



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes recording with Rod Butler, No. 3 Squadron, tape one, side one.

Rod, could we perhaps just begin by finding out where you were born and grew up, please?

I was born in Dubbo in 1916 but I have no memory. I left at quite an early age. My earliest memory is when we moved down to Harris Park outside Parramatta.

Right. And I understand your schooling was mostly in Sydney but then later, I think, high school in Mudgee?

That's correct. I went to Kogarah Primary and from there I spent twelve months .... At the age of ten I went away with my brother and spent twelve months in the back country and returned to Mudgee where my mother was born and where we had lots of relatives and I went to high school there.

That's a good old expression you don't hear today 'the back country', where? How far back were you?

In Mudgee itself.

I think you said you went off to the back country.

Oh, we travelled up as far as - across the border from Mungindi. My brother had been on two stations there owned by the same owner called [inaudible], and he finished up marrying the squatter's daughter and we trapped rabbits on the way up. And then when we finally got up to [inaudible] we stayed a few months there. I was there for the shearing and I learnt a bit about picking up and being a tarboy and so forth. And then we turned up - twelve months completely away - back to Mudgee.

Fascinating. Going on a little bit, Rod, I think it was in Mudgee that you left school and you had a couple of jobs before the air force after leaving school?

Yes. I got a job in North Sydney at a firm called Cascade Cordials as a leading hand. I knew the cordial manufacturing business because my father and grandfather were cordial manufacturers and also one of my mother's brothers, so I stepped into leading hand there and I was there for a time as leading hand at Cascade Cordials.

Right. And I think when you were about twenty-three, or twenty, you had another job, I think, also in Sydney?

Yes. I went over to Malleable Castings in Marrickville. They had the factory adjoining my brother's place which he was managing director of C.O. Ogden and Company. And I went over there originally for a week because I'd run out of money during my holidays and they

asked me to stay and the money was good and I preferred it to working in the cordial factory so I stayed there for a couple of years and a bit more.

> Right. In those years between the world wars, was the tradition of the ANZACs - what Australians and New Zealanders had achieved in the first war - very much part of your childhood, of your memories, or not?

Yes. As a matter of fact, when we went to the Middle East I met quite a few Kiwis and I always considered them as being Australians. There was no barrier as far as I was concerned and I think that was from that ANZAC tradition that we're more or less the same clan.

> Had you had any family members direct or indirect who had been involved in the first war?

My uncles of which I have very little knowledge. I also had one uncle that was in the Boer War. But that's the only association I can remember.

> Going on through the late 1930s when there were very great political developments in Europe - Hitler's rise to power and so on - do you think you personally were very conscious of those changes, or not?

Yes, I thought twelve months before '39 that we were more or less a certainty to go to war then. And I remember thinking at the time it would not be long before we would be at war with Germany.

(5.00) Was that something you talked about with your mates, or not?

Not so much with my mates, with my people - my two brothers, one was eleven years my senior and the other thirteen years my senior and my eldest sister who was older still - discussed it with them. But not so much with my mates.

> Right. And I think you were saying one of your brothers was a photographer in the air force?

That was my brother-in-law, Jack Newton. Harold joined up - that's the second eldest brother - he served throughout the war. Bill - that's the eldest brother - he didn't join up, he was the managing director of Ogdens and they were on war contracts and he said they'd let him off (laughing). A younger brother too also joined up and served.

> Right. Well, going on a little bit. I know that you in fact joined the air force yourself prior to the war. You had a real desire to fly. Tell us about that, why you did and how the first approaches were made to the air force?

Well, I was eighteen when I first applied without reference to my folks and I was granted an interview and I came down to Sydney and told my sister I had an interview at Victoria Barracks for a short-term commission and she told me unless I had a sponsor I had no hope, which turned out correct. But that mightn't have been because I didn't have a sponsor I'll be kind to them. But later on, on talking to my brother-in-law, he said I could join up as a

wireless trainee but I told him I had no interest in wireless, that I wanted to fly. And he said that if I joined up and was accepted I would then be able to qualify for a course as what we called 'airmen pilots' that was going in the air force then. You could be an LAC or a corporal pilot and they were taken from the serving members.

> Right. Just going back to this other business of the short-term commission and having to have some kind of a sponsor, that does appear to smack a little bit of social levels and hierarchies and people making judgments not on the objective criteria of whether or not somebody would be a good pilot. What did you think about that at the time and what did other men think?

Well, I had a lot of delusions really that you should get where you were going by merit not by influence, and I found that was possibly the case, because in the first year I was with the air force I played football with them and I played in the front row, and my two front rowers with me were both commission men and became very friendly, and I remember one of them telling me that he had false teeth which was one of the things you weren't allowed. Your teeth were supposed to meet on so many points and so forth, because you supposedly ran the risk of choking on your plate and this sort of thing, and he was knocked back but his mother was apparently well connected socially and spoke to the right person and he was subsequently granted a commission. So he agreed that it did work.

> We might talk later again about some issues to do with officers and men when you're in. Anyway, you did join up as a wireless ....

Training wireless operator.

> Training and I think you went first to Laverton in Victoria where you did both a rookies' course and a wireless course. Endless parade ground bashing, was that part of your training, or not?

Yes. Yes, we had to do so many hours like rookies' training and squadron drill and flight drill and wing drill and all that sort of stuff. We had to go through the whole issue there.

> How did that slightly mindless sort of training appear to you?

It didn't worry me very much. I just accepted that as part of the basic training. I wasn't concerned about it. I could do it quite okay without any sweat.

> Did you get a really heavy time from sergeant and people such as that in those, you know, in your very first days, weeks, or not?

No. As a matter of fact there we used to say, I think at that time you were given a period of grace of about three months to make up your mind and if you decided after that period - I'm not sure of the exact length of time - that you didn't want or couldn't cop the service life you could get a free discharge but after that you had to buy your way out which was really very difficult. But we had nobody drop out. We reckoned we got it easy for a little while because they didn't want to discourage any of us. But I found it quite good and very little - I couldn't

say unfairness. The occasional mistake by a corporal or a sergeant or something but, in the main, they were good.

(10.00) Not outright sort of vindictive ...

No.

... squeezing people down.

Very good I thought.

Right. Well, on to the more serious training, your actual work as a wireless operator. What were the different things that you covered there? What different areas? I would assume morse code operating would have been one, but what were the other things?

There was radio theory, radio prac - practical work, maths; that was about it. And, of course, flying training, we did part of that like the aircraft installations and ....

Right. Well, let's look at those in a little bit of detail. Radio theory, I guess that was the general theory of radio was it?

That's right. Of radio and electricity and the .... We also did stuff on electrical motors and practically from the ground up, so at least you understood what you were doing when you tuned the set or what you were trying to do, that you just didn't press a button and just hope. And it was a pretty good course; very thorough course. And a lot of it we thought, you know, it was unnecessary but in the long run you realised it was really necessary because, well, you had a bunch of boys of varying stages of knowledge. Some of them, the majority of them I would say, had quite a fair bit of experience in radio and electricity and that sort of thing where some of us didn't know - as I said to one of the instructors - I didn't know a radio valve from an electric light globe when I joined up (laughing).

Right. So you went back to basics and you got that solid grounding.

Yes.

What about the practical side? Was that practical in the sense of operating or maintenance or both?

Not so much maintenance. That was more or less the purlieu of the wireless operator mechanics. But the actual operating of the sets enabled you to correct small things that went wrong. We weren't capable of sort of, say, building a transmitter or a receiver but we could generally locate the normal elementary faults that you get in everyday work with them.

