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# TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Reg Stevens of 3 Squadron on 5 July 1990.

I think you were saying you finished school, or got to the Intermediate level but didn't in fact do the Intermediate.

Didn't like school so I didn't do the Intermediate.

Right. I think actually you loathed school.

On occasions.

You were saying that after that you worked, I think, quantity surveying for a builder in the years after leaving school. Just a few questions about that period. Were you particularly conscious as a boy, as a young man, of the general story of Australians in the first war, the ANZAC tradition, or not?

Oh yes. I was quite conversant. I had an uncle who was in the first war and I was quite conscious of it. But I don't think it ever came home to me until I was rather more adult.

And what about the - I know this was when you were later in PNG - the political developments in Europe in the later 1930s, the rise of Hitler to power and so on, did you see the omens of war, or not? Did you talk about it with your mates?

Yes, we were very, very conscious of it, mainly a fear of the Japanese, or, not exactly a fear of the Japanese, but we did see a great number of their fishing boats, or so-called fishing boats, that were absolutely festooned in electronics and whatnots. The European war, that was the major one that we were concerned with, and it was then that I thought, well, should there be anything come of these wars and Hitler and his Germany, that perhaps we'd have to participate in it.

And I think in fact you were in the Militia as a young man?

Yes. When I was under eighteen I put my age up and joined the artillery - horse-drawn artillery.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit Reg, I know at age nineteen you went up to Papua New Guinea and worked there in a trading company, later in the administration. I think when 11 Squadron arrived there you became quite interested, or perhaps had been always, in the air force.

When 11 Squadron came up there, I was fortunate in meeting the adjutant who was a great friend of mine, a Gordon Steege, who was also at school with me. And, of course, I became quite interested in their Walrus aircraft. But prior to that I'd flown in the *Guba*, which was the Archbold expedition aircraft, and perhaps that whetted my appetite for future work.

Right. We should put down for the record too that you were married in 1938 and your wife's still here today. Did you ever talk about flying and the possibility of flying together, or not?

No, I don't think so. Did we, dear?

(Mrs Stevens) No, no. You never said anything at all. It was a shock. When war was declared he said to me, 'I'm going to fly Spitfires'. Irrespective of a six months' old baby, it didn't occur to him.

Right, yes. Well, war was declared late 1939. What was your first thought when war was declared? Do you remember the date?

I certainly remember it and I remember Bob Menzies mentioning that we were now at war with Germany and the first thought that went through my mind was: well, I have more to lose being married and with one child and under those circumstances I felt that it was an absolute duty to go and join the war.

Right. Well, I know you were called up in mid-40. Your wife left PNG for Australia about mid-40. You, yourself left September '40 and November '40 you were at Bradfield, initial training. What's your first recollection of the air force?

Well, what do you mean? Do you mean the air force or do you mean the actual initial training?

Yes, there's a difference, isn't there? Yes, I should have said what was Bradfield like?

Bradfield was not terribly good, and especially when I hadn't cleaned my shoes for a number of years having had natives to do it, and then to have to turn around, make my bed, clean my boots, clean my shoes; I wasn't terribly impressed.

(5.00) That general discipline, parade-ground bashing and the rest of it, do you think that carried over into in-air discipline or was it just .... Or are they totally different things?

Oh, I do think that it's carried over and not only into the air discipline but also into my .... Even today I feel that that discipline was something that has carried me through a tremendous amount of worries and has given me more confidence than perhaps I've ever had before.

We were just talking about the harsher aspects of service discipline. You had a Sergeant ...?

Sergeant 'Bully' and he was a .... Well, he wasn't a particularly fine fellow. No great friend of mine. On one occasion he asked for three volunteers in the normal manner of you, you and you and said, 'Okay, you'll clean out the latrines', to which I said, 'I'd come down from New Guinea and I was not going to clean out latrines'. At any rate I finally did clean out latrines and perhaps I enjoyed doing it.

Well, moving on a little bit, Reg. From Bradfield you went to Mascot elementary flying training on Tigers. So you're up in the air at last, flying. Did flying live up to your hopes, or not?

Oh yes, very much so. But I still looked on it as a means to an end and not as an enjoyment.

Right. So you're not saying then that you were the kind .... I mean, some pilots swore that flying in itself was a great love and a thing worthwhile in itself.

No, definitely not.

So the means was to the end of fighting?

That's all.

Right. Going on to Wagga where you did your service flying training, I think this was Wirraways, what's your recollection of the courses that you did there, and what were the main subjects you studied besides actually flying Wirraways?

Well, I'll always remember the people who were scrubbed from flying. And on arrival at Wagga we were met by these dissidents who said, 'Oh, you'll never fly those Wirraways. They're dangerous', and this, that and the other thing. But we found and I found that they were quite an easy aeroplane to fly and very, very comfortable. As far as the exercises, apart from the actual flying, we had lots of navigation, map reading, and the likes. Mainly I suppose to give us a grounding on our cross-country flights.

Right. Was there ever any study of tactics - fighting tactics?

The study of which?

Tactics?

Ah, no, not at that stage.

Right. What are the other chief recollections of that period at Wagga, Reg?

I found there was a very, very delightful station. The CO was now Sir Frederick Scherger (deceased), and he kept a very, very .... Ran a very, very good station. The food was extremely good and ever so much better than that at Mascot, which also was very good.

Mmm. Of course you would have been one of the few men training at least who were married, did that set you apart at all from your other fellow course members?

No, not a bit, Ed.

Right. Well, I guess, in fact, they weren't really very much older than you. You were married fairly young and probably much of an age with the other pilots?

I'd say there were very few people older than myself, but generally around the same age.

Well, the quality of the training, just to finish with: if you had to rate your training up to this period - good, mediocre, very good, poor - how would you rate it?

Oh, the training was absolutely excellent - splendid.

Well, moving on. You were posted to England and left on 10th August '41. That departure from Australia, especially being a married man, must have been bittersweet I'd imagine. How do you recall all that?

It was with very mixed emotions that we sailed on the *Awatea*. I knew that I was leaving a wife and a child, but I think she realised that that was very much in my make-up, and that I wanted to be part of it.

Part of the war effort?

Yes.

(Mrs Stevens) And his brother had sailed a week before to Malaysia [sic].

Right. Yes. This is just for the record too. This was one of your other brothers going to Malaya, Reg?

(10.00) Yes. Clarrie sailed for Malaysia [sic] with 6 Div - 8 Div, I beg pardon.

Right. And he was the brother who did, or didn't, come back?

No. He died in a POW camp at Sandakan.

Right. And Reg was saying his other brother came back, an ex-POW, but much reduced.

Yes. Jim, who was the eldest son, the eldest boy, he came back five stone one out of the Japanese POW camp.

Right. Well, let's move on. You crossed the Pacific I know to Vancouver and then across Canada to Halifax. I think at Halifax you .... There was something of a disagreement about the ship you were about to embark on?

Well, it was the filthiest ship, this was the *Empress of Asia*, and it was absolutely filthy as it had just transported some thousands of Italian prisoners of war from the desert and they were a notoriously dirty mob. And we refused, point blank, to sail on the ship. And later on the air officer commanding the Canadian air force came down from Ottawa and saw that the ship was cleaned up in a sense prior to our embarking, which we did, and finally after I think it

was thirteen days' sailing we reached Liverpool after being north of Iceland and God knows where.

> You were sailing, I think you said, as a lone ship. The Atlantic was a dangerous place. What tensions were there on board? Were you involved at all in the observation and so on to defend the ship?

No, not exactly, Ed. The main thing that I found - I spent most of my time on deck even though it was bitterly cold - and the main thing there was to dodge sea-sick Canadian soldiers who were lying and sprawled all over the deck, and, oh, pretty terrible conditions.

> Well, Bournemouth in England, I know you did have some leave, and you were then posted down to 61 OTU, which was from a period October through to mid-December 1941. I think this was for a conversion course to Spitfires?

That's right, Ed. This was the culmination of, what, nearly twelve months of wanting to fly these little toys and the conversion to them was particularly good. Unfortunately, I pranged one of them, a Spit 2, having run out of gas. My fault entirely and I took full blame for it.

> Could I just pause for a moment. Let's just pursue that story for a moment. I'd imagine navigation was quite tricky. Had you become lost and couldn't get back, or what?

Well, I knew that I was somewhere over England but I really wasn't certain exactly where it was because I'd been low flying, unauthorised low flying, and apparently the winds had swept me out and I didn't know where I was actually. So I put down on the first little place that I could find which was a place called Dagenham Park.

> And that was a wheels-down landing?

No, that was a wheels-up landing! The CO of the squadron of the 61 OTU, he wasn't very, very happy with it either.

> Right. That must have been very difficult that sort of, I mean, familiarisation with the plane. Could you tell us in a little more detail the kinds of steps one went through in that kind of conversion to a new aircraft?

Well, we initially started off by flying a Miles Magister which is a very, very light aeroplane. From there we converted onto a Master Inline and then to a Master Radial. Did a few hours in those and then we were to set off solo in the Spitties.

> The first solo flight in a plane as lively as a Spitfire, could you recall that now? Was it a flight of excitement or of trepidation?

I think mainly of excitement, Ed, in that in those early Spits we had to pump the wheels up and I can imagine what it looked like just leapfrogging across the strip itself, although it wasn't a strip, it was an aerodrome. And I was very, very thankful when it was in the air and I had the wheels safely pumped up.

> Right. Reg, the Spitfire itself as a plane, what's your memory of the plane?

The Spit 2, it was a delightful little aeroplane but it had fabric ailerons and it was fairly heavy on those ailerons. It was not until the Spit 5 came out with the duralumin ailerons that they became the little pet that everyone loved to fly so very, very much.

> Mmm. That's interesting. I think you were suggesting before that some people who'd flown Spits later found Kittyhawks difficult, and there was a little bit of tension, I think you were saying with Bobby Gibbes there?

(10.00) Nothing really difficult about flying a Kittyhawk but what Gibbie was cranky about, and I go along with it, was that so many of the boys who had flown Spitfires in England came out and said, 'Oh, my God, we're not going to trundle those German tank-type things around', and of course Gibbie got up no good about it. But fortunately I kept my trap shut and that's why I got on well with Bob.

> Right. Well, just for the record too, I think it's interesting, we worked out before that on Spitfires you flew, I think, thirty-seven hours and at the end of that OTU you had a total of 193 hours. Looking back in your estimation now, 193 hours, was that more than sufficient or not enough to fit a man to fly in combat?

Definitely not enough. I'd say that .... I didn't start to learn to fly until I had over 1,000 hours and to send some of the young boys into combat at anything under 500 hours is purely and simply murder to them.

> Right. Mid-December 1941, in fact the 24th, you were posted to 451 Squadron, an Australian Spitfire squadron on the Isle of Man. I think it was a very cold winter. What's your recollection of that?

Cold, yeah, I think it was cold. It really was cold. For ten days on one occasion we were snowed in, nothing to do and, of course, the CO thought we'd get some exercise by getting us to shovel snow off the runways. He drove past in his car and I think we half-filled the car up with snow. So that was the finish of clearing runways.

> Well, obviously coming from PNG, the cold must have struck you. Your first Christmas overseas though, what's your recollection of that?

It was quite a pleasant one. We had sufficient to eat and sufficient to drink. The Isle of Man or the Manxmen, they turned out a very, very nice bottle of beer, Castlemaine Blue I think the name was, and the food was quite good. But there wasn't very, very much of it, even though a number of our boys used to skip across to Ireland and bring back hams and eggs, so there was really no shortage and it was quite all right.

> Did you have much contact incidentally at this time with your wife back in Australia? How regularly were letters able to pass to and fro?

I used to write pretty regularly, Ed, but some I'd send by sea mail and some by airmail and later on, when I came home, I found that on a lot of occasions the sea mail arrived before the airmail. But there were also a lot of letters that just did not get through, and on looking back

now it's quite understandable with all the sinkings that went on between England and Australia.

> Yes, certainly. Turning to the work of 451 Squadron, what were the most common kinds of operations during your time, your few months with the squadron?

Generally, convoy patrols and exercises. Different manners of flying, whether it was to be in fluid pairs or fluid fours. They were extremely good with their training, additional training over there and I've got nothing but admiration for them.

> Tell us about a typical convoy patrol?

Oh, just, it's rather a dreary business of purely flying around and around these infernal convoys. Fortunately we weren't attacked by any 109s or even the Focke-Wulf 190s, we didn't even see them in those days, but most dreary and I was pleased to get back on the ground again.

> Right. How long would a typical operation have lasted?

With long-range tanks, about two hours.

> Well, I know it was while you were at, or with 451, Reg, that you had a major prang. I think it began with a tyre blowing out. Tell us about that, about how the incident stays in your memory?

Oh, I'll always remember it because I've still got a damn sore back from it. But just coming in I made a normal approach and landing, and halfway along the runway the starboard tyre blew out, and she slewed over to the right off the runway itself into mud. And of course she catapulted straight over. Well, I smacked my head very, very hard - I was sitting high in the cockpit so that I could look over the long nose of the Spittie - and I just couldn't move, couldn't get out. Any rate the fire bods came out and I can recall quite well them lifting the tail, two of the ground staff boys lifting the tail and someone leant into the cockpit, pulled the pins from my Sutton harness and I fell about another two feet on my head. The next I remember is waking up in hospital, where I think I was x-rayed and I was stuck in there for a week.

(20.00) Just undergoing general recuperation?

That and doing tests and whatnot. But I came out of it quite all right.

> Mmm. Those moments or minutes in the plane before you were dragged out, what was going through your head?

I could hear the ticking of the identification 'Friend or Foe', the IFF and the second thing was the infernal petrol might go up. That was all.

> Right. Well, we've had a look at a photograph of that upside-down plane before. It was obviously a lucky escape. After that, how easy was it to get back up into the air again?

No problems, Ed. No problems at all.

> Right. February 1942. Of course Japan by now was in the war. In this scrapbook of yours, Reg, there's the .... This is a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, February 16th, '42, Australian pilots of a Spitfire squadron recently cabled the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, 'We demand to be recalled to defend Australia'. What's your recollection of that feeling?

Mmm. We were all very, very much in favour of returning to Australia to defend our own country - that's after the Nips came in - but at the particular time to Mr Churchill - Winston Churchill - was debating in the House of Commons whether or not the WAFs should wear blue underwear, or whether they should wear black underwear rather disgusted us and as a squadron, as an Australian squadron, our thoughts immediately turned to home. And we thought, well, John Curtin's the only person who can do any good for us.

> Right. Hence the cable. What was the response to it?

None. Absolutely none. Although later on in, later in the year I think it was, the squadron was sent home with Spitfires, or as they were called then Capstans. They were sent up to Darwin where most of them - a lot of my good friends - were shot down and killed.

> Mmm. Was there any move on the part of the pilots who sent that cable to follow it up in any way?

That I don't know, Ed, because I was posted out to the Middle East very shortly after that happened.

> Right. Well, let's move onto that. I know it was February 15th, '42 you were posted. I think the climate was a fairly major part of your request to leave?

Well, having lived in Papua New Guinea for so many years perhaps my blood was fairly thin, either that or it was an extremely cold winter. Any rate it didn't suit me. I didn't like the climate and when the opportunity came I made application for the Middle East and it was granted. And I was posted out without, via West Africa by ship.

> We might just interject here. There's a rather nice note from your ... I think your logbook. This is a quote, 'Posted to the Middle East, what-o the warmer climate'. That seems to sum it all up.

Certainly does, Ed.

> Well, the journey to the Middle East was something of a roundabout route. Just tell us the general details of that journey, Reg?

Well, we went from Greenwich up in the Clyde in the armed merchant cruiser *El Qantara*. Went as far as Freetown in that where we transhipped then to a small wooden ship called the *New Northland*. The *New Northland* had been trading and been sailing on the Great Lakes, and whilst it was reasonably comfortable it wasn't a ship to travel the oceans in, in my opinion.

> Mmm. It seems a long way from the Great Lakes to the west of Africa. I hope their navigation hadn't gone wrong. Anyway it was aboard that ship that you got pushed on to Lagos. I think from there you were taken by Pan American?

Pan Am flew us then right across Africa to Cairo. It took us about five days. I must say that it was very comfortable as a passenger on these DC3 and the Americans did, when we landed at night-time, they looked after us extremely well. There was always plenty of food and plenty of drink and good company.

> Right. Well, the Middle East, which is the main focus of the story, or your story with No. 3. I think you first went to a training flight which was attached to 239 Wing?

Yes, 239 Wing had this training flight so that we became virtually a pool for the whole of the wing, not only 3 Squadron.

(25.00) And this was basically, I think, for conversion to Kittyhawks?

Yes. We converted firstly by flying the Harvard, which was very similar to the Wirraway, and then into the Kittys, and we had absolutely no trouble flying the Kittys. They were pretty heavy to fly and perhaps landed a wee bit faster than the Spits, but they were a good aeroplane and I have nothing against them.

> I was just going to ask you, Reg, a little bit more about the Kittys, perhaps, because it was the plane you spent your No. 3 time in at least. What's your recollection of the best and the worst points of the Kitty as an aircraft - as a fighting aircraft?

One very good point is that they had 6.5 machine-guns firing forward. The airframe itself could take a tremendous amount of punishment and still keep flying. Unfortunately, if you lost your 'donk' [the engine] they had the gliding angle of a brick and it was rather difficult to put down under those circumstances. Still a very, very good aeroplane.

> What about taking off and climbing? How did they compare with other aircraft of their kind?

Oh, very, very slow take-off; very, very slow climb. Oh, not so bad I suppose after about 10-12,000, but over that the Kitty-1s were struggling to hit the 25,000 feet.

> Landing I know for some pilots at least was something of a problem, or something at least you'd come used to with Kittys, the two or three-point landing and so on. What's your memory of that?

Well, it was suggested that we wheel them in but there again, even doing a three-pointer, it didn't worry us at all, and the Kitty was such a heavy aeroplane that you three-pointed and it sat down. Once it was on the deck, it stayed.

> They did of course have a very long nose coming up over the engine. What difficulties did that pose for taking off?

I don't think their motor was, or the length of the nose was any greater than that of the Spitfire and, of course, we could sit pretty high in the cockpit and look, virtually look over the nose. But, usually on take-off and landing, you kept your head out of the office on the left-hand side.

> Right. And you were therefore looking down along the ford, along the fuselage?

Along the fuselage but also kept a pretty close eye on the deck.

> Right. The conversion to Kittyhawks, besides actually hands-on flying of the aircraft, were there any other aspects to your training at that stage, that you recall?

As far as the Kittys were concerned? No, we did a tremendous amount of flying in that conversion time, and the instructors we had there were chaps who had come down from 3 or 112 Squadron who had had a lot of combat experience and of course they passed it gladly, passed it on to us. And I think most of us absorbed all that we possibly could.

> Was there much talk or specific training to do with tactics, the tactics of aerial combat and so on, or not?

Yes. Generally the squadron flew two sections of six a piece and, of course, the training wing, they coached us very, very much in that. It was different formations to those we'd flown in England, but it was a very, very good, I think a very, very good defensive rather than offensive formation. And the fluid sixes could be easily split up into fluid pairs.

> Right. Let's just pause for a moment.

END TAPE ONE - SIDE A

BEING TAPE ONE - SIDE B

> Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Reg Stevens, No. 3 Squadron. Tape one, side two.
>
> Reg, I think it's interesting that you had an interview with Bobby Gibbes during this period. Tell us about that?

Yes. When we were doing this conversion course, Gibbie came up in what we call the 'glasshouse'. It was a station wagon that they'd stolen from the Free French I think it was, and Gibbie was in the back. And he had - I'm not sure whether it was his left or his right ankle - was in plaster, and he said at the time, 'Would you like to join 3 Squadron?'. And I said, 'My very word'. I said, 'My very word I want to', I said, 'That's virtually why I came up here', and he had a look at my log book and he said, 'Oh, I notice that you're below average in your air gunnery', and I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'So was I so you'll do well in the squadron'.

Right. That's interesting in fact because it was at this time I think that Nicky Barr was CO. Bobby Gibbes had been injured so he was doing a bit of kind of behind-the-scene scouting for his old squadron it would seem.

Gibbie couldn't keep away from the squadron, that was his complete life. But he did help Nick very, very much when Nicky took over temporarily.

Right. And there was obviously a great shortage of pilots. I know Nicky was speaking about the other day. Well, just to sum up that training, we might just put down it was from 27th May to 6th June '42, and I think the record was ten hours forty-five minutes in Kittyhawks. How adequate was that in retrospect to prepare you for what you had to do with Kittyhawks in combat?

Well, of course, you don't start to learn to fly until you've done over a thousand hours. But at that particular time we'd have taken on the whole Luftwaffe; it didn't worry us. I think we were perhaps a little over-confident or more than a little over-confident - very, very cocky - but we were ready for it.

Right. Well, let's go onto actually joining the squadron. It was at Gambut and 7th June, '42 is the date. Nicky Barr of course is the squadron leader, having taken over from Bobby Gibbes. What was your first impression of the men of the squadron when you arrived there?

Mmm. It was an opinion that I've never changed: they were a very, very grand lot of boys. Not very, very much experienced as far as air combat and flying was concerned but it was more than made up by their enthusiasm and their respect for both Bobby and Nicky Barr.

Mmm. Right. So there was a real bond towards those leaders.

That bond, oddly enough, Ed, has still gone on. Even today the bond is becoming even greater in my opinion.

Right. Well, this period of June, or basically of June '42 was when the squadron was forced into a very rapid retreat, numerous short operations, often more than one a day. What kinds of operations were you involved in?

Generally we were bombing and strafing with quite a number of aerial combats against 109s and 202s. On one occasion I recall we took off from Gambut, Sat 1, I think it was, and we no sooner had our wheels up than infernal German tanks started firing at us. We didn't land back on our own strip. While we were having a go at those tanks the whole of the squadron, the whole of the wing actually was moving back and moving back very fast. So we caught up and past them and landed on one of the airstrips east of Gambut.

(5.00 The airstrips in the desert during this period when you were literally leapfrogging back from strip to strip, how good or bad were they as landing grounds?

They were quite good. The desert was fairly hard packed, there wasn't much sand left. I think all the sand had been blown away thousands of years ago. But it was very simple and we didn't even need a strip in a lot of instances to put down. Later on when the Americans came in we had .... I think it was three squadrons of them came over to us, pursuit squadrons, came

over to us for experience. And we gave what we could to them. They complained very bitterly though, that on moonlight nights they were pretty heavily bombed and we weren't bombed. They didn't wake up to the fact that by their putting all their old oils and whatnots on the landing ground it stood out, oh, as black as ink, and it stood out so very much and of course they copped the bombs. We had no oil or covering on our strips and we were right.

Mmm. That's interesting. The oil they were putting down was to cement the ground, was it?

No, I think it was to stop the dust rising, Ed.

That's what I meant, to damp down the dust.

Yeah.

Desert flying, what, as you see it, were the advantages and perhaps disadvantages of flying in a generally flat desert environment?

Well, the first thing was that you could bomb and strafe and you're not going to hurt any major towns because they just don't exist over there. That was .... To my way of thinking that is a very decided advantage. But as far as flying is concerned, if you're knocked down, it's a darn sight easier to land in the desert than it is to try and land on a city road.

Mmm. Right. Or, for example, in fields in England.

You're right.

What about navigation in the desert? Was that ever difficult in this featureless landscape, or not?

Navigation was not easy but, there again, I think we flew 'by guess and by God' and a lot of manners. Later on I became very interested in navigation in order to lead the boys. And we made a pretty fair fist of it, I think. But it was still pretty difficult, a featureless desert and we used to fly 'on the clock' as much as fly anything.

What do you mean by 'on the clock'?

Well, we'd know that we had a certain distance to go we knew what our air speed would be; and we then flew on that time and just looked around and picked up something. Invariably you could pick up something. And in a lot of instances be a German camp.

