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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00943
Title	(4261) Thom, John 'Jock' (Flight Sergeant)
Interviewer	Stokes, Edward
Place made	Not stated
Date made	4 May 1990
Description	John (Jock) Thom as a flight sergeant, 3 Squadron RAAF, interviewed by Edward Stokes, for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes recording with Jock Thom, 3 Squadron, tape one, side one.

Jock, you were born in Scotland, I think.

That's correct.

When and where?

A place called Coatbridge in Lanarkshire. It's about halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh on the Glasgow-Edinburgh road, and railway.

Right. And I understand you did most, well in fact, all of your schooling in Scotland and had begun an apprenticeship there, too?

That's correct.

What was it an apprenticeship in?

Automotive engineering.

But I think almost towards the end of that in 1928 the family migrated to Australia?

That is correct. I had done just on four years in tech. in Scotland. If you decided on a technical course you could do a night-school course one year ahead. They are only starting to realise that sort of thing can be done in Australia at the moment, but it happened, I can assure you, in 1926, '27.

And the family's move to Australia, was there any particular reason for that?

Well, my father had the idea, and rightly so as it turned out, that there were more opportunities for his family here in Australia than what there was in Great Britain.

Well it was certainly a very different world you came to. And it was in Australia, I know, that you finished your apprenticeship and I think by the age of about twenty you were working at different jobs.

That's correct. I had a job when I came here first, I had a job to come to because the chap who was the Chief Engineer of Clyde Engineering at Clyde, next to Granville in New South Wales was a graduate of engineering from Glasgow University and was employed by the same company as I was, which was, incidentally, the Scottish Iron and Steel Company.

Right. Well, that's most interesting. Perhaps we won't go into more detail of your work before the war. But just to put on the record I think you were repairing stations in the back country and later working for a tyre and rubber company. But amongst all this in the early '30s before the scheme was phased out, I think you were in the Citizens' Air Force.

For a short time, when I came to this country first, compulsory training was in vogue and for the first I think it was about eighteen, well, a little over a year anyhow. You had the opportunity to get either into the army which for me would have been the New South Wales Lancers at Parramatta Barracks, or travel to Richmond and join the air force. And therefore I had a short, relatively short, sojourn in the air force as a member of the CAF.

And during that period in the CAF were you working as a fitter, or what were you doing?

Yes, an air frame fitter. I chose air frames because they didn't want, at that time, engine fitters, they wanted air frame fitters.

That's interesting. I think, going on a little bit in the story, it was, pre-war years, I think Christmas '38 you said, the permanent air force now, was once again advertising for fitters. You applied, why was that?

Well, you might kid yourself that you were wise in hindsight, saw a war coming, read all about it, but all these heroics aside I think there was a small element of that in it but the idea of playing with aeroplanes and servicing aeroplanes did appeal to me and that appeal lasted for many years.

(5.00) Right. So just to interpolate on that, there was a consciousness of war approaching but it wasn't the primary factor in your enlisting?

No, I don't think in all honesty I could say that it was the prime factor in the decision I made.

Well, you were saying you did actually join the permanent air force in, very soon afterwards, February '39 and I think you went first to Richmond's second of 2 Aircraft Depot. What's your recollection of that first period in the air force?

Well, it was a new life. It was a life of challenge because the air force was starting to get aircraft approaching modern standards and with, at that time, a fairly advanced for Australian things, technical content in them, and it was most interesting.

I think you were saying your initial work was on planes called Walruses and Demons, doing air frame overhauls. How modern were those planes?

Well, by Australian standards they were our first line, by world standards they would be fourth or fifth rate in that modern technology as it was then. Certainly you got all the basics and all the basic training that was necessary to carry on as happened when we got more modern aircraft and reached the modern aircraft stage in the latter stages of the war.

I think you were saying before, Jock, that the training, or the learning in air frame work and so on that you did was mostly done on the job, there was no training course as such. Was that good or bad?

Well, I think it would, looking in hindsight again, I think it would have been far better to have had a basic training, technical training in aircraft construction itself, instead of just learning in

the old apprenticeship style from your journeymen and that was it, because not all journeymen are good journeymen.

Yes, sure, and I suppose there's also a difference perhaps between a good journeyman in what he can do and what he can teach.

That's right. Not everybody has got the faculty for teaching other people; it's a trade apart.

Sure. What about more general recollections of your very first months in the air force, I suppose the discipline, the regimentation. Was there much of that? Were you involved in a lot of parade ground bashing?

I think the air force looked at it more or less in an advanced light. There wasn't an overabundance of square bashing, but you had to know your King's Rules and Regulations and you were at times, especially if you were going for promotion to the higher rank of corporal, you had to do an oral examination on air force rules and regulations and procedures. In other ways you got your backside well kicked if you didn't adhere to the system which you wouldn't have got the same, probably, supervision in a school, so it had its good points and it had its bad points. But I would, looking back, I would prefer that it was a school, the basis to do it.

What about other things of those, that first period in the air force: recreation, living conditions? What's your recollection of that?

The living conditions in the air force by and large were good. The accommodation at Richmond for its time was very good. We had brick barracks which are still in existence, still used for the same purpose today at Richmond air base. And I only had a walk through both the old sergeant's mess, had a look at my old room in the sergeant's mess, and had a look at my block which was Block 2 inside the main gate and I was agreeably surprised at the way they've tarted the accommodation up and made it acceptable for today's airmen.

(10.00) That's interesting. Well going on a little bit. I think it was in June 1940 that you were posted to 3 Squadron and it was really only a month later that they went overseas. That first month in the squadron, what was your general impression of it, of its organisation of its men?

It was a time of panic reign supreme really, if you want to coin a stupid phrase for it. Nobody from the CO down knew precisely what was happening. I even questioned whether Air Board knew what they were bloody well doing either.

Do you mean in terms of where the squadron was to go or how it was to get there?

In all phases. This was something new. I don't think really that we were completely prepared for the eventuality of war.

I guess, am I correct in saying that 3 Squadron was the first fully equipped Australian squadron ever to go overseas?

That certainly is correct. 10 Squadron left Richmond Air Base before Christmas 1939 but it went over in dribs and drabs. There were some people over there taking control of Sunderland aircraft then it was decided to put a whole squadron over there and everybody that missed out on a posting to 10 Squadron felt that the world had come to a bloody end.

In that very frenetic month, Jock, were you very involved in the physical preparations of leaving? And if you were, what were you doing?

Mostly we were getting injections, getting our field gear up to scratch and having a few gargles down at Ma Tunnels which is the pub at Clarendon station, affectionately known as 'Ma's'.

Soaking up some good Australian life before it was all over. So it sounds as if that month was very much a month of, in a sense, more personal organisation rather than major logistical organisation of the squadron.

Oh yes, that would be a fair comment, I would think generally speaking. Yes, I agree with you.

Just one thing perhaps to dwell upon for the moment, Jock, you were saying, mentioning some of the names involved in the squadron in Sydney. We had the officer in charge of air frames, Larry Adler, his Warrant Officer, one. Ted Stocker, IC Air Frame, Wing Commander Seachamp, Station Engineering Officer, his offsider, Warrant Officer, one, Hagforth [sic].

Hagfath.

Sorry.

F-A-T-H.

Right. Hagfath. IC Engineering Air Section. How closely did warrant officers and their officers work together on the maintenance side of the squadron?

A warrant officer usually got there from years of training, had been through all the mill himself and generally speaking the peacetime air force warrant officers were both knowledgeable and approachable.

That's interesting. Are you suggesting that they were different to the wartime warrant officers?

Well, yes, inasmuch that they didn't get their promotion quickly. They got their promotion not by the effluxion of time but a combination of exams, periodical exams. They'd come through the ranks, had heard all the hard luck stories, knew when a bludger was a bludger, and generally speaking these men were, as I said first, knowledgeable and experienced, and if asked properly would go to great lengths to tell you the proper way to do it.

And I understand those points about the wartime men. What about the officers? Do you think there were differences either in attitude, character, approach to the service, between permanent officers and wartime officers?

(15.00) It's hard to make a general statement on that. Like all walks of life there are good and bad. Some of the finest persons I've met even to today were permanent air force officers. My choice of permanent air force officers of great significant value would be that of Group Captain Peter Jeffrey, the second CO of 3 Squadron, and the CO of Richmond aerodrome when I first got back from the Middle East was then Air Marshal - afterwards he was Air Marshall - Sir Frederick Scherger. Both led from in front, were approachable, knowledgeable and very, very good disciplinarians.

That's interesting. We might actually come back to talk about Peter Jeffrey in the context of some of the other squadron leaders later, Jock. Well, let's move on a little bit. The decision came that the squadron was to go overseas although, of course, you didn't officially know where although I'm sure there were strong rumours. What were your feelings on, well, just before embarkation and, incidentally, how did your family feel about your going overseas?

My mother had recently died. My father had two sisters to look after him when I was gone. I more or less think that I treated it as a great adventure.

Well, could I just clarify that it's something that people often refer to? Were you primarily going overseas in a patriotic sense to fight for your country or was it more a personal thing of seeking a kind of personal adventure?

Well, part of both. There would be nobody, I think, more patriotic to this country and to Britain than I am. Always have been, and that, I must agree, would be part of my reaction of going off to war. I was old enough to realise the seriousness of it and that it was not going to be a piece of cake, and it wasn't.

I might just pick up on something you said there? You were, of course, quite a lot older than a good deal, or probably the majority of the men in the squadron, although in fact not so old yourself. Right. We've just worked out that Jock was twenty-seven when they went overseas. How did that affect your relationships with other men within the squadron? Did they look up to you as a kind of father figure, or not?

No. You were judged on your own merits. There can be no harder taskmaster than being tried by your peers, and that, I think, is applicable today as it was then.

But in terms of day to day living, did men who might only have been nineteen and twenty, slightly turn to, or rather, turn to men who were slightly older or not?

Oh yes, the very young that were there, and I'm talking about the eighteen, nineteen year olders. Some of them were very, very young, eighteen and nineteen year olders. Some were very old nineteen year olders. It depended on what strata of society that they came from, and

their areas of affluence, but war is a great leveller I've found, and it didn't take long for people to sort themselves out.

Well, let's go back to the voyage. It was on the *Orontes* which was then, of course, still equipped and, I mean in its peacetime fittings and so on. On her to Bombay and then the *Dilwara* from there on. What's your recollection of the journey on the *Orontes*?

The journey on the *Orontes* was, looking back on it, was the best trip the government had provided me with. I had been on ocean liners. I came here on the *Ormond* and the Orient boats, this was a newer vessel, better appointed, and we were treated as passengers.

Did you do any training while you were on the voyage to the Middle East, or not?

Actual training, no. We did physical exercises and that, more to keep fit than anything else. And to cut down on boredom because there were no dancing girls provided which was most unfortunate.

That was a bit of an oversight on the part of the authorities.

Oh yes.

Well, I imagine if there weren't any dancing girls on the *Orontes* there were even fewer on the *Dilwara*.

The *Dilwara* was a disaster. We were conned by the 'Poms' in a big way. We were docked ahead of the *Dilwara* which was a small transport, was a permanent British army transport designed to take no more than 600 people, officers and men from one foreign posting to the other. We were given the forward hold and the forward mess deck as our portion of the ship. On the mess deck you slept under the table, on the tables, or slung a hammock from stempipes above the table. So we had a three-deck bedding layer and there was only one The hatches on the deck were the only ventilators. All portholes were closed. There were no fans and to say the least of it, it was quite warm.

Sounds like a hell hole, Jock. And what about the food?

The food was atrocious. They had stocked up in India, mainly with a form of Indian fish which had a very pungent odour and a worse taste. Apart from that the ovens and the stoves on the ship were a disgrace.

Well, let me just turn to a slightly different issue in all this. Were the officers on the *Dilwara* much better set up than the men, or not?

Oh yes, the average British outfit looks after its officers to a much greater extent than they looked after their troops.

Were men very, well, conscious or resentful of this general set-up on the deck of the *Dilwara*?

Which Australian wouldn't be? I'll give you an example. We rebelled about staying down in the hold in crossing the Red Sea. The officers had deck chairs on the officers' deck which other ranks were never allowed to tread. So we decided that that's where we were going to sleep. So we went up and next thing we knew the military police and the OC Troops

Were there English troops on the ship too, or only

Yes.

So the military police, were they British or Australian?

British. Ah. The OC of the troopship was a colonel. Colonel Blimp was a good indication of what he looked like. And his intelligence quota would about on a par with what the Colonel Blimp of film fame portrayed.

So once you moved up onto the deck what happened?

Well, we were ordered to remove ourselves back down to the cattle-truck underneath. So the following evening the officers had no deck chairs to sleep on. Somebody said that they saw them disappearing over the side. And that wasn't viewed by the OC Troops with any great favour I can tell you.

Let's just be clear on this. In a roundabout way, are you saying that the chairs were actually thrown over, or were they secreted somewhere else on the ship?

I never saw them thrown over. But as they searched the ship for 'em and they weren't on the ship, there's only one place they could have gone.

I suppose the seagulls might have picked them up?

I never thought on that one before, but then again, I'm not a very facetious person.

So, seriously now though, what actually happened? I mean was that something that the British commanding officer just had to grin and bear or were there great ructions?

Oh well, there was threats as there always is threats and life has taught me that it's a useless thing, threatening. Don't indulge in it. Won't stand for it.

So it was a stand-off, was it?

(25.00)Oh, it was a stand-off. He got our back up and the nameplate which was on every ship was screwed to the front of the bridge, or bolted, I can't remember which, but the day before we got into Port Tewfik that nameplate disappeared, and the poor captain of the ship and the OC [inaudible] did everything in a most appealing manner from the bridge that this had to be returned. And if it wasn't returned all dire threats were that we would be thrown in the citadel, the military prison, in Cairo.

An appeal from our own officers brought some results, I don't know why but it suddenly appeared down in front of the purser's office and I think, the military guard that was waiting

for us at Port Tewfik were dispersed and sent back to their barracks because we arrived without any how-do'ye-do.

We'd better not dwell on this too long because there are probably more important things to go on to, but just briefly, what was the role of the Australian officers in all of this?

Our own officers had to abide by the rules. We were quite well aware of this but I think secretly they agreed that the conditions that we were forced to be in and that, was, well it wasn't what it should have been. But then, we were new to this game then. We hadn't lived rough before but we soon learnt.

Well going on a little bit, Jock, just in general terms, arriving in the Middle East: a very different part of the world to Australia in terms of its life. What was your reaction to it? What was the reaction of most men?

I think most people viewed it in the light that it was new. And going up in the railway up to Ismailia which was the first station we were posted to, we passed these canals, irrigation canals, which came from the Nile and in that they used as their drinking water, their bathroom and their toilet. And I think that horrified me more than anything else.

But did you get much time when you were over there, this is looking at the whole period in the Middle East, much leave, odd days here and there to get around and see the sights? And did men try to do that or were they so caught up in their own life that it was more a matter of just, you know, washing of socks and shirt and flopping on a bed in camp?

Oh no, I think everybody, I was I know, keen to see whatever sights were available and to see as much as I could of a foreign country while it lasted because we all realised that what we were about now was the good times, that the bad times wouldn't be that long in coming.

Sure. Well let's move on a little bit. As you were saying the squadron did go first to Ismailia where you were allocated a number of Gauntlets. Was there ever any feeling in the squadron that the British squadrons were getting the better planes, such as Hurricanes and the Australians weren't? Was that just accepted as the fact that planes were in short supply, or was there some resentment towards the British for giving Australians much older planes?

No, I don't think that really was basically the reaction from chaps such as myself. I viewed it in this light, obviously they were short of supplies, and by them I mean the RAF were short of supplies, like ourselves. There was no evidence that they had overabundance of military equipment. In fact it was very obvious that we were an army co-operation squadron and we had no army co-operation aeroplanes to operate. But a convoy got through Malta, Gibraltar and Malta and we were told that we had allocation of some Lysander aircraft but we'd have to assemble them ourselves.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Jock Thom, 3 Squadron, side two of tape one.

Well, I was going to go on actually to ask about assembling the Lysanders, Jock. I know you went to Aba Aswear, that's incidentally A-B-A A-S-W-E-A-R, to assemble some of these Lysanders you'd been given, I think, three. How on earth do you assemble a plane that you've never seen before?

Ah, there were a few odd permanent RAF staff like flight sergeants and WOs who were very knowledgeable people. And if you asked properly, you were told. And if they didn't know they'd find you a manual.

And manuals, were they ...?

They were not in plentiful supply by any means but there were a few manuals floating around.

The manuals. Were they specific down to the smallest part of the aeroplane, the smallest screw and so on or only general?

Oh no, they were a pretty good manual. The Lysander manual was a pretty detailed manual and if you happened to be a tradesman, and not all of us were tradesmen, but if you happened to be a tradesman and had tradesman's training, it wasn't an insurmountable job to follow your manual.

How long would it take? I don't know how many men would be working on a job, but however many were, perhaps you could tell us that? How long would it take to put a plane together?

Well, that's the first time I've been asked that question and quite frankly I wouldn't like to put a timescale on it. Ah, but I'll make this comment. We worked long hours where the RAF were, and most people there were permanent RAF, took off from They started at seven o'clock in the morning, they'd work till twelve and then they'd have two hours rest in the hot day because it does get hot over there in the Canal zone. And then they'd start and they'd work till five. We just kept working.

Do you think that was partly that Australians found it easier coping with the heat?

Could be, because at that time I had been ten years in Australia more or less and um, I had become more an Australian than a Scot.

Well let's move on a little bit, Jock. After this period with putting the Lysanders together I know the squadron regrouped at Helwan where you by now had Gauntlets, Gladiators, Lysanders and I think a Gloucester biplane. Having a number of different aircraft such as those in one squadron, what problems did that create for ground crew such as yourself?

(5.00) Oh well, we had a title for that sort of thing and it's called 'Snafu', 'Situation Normal All Messed Up', work it out for yourself.

Right. So things were really at sixes and sevens?

Oh yes, it was an unstabilising or destabilising arrangement, especially as all the equipment was old, out of date, and it wasn't a great morale booster that we'd But we, I think, accepted the fact that we'd have to make do with what we had been given. There was no alternative.

Spare parts, were they in reasonable supply? Or were they as rare as hens' teeth?

Well, hens had a full set of dentures - would be a comment, I suppose, facetious but still that gives you some idea of the availability of spare parts.

So was there a lot, I know there was a lot of scavenging of other things later, but in terms of aircraft parts specifically, could you scavenge? Or was there nothing to scavenge from?

You got the wrong title for it. Scavenge or steal doesn't come into it. There was a magical word for it and it was called scrounge. What we didn't have, we pinched.

First come, best dressed.

Oh yes. If we didn't have it and other people had it, especially enemy gear, we lived on that and we had I think quite a deserved reputation in the military forces in the Middle East that we were called the 'Hydraulic Squadron', lift anything.

I know later, Jock, you were working, doing maintenance and so on in very primitive conditions on desert airstrips, but this early work at places such as Ismailia, Abu Sueir, Helwan, what were your working facilities like? I mean were you in covered hangars or what?

Oh yes, the, especially Abu Sueir and Aboukir which were the two main depots in the Canal zone, they were well equipped except with the vital goods which was modern aircraft. They didn't have any of those. But as far as gear and hangars and that, yes, their gear was good, their equipment non-existent.

By equipment you mean spare parts?

Spare parts, lifting equipment. The hangars were there, they had concrete floors and they had space and they had runways and they had tarmacs in front of the hangars and all that was there. But no aircraft, was the cry. No transport. We went into the desert, I think, the poorest transport facilities, then we came out of it with the best transport in the Middle East.

Mm, yes, well ...

Enemy goods was fair game.

Of course. We'll come onto that later. Well let's go on now to what was a very particular episode. You were detached with a number of other men from Helwan to RAF Squadron 208, at a place called, Qasaba, I think.

Yes.

Q-U-A-S-A-B-A [sic]. And just for the record this was 20 September '40 to late October '40, 1940. The officers were Flight Lieutenant Blake Pelly in charge, Flight Lieutenant Rawlinson, Flight Lieutenant Peter Turnbull, Flying Officer Lindsay Knowels plus twelve airmen and a few others who followed on later. Those names, incidentally, from Jock's record of 3 Squadron activities. What was the point of this detachment?

Well, theoretically, officers and men had been trained in the theory of war. This was to give some working knowledge of actions in war. Doing a 200 hourly inspection on a aircraft such as a Gauntlet or a, or any aircraft for that matter, out in the sand and the sand blowing all around you is different, totally different, than doing it in a hangar, or on a tarmac. So procedures were different, attitudes had, of necessity, to be different, and this was the best training we could get, and 208 Squadron personnel, officers and men, treated us very well; nothing was a trouble to them. They didn't have very much either.

(10.00) And we might actually come to talk about the specifics of open air maintenance just in a short while when we're actually out in the desert ourselves, so to speak. But I think one of the other points of this contact was for the pilots to improve their army co-operation work, is that correct?

Yes, that was the, what we left Australia to be; an army co-operation unit, particularly for operations with the 6th Division AIF. The old-fashioned idea of what army co-operation was, was soon dispelled. It was a different war and a different era with different things, under totally different circumstances. A Lysander floating around in the air at sixty knots with flaps down spotting for artillery, that had gone out with straw boaters.

So it was a much faster sort of war and that kind of leisurely reconnaissance just wasn't on.

No.

I think, though, and of course that lesson hadn't, perhaps, quite been totally absorbed and so there was this, still some training in army co-operation. I understand you, besides being an air frame man, were also trained as an observation and air gunner?

That was something that we did when we were in the CAF. Ah, it was part and parcel of what they did in the permanent air force prior to 1939.

Did that training continue now with 208 Squadron, or were you only doing ground maintenance training?

Only doing ground maintenance, under battle conditions.

Well, would you like to recall any more of that first battle condition ground maintenance training, Jock?

Well, it's hard to find something, describe something that is poles apart. Cleanliness, lack of dust, scrupulous cleanliness really, was instilled into you in peacetime in Australia. How do you cope with that, trying to get that sort of thing in the middle of a dust storm, when a dust storm blows, not for an hour, but sometimes for two or three days, night and day? Er, totally different war. Totally different set of circumstances.

Let's again, if you don't mind, just leave the specifics about that - I think are terribly important - 'cause they somehow fit in a moment later. I think it was late 19, oh sorry, late October 1940 when the men who'd been detached, or most of them, joined the squadron at Garal....

Gerawla.

Gerawla, spelt G-E-R-A-W-L-A, where the squadron built a camp and it was really here that you began changing to a more direct fighter support role than an army support operation?

That is correct.

And some men here who therefore became redundant were posted to RAF squadrons. Extra Gauntlets arrived. What's your recollection of that period before you got involved in the actual fighting?

Well, it was an experience of learning. Learning to operate under these not too pleasant conditions. Knowing full well that it was going to last for a long time you had to find a solution to it and bring your mental approach to it. In other words, stop grizzling and get on with the job.

Was there much apprehension about not only the physical hardships and difficulties but the sheer outright danger of being strafed or bombed or injured or killed in some way. Did men think about that much, talk about it?

I would think there'd be very few men that didn't think about it. But thinking about it and dwelling on it is two different things. Let's say that part of the process of learning there was to learn to live with it. Some great philosopher in the ages said, 'Sufficient unto the day thereof', 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof for tomorrow never comes', Omar.

(15.00) Was that sort of day to day mentality what really kept you going?

Well, it was part of the thought process I suppose. The squadron was starting to find its own identity. The same as the men were finding their own identity and the niche that they had to operate in in that particular circumstances. I don't think there was any heroics attached to it at all. It was a case of if you didn't learn and you didn't beat it, it would beat you, and the realisation that that was the bare facts of life made you try harder.

The first death in the squadron, 19th of November, we've worked out. Squadron Leader Heath's, second-in-charge of the squadron, he didn't come back; first killed in action. How did that affect the squadron?

Well, it was the first signal that this wasn't games we were playing. I think, concisely, that could be said to be the lesson that was learnt from Peter Heath's demise. The gloves were off and we were into it then.

That's very clearly put, Jock. Let's go on now to talk about what is in a way central to your war, what you did with the squadron in the Middle East. And that is, the techniques as you've put it of open air, primitive condition frontline servicing; that seems to put it very well. But let's talk about it in some detail. What was the single greatest difficulty?

The single greatest difficulty wasn't getting the aircraft into a rigging position, that was meant as the true flying position, but in the lifting of heavy engines when you had to do an engine change. And engine change is, even with the best of equipment, is an awkward job, and a delicate job. You can do an awful lot of damage wrestling around with a flopping great heavy motor hanging on the end of a chain.

It made it very hard but it made the boys depend on one another. The man that was looking after to see if the engine bolts were in the right position, he knew he had to be right, the same with the man who was pulling on the block and tackle, raising or lowering it, pushing and shoving it, as we used to call it. But you work out, a technique was worked out where we could change a motor in a pretty good time, even under those conditions and do it well.

How long would it take for an average engine change?

Well, depends on the aircraft. It varies from aircraft to aircraft, but in a

Say, a Kittyhawk?

Oh, a Kittyhawk, an in-line motor, oh, I've seen it done in a day. I've seen one on a Gladiator done in five hours, but that's a radial motor and it's a frontal attack upon it. It's not sitting like an in-line motor is sitting on a cradle. An in-line motor's much harder to do than the, er, the radial motor.

That's very, very interesting, Jock. Some other things about the work you did. I've already asked about how rare spare parts and so on were. How much did you innovate? How much did you actually manufacture parts on the job?

(20.00) Well, to answer that sensibly I'd have to leap-frog a bit till after the fall of Tobruk. When Tobruk fell, our engineering officer, Bert Bodinson and a little, cheeky LAC we had called Billy Lee, whose father and brother I worked for in a garage at Parramatta about 19, for a short period about 1929, was an excellent fitter and turner. Had served his time at Howard Auto Cultivators, I think, from memory in North Parramatta.

We got this Italian workshop tender and it was the greatest scrounging prize we ever had because it had a lathe, it had a vertical drill, it had all the spanners that were necessary, it even had very high carbon steels in various forms, and many a spare part for motor transport and

many an attachment for aircraft was manufactured by Billy Lee in that workshop. And that was I believe, when I left the squadron it was still our prize possession. I believe they dragged it all the way to Sidi Azeiz. I don't know whether it went to Sicily in Italy, but if it didn't, they threw away a prize piece of equipment.

That's very interesting, Jock. You were explaining before how engines were lifted by basically building a kind of a metal tripod. And I'd asked why planes weren't themselves dug down into the ground to lower the actual body of the plane. I thought that was quite interesting the reason why not.

Well, the reason why not, was very simple if you'd been there. The person's concept of what the desert was, was you know, *Lawrence of Arabia* in the movies, where they'd charge over sandhills and down great sand dunes. That's not what the bloody desert was like. It was hard, rock hard shale, and dust, powder dust. Very much like, in parts, the Nullabor Plains [sic] prior to the main road going through there; dreadful country.

Well, I've been out that way, I know what it's like, hard as hell and certainly you don't want to dig holes in it. You mentioned dust. How great a problem was dust with engines, both in terms of dust getting into the engines when they were actually running, taking off and all the dust being kicked up, not to mention dust storms, and also the somewhat different problem of keeping dust out of engines when you were trying to fix them up?

Well, it was a problem. How we got away with some of the things that we did, it was against all principles of engineering. It was a horror really. One could say that a Curtiss electric clock is a very fine piece of engineering, and it is, small gears in the hub where all the blades are controlled by these small gears, grease being necessary to keep them lubricated.

Grease in the dust storm was just like flies on flypaper. How it didn't, it lessened the useful life of both engines and engines' ancillary pieces to a great degree, but how we didn't have more failures in some of the things that we did and some of the parts that we scrounged and built up

Correct me if I'm wrong, Jock, but I would assume that a bit of dust in the fuel lines of a plane could be disastrous. I mean, a bit of dust in the fuel line of a car and you've got a stuttering engine. Is that correct, or not?

It's just as applicable to an aeroplane as it is to a motorcar.

How did you keep the fuel lines clean?

Well, you had a rag round the end of it, and you didn't connect the fuel lines at all, you never left them open. You tied a lump of rag or stuffed a bit of waste of something in it. Then you had to make doubly certain that you didn't leave any in there. That was one of the great problems. But as I say, how we didn't have more failures, I wouldn't know, but you must realise that an engine didn't last long in desert conditions.

(25.00)How many hours?

Depend how many big dust storms you had and how many times you had to push it through the gate.

Let's say on average.

Oh, I've seen them going back stuffed at 150, 200 hours; as low as that.

Well look, just two final questions on this issue. I'm sure it will crop up in different ways as we go on. What were the hours that you often had to work and did you work at night to get planes serviceable for flights the next morning?

Well, sometimes it was possible to work at night under a tarp, but if you put a light on you drew the crabs. And as mostly the boys were camped down fairly close to the service areas, you only worked at night if it was absolutely, an absolute necessity. I think the hairiest thing that happened to me at all, and when I was more frightened than any other time in the air force, was Gordon Steege came in one night from a dusk patrol in a Gladiator and blew a tyre when he came in. But that aircraft, we were running short of aircraft, and that aircraft had to, just had to get up the next morning. So we had to go out in the dark and jack it up and change a wheel. Of course we didn't change a tyre, we just robbed another unserviceable aircraft and changed a wheel.

But in that time we were right out in the middle of the 'drome, with a light on. And the old Savoias used to come over at night and they all had daisy, what they call daisy cutters, anti-personnel bombs, and they fractured into pieces about, oh, a pound weight of metal, probably about, anything up to about three-eighths of an inch thick with jagged edges and it used to make a horrible mess of planes and people. And the thought of that, I don't care how blasé people get, if they weren't frightened and they had to do that at night with a light, there was something mentally wrong with them. It was not a good job, but if it had to be done, it just had to be done. It wasn't done often I can tell you that because nobody wanted lights.

Just a final question, Jock, how much did personal qualities matter in all this, besides of course the obvious technical competence of people?

Well, people could be technically very competent and yet be not compatible, one to the other. The human relations problem, if it had to be a problem, was determined on a one to one basis. In other words, if you felt happy with a man as an offsider, and you were working on a technical problem, and the other man you couldn't stand the sight of, well, you didn't get on with him at all, and he was technically excellent, of course you would choose the man who was just fairly competent.

That's interesting.

These sort of things were worked out all the time.

Just informally, man to man?

Man to man. It was purely a man to man basis.

One other thing related to that is, were ground crews generally responsible for a particular plane or a particular couple of planes?

In the main, yes. A pilot had his crew and which, if he wanted to live long and he wanted to make life a lot easier for himself he got to know his crew; he became part of the crew.

Yes, I was going to follow on and in fact ask you just that. By and large, I'm looking at the broad spectrum of pilots, did most of them, all of them, or only some of them have that relationship with their crew?

Like all human attitudes, in some men it is different than in others, but we were very fortunate that we had one Peter Jeffrey who almost made it mandatory with new arrivals, new pilot arrivals that

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: Edward Stokes with Jock Thom, 3 Squadron, tape two, side one.

You were saying about Peter Jeffrey and the ground crew.

Well, I'll repeat the thing. We were fortunate for the greatest part of my time there in 3 Squadron having one, Peter Jeffrey, who almost made it mandatory that new arrival pilots must meet and fraternise with their ground crew. This created a great feeling of companionship in the squadron. And my own opinion is that that's why the 3 Squadron operated with such efficiency. There was a personal liaison between ground crew and air crew.

That personal liaison, did it extend beyond the camaraderie of men, pilots, returning and chatting with the ground crew and that sort of thing? Did it extend to going off on excursions, on leave together, that kind of thing as for instance bomber command crews definitely did? Or was it, can you see the distinction I'm trying to get at?

Well, put it this way. Usually officers moved in a circle by reason of the traditions of the British Army, or the British military forces; that officers and men, and other ranks, did not mix very much. But if some of our chappies got into strife on leave and there was an officer in the vicinity, the first place we made for was to inform the officer. And I know of no circumstances where that officer did not make a beeline straight to the area of the disturbance, and try his damndest to get 3 Squadron blokes out of trouble.

I was going to ask later Jock, but perhaps now's the moment. The commanding officers of the squadron, Squadron Leaders McLachlan, Peter Jeffrey and Gibbes, just to take those three. How did they differ? Which was the best?

Well, you look back on the family circle. It would be a rarity if you found all brothers in the one family of a like disposition, and the same with COs of units. Some people, or some persons, fall into a category where they are born leaders.

Who was the born leader in that group? And who wasn't?

No, I wouldn't say that you would say any of them wasn't a born leader. A leader of what? In aircraft combat, we had many and it's well recorded that we had many ace pilots who proved by their deeds that they were men of valour. The rarity occurred when you had a man that could excel in that, he could also excel in leading the squadron in other ways; they are not common, never are, never were. But to fall into a trap, let's call it, of saying that one man was better than the other; one man would be better than the other man in some things. The man that stood out was the man that was good at all of 'em, and that's the born leader.

(5.00) And I think you suggested before, at any rate, that Peter Jeffrey was that man?

Peter Jeffrey in my opinion made 3 Squadron with the help of his other officers. Various other officers didn't rise in my view, and this is a personal view, to the heights that Jeffrey did for the simple reason: their natures were different. Jeffrey had an insight into getting the best possible effort out of anybody he had that came under his command and I will always, not be grateful, I will always honour the man for it. He's a man of exceptional ability. He's a man of exceptional forbearance, but he wasn't an easy one if you got on the wrong side of him.

That's most interesting, Jock, especially that distinction which I'm sure is true between the different, you know, people being brilliant in their different ways and so on. Just to move on now to some other things. December to January '40 the squadron was travelling on towards Tobruk using forward aerodromes vacated by the Italians until you reached Bardia, I think. There was a great cache of equipment along the route as the Italians were swept back: planes, spare equipment, trucks, et cetera. How did that affect your life?

Well, it affected us to the extent that we had equipment both in motor transport, especially in motor transport I would say. And being a mobile squadron that was all important. The squadron could not function unless it had adequate available transport because if the enemy ran you had to catch up with him pretty quick. And if he broke through as Jerry did, when Rommel appeared on the scene, we had to run very quick. You can't do that on foot, not in the desert.

Yes, that's interesting. One of the places, of course, you travelled to and where transport no doubt was critical was your journey down to Giarabub. I just thought I'd ask you about this, simply because this journey, which I think was to restore a plane with a wrecked undercarriage, perhaps typified the kind of life you led. How did that begin? And how did the journey turn out?

Well, that was actually one that happened just at the start and before the start it was, slightly before the start of the Italian campaign or the attack on Sidi Barrani. Giarabub was a fort out from Siwa oasis. The Bren gun section of the 6th Divy was out there and it was an army co-operation exercise that was going on with these very light tanks. When the Gladiator crashed and buckled his undercart, at that time war hadn't really hit us, it became an exciting adventure rather than an episode of war. But we treated things like that a bit more seriously

later on when there was sometimes a lot of danger of getting off the beaten track. You'd get a roving patrol get on you and you were gone.

(10.00) So on this particular occasion getting down there was relatively straightforward.

Fixing an undercart, an undercarriage, out in the middle of nowhere, how easy or hard was that?

Well, things like that were never easy. There was a lot of hard, back breaking work attached to it. But then, we were all young and strong, ambitious, motivated, and that didn't seem to worry us at all.

That's interesting. Well let's move on a little bit. During the advance after that period, Sidi Barrani, Salum, Hellfire Pass, these were some of the places we went through a while ago, east of Tobruk and then Gambuk [sic] just east of Tobruk.

Gambut.

Gambut, just east of Tobruk and then Gazala, G-A-Z-A-L-A, west of Tobruk. During that period the squadron was converting to Hurricanes. What's your recollection of that period? And how much extra stress did it put on the ground staff?

It put stress on everybody. The pilots had learned techniques, and I'm talking as an observer, not as a pilot, and probably I'm talking out of turn. I would think that the type of flying a single-engined monoplane, low wing one-plane would be completely different than a biplane.

Going back to this issue of the conversion to the Hurricanes, Jock. How did it affect the ground staff such as yourself?

The aircraft in itself was completely different. The component parts and style of servicing required was totally different. The only good thing about it is, we who had worked on Demons, had experience in the Rolls Royce Kestrel motor a much under-powered motor compared with that that we found ourselves with in the Hurricane. But basically the training stood us in good stead. Hydraulics are hydraulics. Cables are cables. If you use your brains you can overcome these small problems. But they were a sturdy aircraft. They were an easily serviced aircraft. The only bad thing about 'em was they came down and you had no battery cart, you did not start it again. And that was, as far as desert warfare was concerned, was a highly undesirable feature of the aircraft.

Do you mean in that it was impossible for a pilot to land away from base and start the plane?

Start his motor and then take off again. You could not start it without a battery cart.

I see, whereas planes such as the Kittyhawk, for example, you could.

Yep.

Why did they design a plane in that way?

Well, who would know that? Only Hawker Aircraft, and the Air Ministry England would know that. It certainly wasn't designed for anything other than close field operation where you had many aerodromes within a very short period.

In other words the sort of Battle of Britain situation where if you didn't make it home to base you went to somebody else's.

That's right, somebody else's. But that wasn't good enough for the desert but they were a good aircraft. They were a good aircraft to work on, and they were a serviceable aircraft, they were a sturdy aircraft.

Right. Just one other thing to do with ground work but not particularly Hurricanes. Refuelling planes, I assume that was done by the ground staff. How was that done? Was that pumped in manually, or how?

(15.00) Well at various stages it was the most primitive operation I've ever come across. When we started off first with 208 Squadron petrol supplies came crated in two four-gallon tins to the crate, in a wooden crate. These were poured in, in the main plane, with a funnel. And if you can get anything more crude than that, well, you'd have to get a hold of Wackett's Widgeon or some prehistoric monster like that. No. Then we had pumps and pumped them out of forty-four gallon drums when we got really in the big time.

Then we had a couple of fuel tenders which we had to fill the fuel tender from forty-four gallon drums. And by the time you got onto a pump handle and move it up and down a few times, your arm gets bloody tired. So we built a rack and a pipeline and we put a battery of half a dozen forty-four gallon drums in a row up on their side, get the hoses into the main thing and then pump that, or let it flow, gravity feed it into a, I think it was 2000 gallons was the biggest petrol tanker we ever had. And that doesn't go far if you're servicing twenty-five aircraft.

Mm, I'm sure. One other thing that I in fact meant to ask you before but forgot. How much was heat a problem, not only the heat that obviously could be quite enervating in the desert but the sheer heat of metal in terms of working with metal, for example, the fuselage of a plane during the day?

Well, it was a funny place. I've seen it at four o'clock in the morning with every stitch of clothing that you could carry on you and a couple of blankets, your teeth were chattering. Yet, at twelve o'clock after refuelling an aircraft, sliding down the main plane with just a pair of shorts on, it would burn your backside off. So you had great extremes in short periods of time. But with the food that we had, the rigorous conditions that we lived in, I must say, I came out of the desert after seven months in one spell, hadn't been east of Mersa Matruh, I was as thin as a rake and as fit as a fiddle. And I could run all day. Queer place but the human frame adapts.

I'm sure apart from the extreme heat that kind of desert environment in fact generally is a fairly healthy one.

Well, it's dry. How the old gut put up with all that dust, damned if I know.

What about all that food? How did you put up with that?

Well, the food was adequate to keep you alive, monotonous. I was with, when I went to Giarabub, we were fed, the 6th Punjabis were there and also, of course, the Bren gun carriers from the 6th Divy. Ah, but we were issued with Indian Army rations, with no meat, ah

Was it good food?

Yeah, but tasteless. Oh, horribly monotonous, but you were healthy with it. And those dog biscuits that everybody claims about, they break your jaw and certainly your false teeth. You never die eating them.

Mm. Right, so it was spartan fare.

Oh yes.

But it was quite good to get through on. Well, let's move on with the actual story a little bit, Jock. March/April, these dates are, I think '41, but anyway it was when the Germans had entered the war and there was this very, very rapid retreat, an incredibly rapid retreat; hundreds of kilometres in a matter of days. How did the ground staff cope with that? And what were the particular difficulties thrown onto you because of the speed of the retreat?

(20.00) Well, there again, I think we'll have to turn onto a Peter Jeffrey fan situation. In a desert operation like that it became apparent that two things you had to have: it was extreme mobility, and if you're going to operate aeroplanes you must have a petrol supply. Now, one of the senior warrant officers was detailed by Peter Jeffrey, and this is not known to all the ground staff or all the squadron for that matter, was detailed to get on his motorbike and keep him informed through intelligence and particularly from British MPs, where petrol, what 'dromes, what landing strips, had fuel supplies on it, on the way back. This he policed, I'm told, religiously himself, but we never ran out of fuel. So we never ran out of air cover for ourselves or for the retreating army which we were doing air cover for.

What about moving equipment that, you know, there was obviously a fair deal of equipment, if not as much as you would have liked? How did you manage moving all that back so quickly and so often.

Well, you lived with it, you died without it, so you kept it, simple.

Well, it's simple to say that, but how simple was it to do it?

Bloody hard. Not easy, not easy at all. Sometimes if we were moving rapidly, it meant working and loading well into the night, and taking off long before dawn, and just keep on going to And you never knew, sometimes you never knew at nine o'clock at night where you were going to be the next morning. You could be anything up to 200 kilometres away by the following evening.

I assume the general pattern of the retreat was that at the beginning of a particular day a certain airstrip further back would be targeted as the place to

head to, the planes would fly there independently, perhaps, sorties en route. The ground staff would get themselves there. Is that correct, or not?

That's right. The whole thing fell down with, or depended on, I suppose would be a better way to put it, on availability of hundred octane fuel. This was the We existed on the benefit of the foresight of the commanding officer, and the senior warrant officer he had detailed to get that information to him. I don't think a lot of people in the squadron appreciated that. And I don't think a lot of people knew about it.

You mean the general logistical organisation of ensuring petrol, et cetera?

Well, that was the nature of the man.

Going on a little bit, Jock, I know beyond Benghazi there was very heavy strafing between Tobruk and, of course, you yourself were injured - I'll come to that in a moment. I have been told by another person in the squadron that there was an incident where about twenty 3 Squadron planes were basically trapped in Tobruk, or a little outside of Tobruk, or anyway, in some place around there and really it was a question of abandoning the planes to the Germans or destroying them, and the planes were destroyed. What do you know about that?

First time I've heard about it. I'm astonished.

Yes, well I was rather, too. This was an account that twenty, upwards of twenty planes were destroyed on the ground.

You know, if we'd had twenty planes, we'd have been very lucky. We started off, but to have twenty planes that far back in the retreat, somebody's, let's say, hallucinating.

Right. Let's pass on over that. I want to talk about when you were wounded. This is in the country some distance west of Tobruk, perhaps the precise spot doesn't matter. How did the day begin? What was going on immediately before you were wounded?

(20.00) Well, we were proceeding in convoy along the coast road which was the only road. Strangely enough, away out that far, it was a macadamised road, but it was a road, but it was the only one, so they didn't have very far to look for convoys. So whenever there was some Jerry planes floating around, usually JU-88s or Heinkels, they just come out of the blue somewhere and they started strafing. Occasionally there was a few bombs. If you were trapped on, say, Derna Pass or any of the passes you had nowhere to go. You had a rock wall on one side of you and a ravine on the other, so you crossed your fingers, your legs, your arms, everything, and hoped for the best.

What was actually going on immediately before you were blasted?

Well, there were a couple of Heinkels and a couple of JU88s strafing the road, and of course there was reply ground fire back. And I just got myself tangled up on the rear wheel of a Ford truck and punctured myself very badly and smashed the side of my face in.

Well, let's be a bit clearer about that. By that you mean you were blasted by percussion against the wheel of a truck?

That's right, that's all it was.

Did you realise it was happening? Or was it so fast you never knew?

Well, I knew we were being attacked, we had nowhere to run, and that was, that was all it was about, just one of those things that happened. I was damned lucky to get out of it.

Yes, probably. Let's just look at the moments afterwards. Your left side, at least, of your face was very badly injured and one eye was hanging out. Did you realise how badly you'd been injured, or not?

Oh yes. It caused you some worry, but then your greatest worry was staying alive. It could happen to you a couple of miles along the road again. We were lucky we didn't lose a lot more men, we lost very few. We lost very few transports which was a major thing. Because without trucks, you were gone, you were captured.

So I assume once the planes had cleared off you ...

Got mobile again.

Dragged yourselves back into the vehicles.

Yeah, that's it. No, it was

Had anybody been killed?

Oh yeah, there were a couple further up along the road in one of the trucks, they were scuttled. Ah, now, who was it? One of the Braes was one, I think.

Well, tell us the story from there on, Jock. I know that there was a long, long journey given the state you were in.

Well, we were sent back in an ambulance and, we were to go to Mersa Matruh which was the end of the rail line and get on, there would be a casualty clearing station there, and we When we got there the army was queued up for miles and we were told it would be at least three days before we'd get in and we would be All go down and get dressed, the wounds dressed, all personnel requiring it, down at the casualty clearing station, and get in the queue. So the driver, transport driver who was driving the ambulance, he decided that we wouldn't go there, that we'd go to, probably Heliopolis which was a big British casualty clearing station and hospital outside Cairo.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Jock Thom, 3 Squadron, tape two, side two.

You were telling the story of the ambulance.

Well, then when we got to Heliopolis they had been taking most of the casualty trains, the Red Cross trains, and they had no room for us at all. So we decided then, amongst ourselves, that we'd gone this far, we'd go to No. 2 Australian Field General Hospital on the Canal Zone at Kantara. So we went there and they grabbed us and put us in bed and we were treated very well.

Just going back to one or two other issues of the actual journey there, Jock. Water and food, how easily were they got and could you sleep and rest at all with your face smashed up the way it was? Or was it just an agony of wakefulness?

Oh no, you just dozed while you could. We drove through the night down from Heliopolis, down the ninety-odd kilometres or miles, I think it was miles, down to Kantara, approximately that mileage. Bobby Wilson was the ambulance driver.

There must surely have been a real possibility that you'd lose the sight in your left eye. Did you think about that at all?

Well, yes, but you know, you'd develop a fatal outlook in these times that if you're alive, well, good and well, you're better than the bloke that's buried in a thing up the road. So with that sort of crazy philosophy you managed to put up with these things.

Perhaps, not so crazy. Let's go on to the period in the hospital. I think you were about one and half months. Could you tell us which the hospital was? I think that's interesting. And also what you think, looking back on it, of the treatment you received. I don't mean in terms of judging the people but how well set up were they to be able to deliver the sort of treatment you needed?

Oh, they were a tremendous set up. While I was there, the evacuees from Greece and Crete arrived. Through this time I had been operated on and was on the point of recovery. The ward I was in was directly over the main surgical ward and the doctors there operated after the first hospital ship came in, which was mainly 6th Divy people. I think somewhere, Dr King told me - he was the doctor who did my hernia and patched the old groin up - he told me that he had been operating continuously for thirty hours.

That's remarkable. I think you were saying before that a Captain Rank, an Australian, later Sir John Rank, was the doctor who was involved in the reconstruction of your face.

(5.00) Yes, well, I was very lucky. John Rank was a captain at the time and had just come from the RAAF, or the RAF Burns Unit in England, and he set out about straightening my face up and sewing it together again. And I was lucky to have the, that man's expertise available to me. Had I been a month before he wouldn't have been there. Then it might have been somebody else, who knows? But he was afterwards knighted for his contribution to plastic surgery.

Could I just add, perhaps ask, perhaps one final question? Your face, as it is now, Jock, is so well rebuilt and unless one looked closely one would hardly know. I certainly had no idea that you'd been wounded in the face, for example, when I came today. Did you later have other plastic surgery?

No.

Or was it all done in the field?

All done in the field. It was all done at Kantara.

So they really were doing quite, I mean, a very advanced type of work.

Oh yes. Oh, well, the doctor eventually his abilities were recognised and that's why he was knighted, and deservedly so.

While you were in the hospital, I'd assume there were men there who were much worse off than you were? How did men cope with the knowledge of living out their lives with totally disfiguring injuries?

Well, the burns unit was the worst which was in, of course, plastic unit. I happened to be in there. I would have been about the least serious injured one in the plastic unit. There were those who were burned, particularly air force personnel who were badly burned, and they had a delightful joke amongst themselves. Most burns at that time, the method was to encase them in plaster and after they'd been in there for quite a while their stink, stench, was, for those that came in out of this thing and did it first were nauseating. For two reasons: encasing it in plaster caused the proud flesh and all that got there and they used to seed them with maggots. And their pet maggot would come up and they'd have a look at him and put him back down again, and make a joke about him.

And, oh well, when I first got that in the first couple of days when I was able to take a bit of notice, I thought that's dreadful. But the whole business was that when they took the plaster off there was white skin underneath it and no gangrenous effects. The maggots ate the proud flesh, and that's what the maggots were for.

I have actually heard that from doing some work with medical people, interviewing them. The thing I could never quite get over was just how, I mean, the unbearable itching the maggots must have created.

Oh yes.

Oh well, let's move on. I think that's probably enough on that, except could I just check, I'm not sure if we did get it before, the actual unit number of the hospital?

Yes, the 2/2nd AGH.

Right, thanks. Well, it was after that you rejoined the unit, this is about April '41.

Yes.

I think you said without any leave in between. Was that on your choice or orders?

No, I was just posted from the hospital back to the unit.

Right. And I think you rejoined them shortly they went off into Syria, or in fact shortly before the move to Lydda. At Lydda the squadron was re-equipped with Tomahawks and I understand from pilots this was quite a difficult conversion in that it was a much, much more highly powered plane and so on. Quite a lot of prangs involved in the conversion. What about the conversion from your point of view of working on the planes and did you have a great deal of work because of the ...?

No, they were a very, they were a very easy plane to maintain. For maintenance purposes most components were accessible, the engine bay was not as cluttered up as, say the Spitfire. It was a bigger plane than the Spitfire, a heavier plane, more robust plane, but not as manoeuvrable a plane. But, it was years later when I was at Test Flight in Richmond that I had become in contact with Spitfires, both Mark Vs and Mark VIIIs.

(10.00) What about all the pranging that I understand from pilots did go on during the conversion? That must surely have put a great workload on the ground staff?

Oh yes. It did put a bit of a workload on them but the thing that upset the ground staff more than that was the injuries to the pilots and the loss of life of the pilots. No, I would not be competent to say specifically why they, there were so many prangs, because I can't relate that back to what happened with the Kittyhawks that years later I had a lot to do with when I was posted to Test Flight at Richmond.

I think the way it's been told to me, perhaps, just to get an opinion on this, was that the jump from Hurricanes to Tomahawks was a jump from relatively lowly powered planes into very highly powered planes with a very high nose and so on. And that was what caused the problems.

Well, as I say that's why I'm not competent to comment on that with any, any authority, that's out of my field. The pilots would have to answer that, more than anything else. But one thing I am sure, the aircraft itself I don't think there was very much wrong with it because it survived, it survived The same basic design survived right through almost till we were re-equipped with Mustangs towards the end of the war and that was, I'm talking about '45.

That's very interesting, Jock. Well, let's move on a little bit and perhaps we'll have to keep things fairly brief now because the tape's running on a little bit. After the re-equipment with Tomahawks, of course, the squadron went up into the Syrian campaign. Perhaps without going into the precise details of that, what's your general recollection of those few months?

Well, we were operating in a totally different type of country, in a populated area where the only We were in the desert, you only saw the nomadic Arab occasionally. Dry and dirty,

arid, dusty, windswept place to a highly agricultural, high agricultural areas except for some areas of the Homs Valley when we came down from Damascus.

So did this make life easier or harder for you?

Easier. Well, you were living in buildings then. They didn't give us feather pillows or the niceties but you at least had a roof over your head and you were dry and you could keep yourself warm.

I assume water was quite a bit more plentiful?

Oh yes, there was no, little restriction in it, not in Palestine, not in Northern Palestine nor in Lebanon. 'Cause we eventually ended up at Rayak. I think this little incident at Rayak might, or two incidents really that happened at Rayak which was a big 'drome outside Beirut. It was, normally it was a French top-line air base. We saw the Maraine fighters which was the French equivalent of the Spitfire, Hurricane type of fellows, low wing, one-plane, which was a very good craft, very well made, manoeuvrable and speedy. But then they There we had on the outskirts of the 'drome, Ceylonese regiment from Africa who caused a bit of problems.

(15.00)Did you say Ceylonese?

Yes.

From Africa. Do you mean they'd been through Africa or ...?

Singhalese, I should say.

From Ceylon?

No, no. I mispronounced it. Not Ceylonese, Singhalese. They're a very ebony black Negro, I think they're negroid.

Ah, is this from Senegal?

Yeah.

Oh, right. From ...

Africa.

Senegalese.

And they were prone to cause a bit of trouble, but we had a General Dence[?] who was the commander of the French forces. And it was a funny situation, they signed an armistice so, they were like the Vichy French, De Gaulle wouldn't have anything to do with them, there was friction there. But this General Dence[?] had a big Farnham aircraft, unusual type of aircraft. I've got a few photographs of it.

How did this affect your life, Jock?

Well, they had a big hangar there and this general had his own private aircraft in it. Well, that proved a bit too much for 3 Squadron personnel. They thought, they reckoned they had a better right to it than he did, so there was an upheaval, there'd been looting of the plane. So Peter Jeffrey got out in the morning, read us all a great lecture and said, 'There'd be no leave to Beirut unless all the gear was put back again. These were now our friends not our bloody enemies.'

And I think his name was Black, an RAF grouper, I think he was, or air commodore. He didn't see any humour in this stripping the general's plane so Peter said, 'Well, there'll be no action taken, disciplinary action taken if all the parts are then by stand-down tonight', which was half-past four. We had joined the union by then. We were on at stand-down time.

I went over there and there's a troop of people coming back with gauges and bits of this and bits of that and putting the pile down. So I raced back and I got my camera and I got back just in time to see one of our officers carrying the radio set from the plane in both arms, it was quite a big thing, but the general's lavatory seat with his head sticking through the middle of it was the only way he could carry it, and carry both at the one time. It looked comical, in fact it was bloody funny, it wasn't just comical.

So I took a photograph of it and I had this until one ANZAC Day somebody thought they had a better right to it than me so some of our friends in 3 Squadron got a photograph of this officer. I'm sure he'd be most embarrassed now if he saw himself staggering into that hangar with, in the lavatory seat framed around his head and carrying a radio set. But that was the strong of it.

Right, well, perhaps pinching the photo was in keeping with the original story.

And the other one was that there were a few in 3 Squadron in Beirut and the same unfortunate general, or his adjutant, had a big Ford, no, Lincoln, V8 car, station wagon, no, it was a car, that one. So ...

Jock, can I just perhaps interpose here a bit because I know this tape is running out. There are just some things I feel perhaps we could go on with.

So we pinched Peter Jeffrey, we pinched the car for Peter Jeffrey and gave it to him.

Right. And was that appreciated?

Yeah. And what's more we smuggled it through the lines when we went back up the desert and they had use of that car for I believe two years.

Mm, that's lovely. After the period in Syria there was the second push into Libya and so on, and you stayed with 3 Squadron, I think, until reaching Gambut. Is that how it's pronounced?

(20.00) Yes, Gambut.

And then Gambut. And then back to Australia. That period just up to Gambut, just in not too much detail, what would your main recollection be?

Well, we were starting to get a bit of equipment. We were starting to win on merits and not win by default and I think that could best be classified as the Italian resistance, we were winning by default. We were winning because we were a superior military force but then that was short-lived. They didn't let us get too much further than where I left them and then they gave us another hiding and chased us all the way back to El Alamein but that's not for me to comment on because I wasn't there.

Yes, that's right. One other thing I did want to just put on the record. While you were, or towards the Syrian campaign you been promoted to corporal. I understand there was some, if not resentment, at least disquiet on the part of some Australians that promotions were very slow to come through. Do you recall that attitude, or not?

Oh yes, there was in a way because you'd get letters from people in the services whom you knew and when you went away they were AC1s or LACs and the next thing you were sending letters, replies, back to them in the sergeants' mess and that, we couldn't quite see the humour in that.

No. Do you think, did people feel that in the Middle East they were unappreciated? Or was it simply that because the chain of command was rather scattered and loose that those things didn't get dealt with as efficiently as they might have been?

Well, in some respects they didn't make such a wonderful job of managing affairs between Sydney and Melbourne. And I don't think their expertise was up to managing it between Canberra and Cairo, and in that light I think you've got, the answer to that is in that area.

Sure. Well, let's go on to the shift back to Australia. The news came that you were to come back. Of course, by this stage the Japanese are in the war.

No, not quite. They were just coming into the war, then they were, well, they were in the war but they hadn't, at least, taken Singapore by that time.

Right, but it was after Pearl Harbour.

Oh yes.

I mean they were, war had been declared.

War had been declared.

How anxious were Australian men, perhaps yourself, following the Japanese declaration of war to get back to Australia? Or did people feel they were doing just as important a job in the Middle East?

Well, no. I think, and I can only speak for myself. I felt my place was in Australia. Because my number one priorities was Australia, though I was born overseas. Our anxiety, or my own anxiety, was when we got to Singapore the Japs were starting to land, or they knew they were going to land. There were units at Singapore which, we had a few Hudsons there and a few

Brewster Buffaloes, useless damn things. And we had enough military knowledge to know that they weren't going to be very useful, and events proved us right.

Of course, you did actually get back to Australia, Jock and ...

Well, we got shovelled from the *Marnix van St Aldegonde* which was a Dutch liner, pre-war was on the Batavia-Amsterdam run, and we were shipped onto the *Largs Bay*. Now, if we were a bit crowded on the *Dilwara* we were overcrowded on the *Largs Bay* and by that time the Jap had a few, and the Jerrys had a few, armed sea, merchant seamen in the Indian Ocean. We raced hell for leather to get through the Sunda Straits out of Indonesia and into the Indian Ocean. And then that was when the *Sydney* was sunk. Well panic reigned supreme, and we went due east for four days and we were expecting to see Mozambique any tick of the clock.

(25.00) Due east?

Due west. And then we went due south and after about five or six days steaming due south, we were down near the South Pole somewhere and you had everything with you in the daytime up on deck because there was no room for you down below, blankets and all, huddled round. And then we, due east we turned then, and then due north. We hadn't seen a boat, we hadn't seen, we were unescorted.

So where did you finally reach Australia?

And we saw, Wilson's Promontory was the first view of Australia we saw and the cruiser, what was it? *Hobart*, the *Hobart* met us off, and, no it wasn't the *Waterhen*, I forget now, there was a destroyer there, too, met us there.

Jock, can I please move on because there's very little on the tape. Coming back to Australia must have been quite emotional and wonderful, I'd imagine. Of course, just for the record, you were a sergeant, promoted when you were at 2AD, I think, Richmond.

Yeah.

And then you went to 6 Squadron at Richmond and from there you went up with No. 6 into the islands.

To Horn Island and then in Milne Bay, yeah.

We'll have to skate over that, but that's there now on the record. Could I just ask you? When it was all over, when first of all war ended in Europe and then later, of course, in the Pacific, how did it all seem, looking back? What did you think?

When, immediately pre-war, post-war, like every other person, we'd had a gut-full of war. Then in latter years, or in later years, say, twenty-five years ago, the realisation came that what we'd been through was all so bloody useless, both our enemies were our economic superiors. I haven't quite adjusted to that thing yet.

Yes, it must be difficult, though, as you yourself said, at the time in the second world war there was a clear moral purpose for defeating both Hitler's Nazism and Japanese militarism.

Yep.

One final thing I'd like to ask, which I say to anybody is, having heard that story of your war service and so on, having put it down yourself, is there anything you'd like to add that you feel isn't on the record and you would like to be?

Not really. Probably this is the first time that I have spoken at length on this subject. I'm very proud of my service. I never wear medals.

Do you go to ANZAC Day?

I go march on every ANZAC Day. I still haven't come to grips with why they could find the money to resurrect the enemies and not us. And having been born in Britain, I can well understand the socialistic attitude of a lot of Britons who were stripped of almost everything and got no real rehabilitation finance to rehabilitate themselves.

Yes, of course, Britain's position after the war was totally different to Australia's.

That's right. And there's a lot of things about the war I often wonder about. Some people have asked me before, do you think it was all worthwhile? And I've got mixed feelings on that. No mixed feelings that I'm under any apprehension about Nazism had to be exterminated, Japanese ...

END OF INTERVIEW