Right. And morse code, that was part of it I assume?

Oh yes. Well, I was very fortunate in I found that no difficulty at all in the morse code. I know that's not a matter of brains, it's a matter of just aptitude because I think there were two

of us that passed out at a hundred per cent with the morse in sending and receiving and one of them was an ex-naval operator. But there were other boys that had done Marconi courses who were more or less qualified as operators but I was able to read it better than they could but, as I said before, it's not a matter of brains, just aptitude.

> Probably a bit of both I would imagine. Did you, as the war or your experience with radio went on, did you get faster or was Morse the sort of thing where you'd reach a peak fairly early and probably stay there?

Well, we were supposed to operate at twenty-five words a minute sending and receiving. I could send and receive faster but in actual operation you very seldom do that. Now I would say the average speed that you would operate at and more especially in the aircraft would be about eighteen or twenty words a minute.

> That always still amazes me when you think that on average I suppose a word must be three or four letters so you're looking at something like - you'd have to be looking at about ninety letters a minute, wouldn't you?

Well, in code it was generally a five-letter group and they were classified as a word but twenty-five is a pretty good standard.

> Twenty-five words of five letters?

Yes. You'd, say, average that on code groups because you'd have to pass out in code as well as PL - or plain language. It's plain language you can 'journalise', as we call it, a little bit. It's not encouraged - that you sort of write the word down before it's completely sent sort of thing. It's called journalising - to be discouraged. But you learned to do it.

> Just to get those figures straight. We're talking about, say at the lowest, twenty words a minute in groups of five letters. So multiplying twenty-fives, you're talking about something like a hundred letters per minute. That's more than one per second. Working at that rate, Rod, receiving morse, let's say, was your brain consciously saying, 'Okay, that's A, B, et cetera', or was it just totally automatic; so well learnt that you didn't even think about it?

It's almost like somebody speaking to you. It becomes, as you say, more or less automatic. Now I haven't worked morse for over forty years and I'll bet you I can pick up a paper now and transmit it in morse straight off. I'll give you an idea.

(15.00) Right.

It's *National Geographic*.

> Right, this is *National Geographic*.

Der dit der-der-der dit-dit ... [Rod Butler proceeds to orally send morse code.]

Incredible. Especially given that two of the letters are obscured by an ape's head (laughing). Let's do 'a personal vision of vanishing wild life'.

Right. Dit-der dit-der-der-dit dit dit-der-dit dit-dit-dit ....

That's unbelievable. That's incredible. Well, that really gives a good indication of that.

The training must have been pretty good.

Well, I was going to ask you about your training. If you looked across the broad range of your training and the different aspects of it, would you rate it as adequate, good, very good, poor? How was it?

I would have rated the course as very good. As a matter of fact the only bad experience was the CO of the wireless school who shall remain nameless. Not the CO of the wireless school, Knox-Knight, he was a champion guy, but the OC of the wireless part I did not like and he did not like me (laughs).

Without going into names, was that just a personality clash between you or ...?

I think so.

It wasn't a general feeling amongst people?

Oh, he wasn't very popular with the boys. He was more or less, what would we call him - 'rank happy'.

Right. I'm sure it says a lot. But just pursuing that issue for a moment, the difference between the boys and the officers, what were the characteristics do you think that men most admired in their officers and what were the characteristics that they tended to resent?

I would say the majority, practically all the officers that I met during that period, were absolute gentlemen. I played football with the team and the majority of them were commissioned men and they were champion guys and as a team and off the field we were on first name terms and there was no problem when we got back on the 'drome to revert to the service standard. And everybody understood that and accepted it and I found them very fair and great company.

So 'Bob' on the field became 'Sir' off the field.

Exactly, yeah, no problem. And I've nothing but admiration for the boys that I met there - the officers.

Just going back to the more general question about qualities that men generally or perhaps yourself specifically saw as the good qualities of officers, or the

most respected qualities besides being generally easy in the sense you were saying, what do you think those qualities were?

I think fairness - to be able to disregard differences in, what shall we say, status or class, to disregard that and be on a service footing that every man was entitled to respect as a man for the job he was doing provided he did it well.

To look at the individual not his background.

Yes.

Do you think there was any difference between men who were wartime officers and men who were permanent air force officers?

Oh yes, I would say. I would say the permanent men were more gentlemanly and they had a far greater respect for service life and the service as an entity than the majority of wartime men.

In saying that, are you saying that the permanent air force men stood on the dignity of rank a bit more than wartime men, or not?

I would say to a point, yes. Some were I think disciplinarians to a fault but you could cop even severe discipline with fairness and I think that was the .... Now one man who was a great disciplinarian - I'll name him too - Andy Swan. He was to me one of the nicest and fairest men I ever met in my life and a man that you could approach and ask his advice and he was strict, tough but very fair, and as such he was respected.

Right. So he'd be tough on his flying officer as well as on his fresh recruit.

(20.00) He was tougher on his officers than he was on the men and another CO, ICC Thomson, who put it pretty right: the greater the rank, the greater the responsibility. And they regarded it that way and if the boys know that, they'd say, 'Oh well, just because you were an LAC or a corporal that you're going to cop this. You can bet your life if you're an FO or a flight leader you'd cop something a lot worse.' And we'd say, 'Well, that's fair'.

Sure. Just going on a little bit. I know you were saying you were a very good football player and you were mentioning playing football and so on, that must have been good. What were the other main kinds of recreation during your training period?

I did a little bit of wrestling. I liked gym work; most of the physical stuff. I'm not very fond of you saying that I thought I was a good football player, it sounds like beating your own drum. But I thought because I was a good footballer helped me to get into the air force.

Oh yes. No, I didn't mean it in that sense. But you were playing I think for A grade teams, weren't you?

Well, I played first grade union in the country when I was fifteen and I played first grade league when I was sixteen and I was a registered professional when I was eighteen. And I can remember when I joined the air force there apparently the MO was well aware of what we could do in the way of sports and he was a football fanatic and asked for a short burst on hygiene which boiled down to 'Don't do it and you won't get it', said, 'Who plays football?' and I didn't stand up. And to finish he said, 'Who's Butler?', and I stood up and he said, 'You play football?'. I said, 'Yes, but I'm a registered professional and can't play union', and he said, 'You can now, you're whitewashed. See you at training.' I've never forgotten that (laughs).

That's interesting. Well, moving on a little bit. Of course the original aim was to use your wireless entry into the air force to become a pilot.

Yep.

But I think that rather ran foul. Tell us how that happened?

Well, they called for applications from serving members for air crew and I can remember John Turner, who was on my course and myself - he joined up with the same idea - we put in an application and the OC of the school called us up and told us that we'd be passing out in a couple of months' time as wireless operators and it would be foolish just for the sake of a couple of months to throw away that training and mustering because if we failed in our flying or became medically unfit we could then fall back on our basic mustering and we agreed. So we duly passed out, and when they next called we applied but were told that they were no longer taking wireless operators, which was a kick in the face, you know.

That must have been very disappointing.

Mmm. It was, yep. It was very disappointing.

Did that rankle for a long time or did you get over it?

No, no. It was just one of those things.

It's a sort of real catch-22 situation, that one. Anyway, it was towards the end of your course I think you were saying that war was declared and you were saying before, of course that you had an inkling of that happening. Do you remember hearing the news?

I heard it. I was living out. I was married the day before war was declared and we travelled straight down from Sydney - I was married in Sydney - to Victoria and when a paperboy came along the street and was yelling out, 'Britain gets stuck into the Nazis', that's how I got the news, from there and during the night I received a telegram telling me to report back immediately. So that's how I got the news.

That must have been a somewhat jarring or disappointing start to your married life?

Well, I wasn't worried about myself. I was more worried about my wife because she didn't know a soul in Victoria or Melbourne and she was left in a flat on her own at Clifton Hill and I wasn't allowed off the unit for a fortnight.

Do you think you should have been?

Oh, in the light of hindsight, yes. I can't see that there was any great value in keeping me in the unit for a fortnight because it wasn't like as if I had to be on twenty-four hour call or anything like that and I thought that was a bit rough - useless I would put it.

Did the air force make any accommodation for that kind of domestic situation, for example, in terms of getting other women to be in touch with lone wolves such as your wife?

Not to my knowledge.

Right. Well, going on. It was shortly after this of course I think you were posted to No. 6 Squadron up at Richmond where they were flying Avro Ansons. Did your wife come back with you?

Yes, she came back. We lived out at Richmond.

So you weren't living on the base?

No.

Tell us about what happened there with No. 6 Squadron? This is your first permanent appointment I suppose after training. What kinds of tasks was No. 6 involved in?

(25.00) Mostly across country trips. Some training, tuition of second pilots and stuff like that. The coastal patrol, the sea searchers. There was a period where we did quite considerable training in formation flying. That was for the benefit of a newsreel that was being taken for propaganda purposes. I can remember it was very hairy flying in formation in Avro Ansons. But that was mainly our task.

Do you remember how pilots felt about that? I understand they weren't too used to flying in formation.

No, they were a little bit, what will I say, worried about it. You know, there were some close calls and I don't think they were thrilled about it but they did a good job. I saw the newsreel subsequently and saw the flying and it was quite good. I enjoyed it.

Right. How real was the feeling here, while you were with No. 6 Squadron that you were really training for a war? Was that a real feeling or were you - incidentally, excuse my voice, I think I might have mentioned I had this tooth job today. I'm getting tied around the tooth occasionally - how real was the feeling that you were preparing for war?

Oh, quite real. Didn't have any doubts about it. We knew eventually that we'd be into it. Of course I don't think anybody that had a bit of commonsense could see any early end to it, and so it was just a matter of eventually we would be in action - close action.

Was that an appealing prospect or something you simply accepted?

Ah, it didn't worry me. I remember when I was posted to 3 Squadron for overseas service my wife saying to me, 'Some of the chaps that had been posted wives' tell me that they got out of it', and I said there were only two ways of getting out of it as far as I was concerned: one, for medical reasons - medically unfit; or that you .... I can't think of the other one. But anyhow I said to her, 'The only reason that I can offer is that I'm in love with my wife' and I said, 'I don't think they'd take much notice of me'. And I said, 'Other than that I don't propose to try and get out of a job that I'd been trained for and paid for in peacetime and when it comes to the crunch say, "I want out"'. And I can remember her saying, 'Oh, I wouldn't care'. I said, 'You wouldn't care now but you would in later years and I certainly care'. But I was quite happy to do the job that I'd been trained for.

How did your family, I mean your parents and so on, feel about your heading off?

They were quite proud of it, except Toots, she just didn't want me to go - that's my wife - but she was very upset. But the family were quite proud.

Let's move on a little bit. I know during the period with No. 6 you did go to Cressy in Victoria where you did a squadron gunners' course - I think that's correct?

Yes.

Tell us about that?

Oh, they'd send down a squadron at a time and we'd do our training in the armoury, the dismantlement of the guns and the cleaning and practice with stoppages and loading and ammunition, air-to-air, air-to-ground, and just a general squadron gunners' course. You were then granted sixpence a day specialist pay and you were entitled to wear the 'winged bullet'.

How much of that training was done in the air, the actual learning to fire the guns?

Oh, the majority of it, like the air-to-air and air-to-ground and shooting at the drogues and that sort of thing. The drogues were towed by Hawker Demon aircraft, I remember. And I can remember the ammunition, we had different coloured paints on them so that you were able to mark the hits after when they dropped the drogue, and it was collected and you'd know by the number of - if your paint was red and you had a few red marks in the drogue that you'd hit something. But it was quite interesting, we enjoyed it.

Did you enjoy flying? Actually being up in aircraft?

Yes. Oh yes, I had no worries about it. Quite a lot of it - as most air crew will tell you - is boring and that's why the boys tend to get close to the ground where at least you get some impression of speed and why so many, you know, got into trouble for low flying (laughs).

What about air sickness, was that ever a problem with you?

Never a problem. No, never a worry.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is continuing. Ed Stokes with Rod [Butler], No. 3 Squadron, tape one, side two.

Rod, it was while you were at Richmond that you were posted to No. 3 Squadron that, in fact, was itself also at Richmond. What was your first impression of the squadron?

Well, it was in a state of flux at the time that I was posted there because it was just a few weeks before they were due to leave and there wasn't any work really going on. So it was more or less getting to know the boys that were in the squadron. There was practically no work as such.

Right. What about the structure. Obviously, later it was a unit that came to have a very strong name or strong reputation. Was that evident then, or not?

Not at that time. There was a good feeling amongst the boys. It was a case of all in the one boat and we've got to do a job and getting to know each other and picking out the ones you wanted to know and the ones you didn't care if you knew them or not. That's about all, you know.

Right. What about the officers? I think the squadron leader then was McLachlan?

Well, I knew Ian because I'd played football with him and I knew him quite well and I had a lot of time for him on the field and what little I'd had to do off the field, I found him a thorough gentleman.

Right. I understand you were really posted pretty much at the last moment to top up the squadron's numbers before they went overseas, even to the point where I think they tried to give you your inoculations immediately before going on leave?

Yes. I knew that some of the boys had suffered pretty bad after-effects from the injections, especially the smallpox one. So I wangled my way out of the injections and had them after I

came back from leave because I didn't want to spend my leave nursing myself. And so I had them after I came back from the pre-em leave.

> That's certainly understandable. And one thing I did want to ask you: you had been trained as a peacetime wireless operator, of course there are also men who are wartime operators coming into the picture now, do you think they were as well trained as you, or not?

Oh, some of them were champion because I think they'd brought in a course called S1 - Special Course No. 1 - and there were a few of those boys with 3 Squadron. Chaps like Bluey Aked and Tim Teehan that weren't CAF. There were some CAF men too, and they did quite a good job. No criticism of them and certainly none of the Special Courses because they were thoroughly trained and really blokes that loved radio and loved wireless and with lots of them it was their life. And they were really champion guys and very well up in their knowledge - very good.

> Right. So, if anything, the unit was strengthened by the addition of these wartime men rather than weakened in terms of training?

Oh yes, as far as the Special Course blokes were concerned, I'd say yes. With the CAF most of them had elected to be in the radio because that was their life outside and they had a background in the main of radio and electricity and wireless operating. So they were no loss either - they were good.

> Great. Just a moment. Rod, leaving Australia must have been quite an emotional event I'd imagine. You were going off to a war and to a fairly distant place although I guess you didn't know exactly where, or did you?

No, we didn't know.

> How did you feel when the news came through that you were to embark?

(5.00) Well, I suppose the greatest sense was the feeling that I was - not having been long married and being deeply in love with my wife - was rather a wrench but other than that, no problem. But I suppose everybody suffered that (laughs) who was in love, anyhow.

> Sure, the men obviously who were married. This photo here, it's a press photo of the embarkation. A gangway here marked 'Orient Line', of course going onto the *Orontes*. Do you remember that day?

Yes, quite well. I remember, you notice the boys, most of them have their greatcoats on. It was a rainy, dull day and I'd told my wife I didn't want her to be down there, that I didn't think it would be very nice. I didn't think that she'd get the opportunity like to speak to us or be close to us, which turned out to be correct, and I thought it would only be more heart-wrenching for both of us, you know, if she was there. It was better to say goodbye at home.

> Were there any women there, or not?

Oh yes, quite a number. Quite a number there but they were kept at a fair distance away. It was pretty hard to recognise any of them.

How did the day begin?

We marched out of the gate at Richmond, and I can remember De La Rue who was the station CO had tears running down his cheeks, and it was quite emotional apparently for some of the old boys. I can't remember any great emotion, I think I'd spent that at home. On my part it was just part of the process, the beginning and hopefully not the end.

Well, embarking on the *Orontes*, it was quite a flash ship. What do you remember of that?

It was like going on a pleasure cruise. It had not - although it was classed in as troopship - it had not been converted to a troopship. It was all still fitted up and we still had seven course meals and it was the height of luxury - marvellous trip.

And including accommodation?

Extra good. Very good. As good as any passenger's.

Well, you steam out of the heads and you head off I know towards Bombay to tranship to the *Dilwara*. The voyage on the *Orontes*, did you have on-going training or was it just a time to fill as you wished?

No, we had physical training and we had various jobs dished out to us, you know, like to try and keep us busy. Not that there was much to be done. But mostly physical training and parades and just something to keep our minds occupied I think so we wouldn't sink completely into apathy.

But I hear you did sometimes sink into deck chairs?

Yes. There were deck chairs laid on, sprawled out on the deck. We were really playing the tourist quite well.

And what about things such as the threat of submarine attack, was that a real issue or not?

We had escort. If I remember rightly the *Perth* picked us up and took us part of the way anyhow, that I can remember. They could have been quite a bit along the way but out of sight. But no great trepidation.

But obviously strict rules of ...

... of blackouts, yes. But there was, as far as I was personally concerned and my mates, there was not any great worry.

Let's move on a little bit. Bombay itself must have been quite a shock or a very different place to Australia.

Yes. I didn't think much of it, especially the native quarter which we had a look at and the cages as they call them and some of those low joints. I wasn't impressed with it at all. I didn't like it.

You embarked on the *Dilwara* and you were telling me a story that I think is worth getting down and I think this is while the ship was still tied up, before you departed. There was really quite an uproar over the men's food and conditions?

(10.00) Yes. There was quite an uproar. We were a bit dazed when we boarded the thing - if you could call it a thing - compared to the *Orontes*, the contrast was dreadful. And we were several decks below and the ceiling of the deck you could touch reaching up with your hands. And your mess tables - your hammocks were slung over them of a night time. And it was smelly and hot. The first meal that was brought to us was brought up in wash tubs and consisted of some sort of hash which had a pretty thick crust of hash on it, not of pastry, and when they broke it to serve it up there was steam. The smell of the steam that came out of it would just about knock you down and that was the beginning of the uproar. Also we were told we could sleep on deck while we were anchored in harbour waiting convoy but would not be allowed to sleep on deck whilst at sea nor could the portholes be opened and there was quite a hubbub going on and the rotten food was the last straw.

The next thing the boys were going to get off the thing. So as the seamen were undoing the ropes, they took over and tied her up again. And the CO, Ian McLachlan, came down with Squadron Leader Heath and I suppose because Ian knew me he asked me what was the problem. I told him that the boys were very unhappy about the sleeping accommodation, the fact that they would have to sleep in that hell-hole below with no proper ventilation and stink; that the food was rotten and that that was their main problem. And he said that he would see what he could do about it. And then the medical officer, Squadron Leader Laver, who was very popular with the boys, came up and spoke to us and said he would guarantee us supervision of the food and would also get us permission to sleep on deck.

And did the situation really improve, or not?

Yes. The next day a lot of food was thrown overboard because it was rotten, because he was doing a personal inspection of the stores and he assured us that we wouldn't be served any more rotten food but if we were, not to throw it overboard like we did with the first lot but to bring it to him and he would take it to the OC Troops and also we understood that Ian had spoken to the OC Troops and told him what he wanted, and that we could sleep on deck and that the food in the future would be a lot better.

So how did the journey in the *Dilwara* turn out?

Oh, quite good. Our main problem was I think we wanted fresh air and food that wasn't rotten and if we were assured of that we were prepared to put up with the other hardships or comparative hardships compared to the *Orontes*.

Sure. Well, let's go on a little bit. Of course I think it was at Port Tewfik that you in fact disembarked?

That's correct.

Right. What was your first impression of the Middle East?

Well, much as I thought it would be.

You were saying you didn't like Bombay. Did you like or dislike the Middle East?

I'd more appreciation I think or more expectation of Egypt because of the fact that our boys had served there during the first world war, and I'd heard considerable stories about Egypt and also I was interested in the ancient Egyptians, and I was looking forwards perhaps to have the pleasure of seeing the sights and the tombs and so forth. So I wasn't .... I didn't have any anti-feelings about it at all. I knew that there would be lots of things to interest me there apart from the service life.

Let's just talk about getting around a bit, just while we are on the topic. In your time in the Middle East did you get much opportunity in terms of long leaves and short days here and there to get around and see the country, or not?

Yes. Not long periods - short periods. I was very fortunate in being able to visit some new excavations there that had been unfinished, and we were able to become friendly with the guards who allowed us in there and there were still mummies lying around and [inaudible] and that sort of thing. That was something we'd never experience again. That was very close to the step pyramid where those new excavations were and that occurred while I was at Helwan. Also I saw the main tourist spots like the pyramids and the ruins of Memphis and those places but not in a long period. But enjoyed myself really going around those places although there was nothing .... The greatest thing was to be able to visit those new excavations where they'd been stopped. The archaeologists had just stopped in mid stride because anything they brought up would have had to have been buried again and they thought it best to just leave the stuff there. But we were careful not to vandalise or destroy anything that was there. But that was very interesting.

(15.00) Do you think most servicemen took that kind of interest in these things, or not?

Not a lot of them. One of my close friends, Bob Currie, that was killed over there and also Bluey Aked, they always came with me on any of those things that we could organise together. They were very interested in those things.

And did you get around by scrounging army transport or public transport?

Whichever way we could. If we could get army transport it was so much the good, but the private transport we generally had to pay for in the way of gharries and things like that, and hire donkeys and that sort of thing.

> Tell us about a couple of these photos, Rod. This seems rather a lovely scene with this canal here.

That's called the Sweet Water Canal. That's one of the - well, it's navigable. It's also used for irrigation but you can see, if you look at the top end of the photograph there that's in it you wouldn't think by the width of it that it would accommodate them but they're quite shallow [inaudible]. But along the Nile Valley the irrigation from the Nile is considerable and it's a terrific contrast to having the desert on the edge of it with such rich country, you know, close handy.

> Yes, it must be an incredible difference. These ones, or that one in particular, of the aerial photo of the pyramids is lovely. That must have been a remarkable ....

That was taken out of a Blenheim, when one of the chaps from a desert 'drome up near Tobruk that I took on the way back. A trip that we came down for a complete refit on one of the aircraft. But that was quite a good shot that because it shows the Tombs, what they call them, of the Princesses and up till that time they hadn't found that complete boat, remember that they found in practically its entirety that hadn't been excavated at that time and it was found not far from the Tombs of the Princesses. You can see the Pyramids of the Princesses.

> One thing I did want to ask you about these photographs and, in fact, also about the diary you kept that seemed very interesting. Officially, of course, diaries certainly weren't sanctioned, did the authorities take a sort of real interest or just a half-hearted interest in those regulations?

Well, they never approached it and asked me. I was very careful not to put in any service details or anything like that in. It was more personal stuff and observations, personalities but nothing .... Although they say it's surprising what they can gather even though you think that you're not giving stuff away. I was very careful not to put any service details or anything like that that could be used in evidence against me (laughs).

> And these photographs that you've got, your own photos, were they being processed by people outside the unit or did you have photographers, unit photographers, who were happy to ....

We had unit photographers and you could get some stuff done there, but in the main I didn't take a camera. I think I had a camera for a very short time when I first went to 55 Squadron RAF, but one thing you couldn't get film up there, and the other thing there wasn't much to photograph other than desert and I mean you were flying too high as a rule. Although I've got a couple that I could show you where about all you could say was 'enemy coast ahead' sort of thing. It's just a bit of land in the haze.

> That's right.

Very uninteresting.

A bit like flying across Central Australia.

Exactly.

Well, going on to some more detailed things about the units, Rod. I think September '40 was when No. 3 Squadron went to Ismailia where they were really setting up with Lysanders and Gladiators, what's your recollection of that period? What were you doing?

Practically on a peacetime existence because Ismailia was a permanent RAF station and it had a beautiful base there and permanent barracks, well organised messes. As a matter of fact, as wireless operator air gunners we had practically nothing to do other than .... We did refresher gunnery courses, we did a few classes on navigation because as two-seater aircraft normally they would fly observers who were trained in navigation and we thought it would be a good idea if the wireless operators also were able to understand navigation, at least elementary navigation.

(20.00) What, the idea being if the pilot was boxed you might get him out of a scrap?

Or that if you could possibly help with map reading or something like that, to recognise points, to orientate yourself or whatever. We thought it would be no load to carry in any case so we did refresher gunnery courses and we also did some classes in navigation while we were there, but other than that it was more or less peacetime.

Right. At this period I think the Hurricanes were mostly going to RAF squadrons and there was a bit of a shemozzle with the No. 3 Squadron's planes.

Well, the way we understood it, which to me of course was second-hand information, that the headquarters, Middle East didn't want another army co-op and they were in the throes of organising us as a fighter squadron which eventually happened till they organised - possibly only had enough - aircraft to fit out the two flights which they did; and left the one detached flight with Lysanders at Ikingi Maryut which I was in until they had enough aircraft to fit out the third flight, which then became the full entity of 3 Squadron other than some of the radio operators, the ground ops and the air operators who became redundant.

Was there ever any feeling on the part of Australian men that the RAF was giving preferential treatment to their own squadrons, or not, in terms of equipment, planes, et cetera?

I have no first-hand knowledge of that and nor do I have any personal experience of it. So we didn't know what the hell was going on really except that we were dragging our feet.

And the change from the squadron's role being one of army's co-operation to close fighter support in terms of strafing, bombing and just fighter cover and so on, how did that directly affect you as a wireless man?

Well, the biggest kick to me - meaning 'kick in the guts' - was leaving my own squadron and serving with RAF boys that I didn't know, but leaving a batch of my own people and my own friends to go and serve with a squadron of whom I had no knowledge whatsoever. I didn't like that very much at all.

I assume there was no choice in it?

Absolutely none. None whatsoever.

Just to work in a date, we've got here 9 January '41 as being the date when Rod actually received orders to go to 202 Group which incorporated 55 Squadron.

That's right.

Right. Well, we'll come to that in a moment. We'll pick up on that again. One thing I thought I might ask you about, Rod, is living conditions in different places you served in during your period in the Middle East. You were saying Ismailia was very well set up and comfortable. I know later you went to a place, and you have a photograph here, I think it was called Ikingi Maryut ...

Ikingi Maryut.

Right. He said it not me. Ikingi Maryut ...

Maryut. Yes. We generally referred to it as Ikingi.

Right. And this was near Alexandria.

That's right.

And I think you lived in this bunker here?

Well, the RAF people who were there prior to us going was No. 30 Squadron RAF and they had this dug-out - two rooms to it - where they used to store oil and stuff. Anyhow, I sighted it and I thought, 'That'll do me' and so I promptly shifted camp into that.

The option I assume being tents?

No, there were huts there but they were amongst all the mob - the snorers and the yahoos and the yellers and all that (laughs). I preferred to be alone. And so I shifted camp to that and then Yank Mullaney, one of the wireless air gunners, he was in hospital when we shifted there, and he came out and he sighted it and said, 'What about we dig another room and I'll move in too'. So we did that and so that's where we camped. When Campbell took over from Perrin as OC, he had an inspection of the quarters and inspected the dug-out and didn't find any faults with it. Didn't say anything to us anyhow, but asked the other boys, if they kicked us out. Maybe he thought we were buddy buddies or something (laughs). But it was a dreadful place and the CO of No. 30 Squadron when he left there declared the place unfit for human habitation but nobody took any notice of him.

(25.00) Do you mean your dug-out or the entire camp?

The whole camp. The latrines for the boys were 300 yards away from the huts and they used to borrow the equipment, the store's [inaudible] bike to go back and forwards but of course if two or three wanted to go together, some had to walk.

Quite a long way to go. The dug-out that you had, was the real attraction with that that it was cooler or that it was warmer in winter or safer from bombs or what?

Well, it was safer from any bombing. It also was private and as a matter of fact we used two rooms as a bedroom and one room as a store room and it was quiet and if you wanted to go to bed at eight o'clock you were assured of a sleep, not being kept awake half the night by people coming and going and snoring and yahooing and so forth, so that it was quite a big thing with us.

Well, it is certainly quite a well set-up place, isn't it, with the banked up walls and the sandbag roof and so on. Another place I wanted to ask you about and this seems to be fairly extreme in terms of camp conditions was ...

Kafarit.

Right. Kafarit that was near the Suez Canal. I mean this is real pure shifting sand. What was living there like?

They had a reasonable canteen there. You could get beer there, you could drink and you could get a tent but as far as the meal conditions and the dust and the dirt, that was lousy. But they were housing air crew there, and also we were waiting there to embark to return to Australia, and they told me that the idea of shifting the air crew here whereas previously they used to go to Ismailia which was, as I told you, beautiful, that the air crew who were spelling there or in transit fell in love with the place and didn't want to be shifted out of it and found all sorts of reasons not to be shifted. So they moved it to this place where everybody wanted a reason to get out of it, not to stop there. So that solved that problem.

Right. So it was really to keep people moving along.

That's right.

In the photograph you see most of these tents coming down with their sides pegged above the ground. Did they also have vertical walls going down to the ground or not?

A tent proper was inside. These are what we call the fly that goes over that sort of sheds the rain and stuff outside the tent proper, and keeps it dry and any leaks that occur are only minor. They were more or less what they call the fly. You'll see there's two different types of tent there but these are the main ones.

Yes. So the tents under the fly did go down to the ground?

Yes.

Right. Well, I was going to ask you just generally about other camps, perhaps not these specific ones in the photos, but the other camps you recall generally through the Middle East where you went. How comfortable or otherwise were they generally and how often were you living in tents?

When I was first with 55 we were on a desert 'drome there and on dispersal scattered all over the place, and conditions there were lousy and mainly we existed on what we called our own tea clubs. We were fortunate in that we could buy eggs occasionally from wandering Arabs. Also the .... Being air crew when we flew down to base, or some of our flight flew down to base they could buy stuff and bring it back and we used to call that the tea club, and that's practically what we existed on because the stuff available at the mess was dreadful. And also what we managed to scrounge from Italian stores that had been left behind came in very handy.

Was there much flying, you know, major flying backwards and forwards of supplies and perhaps beer too?

Not a great deal, not as much as we would have liked but the normal flights down of the .... Some of the officers had to go down like officially and other times flying aircraft down for maintenance that was unable to be carried out on the 'drome proper as we saw it. But as far as the sand storms and dust and dirt was concerned - more dust storm than sand storm - it was about the consistency of cornflour that in some cases would blow for three days and three nights and you'd wake up of a morning with a ring of mud around your lips where you'd lick your lips because the dust was settling on you through the night. And, of course, we were unable to wash because there was insufficient water. To get enough to wash our faces was about all. As a matter of fact, when our clothes became too smelly we used to pinch aviation gasoline and wash them and at least get the grease out of it. So that wasn't very good.

So there was a very severe shortage of water?

Oh yes. As a matter of fact, in some stages they used to put a guard on the water cart to stop the boys pinching it. It was pretty desperate.

Sure, I can imagine.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Rod [Butler], No. 3 Squadron. Tape two, side one.

You were saying water was very scarce. Would you say that was the greatest of the discomforts of daily life, or not?

Yes. That, and fleas, because the place was riddled with fleas and we used to smear kerosene on ourselves to discourage fleas which wasn't very comfortable and in some cases it was quite hot but preferable to fleas crawling on you. So those were the two things that I remember mostly as the greatest discomforts, especially not being able to bath properly.

What about stomach upsets?

Medical parades, well, mostly we kept away from them because you got the same medication for a toe ache as you got for a stomach ache or a headache.

Which was what? Aspirin?

Oh, generally some dark coloured liquid. Drink this and take this and come back if you don't feel any better. So we came to the conclusion that that was a joke. So we generally let nature take its course.

Were stomach upsets and that sort of thing common, or not?

Yes. We used to refer to it as 'Gyppo tummy' but also there were some severe cases of dysentery up there. One case I remember it must have been a very, very virulent type that the lad got hold of and he died within three days. But in the main they were just short-term upset.

I guess certainly compared to the tropics it was, being a dry climate, relatively healthy.

Yes. Some of the boys suffered from desert sores and I can remember Shank got fever they called 'sandfly fever'. Some suffered more than others. I think it was sort of an individual thing, just what antibodies you had in your blood, how efficient they were.

Besides the things we've talked about, I suppose accommodation and food we've touched on and these sort of general issues of comfort, are there any other things that would stand out in your mind regarding your general day to day life?

The ration list, especially with the RAF. I came to the conclusion .... I went a couple of times with the ration boys to collect it, I think it was the ASC and stuff that was on the list that you couldn't get - supposedly destroyed by bomb damage and so on, you could buy if you had the money, such as cases of tinned fruit and stuff like that. So there was a racket going on in that. To what extent I don't know, but we took advantage of it when we had the money but it still should have been there. So there was some rackets going on up there amongst the food supply. I can remember we paid a pound Gyppo, which was twenty-five bob Australian, for a case of tinned fruit from the ASC.

And what would it have cost back in Australia? I've got no idea.

I have no idea at that stage.

A shilling or less?

No. I don't know. I can't even remember how many cans were in a case. You know, it was only a couple of times that I went. But what I saw and heard, I formed that opinion. Whether some of it disappeared when it got back, more of disappeared or not, I don't know. But you were lucky if you went to the mess, which we seldom did, if you got a slice of bully beef and an onion (laughs).

Well, let's just go back now to the actual story of what No. 3 was doing. I know it was fairly early on, about November 1940 you were detached. I think, or there was a detached flight?

Yeah, we were still 3 Squadron.

Right. But you were part of it. Why was that flight detached from the main squadron?

(5.00) As far as I can gather they were only able or only prepared to fit out two flights with fighters and until such time as they were able to fit the third flight out we remained as detached flight and worked with the 6th Divy still as army co-operation.

So, did they have planes you could use or you were a detached flight without aircraft?

No, we had planes. We had Lysanders.

Oh sorry, you had Lysanders but not the fighters.

No, no. As soon as they got the fighters our little group were posted to 202 Group RAF.

I see. Well, tell us about that work you did in the period when you were a detached squadron - a detached flight from No. 3. How close was the cooperation with the army?

It was more or less training. On the initial exercise I remember it was a shemozzle but that was rectified and any subsequent exercises we carried out - also some we carried out with the Indian army - I can remember they went off quite well. But, as I say, the initial exercise was a complete wash-out. Whether it was due to bad organisation or what it was - I'd say that was what it was, it was disorganised - but we had a meeting after that and we all aired our little grievances and suggestions and from then on everything was fine.

Right. But I understand having done this training you didn't, as that detached squadron, ever fly in active combat with the army?

That's correct. We never .... They were more or less training with the army preparatory to moving up.

Right. And then you went off to 202 Group.

That's right. Yes.

> I think there was also a bomber gunnery course at Ismailia and you managed to get onto that because you felt you were being very unproductively occupied.

That's right. While we were at Salum, we were with 202 Group there. We were doing nothing, and we had no indication of what we were likely to do or when and I suggested, that seeing the possibility that we would go to a bomber squadron and have turrets to operate and we had no experience on the operation of hydraulic turrets, that it would be a good idea if we did occupy that time at least in some place where the living conditions were reasonable doing a turret course. And the OC agreed with me and three of us subsequently went down to Ismailia. Two of the boys that weren't sent down, that was Bob Currie and Tim Hale, just after we left, they were .... 55 wanted two gunners and they were sent to them and by .... There were several officers - only commissioned officers were on that turret course - and while we were completing that word came through that we were to return to the desert and we were posted straight to 55 and in the meantime Hale and Currie were killed before we got back. And it was only a matter of weeks.

> Tragic. The appointment to 55 Squadron and RAF Squadron, Rod, you intimated before that you weren't very happy about that but there was nothing I understand Australians could do to avoid being passed over to the RAF.

No. Well, that wasn't a matter that we had any say or choice and didn't expect any really. I'm sure if there had have been a choice we would have been given it. But one of the main things when I went there that I was .... I had an interview with the CO and he had a look at my log book and he suggested that I go up in this kite and become familiar with the gear, just off the coast, and so we went up and did some practice with the turret and the guns and I got about twelve stoppages from the guns in the course of 150 rounds and on return to base I found out the guns were in a dreadful condition. They were rusty and crooked and one barrel was completely ruined in one of the guns, and I went to the so-called armament section, which existed in name only, because the armament gear for the service of guns and so forth was scattered throughout the flight - bits here and everywhere. Apparently the boys did bits in here and when you wanted them to do something you went and chased it round the flights.

(10.00) On the next day I was to take off on an exercise and took off and operated the turret and when you gave it extreme starboard traverse the guns immediately started firing without touching the triggers, because the Bowden cables that operated the triggers had been threaded through the wrong way and it opened fire (laughs). And also they were in a dreadful condition. The guns had been left out in all the weather and hadn't been cleaned since the last usage. Well, these were things, you know, we wouldn't even dream of doing in Australian squadron. So I had to go back and clean those guns and then I was allotted a kite of my own but it was only then that I could say, 'Well, this is the third lot that I've got to clean up and get going and get into condition to suit me'.

> Is the general point there that this just happened to be a run-down squadron with some poor gear or that overall Australian squadrons were kept up better than British squadrons?

I would say the Australian squadrons were far in advance in their maintenance and their attitude in the whole set-up. The officers didn't seem to give a damn: they seldom saw you outside of actually flying with them; the CO didn't seem very interested; you weren't even briefed on take-offs and weren't debriefed.

When you say 'you', you mean as one of the air crew as against the pilots?

On the first op that I took off on we were to .... The pilot told me that he would give me the details as soon as we were airborne, that he didn't have the operation order. We went to Benina to use that as an ALG and when I got there he said I was to keep a watch with 208 Squadron. He didn't know 208 Squadron's call sign nor did I, nor did anybody else. The battery in the aircraft was flat because he'd left the landing light on all the way and apparently when he cut out .... When I went out there the battery was flat but it had apparently flattened on the way up, the engine generator wasn't giving enough herbs to replace the landing lights, and this was in the middle of the night. By the time I'd got another battery I couldn't zero tune it, as we call it - tune by zero beep by transmission of a base station. So I had to get a wave metre to get a frequency - I had no operational call sign. I didn't know 208 Squadron's call sign. By the time I got things and got on frequency and got in order and called several times, it was long past the time of the sched and I was very unhappy about that and expected a great old interview about that, which would have happened in the RAAF and where you do grievances about lack of organisation and knowledge and so forth and so on - not a word said.

Was this a pattern that stayed throughout your time with 55 Squadron, or not?

Yes.

Things didn't improve?

No. I often thought about it since and they were a squadron that had been a long time in the field. They were boys who, in my opinion, a lot of them needed a spell. They were a squadron .... They'd been up in Mesopotamia and God knows where, and what they call 'browned off' or 'brassed off', they seemed to be. And as far as the air crew was concerned it was only a matter of bloody time too - what the hell. I remember speaking to one of the RAF gunners and I noticed, we were loading our magazines, and he was putting all - we were allowed to load our own pattern, whether it was, you know, so many ball, one armour piercing, one incendiary and one tracer or whatever it was, our own pattern - and he was loading with all tracer. And I said, 'What are you doing that for?'. He said, 'You've got no chance of hitting the buggers but when they see all those tracers they get the shits and clear out', and he might have had a point (laughs).

Yes, well, he might well too. But it wasn't regular practice to do that.

Oh no. And another one, he used to take books to read in the turret because most of the time there was a mile of silence and I said, 'Why don't you keep a lookout?' and he said, 'Because you might see something and it's tempting providence'. (Laughs) But whether that's just humour or not I don't know.

How many other Australians were there with you on the squadron?

With 55, well, Bobby Currie and Timmy Hale, they were killed, Johnny Turner, he was killed, Georgie Kerr, he was accidentally shot by his own observer and died three days later, and Yank Mullaney, he got religion and myself and I got frostbitten. That was it.

Yes, right. So about ten men, that sort of number.

Yeah. There were a couple of photographers that you never saw much of. One of them we called him 'desert happy' or 'bomb happy' or something (laughs).

Let's just go on to the actual work that you did most of the time with the squadron. What were the main duties of the squadron while you were with it?

Mostly photoreco that we did.

(15.00) That's reconnaissance?

Yes, coastal reconnaissance.

Is that before or after attacks, or both?

That was at that time .... That was after the end of the first advance into the desert and when the Germans were building up strength there. We lost a lot of aircraft at that particular time because the Jerry were patrolling in squadron strengths of ME-110s which were long-range aircraft and the German air crew were far more determined than the Italians. I don't think the Italian side was ever in it. They wouldn't come close enough for you to hit them which meant to say they had very little chance of hitting you. They'd never press home an attack where the Jerry was a different kettle of fish altogether. To get caught by squadron 110s was practically a death warrant because the 110 which was the first of the destroyer class - [inaudible] class they called them - were long range and whereas one of the ways of escaping from the Italians with the short-range aircraft was head out to sea - they wouldn't follow you very far - the Jerry could chase you out and back again if need be. So there was a lot more fear in the squadron amongst the air crews when they were up against the Jerry.

In the planes you flew in, I mean the sorties you flew, Rod, were you - or how often were you - involved in reasonably close air-to-air combat?

I wasn't engaged at any stage, with the photo reco, because what we were doing was flying at extreme height and it was bitterly cold and the majority of aircraft at that time to my knowledge had no internal heating. We were flying, I think our ceiling was in the vicinity of twenty-two, twenty-three thousand feet and ....

Which is a lot higher, I think, than a fighter could comfortably fly at. Was it?

They didn't choose to fly at that because it was so deadly cold and the majority of stuff that they'd fight, like find, especially a fighter would be at a lower level and so in the main we were above the patrols. And those that did get caught didn't come back. But we'd flown over

some formations of enemy aircraft but fortunately they didn't see us. But that is how I came to be frostbitten is we're supposed to have five bottles of oxygen for the trip. We had five bottles, three were empty, one was half full and one was full.

> I was going to ask you to tell us the story of frost bite. These bottles being empty, was that an oversight or, you mean they had become empty during your particular flight?

They were empty when we took off. I suppose they would be the ground crew's responsibility.

> But they should have been full?

Should have been full because it was a limit trip, like you needed the five for that. We were doing a photo reco over Tripoli. We didn't switch on till eighteen thousand feet, that was when we started taking oxygen in those days. I believe they take it much lower these days. And I switched the first bottle on, it was empty and then I checked the others and found we had one and a half which consequently we were out of oxygen in a very short time. And from memory the temperature - I was told, I didn't read it but I was told by the pilot - was minus thirty-five degrees, that's centigrade. Firstly the guns froze, they couldn't be cocked. Then the turret froze. We had a camera and when we got over Tripoli .... There was a camera port with four turn screws on it and turn buckles that you took the perspex camera port off and then pivoted the camera around, which I couldn't take the camera port off because my hands were frozen and I couldn't undo them, so I booted them off which meant I couldn't put the thing back again. I pivoted the camera over the port, took the swansdown cover - that was a canvas cover that was stuffed with swansdown which was supposed to keep it warm - but the damn camera was frozen then which meant as far as the gear in my compartment was concerned, was useless. So we just stooged around there for a while and took as much notice as we could of what ships were in the harbour and what was around and came back.

> And how severe was the frostbite?

Well, I was .... We landed at Benina and Doc Laver kept me overnight and massaged my hands and feet, and then we flew back the following morning and I had to have oxygen on the way back and report to the medical receiving station at Tobruk. The medical officer in charge there had been warning the RAF apparently that they would suffer frostbite and had been getting nowhere so I was sort of proof of his advice and he took me under his wing and he took me down to base, Aboukir I think it was. I was hospitalised there for a while and I was then grounded for three months - wasn't to fly over 10,000 feet for three months - which effectively put an end to my flying as far as operational was concerned because that wasn't much good to anybody.

(20.00) It was then I rejoined 3 Squadron who'd gone up to Lydda in Palestine, the Syrian campaign, and I was on aerodrome control duties there.

> Just a moment, can I just pause. Well, going on, Rod, having just sorted out my sort of chronology, you rejoined No. 3 Squadron when they were at Lydda

in Palestine and they were re-equipping with Tomahawks and I think it was a fairly difficult conversion.

Yes. They had flimsy undercarts and they'd been recommended to do three-pointers or something and it wasn't until they took it into their own hands and decided to do wheelers that they stopped wiping the undercart off because it was pretty flimsy. Once they took things into their own hands, against the recommendations, everything went well.

And while the squadron was going through this phase of re-equipping, you were working as an air controller I understand?

Yes, on aerodrome control.

Tell us how that operated?

It was simply a matter of when the aircraft had recognition signals and so forth and the .... Lydda was a civil airport which we'd taken over and they had a control tower and when the aircraft came in they'd circle and you'd give them the challenge and they'd give you the recognition signal and we'd switch on - if everything was clear - switch on the landing lights and they would come down and you'd immediately switch them out and that was more or less what it boiled down to. At times we were under bombing threat and, of course, they couldn't land but the boys had a beach landing strip worked out where they'd go and land there and other than that it was just straight aerodrome control duties.

Right. And Lydda being a civilian airport I assume it was a surface made up airstrip, was it, or not?

Ah, they had bitumen runways, yes. It was quite narrow. That's why some of the Tommys when they came in, when they skidded off that they were history.

Right. Is there anything else to report or record, do you think, on this work as the air controller or an air controller during this period?

No, not a great deal. We had some fears about what the Free French were up to because some of the aircraft had been stolen by different Free French pilots and trying to head over to join their brothers on the Syrian side of it - the Vichy French. One case in mind was that Teddy Giannini, one of our gunners, spoke French like a native, he was married to a French girl and he overheard a conversation between this French colonel who'd flown up in a Morane fighter to Lydda, talking to some of his friends that he wasn't heading back to Egypt, he was heading to Syria. He immediately told the CO who advised the colonel not to get lost on the way back because Jerusalem fighter headquarters had been advised if they sighted any Moranes heading for Syria to shoot them down. So he went back to Egypt (laughs).

Just going back to some more general things. You'd been off with the RAF, you'd come back to the Australian squadron you had gone over with. There are some interesting things I think, I have heard it said that because basically Australian flyers were rather cut off from their chain of command I suppose, things such

> as promotion, changes in pay, other sort of administrative details were very slow in coming through. Was that your recollection, or not?

Yes, that's my recollection, Ed. While we were a detached flight at Ikingi we complained about the lack of promotion, how slow it was, and the OC told us that there'd been three promotion lists had gone in since we'd been there and we assumed that we would have been on it but there'd been no action whatsoever. Also we were hearing from Australia that blokes of our own seniority and blokes junior to us were being promoted and we hadn't been and there seemed to be no hope of it. And we felt pretty hard done by because of that.

(25.00) Eventually we were promoted to acting sergeant unpaid and during my time overseas and that's the way I was and I wasn't promoted to sergeant till I returned to Australia. Also Sandy Mostram who was senior to me and he had temporary rank of corporal, and then he was taken prisoner and he remained as a POW for the rest of the war as an acting sergeant unpaid, whereas boys that had come in later than he that were trained through the Empire Air Scheme received the automatic promotion. It's nothing against them whatsoever but it says something was lacking in the system.

> Is this a feeling particularly of men such as yourself who were serving with RAF units or of men serving in the Middle East including Australian squadrons generally?

Well, I can only speak of those that I was with over there but I can also speak of one letter I received, the last letter that Arthur Campbell who was one of our contemporaries who was with H Squadron in Malaysia. He complained of the same lack of promotion within the boys there, that they were apparently forgotten. So I would say it seemed to apply to permanent men in general working overseas.

> Right. And the beef is, I gather, rather that the permanent men were ignored while the wartime men who'd joined for the duration were not ignored. Is that what you're saying?

That's it because they enlisted under those conditions but the conditions of the men who were serving members at the time, the permanent men, wasn't upgraded to meet the standard of the Empire Air Scheme trainees.

> Well, that's an interesting point and good to have it down there on the record. Well, just moving on a little bit. It was during this period at Lydda in the conversion to the Tomahawks period that you were called back to Australia I think to be involved in training. How did you greet the news that you were to return to Australia?

With great joy because I didn't think I was doing such a great job over there and also the fact that I'd be reunited with my wife and members of my family. We didn't know at that time that the idea was to come back and act as instructors. As a matter of fact when we returned I was posted to 9 Squadron at Rathmines and I was told when I joined 9 Squadron that I was earmarked for the Catalinas and I was grabbed by the, what was known then as the Catalina Training Flight and I was promptly grabbed together with Teddy Aked who'd come back with

me, because we were the only two blokes that he had with operational experience to go on the Cats and we were polishing up on our semaphore and our seamanship when out of the blue came a posting to No. 3 Wireless Air Gunners School as instructors at Maryborough.

> Let's just pause there for a moment because one of the other units we've been dealing with is the Catalinas. I've talked to quite a lot of Catalina people including Scotty Allan. What's your recollection of Rathmines when you arrived there?

A delightful place. I have a history here of the flying boats written by John Newton. I don't know if you've read it. Well, John's my brother-in-law and he wrote that and my recollection of Rathmines is, especially after overseas, a terrific place.

> Was Scotty Allan the CO then?

Of the Catalina Training Flight, yes. I think Wing Commander Connelly was station CO from memory.

> What sort of reputation did Scotty Allan have amongst the men?

Very, very good. Excellent. They couldn't speak highly enough of him. They reckoned he was a champ.

> After that, of course you did go on to this period instructing and I think that continued through the war?

Yes, until I went to .... From No. 3 Wireless Air Gunners School I went down to Cootamundra to No. 1 Air Observer School. Then they amalgamated 1AOS, Air Observer School, 1ANS, Air Navigation School, and No. 1 Bombing and Air Gunnery School at Evans Head into and called it 1AOS, and I was supposed to be in charge of the wireless instruction to the trainee air observers but instead I served in the signals office and for the greater portion of my time at that station I acted as signals officer.

> Mmm. That's interesting. Just a moment.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Rod [Butler], No. 3 Squadron, tape two, side two.

> You were saying you acted as signal officer for that unit.

Yes. And I told the group signals officer of the position and he said that he was quite happy for me to remain there as acting sigs officer and so was the station CO, and so was the CO of the navigation school. So everybody was happy including me.

Right. And I assume by this stage your wife was living nearby?

That's right. We were living out at Evans Head then.

Well, I think you were later a fisherman partly and Evans Head was base for a while, was it?

Yes, I was posted from Evans Head to Beecroft to 76 Squadron actually. I think they were at Labuan at the time and we went across from there to the occupation forces in Japan and on return there I was posted up to Amberley on the Lincolns and from there I took my discharge at my own request and went fishing for twelve years.

Right. Well, no doubt the navigation proved handy. Just one or two final things. When you were at Labuan, or anyway towards the end of the war, there was that incident at Morotai where certain people felt that squadrons were being ill-used. Do you remember that at all?

No, I have no recollection or knowledge of that, Ed, at all.

Right. Well, the other thing is simply to ask: Is there anything you feel you would like to add to this record that we haven't put down about your war service?

Only that one of my very close friends, Sandy Mostram, that was taken prisoner of war - he was a corporal acting sergeant - feels that from his inquiries that they've more or less told him that the wireless operator air, that there was no such mustering as we classed ourselves or thought we were classed as, or the WT operator air gunner, squadron air gunners were not entitled to wear the half wing of the air gunner. He feels very strongly about that and so do I. And I would very much like that to be put straight.

Right. And do you have any, I mean, has there been any support from the air force re this, or not?

Well, this is the first time that I've .... Only through Sandy's speaking of it and it's apparently been a long felt worry of his, that I ever even worried about it. I didn't even know that we weren't classified as air crew or that we were considered as unworthy or put it whichever way you like - unentitled - to wear the half wing of the air gunner. We always considered we were wireless air gunners.

Well, it certainly would appear that you were and it seems a real anomaly and, I guess, unfairness. Is there anything else you'd like to put on the record, just looking back on the war years?

No. All in all I'm proud of my time with the air force. I'm proud of having served with the squadrons that I did and with the men that I met.

Right. Okay. Well, look, on behalf of the War Memorial, thank you for this record of those times.

Thank you, Ed.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW.