to fighting in the desert in that deserts are empty, and to a lot of people, places where the spiritual dimension appears quite strongly?

Yes, I had similar reactions. It is an impressive place. It has its own form of beauty. There are ethereal qualities about it which, especially at dawn and dusk, are very impressive. There's a calmness and a stillness about it which is so remote from what you've been doing in the daytime, so remote from war that it's a form of, or it was to me anyway, a form of therapy in its own way. And I found the desert after even a torrid day relaxing, and this is why I was often detected as being on my own enjoying it, when they'd ask me in the mess, where had I been.

What? And you'd wander off from camp?

Wandering off, and sometimes walk around and talk to the aerodrome defence people at dusk time, who incidentally were Indian Gurkhas in different places - great people. And yes, I enjoyed the desert and I wrote that little thing about it.

I was just going to ask you, could you quote those lines?

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

TAPE 2, SIDE A

The place where nothing seems to be alive, and I jotted down these words which simply said,
Only the wind has life,
it wanders through this arid land,
it does a little truckin' in the sand.

Truckin' in those days was another word for dancing, and I saw the wind whip up these eddies and swirl around, and you could look around and it was the only thing moving, the only thing alive.

Very evocative. Just a couple of general points, Nicky, this isn't referring to any particular period. Your general recollection of the airstrips you operated from and the ground staff support, how good or poor were they?

I thought under the circumstances of advancing or retreating in the desert the quality of the airstrips were excellent. There was little, if any, damage done to aircraft when landing on new areas. As you'd know, a lot of the strips we were using were called landing grounds set out for us by Wing Commander Fred Rosier, now Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Rosier, bless him, and he used to take off in his clapped-out Hurricane and mark these landing grounds out for the graders to do some preparation on and that was our home. Though I had no quarrel with any of the strips that we used, the squadron in my time of the Western Desert, and There was a second part to the question?

Yes, the other thing was the quality of support given by the ground crews?

The only misadventures quite often was in the timing where having regard to dust storms and distances quite a number of times the synchronisation of staff on the ground for these new strips didn't tie up and But it was all resolved, usually by the evening in any case. In no instance were there difficulties in fuel supply. It was mainly in the ground support areas of maintenance, feeding and tent supply.

The whole issue of moving fuel around to particular places, I assume that those decisions - where fuel depots were to be based, where future strips would be made - were being made above the squadron level?

Yes, it was handled by other authorities, usually from Advanced Headquarters RAF. They had staff there that planned the synchronisation of squadron movements, either forward or backwards, and mainly fuel dumps were established obviously in advance. Quite often dumps were destroyed in a retreat.

Moving on to Nicky, I wanted to come now to the first time you were shot down, 11th January '42. I think you'd in fact become involved in trying to rescue a downed pilot. How had the whole situation developed?

That particular mission was escort duty on some Blenheims who were bombing an advanced base for Rommel, called El Agheila. The scrap became a little bit awkward in that the lead Blenheim had a hang-up with its bombs and instead of haring down to the desert and getting away, it decided to return by 180 degrees on to the course again and we encountered rather heavy German and Italian, there were some Macchi 200s and 202s in the air as well as the

109s. And so we were scrapping around trying to defend this, particularly this Blenheim who had come back to bomb again. And so we had a number of aircraft shot down, some people were made prisoners of war from that and one was killed.

(5.00) I had had a bit of luck in one of my skirmishes with a 109 and then saw - this was sort of peripheral vision - that there was a 109 pretty close to the tail of another aircraft and it was going down and down, and I tried to hook on but I couldn't catch up the space between us, but I saw the 3 Squadron aircraft crash land on the desert area and as the Then I thought the two 109s were going to fly away and I lost sight of them and didn't see them at all, and as the terrain seemed fairly suitable for an attempt at a landing, I had put the flaps down and things looked all right and I was starting to lower the undercart when the pilot on the ground, who happened to be Bobby Jones - he was wearing white gloves, I always remember that - and he started signalling and waving to me from the ground near his aircraft, and I looked around and there was this 109 coming in quite slowly just behind me, and started to fire, and I think it was my slow speed with the flaps down because I was able to pull up with the power on, and he must have been a relatively inexperienced German pilot because he overflew me and without too much control on the aircraft I was able to get a burst into him and, I didn't know what happened to him at the time except that when I flew around a little bit longer there was this other plane on the ground burning. And when I mentioned this they confirmed it later by aircraft reconnaissance that it had gone down. But while all this was going on this other pilot came around and shot me down, and even now by this time I had both the wheels and the flaps up, I still was at relatively low speed and I was forced to crash land.

Continuing that story, Nicky, your plane's crippled, what actually happened?

The power unit failed so I must have been hit or, also there was difficulty in controlling the plane so I had no option but to try and put her on the ground, and this is what I did. Then I saw this 109 coming around to see what was going on We must have been some distance away from the other planes that I mentioned earlier because I could see no smoke rising from the ground close by anyway, or anywhere, and so I thought we must have been nearer the front line than I had thought. And so I was getting out of the plane at this stage when this 109 was coming round, and it was quite clear to me that he was going to strafe the plane and set it on fire to make sure that it was inoperative totally. And I had to wait until he started firing and then I ran towards him and to the side to make sure that I would not be in his line of fire or too near the plane when it went up. One of his shells was pretty close, or it must have been, because it hit some rocks some distance in front and to the left of me in the direction I was running and the splinters from this rock which had been shattered entered both my legs, and I felt this pain as though I'd been kicked in the shins in the front scrum of a football match. And then he flew off when the plane was alight and I was there in this desert on my own and I tried to tie up my legs a little bit and while I was doing this - unknown to me 'cause I never heard anyone coming - there were these Arabs on foot, two adults and one child, and they looked at my leg, we couldn't communicate other than with some sign language, and they gathered me up and I was taken into a wadi which led down to the ocean. And these people happened to be members of the Senussi Arab tribe and their proper encampment though was on an escarpment a little bit further down.

(10.00) I don't know why these people were out the way they were to this day, but I was taken down to this other area after they dressed my legs, and we hid at another place on the way down due to a German patrol coming nearby. They must have been looking for somebody from the plane, oh, I might add I'm only guessing of course. But that night I slept in this

Senussi tent just as you see in the films, and in this case I had a camel sleeping on the other side of the partition and the rest of the family and some of the tribe were in this huge tent with me. One of them spoke a little bit of English and some German. Another And I had what was called a 'gooly chip' [sic] - a gooly chit

That's interesting. I've heard of these from somebody else. These were a kind of a passport?

Yes, that was in Arabic and English and you carried it with you. It was born of the days when people were flying in and around Ethiopia and they were decastrating [sic] people and making things rather messy for the ones that were not liked. The hope was that if you gave this chit to these Arab people that they'd be able to read it and say that, oh here, he's a good fellow, and if I look after him and return him to the proper authorities a suitable reward would be given to them. And this chit seemed to be understood by them and they were laughing and were quite happy about it, and so they planned obviously to return me from this place to our own people. And to that end a couple of days later, there was a small camel entourage put together to resemble an Arab family in transit, and I was one of them. And I was dressed up as best they could with the gear to make me look a bit like them and so we set off, and we had to camp another night on the way back but in the meantime we saw quite a number of German formations, I saw a great number of tanks. They, it transpired later, too, had seen very much more than I did, because at the debriefing with Advanced Army Intelligence - they too were part of this process - and the brigadier told me later that they were very helpful indeed with the information they'd given on the build-up of the German formations at that time. A matter of reward: all they wanted was tinned fish and I saw to it that they had plenty plus some blankets which I saw the child interested in. And the last I recall of this very pleasant family and people who obviously were interested either in the reward or in genuine reasons for getting me back was disappearing on their camels over a dune and waving to me. I often think that Gaddafi might have been one of those people because as a child he would be that age, he was of that tribe and he was from that area. It's only an interesting thought, but it could well be.

That's most interesting, Nicky. The question that occurs to me is: without their help do you think you would have got back?

No, I think that the density of Italian and German occupation of that area was so thick that someone not knowing the terrain, not resembling the local inhabitants and posing as the group I mentioned, the chances would have been greatly reduced. It was particularly worse coming up towards the front line area where scout cars from both sides were dashing around at a great rate of knots, and perhaps the most tricky part indeed was when we encountered the first British scout car, who was very highly suspicious of us and particularly with me, looking like a German trying to speak good English instead of Australian, emerged out of this cloak and hat, the burnous, that they wear.

I assume during this period you would have been posted missing. How conscious were you of the emotional repercussions of that back home?

Very much indeed because, whereas I knew I was all right I had the realisation that those who were close and dear to me would be told that I was missing and that the scrap was such that I might not have survived it. It was doubtful indeed if anyone had seen me and it seemed I had an awareness that there can be no worse category in war, or anything else for this matter,

than missing - even missing believed killed is sometimes preferable to the unknown quantity of the earlier category.

(15.00) That's most interesting. That kind of experience, or that particular experience, did it at all throw your confidence, your determination to go back and fly, or not?

No, as a matter of fact I came out of that with a degree of confidence which was not only high but apparently misplaced because, I thought, well, gee whiz, I didn't do too badly, they can't do it to me again. I felt that I'd learnt a little bit about it, but it was clear from my subsequent experiences that it was good to have the confidence but the fact that I was shot down on two more occasions after that didn't really add up logically, but it was good that I had the confidence and the feeling because whether it was justified or not it helped me do my job.

Right. Well moving on a little bit. I know when you returned to the squadron 'Dixie' Chapman was about to be relieved, you yourself went off to hospital. Perhaps just very briefly, where did you go and how adequate was the treatment?

I was sent down to the Scottish General Hospital in Cairo, just near the Nile, and the treatment there was first class and my rate of recovery from the little damage I had was rapid. I was then given some convalescence time, a few days on a houseboat on the Nile where Geoff Chinche happened to be, also from 3 Squadron, and we had a wonderful time together there. But the hospital itself was staffed by wonderful people. For me it was nice to hear Scottish accents again; my mother spoke with a brogue and also the Gaelic and so to be amongst people like that again and it was very pleasant.

And the porridge for breakfast perhaps helped too?

Yes, there was that there too.

You got back to the squadron in March '42, Bobby Gibbes was now CO. Coming up to the period when Bobby Gibbes himself went missing, what's your general recollection of that period of, I think, about two months?

The change in leadership to someone I knew and admired was very pleasant for me. We'd been at Point Cook together, we'd been in the 23 Squadron together, and here we were together again and Bob's leadership qualities were evident strongly even then and I knew we were going to make a great team. Strangely I never ever aspired to command, it just happened. For example I was never one who wanted to reach the stage where it could be said, 'He signed my log book', I wasn't interested in that sort of crap as to who signed or didn't sign my log book, after all to me it was only an audit tick and so with Bob and I, we had a relationship which was warm, respectful and we had a trust in each other.

I think during this period you were flying as his senior flight commander. Could you tell us what being a senior flight commander involved, and how was it different to how you'd been flying before?

Not a lot different in the way we were flying before really but in terms of responsibility. I found that when Bob wasn't flying that one was taking over the flights of the squadron in any case. The responsibility I was worried about it initially. One of the reasons I wanted to be a

fighter pilot was that I would be in a plane on my own and I'd make my own decisions, now I'd be making decisions for a number of other people whom I'd got to like and respect and I didn't quite know whether I'd be up to that, having regard to what I accepted as a very rapid rise in my service in the air force. And so it was only again after some experience when things settled down and I seemed to be doing mostly the right thing that I was comfortable with command. But the command was made light for me by some wonderful fellows around, who just carried on the tradition I mentioned earlier of the ambience of a family squadron instead of ranks and people and authority and that closely knit community - I still remember it very kindly.

(20.00) Right. Moving on a little bit. I think it was in May '42 of this year Bobby Gibbes went missing in early May, you yourself were acting CO and I think confirmed CO 25th May; I assume after some administrative things had gone through.

Yes, that's correct. It had been made known to us that Bob had a broken ankle; that they'd advised him not to fly even though Bob protested he could fly with a cast and put on a typical 'Gibbesy' act, but law and order prevailed and so Bob was set aside, as it were, until he mended and of course one never knew what would happen. But I think it might be as well to say here quickly that once Bobby had mended, and totally unbeknown to me, he'd been to RAF Advanced Headquarters the day that I was shot down, 26th June, and persuaded them to allow him to take command of the squadron again. When I heard of this, a long time later of course, almost in another world, I said to him, 'Gibbesy', I said, 'What was going to happen to me?'. He said, 'Oh, you were going to command the new RAF Spitfire squadrons'.

Right. He had it all worked out.

He was going to come back to the squadron because he wanted to be with the Aussies, but I was going to have no say in it so I let him have a broadside.

Sounds fair enough. Well, that period of 25th May to 26th June 1942 was very intense. Just to encapsulate a few things, the squadron was in retreat, moving every few days, a very, very large number of operations we have from the records here: you yourself fifty-six in a month, the squadron flying sixty-four in one day, yourself I think on that same day flying six. It seems an almost unbelievably concentrated amount of flying. What's your chief recollection of that period?

The main thing is the instruction given to us by RAF headquarters that the retreat, or the strategic withdrawal - pardon me, a retreat is the right word of course but it was described as a strategic withdrawal - was on, and that we were required to fly as many operations against defined targets as the possible was able to fly having regard to availability of pilots and aircraft maintenance. So with this freedom, which required us only to check our targets and our purpose for being in the air, was very nice in that if one was bent that way one could pursue the war virtually to one's own requirements and limitations, and everyone accepted that it was intense, everyone had a belief that our contribution could do much to halt, even defer, the advance permanently and convert it into an advance again. The confidence was high. The most remarkable thing at this time was the incredible support of the ground crew. They worked ceaselessly night and day. The amount of work they did on refuelling, aircraft repair, the armourers, the radio wireless people - we then had radar so that was important that it be maintained - the number of aircraft that they were continually able to present to us to fly.

Don't let us forget the cooks and people who provided the vitamins. The ground crew, it has often been glibly said, you know, you can't fly without them, but they drove it home forcibly and it cemented the squadron so tightly together that it was wonderful. The ground crew of course had the additional responsibility of moving the squadron generally intact from point A, to B, to C, to D, as we were going backwards, and they accomplished this with a minimum of nonsense, no great tragedies and always smiling coming up the next day. And one of the nice things that I recall today, as I did then, was the support given to me personally by my armourer, my fitter and my engineer, my airframe man who is still alive and we're still in touch, we're a unit.

(25.00) As squadron leader during that period, Nicky, were you closely involved in this day to day decisions of those people getting the squadron back, or were you much more involved in the flying side and the ground staff were quite capable, having, say, been given a destination to get to, to get all the things moving in the right way?

Yes, well, this was my first venture into the area of delegation of responsibilities and these fellows were so competent; I had to watch and supervise the first one or two but then it enabled me to concentrate almost entirely on flying with the exception of what to me proved to be minimal administrative duties, and in those areas I took it on myself instead of the adjutant to write the appropriate letters to next-of-kin and things of that sort. I also was keen to make sure that anyone's belongings were properly gathered up and looked after. I'd seen instances where it hadn't happened and it didn't look good to me and

Can I just pause on that for a moment, I think that's an interesting thing to develop? By and large letters to next-of-kin, I think you're suggesting, were written by adjutants not by COs?

I know from the people that I went to see after the war, they had received letters from the adjutant, and that puzzled me a little bit because his letter would have been a second-hand type of letter, it could not have been a first-hand relationship with the deceased, and in my case I personally knew these fellows and felt that the only letter they should receive would be a personalised one, not a stereotyped one from the commanding officer.

Of course it's terribly hard to comfort anybody in that situation, what did you try to say about people?

I think the only thing to say is the great regret about the loss to me personally, and then to the squadron, to try and comfort them by talking about the job that you knew they'd done and that they were incredibly happy, as most of them were, in doing what they were doing. I thought it was important feeling that if it had been me that someone was told that I'd gone out happy.

You were smiling at the end. That's most interesting. Turning to the actual flying, during this hectic retreat, how would you describe the main kinds of operations?

A great number of light bomber and bomber aircraft had arrived in the Middle East at this stage and they were doing daylight operations mainly against the main artery of supply, which was the coastal road, and bombings at daytime was the preferred exercise. And so a great number of our operations in the retreat were escort duties, and the thing was to make sure we

didn't lose a bomber. And this we achieved reasonably well but quite often at the loss of some of our escort. And 3 Squadron was sought after for this very reason and so we ended up with what I thought was a disproportionate number of escort duties. Against that there was a loss, in my view, that RAF command had taken a rather shortsighted view because here was 3 Squadron, the ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Nicky Barr, No. 3 Squadron, tape 2, side 2.

I was saying that here was 3 Squadron, with the highest performance record on air to air combat in the Middle East, being asked to specialise in escort duties while squadrons with lesser history and performance were doing this job at a time when the Luftwaffe were very superior. And it seemed to me that had 3 Squadron been allowed to capitalise on its expertise, particularly in air to ground attacks on airstrips, because there was nothing more desirable than to strafe 109s on the ground and thereby deplete their strength in this manner, and here we were being asked to do these other duties. I took this up with RAF command, in particular Air Commodore George Beamish, who passed it on to the Chief of Air Staff, Lord Tedder, and there was a change in attitude round and about the time that I was shot down.

That's most interesting. Just continuing with this period, May to June '42, there's a note here in Nicky's log book from Tedder.

Yes, this personal note from Air Marshal Lord Tedder to the commanding officer of 3 Squadron reads that: 'Congratulations on most efficient and successful fighter operations past two days. The bombers did very well because of the secure protection by 450 and 3 Squadrons. The fighting by 3 Squadron was particularly grand. You have put the Germans back a good pace and we must keep them there. Tedder'.

You must have been most delighted to receive that?

Yes, it was nice, and when I read it out to the squadron it was like they'd won the football grand final.

Was that read out at an official parade?

No, I went around each of the three messes: our own pilots' mess, the sergeants' mess and the ground staff.

Was that common for commanding officers to have that kind of, I'd imagine, relatively informal dialogue in messes?

Yes, I really did nothing more than follow Bobby. Pete of course was well known for the fact that he deleted the sergeants' pilot mess, his attitude being if he flies with someone he wants to talk with someone, whether he's a sergeant or an air marshal. And right along is this very democratic approach by the COs that took command. I don't include Dixie Chapman in this

because he was not there long enough, and even if he had been he would not have made it. He was a peace-time officer and

Did those attitudes, do you think, for example the pilots' mess idea, did those ideas percolate through to the British units near you?

Yes, they saw a great deal of merit in it, especially the South African squadrons who were at Sidi Haneish when the push started, and they had tried it and I don't know whether they proceeded with it, because the squadrons from South Africa were not kept in the front formations for political and related reasons, but I know they were very happy with it the last time we checked each other's operations out. There were some mixed squadrons which flew under the RAF banner that had tried it out, they too were happy with the experiment.

(5.00) Right. Well moving on, a particular event during this period, 30th May '42, you yourself were shot down for the second time. I know there's another incident to relate later, perhaps we could keep this one a little briefer, if you're happy with that. Could you describe the operation and how it all worked out?

Yes, the briefer the better for this one, because this was an occasion when I was not supposed to be shot down again but I was. It was I don't know to this day how I was hit but I was, and I had to crash the plane because the episode took place very close to the ground indeed, and in fact I must have flown over something with enormous power at one stage, maybe an 88mm aircraft gun because it flew me almost onto my back, tossed a wing right up high and I just got myself straightened out in time to crash it, and it seemed that I had crashed myself into a minefield area in a place called the Battle of the Cauldron, south of Tobruk, near El Adem. To shorten it, I've never been in a place so noisy and so nasty in all my life and I hope never to be in it again; war had been relatively quiet to me but this was frightening. I found myself listening to a loud hailer of some kind or other telling me to stay put because of the minefield. The Royal Gloucestershire Regiment finally showed up, pushed the Germans back on the other side because I seemed to be in between them, and told me how to thread my way through the last hundred metres or so of the minefield. I was then in their casualty section for a while and then taken to Tobruk hospital, where I spent the night. I was re-examined in the morning and returned to the squadron and flew that day. All I'd had was mild concussion.

That's quite remarkable, as you actually brought the plane down you, I assume, were doing a belly landing - that had gone smoothly?

Yes, I must have hit some obstacle near the end of the run and at relatively low speed because the strap marks had gone and I'd gone forward onto a part of the gun mount with my head because the straps had expanded, but there was nothing that serious that I couldn't continue flying the next day.

What was that like, getting into a plane the day after that kind of incident?

In my younger days I used to come some terrible croppers when I was diving and the only solution to a bad dive was to do another one and it applied equally as well, the philosophy, to getting into a plane. I think the fact that I got into a plane the next day was the right thing to do. If I'd had any breathing time, or if I was given the opportunity to think things through very analytically, I might not have gone back to it, I might have tried easy way outs.

Sure. Just talking of easy way outs, while you were commanding officer of the squadron, did you at any time have to face the no doubt extremely sensitive issue of dealing with a man, a pilot, who for whatever reasons was no longer able to cope?

No, I didn't, but I participated in a cleansing activity that Bobby had introduced. A number of people were taken off medically. Another one or two, I think it might have been, were taken off in respect of their unsuitability. None were stood down because they had the required operational hours up at that time. It had the effect though of reducing the number of pilots available to me when I took over, and as I mentioned earlier this was the time when I was seeking replacements, particularly those who'd trained with us at Khartoum and they were not locatable. And so, although everything done there was the right thing to do, and I was a party to the decisions taken by the doctor and Bobby, in my time there - that short period - I didn't have the need and I couldn't have exercised the option, I don't think, in those circumstances.

In that you were so short ...

So short on pilots in any case.

(10.00) Just to touch on a few general points, Nicky, before we come on to the end of your period with No. 3. The enemy, the Germans, Italians, you were saying, I think, before that you believed you'd been taught to hate - I'm not sure everybody would agree with that - what did you mean by that?

Well, the general training or propaganda, designed I think to establish attitudes amongst fighting people one against the other, was to have something greater than a dislike, and so the word hatred might even be too strong but it's the next one up nonetheless, for the Nazis and the Fascists and in other words the Germans and the Italians, and we were fighting them anyway. And so the media of the day were always talking about these attitudes and the hatred we had because, because, because. And so we were indoctrinated rather strongly. My own views were a little bit different later on in any case, in that I had soon learnt that my existence in this world depended very much on the help and compassion that I received from both Germans and Italians, even though I'd been harshly treated at different times by both of them, but for things that I did. If you escape and you're involved in certain things you must have expect to have some reaction when you're in a foreign country and you haven't abided by the laws that they think you should give regard to. But in spite of all of that experience, which wasn't nice at all, I learnt that I could de-personalise my feelings very easily indeed. And so I've been asked so often why don't I hate Germans, why didn't I hate Italians, and it's simply because I can't hate them because of my associations with both of them, but I can hate intensely the things that they stand for, and there is a big difference, and as I said, it is so easy to de-personalise it. And I feel that overall in the world if you can extend that philosophy to other things, if we really did fight for peace in our time by doing the things we did, then you can make that time last much longer, extend it deep into the future by reserving your great dislikes and hatreds to the impersonal aspects of inter-relationship with countries.

Yes, that's interesting. In a sense I guess there's basically a philosophical inconsistency in fighting for peace and hating individuals.

Well, the philosophical bottom line is both sides were doing the same thing, for their sort of peace.

Sure. Well, turning to another aspect of this. A lot of pilots will say that they only shot down aircraft, they didn't shoot down men, and of course in a sense fighting in the air was far cleaner than for example, hand to hand fighting with a bayonet or machine-gunning and so. How deeply do you think people believed that - perhaps yourself? How much was it a rationalisation?

I Here again I think it's difficult to generalise because people's reactions, like their emotions, differ so much that my experience was that it was so easy for a fighter pilot to almost con himself into a depersonalised war, because flying against the enemy in air to air combat was rather remote from the reality of war, which I found was not only horrific but its effect on me was much vaster than from my flying hours that I put in. People who fly in the air and have the rights to claim something in combat don't really think they've killed somebody. They haven't got that feeling, they haven't seen a man die, they haven't seen the whites of a man's eyes. It is You have to say it again, it's quite remote. Now, this is why I find that so many people in the air force with vast experience, they really would not say, 'I have killed a man', and there's a vast difference in this effect on you and your life, your sense of values, if you've done it, no matter what the circumstance. And so I had to find this out the hard way a number of times, and I must say I was never ever comfortable with it, but in order to do what I wanted to do it had to be done.

(15.00)I was just going to ask you perhaps finally, on occasions when you had certainly shot down an aircraft, for example that evening, did you ever brood on the fate of that pilot, or did you perhaps of necessity, push that aside?

I was inclined to push it aside, I can't remember brooding. I can never ever remember feeling elated either. I rather felt a difficulty in reconciliation of things, there are so many things about war anyway that have no reconciliation. But I was more prone to think - when I was thinking about the relationship of those matters - about the number of good folk that I'd lost, and that seemed to me in a very light-hearted sort of way a sort of a pay-off, that was all.

Yes, well, that's obviously completely understandable. Moving on now, 26th June 1942 - a fateful day - you yourself came obviously very close to being paid off, I think the squadron had almost, or had retreated close to Sidi Haneish. Tell us how this operation began?

First of all this will tell you the density of the work being done by the squadron at that time, and in my case I was on my third operation for the day before midday. Looking backwards I now think that I surely must have been operationally tired, I didn't think so but clearly, you know, what with retreats and squadron responsibilities something was happening. And the third operation for the day which started at eleven o'clock was escort again, to Bostons on a well-defined target. And we'd had a scrap defending them way back in the Al Adem/ Belhamed area, and we were coming back in reasonable shape and all of a sudden I had a loss of power and I was the lead aircraft in the bomber fighter formation on escort. So I elected to drop back slowly because of the loss of engine power, and I couldn't keep up, and so the next moment I was in a scrap again with an engine not performing. I was attacked from above, rear quarter attack, and the aircraft was hit in the engine and the wings, and probably the tail because I had no fore and aft control; I was set on fire. I knew I had two wounds in the leg, either from bullets or the cannon, and the next thing was to try and get out and ...

The fire, Nicky, how bad was it? Pilots always speak of that as the ultimate fear.

Oh, it was the most frightening thing, the fire, because it was licking round my legs and where the parachute was, and also round my arm where the wind suction had drawn the flames from the exhaust stubs and other parts of the engine, and I was having trouble with the canopy. And I was wondering if I could force my way out of the plane or whether I'd have to try and roll it to fall out, but I knew I wasn't going to have much time for thinking, and so I got the canopy open and then started pressing on my good leg to straighten up and, what seemed to be a lifetime, I was suddenly sucked out of the plane, and the next thing I knew I was free falling and wondered quickly whether I should delay the release cord or not, but I suddenly realised I must have been pretty close to the ground anyway so I pulled it almost immediately and

(20.00) Why would you have delayed?

Well, if I was high, see they, the Germans, had There were three or four instances of this time where the Germans had shot people from their parachutes, and although they disclaimed this we'd actually witnessed it. Pete had witnessed one in his time and I'd witnessed one when Bobby was in command. When I was in command I didn't witness any myself but there were others in another squadron. So the thought was that the way to avoid that is to have a delayed drop, but as I say this was just a flash thought until I realised that I didn't have that option. And so I got out and the force of the air blew the flames out that were on me and my leg, and so although I landed reasonably well on my other good leg, the parachute was still in its pendulum movement. So I wasn't seeing too well at that time, my eyelashes and that had been seared and I then had these degree burns to my legs and arms as well as the leg wounds; but I was alive.

Yes, well that was What was going through your mind?

Well, nothing too much at that time except that I was flat out on the ground and, you know, if I'd been a Pope I would have kissed it I guess - the ground I mean - and I then heard a voice and it was an Italian voice, and he was feeling my pulse and I'd had some shrapnel there which was putting pressure on my - it's right there and you can get the pulse from it. And he was saying in Italian, '*Lui e morta*' which means, 'He's dead', and I thought it can't be him - it can't be me - and it was like someone whispering. Anyway I, some time later, I don't know how long, I was gathered up and taken to an advance casualty clearing station, which I think very fortunately for me once again the luck aspect of it, it was controlled by Germans, who were as usual very businesslike, very competent and attended to me and decided not to amputate, put my leg in plaster and cast me aside to recover. About two days later I was put on the tray of a truck with a number of other people and shipped to hospital in Tobruk, and along the way a couple of the fellows were declared dead and were cremated on the roadside.

Yes, you were saying this before, I think one was a German officer, I'm not sure if

A German officer, yes, whom We got to know each other reasonably well in hospital and also talked about all sorts of things along the way on the tray of the truck.

In moments, or in that particular moment, or that encounter with the officer, how much were you both able to shed your roles as adversaries, as enemies?

I think that we were on common ground, we didn't seem to think we were adversaries, we were both two human beings who had had a misfortune. And he was glad to be going back to homeland for treatment, as he thought, and out of the war. He didn't look too good to me then but his English wasn't too bad and my German was average. And I learnt from him that he was from a very respectful family just north of Hamburg but he'd had an amputation and I don't I think they'd told him things that weren't quite true because he was so positive about his homeland and everything, but And as for me, he was sorry for me that I wasn't going to be treated back home. And so here was a man in desperate plight, an enemy, I remember him all my life, he had compassion.

Right. Your own leg had, just to go back a moment, was there ever any serious question about amputation and how would that have affected you?

(25.00) It was certainly a question of amputation twice, once there in the advance casualty because it was a faster solution to problems, it happened actually there were three times, the second time in the hospital at Caserta where, but there were no anaesthetics around or anything there so I was relieved of that risk there. The third one was actually back in Australia in peace-time where I had a farming property and my leg played up and I was on drugs. And they said, 'Well, if you're unhappy with what's going on now, we can take your leg off or stiffen it for you'. So three times along the way the threat has been there. As to its effect on me, I would think I would have found it hard to live with. I've loved sport, even though the wounds themselves stopped me from re-appearing on any real arena, I think the fact that I was still whole meant something to me and on the other hand it's the unknown - I may well have learnt to live with it. After all, I might not be a Douglas Bader but I think it's just your attitude.

Yes, people are remarkably adaptable. Moving on a little bit, Nicky. We, as I was saying before, must keep the focus on your No. 3 period so perhaps we can talk in a more synoptic way about events later. But from that I know you went to hospital near Naples and then I think on to hospital in northern Italy. From there I think you escaped?

Yes, I escaped and being in northern Italy it seemed to me sensible to try to get into Switzerland through the lake country, and I actually had reached and was in sight of Lake Como and I was gathered up by Italian frontiersmen with dogs, and there was only one at the start and I was so close to what I thought would be freedom that I engaged him in a bit of a wrestling match and eventually hit him on the head with a stone that I'd picked up. But the dogs and everything around the place gathered at a great rate, and I was gathered up. And this wounded fellow was moaning and groaning and they didn't like what I'd done. Actually these people were there to stop contraband leaving Italy and going to Switzerland, and so it was a pure misadventure that an escaped prisoner of war was gathered up in this net. I had no contraband of any nature whatsoever. However these men and dogs really gave me the treatment; I was thoroughly bashed up and I was returned then to the Milan hospital, prisoner of war hospital again, and it took me a few weeks to recover and I was court-martialled then and

I think that was a very close thing in that the day was really saved at the very end by a Red Cross official.

Yes, it was a colonel from Switzerland representing the Red Cross who was in the area and he'd been checking out things. I'd been told that the man I'd hit had died, and that I was for the firing squad for that as a murder and on top of it all being an escaped prisoner of war. He sorted things out and the end result was that I was sent to a place called Gavi, which was a prison for dangerous officers, and my first ninety days there were spent in solitary. Under the Geneva Convention you're only allowed to give thirty days, so at the end of each thirty days I was given half an hour in the exercise yard and sent back again.

How did that solitary confinement affect you? And how did you retain your spirit?

Other people might think it affected me a lot. I was a loner before that but it made me more so. I can be quite happy with my own company. I don't think it affected me too detrimentally. I learnt a lot about myself. In the final thirty days in any case I didn't really complete the solitary. I ended up with another cell mate who was a professor of languages from Koasha[?] and he helped me to speak Italian and some German better than I did before.

Well, you were saying that the people in this high security prison were a very mixed bag I think.

Yes, the character of this place was very entertaining in that Gavi had been a normal penitentiary closed by Mussolini about 1936 because of the high mortality rate in the prison. It was re-opened again about the time of their war with Ethiopia, and then for our war. But the inmates represented a cross-section of people from the war who were classified as dangerous people, '*e ufficiale pericolosi*', they were called. There were religious folk and real criminals and murderers and a great cross-section of people. We numbered only 157, give or take a few, and

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

TAPE 3, SIDE A

Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Nicky Barr, No. 3 Squadron, tape 3, side 1.

You were saying that the Germans came and basically I think you were to go on to Germany?

Yes, they thought that we were a hard core of people who could be a great source of trouble to them behind the lines should we escape, and so we were told that we were being taken through to Germany where a number of them would have been sent to the bad prisons and others who were classified as pure prisoners of war had the prospect of going to a Stalag. Now, though each carriage in turn was warned that should there be any people not on the roll call next morning the remaining people, having regard to the escapes that had obviously taken place, would be shot. So this was designed obviously as a deterrent to stop any nonsense and apparently from all accounts - this is post-war information - it had the desired effect, except for three carriages where people had taken the opportunity to escape en route, and I was in

that category and got off the train, at night of course, between Piacenza and Bologna in northern Italy.

Was the knowledge, that of course I know you gained after the war, that those people had been shot in your carriage, was that difficult to cope with, or not?

Yes, it was, it had great difficulties within our own carriage. For example, the feelings were so strong as to whether we should make an attempt or not that a senior officer in the carriage had to divide the people up into, as he'd call them, non-combatants and the combatants. And even some of the work that was being engaged in to escape from the carriage by destructing the end or the sides was impaired by these people. It got almost physical at one stage, and particularly when we were able to open one of the side doors by putting the hand through a hole and using the big pull that they had there to open it, they then wanted to join us, some of them did, but it wasn't on, they had not contributed, in fact quite the reverse. So it was difficult.

So there was quite an understandable unwillingness on the part of the men who were escaping to take the previous waverers?

Well, they didn't want us to escape, because they wanted the roll call to be a hundred per cent in the morning. They knew if we started to go the only prospect for them, if they wanted to do it, and there was a fairly good risk when you jump off a train at night in the dark at fair speed, they had the option of sitting it out or taking the jump. And from what I gathered post-war, most of them took their jump in a firing squad.

Moving on, I know after this escaping from the train there was an extended period behind the lines where you were involved with partisans in north Italy. I think that whole thing finally fell apart when you were betrayed?

Yes, there was a strong feeling at the time by the Royalists against the Fascists and vice versa, and it was very hard in a largeish area, which it was, round about a place called Montromole[?] to keep everyone on side. And Germans were offering inducements for betrayals and the Fascists were strongly in favour of this in any case, and the whole group were betrayed and we were once again gathered up and put on a train, taken through the Brenner Pass to Austria to a transit POW camp between Obsteg[?] and Innsbruck.

How long in fact had you spent with these partisans?

Two and a half months.

(5.00) And I think just for the record too, it's worth noting that in the post-war period you have been - in the years after the war - you became very closely involved in revisiting the area.

Not that particular area, it was the one further down when I came down from Austria and met up with the SOE group just behind the front lines which then extended from Salerno through to a place called, it was Castel de Sangro on the Sangro River where there were a number of big battles, and just before the Anzio beach-head was attempted.

Right. So this is after you'd escaped from the transit camp ...

In Austria.

Just for the record, I think you said in that escape from the transit camp five escapees got away, twenty-three were killed.

Yes. Once again, when one escapes you never know what happens. I didn't because I was invariably a loner, and so it was only the opportunity given to me after the war to piece things together with friends we'd met in England and Europe, to learn that they'd been gathered up, similar to other escapees from Stalags as well as the transit camps and shot on the spot. Once again, the Germans in particular were especially ruthless in making sure their deterrents had witnesses so that by fear they could control the situation.

And you were saying, I think, before, Nicky, that you actually made it through the Brenner Pass alone.

Yes. I decided after escaping not to try Switzerland, but to give a chance to making it all the way down to joining up with the Allies in the southern part of Italy, and the only way through then. There were a number of small passes but I thought out that it might be nicer to have a lot of company, the more people the better, and this proved to be the case and I came down through the Brenner during periods of very high density of traffic in the early spring of '44.

It's a remarkable story. I think it's also remarkable that besides debriefing by Intelligence, British Intelligence, that although you later returned to Australia via Britain and I think spent some time in Britain, you were never debriefed by either air force?

Yes, that puzzled me because I have never had a more thorough debriefing, or briefing for that matter, by anyone than the British colonel in charge of Allied Intelligence at a place called Vasto in Italy. This was the spot where I came through the lines eventually to freedom, having developed the Roman sickness called malaria and I was a bit weak from malnutrition. And this debriefing showed enormous interest in all the things I'd done from the time I left hospital. It was therefore surprising to me that when I returned to the air forces, both RAF and RAAF, on not one occasion, at any time, by any party, was any interest shown, no questions were asked, about what I had done in twenty-one months away from the air force. It seemed to me that here again, to confirm the attitude previously expressed, it could be said I had some experience in certain areas which could be helpful to the Allies, and it seemed to me too, that maybe some person in authority could see a way to use it. There was not ever an attempt to either chronicle what I had done or attempt to utilise whatever asset they saw in those experiences.

It really does beg an analysis. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps it was in a sense a reaction of threat perhaps that your adventures - and clearly they were that - posed a threat to men who in a sense had sat through a much safer war?

(10.00) There are plenty of grounds for thinking that because there were so many senior officers in the air force who seemed to me never to have taken the opportunity along the way to gain first-hand exposure and experience. Very few of them indeed, you know, had operational experience. I fail to agree that you can take on positions of high command unless

you've had the experiences of your service somewhere along the line, it doesn't matter how small, but at least some experience in operations. So here again we found that, with the explosion in the growth of the RAAF, such a high proportion of the permanent service went into administrative and/or training posts. Now there were a number of air force people who had Citizen Air Force, or short term commissions, who did a commendable, enviable job, really great, but their numbers are small and I can't remember one of the senior command. Now, I feel that they might well be able to justify it, and I'm quite sure that many of them feel they made some contribution towards the war in our time, but I think that from the viewpoint of a fresh faced young man who'd had no experience of war or of flying to come in and not to have the opportunity of talking to people in high places with that knowledge was a weakness in communications.

Yes, sure. I would have thought even to talk about the psychological aspects of being taken prisoner.

That's right.

Going back to that, just perhaps to finish that story, you've got over the front line, you're back in safe country, what was your strongest feeling and what did you think of most?

The first thing was I wanted to return and see my wife. Of most of the things that I'd done and attempted she was the reason for wanting to get back to things again. She was the image, the focal point. The second thing, almost equally as strong, was what in the hell can I do to help finish this war? Let's get back to peace. And so I guess that I found out too that it was very difficult to get back to Australia from the Middle East, and Bill Duncan who was still there at this time said, 'Well, we'll get things organised and put you in England where you've got a better chance of getting back to Australia very much faster'.

How long did you in fact spend in Britain? And were you flying?

I've forgotten the exact time now, but it was a great number of months, because after I did a refresher course on Spitfires and a parachute course at Prestbury[?] ...

That must have been a bit of a joke.

Yes, I told them, you know, I don't mind jumping out under duress, but to do it voluntarily seemed a bit odd to me. Anyway, the thing was that they wanted someone who'd done this course, and the prospect was that I could be returned to Australia to take command of the parachute school at Richmond Air Force Base, where Alan Rawlinson was supposed to have - a friend of ours from 3 Squadron - supposed to have been sent. So there were reasons for everything that was sold to me. And then I was engaged in testing and flying some Typhoons against the [*Pas de Calais*?] and I eventually ended up being asked to go to France on, not D Day, but it transpired four days after the landing to participate in some control of air to ground operations. It was at this stage they then found out that I had been an escaped prisoner of war and for some obscure reason best known to the command, they thought the Germans might recapture me and shoot me. Now, their system is good, but not that good. They could never identify me with the fellow who'd been somewhere else.

Yes, that's a lovely image of the Some guy in western France flicking through ...

Cross-reference and all this stuff. Anyway, it suited me fine and I was then sent up to Manchester and then across the Atlantic, then back to Australia via New Guinea.

Reaching Australia, you'd lived through remarkable experiences, horrific experiences too, what was your feeling on reaching home?

Well, it was sheer delight. I am not bright enough to describe it adequately. It was the most euphoric feeling that anyone could have. It was also, it wasn't just a short term feeling, it's lasted and lasted and lasted. And those people who sit down and say we count our blessings, that was the sort of Anything that happened was a blessing after that.

That's most interesting, Nicky.

There were three and a half years of it, you see, virtually three and a half years' front line.

I think we must, because of time, skate over the period in Australia, but just to put on record you did go to Mildura OTU, I think?

(15.00) Yes, I found that, due mainly to Bobby Gibbes who wanted to vacate his position as chief instructor of fighter operational training at Mildura to go back to operations again in one of the squadrons or wings up north, I found that I'd been selected to succeed him. So I went up there and had a look at the syllabus, which was pure Western Desert and European, and from the little amount that I'd learnt about the Pacific it seemed to me quite incongruous that a man who'd never been in the Pacific should be asked to train pilots for the Pacific area because we weren't, we were having more people sent back to us from Europe than we had people going there. So here was this very grim situation where I had to get myself up and do a few operations up there to find out how we should train people because the unknown quantity was how long would the war last. The Japanese were formidable, had resources and all that, the bomb hadn't been mentioned, and so we set about it purposefully, and I designed the new syllabus aimed at doing the type of activity like the mopping operations and things.

But it was an onocious[sic] war for Australia at that time because as history shows the war had by-passed us in Australia, politically we were not wanted either by the Americans or the Australian politicians didn't want our involvement. But we had to find this out the hard way, there was no communications by these people downwards to tell us how to shape things, how to mould things so that whatever effect, whatever blow took place it was done with full understanding and appreciation of the event. And so I'm highly critical of the fact that actions were requested and asked of us to delete numbers, to cancel, to reduce the numbers of people passing and this had a very bad effect on the morale in Mildura. We had stacks of people arriving there with wonderful operational experience from Europe and talking about the air force contributing to their delinquency, we had a plateful of that towards the end of the war, simply because here were all these fellows wanting to do either a second tour or even a third tour in some men, to get the whole thing finished, and we were not told that our role had been chosen for us so that we could shape things in respect to that policy at an early date. It just happened very haphazardly.

Well, that's most interesting. Look Nicky, just to end, one thing I like to ask anybody, is there anything that you feel you would like to add to this record that has not been put down now?

I feel particularly garrulous over this session, I seem to have been more chatty about things than I ever have been before. Right at this stage, no, I don't think I would like to add to it or change anything. I have some stronger feelings about some things but I don't think this is the occasion for it, it's best handled in another way and in any case ...

Vis-à-vis the air force?

Yes. I did have the advantage of having Sir Alistair Murdoch on a couple of the boards that we were on together and as his chairman I was able to do a lot through him just after he was Chief of Air Staff. So I think that's the better avenue to go working back, although he's dead now there are ways open to me there for these other things, which I think although they're critical in my case I'd also have their constructive

Good. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial in Canberra, Nicky, thank you very much for these tapes.

I've enjoyed it too. I've thought of so many things I'd forgotten for years.

That's good.

END OF INTERVIEW