Did you have reasonably reliable meteorological information that would give you aspects such as wind drift and that kind of thing, or not?

No. We used to work that out ourselves, Ed. Met. was very, very poor in the desert but at least we had a prevailing wind and we had a pretty fair idea of where we were.

Right. And by working it out yourself, you mean you'd, based on a dead reckoning path and how far you deviated from that, you could work out wind drift, could you?

Yes. On a number of occasions we flew out over the Mediterranean for quite a considerable time and then cut into the coast and I don't think we ever missed out on finding our target.

> Right. The retreat did involve very, very rapid movement back from airstrip to airstrip. How effective was the coordination between the air crew and the ground crew? How smoothly did the squadron fall back?

Oh, that was absolutely wizard. The organisation in the whole of the wing, not only the squadron, but the whole of the wing, was super, absolutely superb and the ground staff boys of course, I do take my hat off to them every time. They coordinated and the officers and the men all coordinated and worked very, very well together.

> In your recollection, was there ever any occasion when, for example, the planes got back to a certain point to be refuelled, maintained, whatever, to find the ground staff weren't there?

(10.00) Yes. But that was quite late in the piece when we were going forward. We leapfrogged and unfortunately the ground staff boys had not arrived and I think we had one of the Americans with us, a Colonel Hogg. He was flying with his 45th Pursuit Group boys, and he came over to me and he said, 'Steve, have you got any food?', and I said, 'Oh, I've only got some bully beef I think', and he said, 'Oh, beef, good'. So he started his Kittyhawk up and we put a couple of cans of bully beef on the motor to heat them up. Pretty lousy Ed, but they enjoyed it, better than their Spam.

> Tell us about food in the desert - I haven't asked many people about that. What were you generally living off, breakfast, lunch, the evening meal. Whenever you could get time to eat?

The cooks did a remarkable job, even though they didn't have a great deal to work with. We had bully beef, and bully beef, M&V or meat and vegetables, and I think that was about all. The way the boys knocked it up, mixed with a bit of sand and rubbish I suppose, was quite good.

> One other aspect that I think would be interesting to ask about is your view of the Kittyhawk as a fighting aircraft as against the German planes you were coming up against, what was your estimation of the Kittyhawk as against the German aircraft?

Up to about ten, twelve thousand feet the Kitty would hold its own. It would out-turn the 109s or the Macchi 202s, but it was so very rare for us to see the Huns on our own level; usually they were two or three thousand feet above us and with that cannon through the nose it was, oh, pretty frightening. You'd see that trickle of smoke coming out of the 109 and you'd think, 'God, struth, where is it going to hit me?'. So the Kitty as a fighter was not in the same street as the 109.

> Right. I just want to ask now about one incident that apparently is quite off the official record, obviously most unfortunate, but through no fault of No. 3 Squadron. This is the incident, and the date we have as 11th June 1942, when

you described how the squadron actually shot up some Indian troops, Indian Allied troops. How did this develop?

Mmm. Very, very obvious that the bomb line that the intelligence bods had given us was incorrect, because Nicky Barr was leading the squadron at the time and we went over and we bombed and strafed until we heard Nicky call up, 'Don't strafe any more. Don't strafe any more'. The reason that he did that was that there was no anti-aircraft fire coming from the troops that we were doing over. And Nicky did an absolutely marvellous thing then. He landed amongst these, this Indian division and being in the desert - as I mentioned earlier - he could put it down on the deck with no problem at all. But he landed and he apologised to the division there. Now I think that was a very, very mighty thing and that is typically Nicky Barr.

Yes. I mean, he might well have received a hostile reception. Do you have any idea of the actual casualties?

No, I'm afraid I don't, Ed. Even had they come out, I don't think we would have been permitted to mention them.

Was that incident to your knowledge ever pursued in any way, in terms of reprimands against the people who'd provided the incorrect information?

I don't think there were actual reprimands against them, but they would have been told to pull their socks up and give us proper information.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit, in fact I think it was the next day, 12th June. This was the day your aircraft was hit in its hydraulic system. How do you remember that operation beginning? What were sent out to do and how did the hit occur?

We were sent out on a bombing, a dive-bombing and strafing show. The bombs we carried were 250 pounders with a twenty-three inch nose rod that protrudes from the nose of the bomb. We went out and I think it was an Italian crowd we were bombing and I got a whack in the hydraulics and electrics with, I think it was a forty mill. - I don't know for sure. At any rate, on the way back the motor started to cough a wee bit and didn't sound too bright. So I went to put my wheels down and there was this blare in my ears to say that the wheels had not locked down. And it was very, very obvious then that the hydraulics had been shot up. So I tried to retract the wheels again - I think they were retracted a wee bit - at any rate, I tried to make the aerodrome, but after the blare in my ears I turned to port, turned left to port, and thought, 'Well, I'll have to put her down'. And I was only, what, two or three hundred feet above the deck then and I looked and I saw the ground staff boys all standing near their tents and waving, and then the next moment off they went like shot rabbits. And I put this aeroplane down and the bomb rolled away. At the time, of course, I didn't know there was an infernal bomb was on there, but the boys did, that's why they scarpered.

(15.00) Well, that was obviously most fortunate. If you had known the bomb was still aboard, what do you think your .... What do you think you would have done?

Oh Ed, I think that had I had height I'd have thought about jettisoning it and baling out. But not knowing - this was not a manual manner of dropping bombs, it was electrical and it was

not a good system - but whether or not, I don't know whether I'd have baled out or whether I'd have .... Had I known the bomb was still on there I would have baled out, yes.

> Mmm. Right. Well, two days later you were saying there was a tragic incident, a similar landing, but this time the pilot didn't survive. I think his name was Ross Brighton.

Yes. Ross took off and he obviously had a bit of motor trouble, put his wheels down and went to land on one of the satellite strips, and the nose rod on this damn bomb hit piled-up sand that was around the camel thorn there and poor old Ross just .... He became very deceased.

> Just a correction incidentally, that was 15th June, the date we have for that fatality. It's a hard thing to talk about I'm sure, Reg, but looking back at your own close escape and then the death of your fellow pilot, how shaken were you by events such as that?

I don't think we were very, very shaken, Ed. We had come to accept that being shot down and losing pilots had become part and parcel of the whole of the action. We regretted very much of course that our friends had gone down, and for a long, long time we hoped and perhaps prayed that they'd walk back or become POWs. But a very, very .... It is very traumatic.

> How hard was it to get back into an aircraft after an incident such as yours, perhaps even more so after you'd seen what happened to Ross?

Has never seem to have worried me, Ed. I mean I'm not being blasé when I say that but I've never been frightened; perhaps I've been concerned but I've never been frightened and I've never neglected to do what I think I had to do.

> Right. Well going on a little bit, for the record, these are just some facts that typify the kind of the intensity of the work, I guess. July '42, you yourself flew thirty-one sorties and this was this very intense period of the retreat. August '42, the squadron had been pushed quite a way back I think, almost to the Delta. August 23rd, you were shot down. Mmm, what had you been sent to do on that particular operation?

What did I what, Ed?

> What had you - the squadron - gone out to do on that operation?

Oh, we'd gone out in the very, very early morning show. Again, dive-bombing and strafing and I know it was fairly early because I was knocked down at ten minutes to nine that morning, and in flames which wasn't terribly nice.

> Just going back a tiny bit, do you remember how the action developed? Were you, for example, hit by ground fire, or were you being attacked from the air?

No. I remember we were coming home. We were well on the way home and I saw this 109 coming down behind me and I turned into him, and I could see the smoke dribbling out of his white nose and then, bang, and I did a very, very quick flick roll. He'd hit me in the right

aileron and also behind my cockpit and set the aeroplane on fire. So it was just a matter of get down, and get down pretty quickly.

> Mmm. The whole thing of fire in the air is something that almost every pilot I've spoken to says was held in complete dread, obviously very little time elapsed before you baled out, could you think back to tell us what was going through your mind?

(20.00) Yes. I thought, 'Well, I'm on fire. I must get out'. So I pulled my straps from the Sutton harness, put my left leg out onto the port main plane, still hung onto the stick and I was ready to jump, and I could smell this burning cloth. And the first thing that went through my mind was that my parachute's on fire. Well, actually it wasn't; it was my shirt that was burning off. At any rate, I put it down very, very fast.

> You decided then not to bale out?

Well, I couldn't bale out thinking my 'chute was on fire. So I put it down on the deck and it landed very fast, and I was nearly shot by the New Zealanders who came out to pick me up.

> From when you made that decision, Reg, not to bale out, to .... When you hit the ground - touch down - how long do you think that would have been?

Perhaps it sounded like some minutes, but I think it would only be, at the very most, half a minute, Ed.

> Right. So you must already have been quite low?

Ah yes, I was low and going down; I had no power left.

> I think you were saying, having got onto the ground, the plane exploded. I think you yourself were burning?

No. I ran from the aircraft with my 'chute, and perhaps I would have been fifty to sixty yards away and threw the 'chute on the deck and sat down on it, and then the oxy tanks in the Kitty blew, which blew it to pieces. The most unusual thing was I hadn't been sitting there longer than it appeared about a minute and an old Arab came along with a - I'm not sure whether it was a camel - no it wasn't a camel, it was a donkey. And he looked at me, and he looked at this burning aeroplane, and I think he meant to say, 'Is that yours?', as if it could have been anyone else's. There was no-one else for miles around until the New Zealanders came.

> Yes, it must have been a strange contrast between an ancient way of life and this sort of madness of modern technology. You were picked up, they got you back to the squadron, what happened then?

When they picked me up, one of the New Zealander soldiers was standing in the back with a Tommy gun pointed at me, and I looked up and could see the flash of their emblem and I said, 'Oh, thank heavens for the New Zealanders'. And he said, 'So and so, and so and so', he said, 'If you'd have been a so and so German you'd be dead now'. Any rate, they picked me up and took me back, fed me, gave me a new shirt, rang the squadron and later on that day the

squadron came over and, I think, Col Greaves the adjutant came over and picked me up and took me back to the squadron.

> You were saying that after that I think you spent two or three days at a rest camp on the Mediterranean sent down by Bobby Gibbes. Did that kind of peaceful interlude help you get over that very close escape?

I think it must have Ed, because down on the Med[iterranean] we were under canvas if I remember rightly. It was beautiful weather and we'd do a bit of swimming - only had a couple of days there - but we had a cook who had come from the squadron, a very good cook, and he seemed to look after us very, very well. And I went back with some regrets perhaps, back to the squadron after a couple of days.

> From your log book we know you flew again on the 27th, the 30th and the 31st August. How important do you think was it for pilots who had been shot down to get back in the air pretty quickly?

Ed, there's stories go around about people who have been knocked down or have had bad accidents and this, that and the other thing, and their CO has said, 'Oh get back in the air as quick as you can', but I don't know whether that's, that is factual. As I said, I have been concerned on quite a number of occasions on flying and I don't think that in the long run it meant a thing to me. It didn't seem to worry me.

> Right. Well, after the end of the retreat there was a loose period I know, and September '42 we have the squadron being stood down for a time. Did you get any leave then? Did you get time to get right away from it all, or not?

That was when we were back in the Delta. Yes, we used to go on leave in Alexandria which was only about, oh, ten or fifteen miles or perhaps kilometres - I'm not sure whether it was kilometres or miles - and we had overnight leave, not day leave. We still had to go back to the squadron but it was a very, very good and peaceful rest period.

(25.00) Mmm. Did men ...? Did you all enjoy the sights? What were the main diversions?

Oh, I don't think people were terribly, terribly interested in the sights. There was one sight there that I think everyone saw and everyone knew: it was the only virgin in Egypt. It was a big eighteen foot statue in bronze.

> How much did men, you know, men who were not married, how much frequenting of brothels and so on was there in your recollection?

Not a great deal, Ed. There was some, but I think opportunity was a great thing and the opportunities weren't there, plus the fact that there were a lot of soldiers around the area and our boys, no, they didn't, they didn't frequent them .... Not to any great extent that I know of.

> Right. Well, let's move back to flying, Reg. October '42 saw the squadron flying again - this is in the period prior to Alamein. Just to get some figures down because I think they're interesting, these are from Reg's log book, October you flew thirteen sorties, November 15, December 19. What were the main kinds of operations in your recollection?

Generally what we had been doing all along the line: reconnaissance, armed reconnaissance, dive-bombing, strafing, a fair amount of aerial combat at the same time, although at that particular time Jerry was starting to go back and feel the restraints that he had on his aircraft. Not a great number were coming over from Italy or Sicily. Also the Navy had been very, very active in sinking whatever ships had left Sicily.

> Mmm. That's most interesting, Reg. The formations that you were flying during this period - I know there were changes during the whole period in the Middle East - how do you remember formation flying? What were the most common formations?

Our squadron, in fact the whole of our wing, used to fly two lots of sixes in fluid pairs with a leader, a yellow one on his right, a blue one on his left and the number twos behind him. We stuck to that right through until after the Sicilian campaign and I think - I'm looking back now with hindsight - it was more a defensive formation rather than offensive.

> Mmm. Tell us what you mean by fluid pairs.

Fluid pairs: there are two flying. One flying directly behind the other so that you can be sent. If the leader of the gaggle can easily send, say, one pair out to intercept or to strafe or to bomb and he also controls the fluid pairs up in top cover.

> I see, right. Mmm. It was during October Reg that you shot down I think a 202. What's your recollection of that encounter?

Well, I was still fairly new to the squadron and we'd done this particular job and I saw this fellow, he actually came up from under us and climbed in front of me, and I was just very, very fortunate and pulled the nose up and gave him a squirt and he went down. But, oh, there was no actual fighting as far as I was concerned in that one.

> Right. After that kind of episode, or perhaps during it, of course it all happened very quickly, was your thought that you were shooting down a plane; that you were shooting down a man; or both?

No. I'm afraid I didn't have very many thoughts of it at all. I thought, 'Oh, that's one less of the cows'. But, no, I had no worries about whether it was an aeroplane or a man. Later on I thought a bit about it but it didn't worry me.

> Right. Do you think there was an element in what you as a squadron had to do? I don't mean you personally. Was there an element of hate against the Germans or was it a fairly impersonal kind of combat?

No, it was pretty lot of hate, Ed.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

> Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Reg Stevens, No. 3 Squadron. Tape two, side one.
>
> Reg was shot down on numerous occasions and we're just going to talk about some aspects to deal with this, and I'm just reading from a statement made on 19th May 1981 by Reg to his doctor, an account of different shootings-down. These are dates: 31.12.41, on the Isle of Man whilst landing a Spitfire the starboard tyre blew out, the aircraft slid off the sealed runway onto water-sodden grass and somersaulted on its back - there are some further details I won't read out because we've already talked them through; 12.6.42, my aircraft was hit by enemy 40 mm ground fire and crash-landed in the desert; 29.6.42, following hydraulic failure in the undercarriage and being unable to get the wheels down I crash-landed on our desert strip; 23.8.42, I was shot down in flames by ME-109 enemy fighter, crashed landed in the desert - the episode we've just talked about; 3.8.43, in Sicily I was shot down by enemy ground fire, crash-landed in an olive tree near Mount Etna; 9.5.44, back in Australia whilst flying a Spitfire the motor blew up and I crash-landed on the road near Merbein, Mildura, Victoria. After cessation of hostilities I returned to New Guinea to my pre-war post with the administration and was retired from there on medical grounds due to my back complaint in 1952. Reg, I think you were saying that the retirement from the administration in New Guinea was because you couldn't complete journeys overland and so on?

I'd done a fair amount of patrolling as a senior inspector of native labour and I found that I could not walk the distances that were required. So the Public Service Commissioner suggested, or recommended, that I be medically boarded, which I was, and I was retired, superannuated from the Service.

> Right. Well, let's actually go back to the war period. It really is a remarkable catalogue of being shot down and surviving to tell the tale. Fear, I imagine, must in some element have been present in the life of a fighter pilot. How do you remember that? Was that something that was just a general thing carrying all the way through your war experience, or was it something that came and went?

No. Ed, it's rather a peculiar sensation but, without being blasé, I don't think I was ever frightened. I was concerned, certainly concerned, but I was more concerned over some of the other boys who perhaps had not had the same experience I had. But I do know of people who, after being shot down, were most reluctant to fly again and in many instances were sent back for additional training and perhaps counselling.

> The concern that you expressed yourself feeling sometimes, was that most evident before or during operations?

I think at the start of any operational flight there was a certain trepidation .... Well, we know that the ground staff boys objected rather strongly to changing the wheels - the rear wheel on the Kittyhawk - because of the pilots always urinating on it just prior to take-off. So that must have been some type of internal worry or concern.

Were there any other physical symptoms of fear besides, as you said, urinating?

No, I'd say no, definitely not, Ed.

No sweating or nausea, things like that?

No, no.

What about pilots amongst themselves? Were men about to talk about their concerns, or not?

(5.00) Yes. After a job, and especially if it had been a pretty sticky-do, one the pilots when they came into the mess - we had a pilots' mess, sergeant pilots, warrant officer pilots and officer pilots were all together - and there was a very decided sign of relief on all the pilots that they'd at least got back this time.

For men who were particularly overwrought, who could they turn to?

They turned to our doctor, Doctor Tim Stone, who was a grand man and wonderful fellow. Tim could pick out those who were a little bit dicey, but he did it in such a way that no-one else seemed to know about it. It was nothing to come back and find one or perhaps two of the pilots had been sent back to base, but no explanation given, none required. We knew that people did crack up a wee bit under the strain but it was accepted. It was part and parcel of the squadron.

That's interesting. So there was no element of judgment on the part of men who could cope against those who perhaps couldn't.

No, no. To the contrary. The ones who had had a lot of experience, for example, Keith Kildey and Danny Boardman, Charlie Cowd, they were the first to lend a hand to those who were struggling, and I take my hat off to those boys.

Your own record was certainly quite remarkable I would have thought, in the number of escapes you did have from very dicey situations. How much did fatalism play a part in keeping you going? Was there a kind of belief that if your number's up it's there and that's it? Did that help you through, or not?

I think I might have been born under a lucky star. I should have been knocked over on quite a number of occasions, but just luck must come into it. Certainly there was a wee bit of skill, but skill doesn't come until you get experience and that experience was pretty hard to buy on occasions.

What about thoughts for your family back in Australia? How much did they come to the fore when you were in these very difficult situations?

Not while we were flying, not so much, but after we would come home and especially at night-time in the mess when we had no electric light, just lamps, and we'd play cards or write letters, and the thoughts were never far from us of our home people.

**Following responses by Mrs Stevens.**

I thought it would just be interesting to include the perspective of a woman and a wife in this story. Of course not many of the pilots were married, Mrs Stevens, but you'd married Reg just before the war. Aside from the issue of combat danger which we might come to in a minute, what were the general problems, do you think, that a woman faced when her husband went off to war?

Mrs Stevens: Well I had a little boy who was very difficult, because he was a very active child and very strong, self-willed and it worried me to a great extent because I was thinking of my husband all the time and I didn't know how to manage things because I'd always been, he'd always done everything for me, looked after me and spoilt me. I missed him terrifically and it wore me down in the end.

Mmm. There must have been, I can see, a great deal of loneliness in bringing up a child and I think you were living yourself with a sister who had a .... Her husband was away too?

Mrs Stevens: Yes. The two sisters married to the two brothers and they went away within a week of one another. And we'd always been very close and I looked after the house. She was still working, she had no family. But I think that having her coming home .... If I'd been on my own it would have been worse.

The letters that came back from Reg no doubt told of some of these escapes, although I'd imagine they were sometimes made less horrific than perhaps they were in reality. How did the stories of his fighting affect you?

Mrs Stevens: Well, he didn't tell me very much. I heard most of the things through the newspaper clippings. He was rather inclined not to let me know.

To shield you from what was going on.

Mrs Stevens: Yes, to shield me from worrying more than I was.

That's interesting because I think Reg was saying that some of the newspaper reports in fact were somewhat exaggerated.

Mrs Stevens: Yes, I think they are, well I didn't realise at the time that they were.

So you were getting this second-hand information. Did you get any information officially from the air force about these crashes and so on?

(10.00) Mrs Stevens: No, never. Never heard anything at all. Well, it was just as well because they would have been frightful to have even been told it.

I think you were saying that things did rather build up and at some point at least you suffered some kind of nervous breakdown?

Mrs Stevens: Yes, I did. Well, he'd been overseas a long while then and apparently all the worry just had caused it.

What help did you get then?

Mrs Stevens: Well, I was under a very good doctor and I seemed to be okay after his treatment, but I've always been a nervous type and of course I worried all the time.

Was there ever any assistance to your doctor or to yourself from the air force, or from any people who could counsel wives left alone about the things their husbands were going through or not?

Mrs Stevens: No, no, nothing. Nothing at all.

At all?

Mrs Stevens: No, nothing.

So basically it was a question of being looked after by a good doctor?

Mrs Stevens: That's right. It was the good doctor and my family that sort of helped me.

Right. Well that's really what I wanted to ask you, unless there's something else you feel you'd like to add about the whole, you know, the whole thing you went through of being left alone in Australia.

Mrs Stevens: No, I just think that I was very lucky that I had a father and a mother and a .... My eldest sister was wonderful. She used to take the little boy every weekend and give me - on the Saturdays - and give him little trips, to give me a break. Because, you know, a child of - how old was he, I suppose he was two wasn't he - about two is very difficult and I did enjoy .... I think I was very lucky. I had a marvellous family and Reg's family were also very helpful with me.

Right. Well, that's most interesting. We might perhaps leave it there.

**Continuation of interview with Reg Stevens.**

This is moving on again. Reg, the first half of 1943, January '43, Tripoli was captured. February, March, April - this is in the period leading up to when the squadron reaches Tunisia in the end of April '43. What's your recollection of that period?

It was a time of great activity, Ed. We cooperated very closely with the army and especially with the New Zealanders; we virtually adopted them. And we had a lot of successes; we lost a number of boys but generally we were on top most of the time.

Right. Do you have any recollection of the general living situation as you moved on towards Tripoli and then on to Tunisia?

The living ...?

Living conditions?

Oh, living conditions weren't terribly good mainly because the Italians .... We occupied camps that the Italians had vacated as we were going forward, and they weren't the cleanest people in the world. And I know as far, for myself, the first time in my life I was lousy, and I resented it. I resented it very much. When I went to the doctor at that time - I forget who he was now - I said, 'Look, don't laugh Jenks because what I'm going to tell you is humiliating'. And he said, 'What's the matter, Steve; what's the matter, Steve?', and I said, 'I'm lousy', and he roared. And he said, 'You and 300-odd bods in the squadron, you're all lousy'. So that was an indication of living.

Right. That must have been pretty uncomfortable I'd imagine when you were up in the air?

I wasn't so bad up in the air I suppose, but I think we had too much to think of then. But I know when we finally got into one of the places there I took over a house - well it was a house that - and it had a very, very beautiful swimming pool, what I thought was a swimming pool. So I stepped out of my lousy clothes and into this big swimming pool and it was only later on that I found that that was the water supply for the whole of the township.

(Laughs.) Well, I hope not too many people suffered. Mmm, Reg, to turn to a different aspect I want to talk a little bit about promotion and so on. As a pilot officer you'd been awarded the DFC, I think recommended for it by Bobby Gibbes - this is going back a way - and later you received a Bar to that DFC when you were in Sicily. You'd been commissioned in a sense in November '42 but it actually took about six months for the commission to come through. You were saying that you weren't back-paid for that period. Was there any resentment on the part of Australian airmen in the Middle East that administrative routines and so on were a little bit loose, a little bit slack and things such as promotion pay didn't come through as quickly as they might have?

(15.00) Well, I know as far as the other two boys who were commissioned at the same time as myself, that was Gordon Jones and - I'm not sure - I think it was Norm Caldwell, at any rate, this commissioning was not back-dated and there was a fair amount of resentment because, in actual fact, we had been officers flying for six months but still being paid NCO rates. Not that the money meant so very, very much, we couldn't spend it in the blue there, but it was wrong and I still maintain that it was wrong. And that we should have received our commissions retrospective.

Was there any agitation to get that changed, or not?

Not as far as I know, Ed.

Well, just to add a few other details. The 13th May '43, you were officially made up to a pilot officer and became a flight commander. The 19th June '43 you became, were promoted to squadron leader and, in fact, took over to command No. 3 Squadron after Brian Eaton. Just to talk about some issues of

rank and so on. The relationship between the ground crew and the air crew in No. 3 Squadron, how close a relationship was that?

It was a very close relationship. There's not one of those ground staff boys would have signed to say that an aircraft was okay unless it was really okay. If there was any doubt about it the pilot would be told. But we found them absolutely magnificent chaps and they'd work all night to get an aircraft on line. I know my own fitter and rigger, and John was a chappie I knew up in New Guinea pre-war, and he worked on my aeroplane and I knew that I could go out and I'd come home, God willing.

Thank you. The situation between officers and men in No. 3 Squadron, both ground crew and air crew, but looking at the officers as against the men, how close a sort of general relationship was there when you were out in the field in combat situation or were there .... Was there the distance of calling men, 'Sir', saluting and these kinds of things?

No, Ed. We had a pilots' mess and irrespective of the youngest and newest pilot, we all messed together. There was .... The only person who was called 'Sir' was the CO and I think he resented it a bit on occasions. But as far as the others it was all on christian name, and the NCO pilots relied as much on the officer pilots as the officer pilots relied on the NCOs. And it was nothing to see our squadron go out led by a sergeant pilot or a flight sergeant pilot with half a dozen officers flying with him. But he was the number one; he was leading the squadron. And that was the thoughts and that was the general - what shall we say - the general ...

Pattern?

... pattern right throughout our flying career with 3.

In that kind of situation where, for example, a sergeant was leading a flight that had amongst it a number of pilot officers, et cetera, or more senior officers, would there ever have been any question in the air of his authority being challenged or not?

Definitely not. The CO of the squadron would not have appointed a sergeant pilot or a NCO pilot to lead a gaggle unless he was absolutely convinced that that fellow was sufficiently experienced and he had the know-how to take the boys out and bring them home.

The relationship between a ground crew of a particular pilot, was that a first name relationship or would they have called an officer 'Sir'?

No. The CO was the only one - there were exceptions of course. Some of the ground staff boys would call the officers 'Sir' but that was very, very rare and usually it was 'G'day Tom' or 'G'day Harry' and 'David, what are you doing?' and that was the general pattern right throughout the whole squadron.

Right. You yourself were promoted from being a sergeant pilot to a pilot officer and then on to a squadron leader I think more rapidly than anyone else on record. Did that pose any problems, or not?

Not as far as I was concerned. I had the complete backing of all the pilots and perhaps I was a wee bit more experienced or had spent more time in the air than the majority of them had. But they were absolutely one hundred per cent behind me on every occasion and I had no problems with them.

(20.00) Right. Well, let's actually look in some detail, Reg, at your period as CO. The dates were 19th June '43 through to 16th August '43. What was the main duty of the commanding officer?

To ensure that the squadron was ready for any contingency whatsoever; to ensure that the training was right to the very, very tip of perfection - I don't think we ever reached perfection but we did reach fairly close to it - and that was mainly because of the cooperation of all pilots within not only our squadron but right within the wing.

How much as commanding officer of the squadron were you involved in the day-to-day mechanics of supplies getting to the right place, all this kind of thing, or was that generally completely delegated to other people?

In the main it was delegated through the equipment officers and the engineering officers. I did find it a good idea to at least go down to the orderly room once or twice a week. But the adjutant - we had a very, very competent adjutant - and that's all there was to it. He looked after the basics, I looked after the flying personnel.

Right. Just to ask a question about the flying, it's a point that a few people have made, some people have suggested that in No. 3 Squadron, as against other squadrons, there was much more of a group attitude to flying, that individuals were less likely to go off on their own and perhaps get the very high scores of some of the aces of certain other squadrons. Do you see that being the case or not?

I don't think we had a sufficiently good offensive aeroplane to do that. And generally because of the training that these boys had received and the pep talk perhaps from the senior members of the squadron, they had no intention. They didn't want to leave the formation to go out on their own. They knew that if there was someone to be shot down, that the CO or the leader of the gaggle would say, 'Okay, Blue 1 or Blue 2, go down and get so and so'. But that's as simple as that, Ed.

Right. So there was a large element of self-preservation involved in it?

I suppose self-preservation but also pride within the formation.

Right. Moving on to June '43, after you'd become commanding officer, Reg, I think you were operating out of Zuara south-east of Tunis. I think there was some training pre .... Prior to the Sicilian operations?

Oh, we had quite a decent stint of a break - when I say the break, we had a fourteen-day party which included a lot of grog which I brought back from Algiers - but as soon as that was finished and it was a matter of nose to the grindstone again and we did a tremendous amount of flying, formation flying, shadow shooting, both tactical and dive-bombing. Really it was good and it was rather ... I was very, very proud to see the manner in which those boys had

done the job that I asked them to do, in that I didn't do it on my own. We had flight commanders who assisted very much, good fellows all, and they were the instrument of getting those pilots together as a fighting and flying unit.

> Right. That's very clear. On 6th July there was an operation that I think was extremely secret, confidential, via Malta on to Sicily. Could you tell us how that developed and what your role in it was?

Yes. On that particular night the group captain, Group Captain Jack Darwin, he called me over to his tent and he said, 'Steve, this is a matter of the greatest secrecy. I want you to take a composite squadron of twelve over to Malta, where you will refuel bomb up and go and bomb Biscari and Sicily.' And I said, 'Righto, well who's to go from the other squadrons?' - there were five squadrons in the wing. Anyhow, I took three from 3 Squadron: myself, John Hobsonhook and Brian Harris - Brian Harris was one of the flight commanders.

(25.00)Now the unusual thing was that we were absolutely sworn to secrecy and that no-one was to know, apart from the pilots that I was briefing that evening, where we were going, what we were doing. At any rate, we went over to Malta, and landed at Luqa, refuelled and bombed up, then we had a top cover of about eighty Spitfires. So we had no worries about weaving or having to look out for 109s or 202s. We went in and we bombed Biscari and came back, landed back to Luqa then refuelled and on to, back to Zuara where the ground staff boys were very, very interested to know where we'd been. And they inspected the wheels, the tyres and they said, 'Oh yes, it's something white. We think they've been to Malta', but no-one knew about that for many, many years after.

> Mmm. That's an interesting story. A few days later, 9th July, the squadron itself moved to Malta. What were the difficulties of getting the squadron across the Mediterranean to Malta?

There was a tremendous amount of preparation and there again we can only say thank you to the officers and men who did the waterproofing of our three-ton trucks, and all those vehicles and they did a mighty job. As far as the pilots were concerned, we knew that we were going into an established mess at Luqa or down in Sliema but I still look back and I think, 'By Jove, those boys were absolutely marvellous to do in such a short time what it would have taken a normal squadron weeks to do', they did it in days and we landed virtually as a going squadron on Malta. The same thing happened in Sicily.

> How many days did you actually have to prepare for the move?

Oh, I think we were given about a fortnight, Ed. That's a fortnight over and above our training, the very intense training session that we went through. It might have been a little bit less than that but they did the job.

> The shifting of all the squadron's transports, I assume tents, personal baggage, let alone all the aircraft and maintenance gear, spares and so on, how did they get across to Malta?

By ship. By landing craft. And, oh, there was no problem at all. The skies were absolutely full of our own aircraft. The Mediterranean was full of battleships and cruisers, destroyers,

frigates; you name it, they were there. It would have been a very, very cocky German who would come out to try and stop them.

> Right. You were saying you moved to established airfields. What was the quality of the airstrips you moved to? Had they been knocked around at all, or were they in good condition?

Oh, they had been .... Over the past several years they'd really been knocked about but the maintenance, the - I suppose you'd call them the airstrip maintenance bods - they did an absolutely marvellous job and it looked like crushed coral that had been rolled into the runways. I think there were five main strips on Malta. We were on Luqa main and then there was Luqa Sat 1 and Sat 2 and several smaller ones. And in addition there was, down at Kalafrana there was a big seaplane base but we did not patron there of course. But we had no problems at all. Maintenance had been put on and quite a number of our own bods had by that time come in and doing the servicing of our own aircraft.

> Right.

END TAPE TWO, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE TWO - SIDE B

> Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Reg Stevens. Tape two, side two.
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> Reg, the squadron was based at Malta for about ten days or in fact I think exactly ten days. What's your recollection of the squadron's operations during that time?

Mainly the strafing and bombing of Sicily. The Germans still had a lot of aircraft fighters and some bombers on Sicily and we tried to wipe them out as we were fully aware, or some of us were fully aware that an invasion of Sicily was imminent. I was very, very proud to think that an Australian squadron had gone into Malta, an Australian fighter squadron. A complete squadron had gone in as the nucleus of the invasion perhaps of Europe through France. I was proud to take the boys in. I'm very, very proud of the squadron itself and I'm extremely proud of the work that they did.

> Well, it was 19th July I think that you in fact flew over to Sicily and I think you were based, used two airstrips in Sicily. What was the general nature of your role there?

Well, the first thing was that we had to become established, Ed. Our strip was twelve hundred feet that had been ripped out of a vineyard, and that vineyard had been booby-trapped by the Germans and the Italians during their retreat from it, and we were not very happy about that. We lost several boys, not killed, but we had them wounded from these infernal booby-traps. It was rather lovely to go into a strip where there was green grass and grapes growing and trees growing. The whole of the war took a very different aspect and we thought, 'Ah, at least we're getting somewhere now. We've beaten them in the desert; we're beaten them off Malta; we've beating them off Sicily', and the next step was to be Italy. So, Ed, you can probably understand how terribly proud I was to have taken them, to have been associated

with the squadron and to finish up taking the first all-Australian squadron to Malta and to Sicily.

> Yes I certainly can, Reg. And I can understand the pleasure of getting away from the sort of to-ing and fro-ing in the desert. The wing that you were attached to which I think Nicky Barr previously commanded in the desert, were you still attached to that wing here or not?

Yes, 239 Wing came through completely. Nicky wasn't in charge of the wing. He was CO of 3 at one stage, but the wing was commanded by Group Captain Jack Darwin, a very fine chap which I have the greatest admiration for him. Unfortunately he was shot down a little later. But the wing itself consisting of the five squadrons, including a South African squadron, two English composite squadrons and two Australia squadrons, 3 and 450, and there would only be a very thin line between the five squadrons.

> Right. Well, just moving on. It was 16th August when you were posted to 451 Squadron, left No. 3, what are your memories of your last days with the squadron?

(5.00) With 3, I think one of being terribly proud not only of the squadron boys but of their achievements. I was a little reluctant going to 451 after the operations of 3 [Squadron] and after, what, over twelve months, fourteen months with the squadron. I'd seen a lot of them come, I'd seen a lot of them go, and all I can really say was, 'Thank you very, very much for being such wonderful bods'.

> Right. Yes, I can imagine the feeling. Let's just go on briefly to the period later in the war for you. We have to treat this rather more briefly. You did go to 451 in the Delta, that was August '43 to January '44, as CO. What was the main function of the squadron while you were there?

I was posted to 451 in order to convert them from army co-op to a compact efficient fighter squadron. They'd been flying Hurricanes, they were clapped-out Hurricanes they were too, and the enthusiasm 451 boys was very, very low. Their morale was very, very low. They appeared to have been left out of the war. Some of them were terribly, terribly eager to get into a fighting war and not just finish up flying convoy patrols as they had been doing. It wasn't easy to reform that squadron, but when I told them that we were to get Spitfires to replace their Hurricanes their enthusiasm went up. Oh, it was really incredible to see, and once the Spitties started to come through - certainly they were only Spitfires initially but they were still Spitties and the boys loved them - and, as I say, their enthusiasm was absolutely sky-high. So from then on I had no trouble whatsoever in converting them from their Hurricanes to these lovely little pets that I loved so much.

> Right. Thank you very much. Well, it was January '44 that you did then go back to Australia. I'd imagine that must have been delightful to have been reunited with your family?

It really was Ed, yes. The first thing I did, in landing in Fremantle, was to ring Nan .... Oh no, I rang the next-door neighbour and said, 'Look, I'll be phoning you at nine o'clock in the morning' or some stupid hour because when the phone call came through it was about five o'clock I think in Western Australia and I'm not an early riser and, oh, I hated it. But it was

delightful to talk to her, and whilst I loved Western Australia very much I was terribly keen to get on the train and get home, which I did after probably a week on the train. It was great to see them all; great to see my family. And I had a lot of experiences to tell them about too.

> Yes. Well, that must be true surely. I know you went on to Mildura OTU where Peter Jeffrey was CO. What was your general view of the air force in Australia? Having come back from the Middle East where you'd been in a very active situation, what was your general view of the quality of the people running the air force in Australia?

Peter [sic] ... I don't think I should answer that question because, oh, it's a difficult one in that I don't want to tread on people's toes, but everything was so very, very different. There was spit and polish which of course none of us were very happy about. But the main advantage was that we had so many of the old desert boys at Mildura, and it was great to see them. People who had come home months and months before - perhaps eight, nine, ten months before I did.

> Do you think they were used to their best capacity?

At that time the war was fast running out here in Japan. The Americans had obviously taken over and the Australian airmen were to take a very, very minor part.

> Right. Well, let's just go on to the end. At the end of the war I know you were seconded to ANA to be with them for a short time. Peace was declared. When peace was finally declared, what was your overwhelming emotion, thought? How do you remember that?

(10.00) My major thoughts were for my two brothers who were POWs of the Nips, that was primary. My second was, when can I get back to Papua New Guinea, and a third was perhaps a little thanksgiving for coming through it.

> Right. Well, I know you did go back to Papua New Guinea for some time and then, of course, back to Australia again in the early 1950s. Looking back on it all, looking back on your period as a pilot in the air force, how had the experience changed you and had it been for the better or for the worse?

Oh, a bit of a moot point. Some people say that I came home fairly arrogant. Others, that I talked like a Pommy. I have no doubt that I've changed. The change was so gradual though that I can't really put my finger on any major points. It was gradual. I used to drink a fair bit and play up fairly wild. Looking back on it now I don't see even how I could have been wild, Ed, because, you know, I'm a very respectable sort of bod now.

> Easing back into civilian life, Reg, was that difficult or not?

Yes, very. I loathed it. Although I loved the islands, I always had loved the islands, but I loathed the thought of being semi-regimented and having to fill in blasted report forms and this, that and the other thing, and not being able to virtually do what I had to do but I wanted to do what somebody else wanted me to do even though ... I did quite well up in the islands. I loved my stint up there.

> That's interesting, Reg. I would have thought in some ways life in the air force would have been more regimented than civilian life.

Not in the desert, Ed. Out here in Australia, yes, it was very much so regimented with parades and this, that and the other thing which I didn't like. But in the desert, no, it was the happy-go-lucky fellows. They knew the job they had to do. They were proud to be in a position of being able to do it. And I was terribly proud and I'm still terribly proud of the squadron.

> Right. Well, thank you for telling us all that. One last thing, Reg, which I just put to anybody is: Is there any particular thought or recollection that you would like to put down here?

Yes, Ed. Since being back in civilian life I have been over a great number of aerodromes and to our squadrons out here in Australia, and it's really gratifying to see the type of young fellow who is flying these beautiful aeroplanes today. Not that there is a great deal of difference in flying. Basically, you push the stick forward and the nose goes down; you pull the stick back and the nose comes up. But the electronics and the academics who are flying them, they are a great credit and let's keep our air force flying.

> Right. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial, Reg, thank you very much for making this tape as part of the history of No. 3.

END TAPE TWO, SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW