



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

I had to give up the university course. I switched over to a short service commission.

> Perhaps we could just fill that out in a little more detail. I know you were studying engineering at university. Do you think that engineering studying had any bearing - was it of assistance when you later became a pilot, or not?

No, I don't think so. I've always been interested in mechanical things and I don't think that it had any bearing really; certainly not as a pilot.

> And the initial decision to join the air force, the Citizen Air Force, what was the main motive there?

Oh well, there was a number of people in the engineering department, doing the engineering course who were members of the Citizen Air Force and we discussed the thing and I just thought it was a very good idea. Initially we did a three to four months' course to learn to fly and from then on we were expected every second weekend, but if we didn't turn up virtually every weekend, well, we didn't get very far.

> Right, and I think at the end of that you were a pilot officer and with your wings?

That's correct, yes.

> Yes. You were just saying - it's worth mentioning - that in this first air force experience it was also with No. 3 Squadron.

Yes, well, No. 3 Squadron was the only squadron at Richmond at the time and so we were posted to 3 to do our Citizen Air Force course.

> Peter, we might not go into the details of your early flying because the later period's much more significant. I think it was in 1937 that you went to Point Cook as an instructor. What was the background to that?

No, well, I switched over to the short service commission and was granted a short service commission and was posted to Point Cook. And I'd done an instructor's course prior to that at Richmond in 22 Squadron, as I said, as an air force officer. In actual fact the instructor who put me through and qualified me as a flying instructor was Wally Kyle who became the Governor of Western Australia later.

> Right. And I think it was from there that you went to the United Kingdom to complete a signals course.

That's correct. In pre-war days, in order to get a permanent commission as opposed to a short service commission you needed to do a specialist course in armament or navigation or signals, et cetera. And the only one that was available for me at the time was a signals course and in order to get my permanent commission I accepted the course.

Right. Of course in the period that you went over to Britain political events were developing quite rapidly in Britain. How conscious were you before you left Australia of those political developments?

Oh, we were very conscious of it. I remember even before going down to Point ... we were conscious of the fact that the Italians going into Africa and Abyssinia and that things could blow up, and we were conscious of the fact that Germany was moving to Austria and was not obeying any of the - what's the word - the ....

Well, was generally treading roughshod on the ...

(5.00) Yeah, was generally roughshod and not taking much notice of the international agreements. When we got to England of course it was about about the time of the, of Chamberlain's famous, remark of 'peace in our time' and it was well known at that stage that we were just trying to hold off in order to get more time to get our equipment together. And at that stage they were putting up wooden ack-ack guns in all the parks 'round London and so on, so we were very conscious that war was coming.

Right. So when you were in Britain there was a real feeling of imminent war?

Oh yes, very definitely so. And actually while I was in England before I came back to Australia war had actually broken out, although it was still only the phoney war and most of the air action was flying over and dropping leaflets which apparently didn't please the bomber boys very much, to go and risk their lives just to drop leaflets instead of bombs.

The actual declaration of war: do you remember that and how did it affect you?

Oh, well, I was on leave at the time and driving round England and Scotland and I heard that there was an important announcement coming over so I rang up Cranwell which was where I was based and I was told to get back immediately and we heard, before I got back actually, I heard Churchill make his announcement that war had broken out.

Was there any possibility of your having stayed in Britain then, or was it clear from the start that you would go back to Australia?

No, I stayed in England to complete a course which had been, which in peacetime was two years, and been shortened because of the, er, flap, about eighteen months, and finally - we had done six months of it - and we finally only did nine months' total and then I was posted back to Australia.

Were any other Australians, who'd been doing that course or similar courses, were any kept to fly with RAF squadrons?

No, there were five of us on the course and we were all posted back to Australia and posted into our specialist duties. I went to Richmond as the signals officer at Richmond.

The journey back to Australia, perhaps just briefly, how did you come back, and was there any danger during the journey?

Well, we didn't see any. We came back by ship and it was blacked-out and no smoking on deck and things like that. But we didn't see anything and we weren't escorted it just came on its own.

> Right. Well, I know when you got back to Australia it was to Richmond that you went again in a signals capacity I think.

That's correct, yes.

> Could you outline what you were doing?

Well, I was responsible for the communications on the station, replacing, 'Kanga' De La Rue's, the CO's, telephone every time he threw it at somebody when he got a bit upset which happened fairly regularly, and generally looking after the communications. And at that stage we had - some of the Hudsons came over and they all had to be equipped with our wireless as opposed to the American wireless. And also we were converting some of the Empire flying boats and putting guns in them and again putting our air force wireless in them and so on.

> Right. Well, of course it was not long after arriving back, I think, that No. 3 Squadron was set up as an army co-operation squadron. What was your role to be?

No. 3 Squadron had always been an army co-op squadron and in fact we had no fighter squadrons at all really in Australia because we had no need for them as a defensive force. But my role as a signals officer was with an army co-op squadron in the field. There's a lot of wireless people are sent out with the various units of the army and so that they can communicate back to the air force and tell the air force what targets the army want hit and so on and so forth. And being a fairly big section in the squadron it needed an officer to control and that was my job.

> No. 3 Squadron, of course, later became in the Middle East to have a quite renowned name. When the squadron left Australia was there a very strong esprit de corps existing already, or not?

(10.00) No, as a matter of fact there was quite a changeover in personnel, quite a few personnel changed right near the last minute because the people with families and whatnot were given the opportunity to stay home, or people who had relatives and so it was a volunteer force. And not only that but there were a lot of people such as cooks and defence, aerodrome defence, personnel and, oh, quite a number of different ones that wouldn't be on a squadron strength when it was on an RAAF base, but going out into the field of course we needed those. And we had a certain amount of esprit de corps because of the original squadron and the permanent people of course remembered that 3 Squadron had been 3 Australian Flying Corps in world war one.

> I hadn't realised that about the members who went overseas on the original squadron going overseas that they were all volunteers. Did that later have a strong effect on morale; that all the people who went overseas were volunteers?

Well, just to finish your first question. The morale was good and we were the envy of course of the RAAF, because previously six squadrons were going to be sent to England and that was cancelled and the Empire Air Training Scheme took its place, and so 3 and 10 were the only two squadrons which were going to see action as an RAAF squadron and so we were very much the envy of the RAAF; and not only then but at a later stage. Now, what was your other question?

> Well, I was just wondering if in addition, given that the men who did go overseas were volunteers whether that itself strengthened the morale in that people were all there because they wanted to be there?

No, as I say, they were all volunteers. I think one thing that helped to strengthen morale was again when we got to the Middle East, although there were Australians in the RAF they were all air crew and we were an isolated RAAF squadron amongst a lot of RAF people and the old Aussie mateship business came out very much so.

> Right. Well, just going back a little bit. The actual preparations to leave Australia prior to the voyage is there any particular recollection of that period? Anything that's significant do you think?

No, except that it was supposed to be terribly hush-hush of course and when we finally marched out of Richmond down to the little local station at Clarendon, De La Rue, the group captain commanding Richmond at the time, insisted that we went with the band which played 'Roll Out the Barrel' and we marched down, and as we got on the train, as we wormed our way down to the docks in Sydney, all through the back of Sydney, everybody knew we were going and they were hanging out the windows right, left and sideways waving at us.

> Did you yourselves have any idea where you were in fact going?

Yes, we knew we were going to the Middle East because initially as an army co-op squadron we were going over there to be the army co-op squadron for the 6th Australian Division.

> The voyage to the Middle East, Peter: what's your recollection of that?

Well, we went - I can't tell you actually the names of the ships ...

> Oh, don't worry about the names of the ships. I just meant the sort of general routine of life.

We were escorted by HMS Australia and we sailed initially to Singapore where we dropped off personnel in No. 2 Squadron who were going to Singapore and when we went on to Colombo where we were trans-shipped onto a British troopship which was a bit rugged actually, particularly for the troops, and ...

> Yes, I've heard this from other men, not only regarding that particular voyage. Was anything done, or could much be done to soften the conditions of the men down below?

(15.00) Ah, very definitely so. As it was laid out by the 'Brits' the officers had one enormous deck and the NCOs had, the senior NCOs, had another enormous deck and so we squashed all

the officers up in one part of their deck and brought the senior NCOs up to the other part of their deck and laid the NCO deck open to all the troops. But the British were a bit worried about it. If the duty officer wanted to do his rounds he'd endeavour to try and get an Australian to go with him just in case something terrible happened to them, but basically, you know, our boys wouldn't have put up with being locked down in those conditions with going up the Red Sea with a following wind of [?] and travelling at about six knots. The temperature was absolutely hopeless down there; they slept on deck.

> Right. But there was some slight tension was there between British ships' officers and the Australian air force officers over this decision to let the men have more breathing space?

No, they were just told that that was the way we did things and there was .... And as a matter of fact the officer who became the head of the RAF Military Police in the Middle East at a later stage was on board and we was always got very good treatment from him, very much so.

> Right. Just one final aspect of the voyage, was there any ongoing training for officers, NCOs, men, or was it just a matter of filling in time?

Well, some of the wireless operators were very green and when we finally convinced the ship's captain that there'd be no leakage in the morse codes they were - the morse code instruments which we were training with - we got on and trained them in the code, morse code, and got them up to speed.

> Right.

Other than that there was no extra training at all.

> Right. Well, the actual arrival in the Middle East of course was a somewhat confused period because although you were sent as an army co-op squadron that role was very quickly pushed to one side. What's your recollection of that initial arrival and the evolution of the squadron's role?

When we first arrived the squadron was scattered about a bit in fact because our Lysanders had not been assembled and some Hurricanes were arriving and they were so busy assembling them that they hadn't got round to ours. But this stood us in very good stead at a later stage because a lot of our personnel were posted, were attached, to the RAF to assist them in assembling our Lysanders. And so we took some of the higher technical people, what you would call the 2Es and 2As out of the flights and put them into the workshops and brought the flight riggers back out of workshops to replace them in the flights. And so we had really established a garage system of maintenance before anybody else had ever heard of it. And this stood us very much in good stead later on as we started to leap-frog and left our workshop more or less as stable as it could be and just moved it in great big leaps.

> By a garage system of maintenance you mean having one main base where you do the maintenance not necessarily being the same place the squadron was flying from, do you?

No, in peacetime any, up to a hundred and twenty hourly inspections were done in the flights and as a matter of fact pilots were expected to be able to do these sort of inspections too but

in wartime this was out. Anything that took any length of time or dismantled an aeroplane in any shape or form was left to the static part, or the semi-static, part of your squadron which was your workshop; and the flights purely looked after daily maintenance and re-arming and refuelling and that type of thing.

> Just turning to your own personal role; of course with the army co-operation role pushed to one side, in a sense you were, your role was too. I think you were saying that you were mostly assisting McLachlan in general squadron administration.

That's correct. There was a certain amount of problems, of course, of sorting out who was going to pay for this and that and the other and ten copies of a form for a pencil got a bit sort of a problem and so a lot of these things had to be sorted out and we were very lucky that we had McLachlan to do this sorting out, and he did an extraordinarily fine job. He and - I don't know just, I've got a suspicion that Bill McGuiness had a lot to do with it as well.

(20.00) In fact the whole costing and everything else of the squadron was put down on the basis that we would pay the RAF what a squadron cost them to run less pay and less rations when we drew them from the AIF which we always did if we could because they were better rations that sort of thing, you know, eased our administrative problems and whatnot enormously.

> Right. Moving on a little bit Peter, I think you were saying that as the - this is now late 1940 - as the squadron began leap-frogging through the desert but keeping major base camps for some time, McLachlan went ahead with the flying pilots, you stayed behind in charge of the base. What did that mostly involve?

Well, it was the normal sort of thing that - overseeing the base, but my main job was to fly, test the repaired aircraft, and fly them up to the squadron and fly back the crocks that were capable of flying to be repaired.

> Right. So there was a large amount of ferrying aircraft backwards and forwards. Something that I think is important to the story is the ground staff and I think you feel that especially at this stage the ground staff showed great initiative in terms of repairing and replacing equipment and so on.

Yes, the ground staff were - had a terrific amount of initiative and just to quote an example: some of the Italian aircraft had a Bristol engine which was made under licence in Italy and it took our coves no time at all to find out that was exactly the same as the engines we had in the Gladiators and so we had spare parts from crashed Italian aircraft. That sort of thing.

> Do you think the Australian ground staff, ground crews, had greater initiative than their British counterparts?

Oh, absolutely. There was no, 'Aye, aye, Governor' with the Australians and they were first class technicians and they got on and did a job and they didn't need to be instructed in detail or anything else with regard to what their job was. At one stage McGuiness and Bodison, the engineer officer, and McGuiness, the equipment officer, and a few of the troops went up into the frontline because they'd heard there was a lot of booty about the place and came back with

a workshop trailer. And that trailer they, on the lathe and the trailer, they cut gears to keep the lathe going and so on and so forth. It was extraordinary. If you wanted your watch fixed up you went to the blacksmith and if you wanted some blacksmithing job done you went and found a bloke who in peacetime had been a watchmaker; a lot of them had switched their jobs.

Yes, I've heard about that, the repair van, from a lot of people. Moving on ...

But the aircraft to a certain extent became their own aircraft and we were only allowed to fly them just by 'Grace and by God' and they looked after them as their own aircraft.

Were they equally interested, do you think, in the experiences and the difficulties that pilots faced in the air or were their energies and their thoughts very much focused simply on the aircraft itself?

No, I would say that the ground staff were possibly more anxious when a pilot went missing than the other pilots were. We possibly had, knowing that it could happen to us at any stage, didn't sort of take it to heart to the same extent as ground staff did. But the staff not only on the aircraft but right throughout the squadron took that all very, very personally.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit. The first major thrust westwards through the desert - could you generally describe the kinds of operations the squadron was involved in? And how quickly were you moving?

(25.00)Well, the squadron was involved in doing a bit of strafing and doing a bit of army co-op really in reconnaissance work. They were also directing artillery onto targets. But that was initially and they were only really fighting when they were forced to it. And our first fight was really a reconnaissance mission with one aircraft doing the reconnaissance and three of them escorting him to protect him, and of course they got caught up with some CR42s and it turned into quite a big fight in which we took our first casualty who was Peter Heath who was our senior flight commander.

The actual movement westwards, how rapid was that? How often was the squadron leap-frogging from airstrip to airstrip?

Well, I can't give you that in detail because I haven't got my log book of that period which would let me have a much better idea of it, but I know we were sort of saying that somebody should do something about the 7th Armoured Division because they were just getting out of hand and moving too fast and it was getting very difficult to keep up with them.

Right. I think it was during this time that the squadron converted, although I think gradually, to Hurricanes.

Before the squadron converted to Hurricanes, and this was a period when we had some of our first replacements, which included John F. Jackson and some other - Tommy Trimble and Bobby Dewar and a few of the others. But that was, we had a very bad day on 13th December, it was over Salum, I was still the signals officer at that stage, but we had an extraordinary bad day - ran into a very big lot of CR42s and Flight Lieutenant Gaiden was killed but Arthur, 'Wilf' Arthur was shot down, and as he was trying to get out of his aircraft the wing folded on top of him and he finally got out and into his parachute at about

1,000 feet. Lex Witton had an explosive round in one hand and he bailed out. Gatwood and Boyd both crash-landed. So we had five, and that was a really very bad day for the squadron, but ...

> Could I just pause to ask for a moment? That kind of catastrophic loss, how did it affect the men in the squadron?

Er, it was a very traumatic sort of experience but the squadron was very resilient and picked up very quickly and the people who'd - apart from Witton who was a casualty because of his hand - the others were back flying again next day or in a few days' time. To a certain extent, you know, you expected these things but that was just a bit bigger than we normally expected. And seeing as we'd had so much success prior with virtually no casualties it hit us a bit hard for a start. But it was only a few days later on the 26th when we got our revenge back and ....

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

> Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Peter Jeffrey, No. 3 Squadron, tape one, side two.
>
> Without worrying too much about the precise chronology, Peter, I do know this was the general period when there was a conversion to Hurricanes. How did that go? And I think there's an interesting story to do with Peter Turnbull.

Well, in this big fight over Salum when we came back we knew that some squadrons - some Hurricanes - were coming into the command because some of the other squadrons already had them and Peter Turnbull in his combat report added a little note at the end which said, 'Father Christmas, bring me a Hurricane', and that remark went completely right throughout the whole command and he has been credited with getting us Hurricanes a lot sooner than we would have got them otherwise.

> That's interesting. The conversion to Hurricanes, how big a difference did that, or how great an edge did it give you in your ability to fight?

Oh well, of course, the Hurricanes were far superior to anything that the Italians had at that time but if we'd gone up against the Germans which we were shortly to do with Gladiators we would have been in a lot of problems, but of course with the Hurricanes although they were only the 'Hurri Ones' we were particularly at that stage with the 110s and the 88s and the 87s we had an aircraft which would cope admirably.

> Right. Just to tie things together generally, too, this is now at the end of 1940, this was when McLachlan, I think, was given command of the wing and you became squadron leader of No. 3 Squadron. How did you greet that news that you were to command this increasingly illustrious squadron.

Well, McLachlan wasn't getting command of the wing he was given command of the RAF station, Benina, which we'd taken over from the Italians, and he gave me command of 3 which of course was a fantastic thrill to me quite apart from the fact of taking command of a squadron which I'd learnt to fly in but also because it meant that I got back to full-time flying

duties instead of being a signals officer; and that was something that you would only dream of.

> Well, moving on a little bit. I think it was shortly after this, January '41, working from Benina aerodrome, I think your general role was protecting Benghazi. Could you outline the kinds of operations that were involved there?

(5.00) Oh well, we did some standing patrols over Benghazi most of the time to - as the navy was unloading supplies there and of course the navy had been treated rather badly by the enemy air force and they'd lost of lot of ships. And so they demanded protection whenever it could be given to them. And in addition to that of course we were flying down over the 7th Armoured Division which was quite a bit further south at El Agheila when the Germans were just starting to come in with their Ju87s to dive bomb and escorted by their twin-engined fighter, the 110. And Ju88s were being used mainly as well for high level bombing, and so we had two fronts really to protect. And just before the retreat started, in fact we were given an extra flight of 73 Squadron's which was attached to us to assist us to do the job we had to do.

> On a typical day during this Benghazi period, were No. 3's planes going off on pre-determined sorties or were the pilots generally standing by to fly if need be?

No, we had no radar at any stage when I was in the desert that was used and so all our flying was done on a pre-planned basis and as far as Benghazi was concerned we had virtually two aircraft on standby over the top of it for most of the time, certainly first thing in the morning and late in the afternoon.

> How many sorties would a pilot have flown on average during a day, or is it impossible to say?

Oh, he wouldn't have flown terribly many sorties a day at that stage, probably no pilot would have flown more than one sortie because we were only just really re-equipping with the Hurricanes and we didn't have all our spares or this or that or the other there at that stage.

> One thing I'd like to ask at some point and now might be an appropriate time. The Germans by this stage are increasingly in the air to be met with. In your estimation how did German pilots compare with Italian pilots?

Oh, the Italian pilot was - you never knew whether one Italian would tackle ten of you or whether ten Italians would run away from one of you ....

> You were just saying about the Italian pilots.

Yes, you never could tell but the Italian bomber formations I believe held together far better than German bomber formations. The Italian was also inclined to be very flash and he did a lot of aerobatics some of which went to his advantage - particularly when he rolled onto his back and tried to fire his guns which tended to jam them. But you couldn't really, you know, tell and some of the Italians were extraordinary brave and some - and I think it probably had to do with the same as the army whether they were conscripts or whether they were permanent

or not. The German, of course, he was a far more determined type but not far as his bombers were concerned. If you really attacked his bomber formations they tended to break up.

> That's most interesting. And what about the comparison between the planes you were flying at this stage, the Hurricanes, and the range of German planes you were coming up against?

Well, the Hurricane could cope with anything that the Germans had at that time which was the Messerschmitt 110, the twin-engined fighter, the Ju88, the high level bomber, and the Ju87, the dive bomber, and they could cope very readily with that. And in fact we coped so well with it that between ourselves and 73 Squadron, er, between that and when we finally finished off the retreat we'd taken such a - we'd shot down so many German aircraft that the Germans realised that they needed a better fighter than the 110 and that was when they pulled out some 109 squadrons from Europe and sent them over.

> (10.00) Right, that's most interesting. Well, we might actually move onto the retreat, Peter. You were telling a story I thought was quite interesting of how a recent acquaintance, an army officer, had described how he actually saw tanks advancing onto the airstrip as your men, No. 3 men, were still firing and blowing up gear and so on that had to be left behind.

Well, one of the main things to sort of get across in the retreat was the fact that we didn't use any wireless communication at all. We were under the impression that unless we encoded our messages we'd give too much away to the enemy. The Germans on the other hand realised that they were moving quicker enough that although we were getting intercepts on their messages we couldn't get it to the right people quickly enough to take any advantage of it. And so on the whole of the retreat virtually the only contact we had with the headquarters was a Wing Commander Brown who flew in occasionally on a Magister and told me where the next supplies of ammunition and fuel would be. And it was more or less left to us as to when we evacuated and moved. We'd been told [inaudible] that we'd have to move out and in fact when the 2/13th came through - this was the night before we moved - they told us that we were the forward troops.

> How much warning did you in fact have at the beginning of the retreat that you would have to leave? How much time was there between then and when you actually did move off?

Oh, we'd known for about a couple of days that the army weren't holding the line and that we'd probably have to move but we were operating flat out at that stage of course trying to assist the army and stop the Germans coming forward.

> Right. Well, once the retreat began it did of course proceed extremely rapidly and obviously again improvisation was part of the key to the ground staff's success .... [Interruption] You were saying before that it was the ability of the ground staff to improvise that aided the retreat so much, and there was an interesting story I think about the plane losing a tyre.

Well, after the first night we moved back under the escarpment, there'd been a fight that afternoon and one of the Hurricanes landed with a tyre shot out. And the ground staff, not to be dismayed at all, proceeded to tear up some blankets and stuff them into the tyres and first

thing in the morning the aircraft was flown off and back to the depot to get the tyre replaced. And that sort of thing went on all the time.

> The movement of course was extremely rapid. I know there was some uncertainty over the precise number of airfields and days, but we're looking at something in the order of ten landing fields in something like eight days. What strains did that impose on your pilots?

Well, it didn't impose so much strain on the pilots because the pilots were still doing the same amount of flying, they were being molly-coddled by the ground staff - their stewards and whatnot. But it was the ground staff that the strain was on because they had to move either at night or at first light and they were virtually constantly on the move but leap-frogging to a certain extent and trying to keep the aircraft, well, not trying to keep the aircraft but actually keeping the aircraft fully serviceable so we could go on with our flying.

> I'd imagine the sheer fact of travelling through the desert landscape must have imposed a lot of problems on their vehicles and so on?

Well, it wasn't - I mean there's no bitumen roads out there and at night-time, and certainly a lot of that country immediately there'd been some movement of it, it turned into 'Johnson's Baby Powder' and so the slightest bit of a breeze or a vehicle going over and the dust was bad; and so trying to that at night with headlights was [inaudible].

> The actual operations that your pilots were flying during this retreat, was that largely to back-up the army as they pulled out, or what?

(15.00)Well, it .... There was no, as I've said earlier, there was no radar and so we were virtually doing standing patrols but you got a sense of where things were likely to happen after you'd been there for a while and there were usually spots where the army congregated - there was a pass to come through or there was this or where there was a lot of movement there'd be dust. And these were the things that would draw the crabs from the opposition and those were places that you would find them and so that was the sort of thing that we were aimed for. And although we might be given directions as to go and stand over a certain place if we could see that there was nothing to attract attention there well then we would look for something else that would attract a lot of attention and go accordingly.

> But by and large were your operations against enemy aircraft or against the advancing enemy on the ground?

No, in the retreat they were purely against enemy aircraft; we didn't do any strafing at all during the retreat period.

> Right. Well, the actual living conditions which were obviously tents in any case must have been even more rugged than when you had reasonably fixed camps in the desert: eating, sleeping, briefing, all those things. What's your recollection of that aspect of life?

Well, you say when you're sort of reasonably static but I think six weeks was the maximum we were on any one aerodrome at any stage. But I don't know, the boys seemed to get tents up and a camp stretcher out and I never had any problems at all. But some of them when they

were moving, they just slept hard alongside their truck and with a blanket down and over the top.

> Do you think Australians were better at that sort of thing than British people? That Australians, to a certain extent, were more used to roughing it?

Oh, I wouldn't, no, I wouldn't say that sort of thing at all, I don't think that, you know, that the 'Pommy' was any - was a softie in any shape or form, I think he was a very brave man and I think he put up with all sorts of the same sorts of conditions. I think the main difference was he just didn't have the initiative; he waited to be told instead of getting on and doing things himself.

> Right. I have seen one rather evocative photograph, Peter, of a briefing being carried out beside a tent and the men sitting on kerosene tins - sitting in the dirt, that kind of thing. Is that how you recall briefings or were they more often in tents?

Well, (laughs) it depended whether we had a tent at the time or not and briefings could be just done out in the open and the dust made quite a good thing, with the finger you could draw all sorts of plans out and show people what formation you wanted and so on and so forth so there was nothing .... When we were stationary for any length of time, yes, we'd probably have briefings round the operations trailer but the rest of the times, no, it'd be just catch as catch can.

> Right. Well, just moving on just to summarise this retreat period, the losses on No. 3 side were really very slight: two planes, I think, one man killed, a tent had burnt but burnt by accident, two ground staff wounded, one who later died, just added on to that one man who became a POW. And also just for the first tour although I know these figures there's some slight debate about them but the general pattern is 150 enemy planes down for the loss of, I think, thirteen No. 3 planes, five pilots killed, one POW .... A major clarification here. Incidentally those figures just quoted were for the first tour, T-O-U-R, and the major mistake is it is fifty, five zero, not 150 enemy planes shot down. Yes, Peter was saying that's the first tour in the desert. Right, well, we've straightened that out. And just for the record, perhaps to add that I think, Peter, you were awarded the DFC after the retreat and I imagine at least partly because of the success of the retreat.

(20.00) Well, when an award is made to a commanding officer and includes the word leadership it, to my mind, means that the award has been given to the squadron who are pushing the leader along, and I have always maintained that that DFC belongs to the squadron for the job they did in getting out of - not only getting out of Benina and bringing all their aircraft and equipment back - but also taking a big toll of the enemy in so doing.

> Right, that's an interesting comment. Well, just to look at these figures now and to draw some comments from them perhaps. You did say that during the period in the desert on a couple of occasions, I'm not sure when, you objected to, or the implication was that you objected to carrying out operations which were unlikely to lead to any productive result but where deaths were quite likely to occur on No. 3's side. Could you elaborate on that?

Well, I'll only elaborate on .... Yes, I will elaborate a bit more on it. Um, Collarshaw[?] who was the AOC of the desert and a very highly decorated Canadian in the RAF from world war one, but he was very inclined to want to brief individual pilots and debrief individual pilots and I took a great objection to that sort of thing, because I maintained that it was up to the CO to allot the pilots and to - because he knew which pilots were under strain and which weren't, and so that should have been left to him and so we had some arguments on that. But probably one of the major ones was I had with Collarshaw was the final operation which we carried out in the desert when I ran into the Ju52s. I had been ordered to send one aircraft to look at an aerodrome, or a landing field rather, which was supposed to have an Italian aircraft on it. And I objected strongly to one pilot going with nobody to watch his back while he was looking round or doing what he had to do. And so finally I said, 'Well, if one goes well that's got to be me', and so I went on my own. And if two of us had gone we would have shot down probably at least two of them in the air and certainly wiped out the other two on the ground without having to send the squadron to clean up the mess after I'd come back from a single operation. And that sort of thing carried on for a period and we had a bit of it in the Syrian campaign but later on when we got back to the desert that type of penny peckage business was out and when we operated properly with sufficient aircraft to do the job.

> That's most interesting Peter. Just going back to those general figures of fifty enemy aircraft down for about thirteen No. 3 down, what are the major factors do you think that account for that very, very large difference in kills versus losses?

Well, the Hurricane was far superior to the German aircraft and obviously our pilots were more skilled also. The same thing applies really in the CR42s although both the Germans and the Italians in the CR42s, both of them had seen combat prior to us ever arriving in the desert, so I can just sort of say that our boys were better, that's all.

> Right. The retreat had obviously been very rapid or, but equally, there'd been, it had been a successful retreat. Was morale at the end of the retreat higher or lower than when it began?

Um, no, I don't think there was any differences in morale, there was no panic at any stage in the squadron. There were no ground staff that panicked or tried to clear out or anything like that, the whole thing was just completely under control at all stages. When those two men were wounded near Derna, one of the trucks turned over, and it didn't have anything very important on it really, it only had all the officers' mess gear on it including my Leica camera. But the coves were very keen to go back in the morning and in fact as soon as we found out that the enemy weren't there they went back and they resurrected the truck and turned it onto its wheels and brought it back to the squadron again. Of course the Arabs got all the rest of the stuff, all the gear on it, but .... So there was no panic at all and they just got on with the job.

> (25.00) Right. What lessons had been learnt during that retreat, and in fact during the preceding months in the desert, Peter, in terms of tactics?

I don't think I've got anything. I don't think I can say anything on that one.

What about leadership? By this stage you'd been CO for some time. I have heard a lot of other individuals in the squadron speak very highly of your qualities as a leader, as a squadron leader. What would you say were the key aspects of your leadership?

Well, I never realised that I had leadership qualities. Certainly I gave very few instructions on the way back; I told people what was necessary and where we were to go and so on, but there was no detail passed down to them in any shape or form and they just got on with the job; and that was one of the secrets of 3 Squadron that people did what they had to do and they knew what they had to do and just got on with it and did it.

Was it really as simple as that?

Yeah.

The question of your leadership?

Yes. When it came to a movement normally the officers went in - the air crew virtually never had anything to do with the squadron, your flight commanders and this, that and the other, they didn't sort of operate as they did in peacetime as flight commanders they purely were there for the flying. And so you'd call the NCOs from the various sections together and sort of say, 'Well, now we are going to operate from this aerodrome. We want enough people there to look after that; and the next one will probably be so and so, or we'll be still operating here for a period of time, we want so many people to look after that. And workshops and whatnot you better get the hell further away', and that was it. Then it happened after that, and perhaps I might have to sort out who got some transport if somebody was arguing they didn't have enough transport - though why they'd argue about that I don't know because we had far more transport than any other squadron.

You've spoken very highly of the role played by the ground staff and so on. Do you think either consciously or perhaps unconsciously you inculcated in your other officers and pilots a consciousness of the overall unity of the squadron and the importance of the contribution of everybody however humble.

I don't think it came from any one person at all, I think it came from the whole lot, the whole squadron, and I think that was the secret of 3 Squadron, and I think it continued on, it wasn't only in my period. It continued on right through while the squadron existed.

That's most interesting, the sort of feeling of an real group identity and a group effort.

Well, as I say, I can't think of the word that I want at the moment to describe that but, and it wasn't, it's something higher than team spirit but that's what it really was it, and they just got on .... It wasn't a matter of a man sticking to just his own job, there's no trade union business about it, and if a job had to be done it didn't matter what mustering you were or anything else, everybody got stuck into it and did it. And as far as the air crew were concerned we were molly-coddled by the stewards we had and looked after and it was .... And the troops were the same way. I mean, I would never test my aircraft. If the blokes told me it was right, it was right. And of course if when I opened the throttle I didn't know whether it was right or not, well then I shouldn't have been in the damn thing in the first place, but I wasn't going to

let them do that sort of thing. So perhaps if you say leadership I kept on throwing responsibility to people, delegating responsibility and throwing it to them and as fast as they could take it up I would throw them some more and that's it.

Maybe that is the secret.

I don't know.

Right.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Peter Jeffrey, No. 3 Squadron, tape two, side one.

You were just saying, Peter, this mission along the Turkish coast was aborted.

Well, with the smog over the Mediterranean particularly on the northern part of it, you would have had to run into an enemy aircraft to have been able to see him and although you could see the sky was clear and you could see boats down below, the whole horizon meant that you were virtually flying on instruments because of the smog.

Right. Just moving on a little now. It was in May '41 at Lydda that the squadron began the conversion to Tomahawks. I think you were saying that there were no instructors at all for the conversion and it was done entirely within the squadron and that there were also significant difficulties. What were they?

Well, the main difficulty was the fact that it was an unsuitable aerodrome for a start, with a bitumen runway which wasn't all that wide, and it had very deep and wide drains at both sides so if you went off the runway that was the end of it. We had a steerable tailwheel which we'd never flown before, which meant that people had to have much less rudder movement than they would normally have had with a non-steering tailwheel. But the main thing was that there was a weakness in the undercarriage of the original Tomahawks and in fact it was some of my best pilots that had some of the prangs there and so it wasn't a matter of flying, it was this undercarriage collapsing which was the main problem. Also although we had some, two, American army, air corps, people who'd come out to give us some information on the aircraft, their method of landing that they told us was to fly them in on the wheels and fast and that was one of the things that was breaking the undercart, so we modified that type of thing and from then on we had no problems. But we did have a lot of prangs initially.

Later on then were you landing on the two main wheels with the tail off? Or were you coming in for a three-point landing?

No, we never three-pointed them, but we landed them with the tail well down and if you just relax on the stick the initial jerk as the wheels touch allows the stick to go forward a little better and they just roll up onto their wheels with no problems at all.

> Right, that's most interesting. Another interesting aspect I think we might pursue for a moment. You were saying that it was about this time or pre-Syria at least that I think it was Steege went to - that's S-T-E-E-G-E - to 450 Squadron and Pelley, I think P-E-L-L-E-Y?

P-E-L-L-Y, I think it is.

> P-E-L-L-Y to 451. These were officers and I think your point was that this was the beginning of the kind of general transference of No. 3's experience to other units in the air force.

(5.00) They were two of the flight commanders of 3 and two of the original 3 Squadron and they were posted to 450 in addition to which some of the NCOs of various musterings were also posted from 3 to 450 and 451 in order to spread the experience again. And as at a later stage when the 75 and 76 were formed then John F. Jackson and Peter Turnbull and also again ground staff in the various musterings wherever we could grab them. And of course when No. 2 OTU Mildura, the fighter OTU, formed up that was very largely again 3 so they had, 3 had a very big effect on the sort of fighter field of the RAAF.

> That's most interesting. Another related point you made that I think is worth bringing out was that when the squadron went over as an army co-op squadron of course there was an army liaison officer who then, who stayed although the squadron was not used for army co-op, I think the point being that it was soon learned that pilots were bringing back very valuable information.

Yes, normally a bomber squadron would have an army liaison officer because they've got air gunners and navigators and whatnot who can spend their time sort of looking and seeing what's going on down on the ground. But the fighter squadrons were never given an army liaison officer and we had them purely because we were an army co-op squadron originally. And it found that both because we had been trained as in the army co-op role but also because in the desert where action was taking place there's always a lot of dust blowing up and things, so it was fairly easy to see where the action was. And we continued and kept our army liaison officers and at a later stage when we went back into the desert for the second time it would become a standard practice in all fighter squadrons to have them. And we were very lucky in the fact that from Syria and back into the desert we had Alan Binney who lost an arm flying in the Australian Flying Corps in world war one and he was our army liaison officer.

> Right. Another point perhaps we might bring out was that it was about this period generally that the original pilots began to be, or replacement pilots such John Jackson began to come through. In your recollection was there any difference in training between the originals and the replacement pilots, or not?

Er, yes, John Jackson and the first replacements came actually while we still had Gladiators but they were still officers and we didn't get the NCO air crew until we started the Syrian campaign. But basically the replacements we got at that stage had had no operational training in an operational training school. Some of them had come from squadrons but they'd had very little time in the squadrons and most of them had only flown the Wirraway anyhow as an aircraft and so they had to be converted in the squadron, and when you're in the middle of combat it's very difficult to give time to convert these people properly. And so if they had five hours' flying they were lucky in a lot of cases. And some of the replacements,

particularly when we went back into the desert, some of the replacements were coming virtually from SFTS, Service Flying Training School, and this was criminal. And the RAF got a fighter OTU going in the desert but it wasn't until Nicky Barr and the people that came with him, and they were the first people that went through the OTU there.

> Right, so there was a kind of interregnum when you were getting men who really had no OTU experience at all.

No, none whatsoever.

> The Empire Air Training Scheme of course was the source of a lot of these pilots. Aside from the fact that there was this lack at certain points at least of operational training, but thinking now of their basic training in the EATS, how good was that training?

Well, that's hard to say. It was just the fact that some of these people just unfortunately didn't have the amount of hours and whatnot to give them the experience that was needed for the job.

(10.00)I don't know of any of them that didn't face up and went, you know, didn't face up to combat and that weren't brave and didn't fight well within their limitations and they certainly did that but we took too many casualties amongst those people which was one reason why I was anxious to get the OTU going when I got back to Australia.

> Right, that's most interesting. One thing I, one individual I'd like just to ask about specifically is John Jackson and this is because this could tie in a little bit with some other work we've done on 75 Squadron where of course he was deeply involved. What would your estimation of him both as a pilot and a leader be?

Well, ah, John didn't have very much experience when he joined us because he was in that first big fight at Salum and when he came back he didn't even know what a reflector sight was all about. He was a bit hard of hearing and his eyes weren't all that good, and he shouldn't have been in fighters because he was a bit old, and he was inclined to, when people said that it was a bit dangerous flying with John because when he turned his head he also turned his aircraft, and it was a bit hard to keep formation on him. But, and if anything to me, he was inclined to press on too hard and not wait to fight another day, but as far as his guts were concerned, when I was getting 75 Squadron together John tackled me and he said, 'I'm entitled to the command of this squadron'. He said, 'I've got more experience than anybody else has here', and he said, 'I've been through it'. And I said, 'John, look, I'd sent you back from the Middle East, I thought you'd done your business and you're a bit operationally fatigued, and you shouldn't be here at all anyhow'. And he turned on me and he said, 'What in the bloody hell are you doing? You're fighting for King and country or something? I've got a wife and kids back there in Australia and no Jap bastards going to get anywhere near them except over my dead body.' And I gave John the squadron but I had a feeling at the time that he would press on too far and on his first operation I warned him. I said, 'For God's sake don't go backwards and forwards on that strafing run because you haven't got any idea whether they've got top cover or where they are, what's happening; just hit and get away and we'll find out what happens from there on', which of course John didn't do, he went back two or three times and he got - they did a lot of damage but he got some of his pilots caught and shot down too.

And that would be his only fault as far as I'm concerned but he had extraordinary courage, extraordinary courage.

> Just vis-à-vis the Empire Air Training Scheme, Peter. I think you were suggesting that it did rather dilute the command's strength of the air force in your opinion.

Well, the Empire Air Training Scheme was a fantastic thing in that it turned out an enormous amount of pilots and overall they were well trained. But from my point of view I think that the RAAF suffered as a result of it, because instead of getting officers overseas from Australia into combat positions and getting combat experience the whole of the RAAF was virtually turned into a training command. And when I came back from the Middle East I believed very definitely that they had a training command attitude, and that they didn't have any conception of the urgency of getting on and doing things and cutting your red tape and your administration and everything to the absolute minimum.

> That's most interesting. Just to put that in context that was in context of some of the difficulties I think of 75 Squadron getting established and effectively into New Guinea.

(15.00) Yes, well, the whole conception of forming 3 Squadron from seventy-five aircraft showed a complete lack of appreciation of what your losses are going to be going into a place like Moresby with the 'Jap', and experienced Jap pilots at the other side. And in fact they tried, they were almost wanting to pull 75 Squadron back out of Moresby about three days after it got there because their aircraft serviceability had got down to virtually nothing. And if they'd done that the army would have swum ashore.

> And I think you're also saying that when 75 was being or when you were being urged to send 75 Squadron to New Guinea the squadron wasn't even equipped with basic things such as oxygen, throat mikes, et cetera.

No, well, see, there was a difference between the American gear that went with the American Tomahawks, or Kittyhawks rather, and I didn't pick it up immediately because ours had been converted to RAF-type gear. But in fact the only way we got throat mikes and oxygen masks that worked was, I flew back down to Archerfield and 'Snow' Eschell down there had wandered round the packing cases and purloined the ones that were left in the packing cases which the 'Yanks' put one of everything into a packing case with the aircraft - and he had a whole swag of them in his office in a cabinet. And I grabbed those and that's one way that 75 Squadron got up to Moresby.

> Remarkable. Well, moving back to the main story, the story here of No. 3 Squadron. It was after re-equipping with Tomahawks that you started flying against the Free French. What were the main kinds of operations involved here?

Well, we did a lot of support for the army, not only patrols over the top of them but also strafing but basically we did a lot of strafing of the French Air Force. And we went out and literally strafed their aerodromes wherever we could and sometimes we ran into them in combat in the air but I would think that we did more damage to them on the ground than we did in the air.

Why were you managing to get them on the ground? Was it that they were slow in responding, or unwilling to respond?

Well, I don't know whether they had radar there or not but we'd go out and we'd do a sweep and we'd come in very low in case there was radar and we just, you know, mostly found them on the ground.

Besides those actions specifically directed against the Free French aircraft, were you involved in many other kinds of operations, or not?

Yes, there was land strafing, there was also we escorted some of our bombers, our Blenheims, and there was one particular operation over Habforce which was an army unit coming in through Palmyra and the north. And they'd been bombed quite a lot and strafed by the French Air Force and we had only just sufficient range to see the Blenheims out of the area after they'd bombed and stayed there for about five minutes but we were lucky in one day we ran into the six Penmartin Marylands and six out of six we shot down and all over the army. And the general was very kind that night and sent us a signal saying that the morale factor of the seeing that number shot down where they could all be seen was sufficient to let him walk into Palmyra.

That must have been a great boost. The overall figures for the Syrian campaign are quite remarkable I think, again the estimates vary a little but the Australian estimate is twenty-four French planes destroyed for two Australian; a huge difference. What would you put down as the main factors for that difference?

Well, I don't know, well, it appears that we were just better than they were, there's no other way of putting it really.

But was it a technical difference or a difference in the quality of the men?

(20.00) Well, I don't know. We never got hold of, and we didn't really see enough of the French aircraft to work out their speeds and climbing rates and so on and so forth, so I don't know what the equivalent was but obviously the Tomahawk was a better aircraft. But I suppose one of the bigger things we did, we strafed a train which was standing in alongside one of the aerodromes and it happened to be an ammunition train, but they weren't actually strafing the train they were strafing the aircraft which was right alongside the train, and hit some forty-four gallon drums which were alongside the aircraft and they burst into flame, and this set the train on fire and the train blew up and created an enormous amount of damage apparently and knocked out a hell of a lot of aircraft and wrecked the station and everything else. There was a rumour that there was a troop train alongside and that 2,000 men had been killed but that proved to be just a rumour.

Right. Two other aspects that I think are worth pursuing are making some comparisons between flying and living in Syria as against the desert. First of all the flying, was flying itself easier in Syria or easier in the desert?

No, the flying in Syria was over a lot of mountainous country at times and from a forced landing point of view would have been very difficult. And of course the north-eastern side

was a lot flatter but the living conditions were far superior. And in fact at a place called Rosh Pinna we had three runways - and we had a beautiful camp right in the centre of the three runways which of course would have been fantastic if the French had had any aircraft left; and we were amongst the gum trees.

So it must have been a great change from the harshness of the desert.

Oh, not only that, but the kibbutzes[sic] which were about the place looked after us like mad and gave us all sorts of weird and wonderful food that we hadn't tasted since we'd sailed from Australia; and we were living in the lap of luxury.

Did you get much time or opportunity either there or elsewhere to mix with local people, or not?

No, some of the coves mixed a bit with the kibbutz people and after the Syrian campaign was over we had a period there where we had some leave again and no doubt the boys mixed round a bit with the people, the locals, I didn't sort of go into that too much.

Right. Just turning to something that relates generally to the whole period ...

Oh, there was a lovely little thing there.

Yeah?

We accumulated quite a lot of transport when we got to Rayak and the French had these big hangars and one about three hangars away from ours was all full of beautiful Ford, new Ford trucks. And so the boys used to do a little bit of a recce and find out which one they wanted and when the guards got to the far end the hangar doors would open and out would move one of our trucks and hook onto one of theirs and back into our hangar where it was sprayed with the yellow paint that we used in the desert, the desert camouflage. And then it went for a drive around for a day or so to weather properly and we were overborne considerably in trucks as a result of this and other forages about the place by these people with lots of initiative. But it created quite problems when we were moving through checkpoints and whatnot because the only way we could give them a number, all of our trucks were given a WD, Western Desert, number, and so we had to just duplicate our numbers and it used to give the poor old Egyptians a terrible lot of trouble in trying to check up why we had so many of the same numbers about the place.

That's interesting, Peter. Actually I might just ask you, I know, I think the word was 'shiftying', you know, the divine art of acquiring other people's ...

Cliftying.

(25.00) Oh, sorry, cliftying: the sort of art of acquiring other people's possessions without in fact stealing them. What were the ground rules there? I mean, did that ever take place where the possessions of the civilian population were involved or was it only acquiring the possessions of abandoned vehicles ...

No, anything to do with civilian population was frowned on and we were very, very - and that happened only once in our squadron and he was sent to the RAF gaol which was a hell of a

place. And I didn't want to do it, I hated doing it but it was essential because if you once got stirred up the local population that's when people got knives in the back and everything on dark nights and so on and so forth, and so that had to be stamped on very rigidly.

> Right. So what you're saying is that the acquiring that did go on was only from opposing forces, et cetera?

Yes, it was only if, well, only if people had abandoned anything and we saw any use for it, yes, we'd take that; but it was enemy equipment that we took. And of course I don't know who was to get all this equipment that the Free French had had, or that the Vichy French had had rather, in Syria but we decided that we needed a little bit and of course that was one of the secrets of our mobility later on.

> What about the equipment of other allied units that...? I mean equipment that had not been abandoned, did units ever prey on one another?

No, no way at all, never.

> Right. Peter, something I wanted to ask about - a general question relating to your whole period in the Middle East, and of course later too. Levels of fear, both the sort of general anxiety of being in a combat zone and the specific anxiety before, during, perhaps after an operation; how do you remember that? Most pilots talk of, certainly at certain points, experiencing some level of fear either at a low level or sometimes a very intense level. What's your recollection of that?

Oh, I don't think ... I think everybody experiences fear, you'd have to be an absolute 'nong' not to.

> When was it worst, before an operation, or during an operation?

Well, it was, er, worse when somebody said that there's some enemy aircraft about the place and they're likely to attack you, and that's when it opened up. Or if you had bullets coming round you. When I got shot down I got virtually out of the aircraft ready to bale out until I found that it was still flying okay and I thought, well, I can get a lot closer to home within the aeroplane than I'll ever do if I bale out in a parachute. But this was all, you know, you're all very fearful at the time because you didn't know who was following you down and what was happening.

> Was there anything as a commanding officer you could do to help inexperienced pilots overcome their natural fears?

No, I don't think so, as a CO. But as a CO you had to keep a very close eye on your chaps and find out whether .... I mean, you did get 'square pegs for round holes' and you had to try and sort those out but it was left very much to the other pilots, the flight commanders and the other experienced pilots to help to bring in the new boys.

> To chivvy people along.

Yeah.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: This is Ed Stokes with Peter Jeffrey, No. 3 Squadron, tape two, side two.

> Did you ever have to cope with a pilot who simply was unable to face combat, in other words, a pilot who might in the technical sense have been accused of LMF, although I'm sure that was a very woolly concept?

Well, no, LMF was only an Australian thing, the RAF was 'lack of moral fibre', and it was very difficult to move a pilot out if he wasn't coping under the RAF system unless you did push him in as 'lack of moral fibre'. And I had one case where I, um, used the system in order to move this cove out. But very luckily for him Peter Drummond who was the 2IC in the Middle East was an Australian and he knew of this person's family. And so he got in touch with me and asked me would I mind if he gave this chap some other job to do. Well, he was given another job to do and he was given a job in a reconnaissance role and shortly after he was in it he was bailed up by some Ju88s, and again a second time he was just bailed up with some Ju88s and he fought his way out. Now the difference between having somebody else in the aircraft with him and being pushed into a corner and having to fight his way out as opposed to dragging his coat round like an Irishman looking for a fight, and so I was always very, very dubious from there on of using the 'lack of moral fibre' or the 'waverer' and I just endeavoured wherever possible to move people out and get rid of them. But there are times when the whole squadron morale can suffer very badly if you are letting somebody get away with things when everybody else has got to face up to it, so you know, there are times when you can't be namby-pamby about this business.

> Yes, I'm sure. How point were people such as doctors and padrés in lending any aid to people who just needed to unburden themselves?

Well, we didn't have any padrés but we had a fantastic doctor in John Laver who'd actually been with Flynn in the Flying Doctor Service and he was an extraordinary man. And he was really the only confidant that the CO has. And you spend quite a lot of time with your doctor discussing the various pilots as to whether they're fatigued or whether they're not. And broadly speaking the doctor's trying to get pilots moved out because they're getting fatigued, and as a CO you're trying to hold them on because they've got the experience and if you let too many of them go too quickly you end up with poor little [inaudible] and your casualties are going to be far higher, and it's a matter of coming to a compromise between the two of you. But a good doctor is just absolutely worth his weight in gold to a commanding officer.

> Right. Moving on now to the main ...

He's also a confidant of course to the pilots.

> Sure, sure. Perhaps just to end that discussion about these different aspects of fear in combat, is there any one instance that stands out in your mind where you yourself were more than unusually afraid, where things really seemed to you very grim indeed?

Yes, well, I mentioned that going out on my own with that Ju52 business in the desert with the Hurricanes, and when I shot down the first 52 and the smoke and the flames and whatnot came up and I was terrified that it was going to bring all the crabs in the world around about the place because there's nothing like something like that to bring them. If there'd been any fighters anywhere in the area they would have pounced down on that immediately.

> In that sense perhaps it's true that the fighter pilot's greatest danger was being alone.

Yes, it's very difficult to cover the whole sky all on your own and carry on and do a job of any description; so that when you turn round and concentrate on firing or something, well, then you're not looking and that's when you get caught.

> Perhaps just one final thing related to these general, if you like, moral issues. Was it ever difficult to face the fact that in shooting down enemy aircraft you were also shooting down men such as yourself? Or did you simply see that you were shooting down aircraft as a kind of defence mechanism?

No, well, that's the difference between a fighter aircraft and a cove with a rifle and a bayonet, and I don't know what I would have done if I'd been given a rifle and a bayonet instead of an aeroplane, I think I would have run the other way like hell. But it was just a combat between aeroplanes and if you shot him down you shot down an aeroplane, you didn't shoot down the man.

> Right. I have heard it said that at one point in the desert some Germans at least were reputed to have shot down men in parachutes. Do you know anything about that, and do you know of any instances where, if only in retaliation, Australian pilots did the same thing?

No, I don't know whether the Australian pilots ever did it but, and it was expressly forbidden I understand by the German Air Force to do it, but in fact it happened to us. And when we went back into the desert from Syria a chap called Dudley Parker, a sergeant at the time who I went to school with, he baled out and he was shot out of his parachute.

> Was it hard to enforce on your own men after that incident the need or the moral imperative, I guess, not to retaliate, or not?

No, it would be just absolutely stupid to do it unless they continued to do it, for the simple reason that it would happen to you as well. I think we were rather foolish in not strafing pilots once their aircraft had crashed and they got out of them because the pilot was more valuable than the aeroplane and created, took more man hours to produce. It was a sort of a gentleman's agreement that we normally didn't do that.

> What was the difference in your mind between doing that - I mean you're suggesting that would have been a logical thing to do and I can understand that - between doing that and shooting a man in a parachute? Was it simply that he was so vulnerable there it seemed a cowardly act, or what?

Er, yes, I consider tackling a man in a parachute as, you know, that's not fair game at all.

Whereas the man on the ground could run or duck or ...

Yeah.

So in a sense it was a kind of point of honour.

(10.00) Yes, I think there was a certain point of honour in it. Don't forget we hadn't been bombed like the RAF had, and the English had. I mean - and we didn't have our relations killed and this, that and the other, and bombing raids, so we probably looked at this a bit differently to, certainly differently to the coves who came out from England where all this had been happening.

That's interesting that, what, in your view the pilots who'd lived through the bombing of Britain and so on had a revenge element that was lacking in Australian pilots?

Yes, to an extent, but of course as our own casualties built up and whatnot, well, there was a revenge thing there but it wasn't the same as having your families sort of knocked about and whatnot.

Sure. That's most interesting and thanks for talking about that because I know they're difficult things to get to. Just going back to the main story, Peter, September '41, shortly before the army began moving forward again, I think there was this conference with a man who came out from England, Emery, that resulted in your becoming a wing commander. Could you outline that general change of plans?

Oh well, when we came back into the desert again there were a lot more squadrons available and we had a lot more equipment and we got over the sort of initial period of holding. And Tedder had taken over command of the Middle East air force and he got a man called Air Commodore Basil Emery who was a very highly decorated man who'd escaped - been shot down twice and escaped - from France and Germany and he brought out some other highly qualified fighter pilots from England. And they called a lot of conferences and we had a lot of talks together. We were given time off in rotation of squadrons to fly and practise things and the net result was that we devised a lot of new tactics, a lot of new formations and also basically they decided that they'd fly two squadrons at a time and that the two squadrons would be led by a wing leader, or he'd have charge of the two squadrons from a flying point of view. He couldn't fly in the lead of the two squadrons all the time but that would rotate between the COs of the two squadrons and himself. And this made an enormous difference because we were no longer flying in these little penny packets of twos here and twos there and so on. And it was also a buildup in order to try and get air superiority and that meant trying to force the 109s who had superior height and superior capabilities to our aircraft to bring them to combat and force them to fight us. And so we did a lot of bombing of their aerodromes and escorting our bombers with large numbers of fighters and strafing their aerodromes and anything to make them come up and fight us.

You're obviously still very strongly involved, very directly involved with No. 3 Squadron as wing commander but were you sorry to actually give up the direct command of the squadron, or not?

Well, it, I still lived in the squadron and worked with the squadron; there was no difference really to what I'd been doing before. I was only just controlling another squadron from the flying angle but I was still a 3 Squadron man.

> Right. Well, let's move on now to the final period that you did spend in the Middle East, Peter, September to December '41. As you were saying the main aim here really was to bring these 109s to battle. The 109s, I think, really were regarded as a superior aircraft. Could you be more specific about how you got them into a situation where you could dominate them?

Well, they were a far superior aircraft. They had a height advantage on us, anything above 12,000 feet and we were at a disadvantage immediately.

(15.00) But it was virtually by strafing their aerodromes and bombing their aerodromes and bombing and strafing at the same time by coordinating the bomb drops and coming in straight after with strafing the aircraft that forced them to come to combat with us, rather than to just peck at us from above as they'd been doing. But I don't think that they had the numbers of aircraft that we had and I think they were trying to conserve them as far as possible. And in due course we knocked down slightly more than they knocked down of ours but it took the pressure off our bomber squadrons and whatnot. And it took the pressure off the army. And they only operated in big balboes of aircraft which were normally a mixture of Italian and German aircraft, and they'd come over and they'd bomb from on height and dive-bomb from 6,000 feet and they'd be anywhere from ground level with the Ju87s pulling out and the 109s at 30,000; and we'd go into the middle of it at 12,000 and do a lot of damage.

> Right. Besides these actions specifically directed against the 109s, was the squadron, or the two squadrons, were they involved in other kinds of operations in any other capacity, for example, supporting the army, that kind of thing or not?

No, we only did one ground strafing one, that was before we were formed into a wing actually. Rommel broke through and we were pushed back and we strafed his transport and they were so low in the strafing that when we inspected them afterwards a lot of the diffs had bullets in that hadn't gone through the floorboards of the truck. One of our boys ran into a telephone line. Wally Dewar was shot down and picked up by the Germans who asked him where Salum was. So he pointed 180 degrees out and when they ran into the New Zealanders he baled out of the truck and he was back in the squadron in no time. But that was the only actual strafing other than their aerodromes as far as the army is concerned.

> Sure. I might just put in context here that it was during this period that the squadron achieved its hundredth success, its hundredth enemy aeroplane shot down, and you, I think as a result of this, were awarded the DSO. I think you were suggesting in these kinds of awards there was a certain degree of politics. What did you mean by that?

Ah, well, awards were given to make other people jealous and to get them to try a little harder. And about this time I was in the Western Desert Air Force operation tender getting some instructions on some operations. And Tedder and 'Maori' Cunningham were in the tender and I heard Tedder tell Maori that it was about time he did something about some

decorations because the navy who didn't have any ships left in the Mediterranean were putting in for a lot of decorations, and the army who'd just been running backwards had put in for a lot of decorations, and it was about time the air force who was doing the only constructive job did something about it. And in the next couple of days this screed came out asking us all to write in and make recommendations for decorations and mine came out as of the same package, so .... But it was also as a recognition of what the squadron had done.

> I'd imagine there must have still have been an element of personal satisfaction for you?

Oh, a great deal of satisfaction to me, but I still wear them with a great pride on behalf of the squadron.

> It was during this time I know that you were shot down. It was an interesting story I think and in many ways a close escape. Could you tell us about that, and perhaps how the action began?

(20.00) Well, we had quite a number of 109s started to come down on us and I turned the wing into them and it was very difficult to detach a section because our wireless wasn't the best and usually didn't work when you wanted it to. And the net result was we formed ourselves into a circle and I was trying to break up the circle by flying through the centre and waggling my wings and screaming on the wireless to follow me when I saw a 109 going right down below the circle and then coming up through the centre of it. And I didn't think he had enough lead or deflection and I was waiting to turn on him as he went past, but he did have enough deflection and he put a row across me and I went down without - my oil tank had been shot out - and I flew for about a quarter of an hour with no oil pressure until she started to burn, and I put her down on the deck, and Canadian - four armoured cars picked me up.

> Right. And you were showing me with a sketch before, Peter, how the bullets straddled the wings but one middle bullet, in a sense, was out of kilter so you yourself were very lucky.

Well, the spacing laterally was obviously from one gun but one just happened to slip out of line and that was the one that should have had my number on and didn't.

> How fatalistic were you, or were men generally after that kind of incident?

Oh, you thought you were very lucky, didn't you. There was nothing else you could think (laughs).

> Sure. Well, yes. Did that sort of memory linger or did you brush it aside?

No, the fact that you'd been shot down lingers, the fact that - it starts to build up little by little and finally you get to the stage where you're operationally fatigued.

> Right. There was another episode I think that we should try to get down here. I think shortly after this when you rescued 'Tiny' Cameron, Tiny being the nickname of course. Tell us about that?

Well, I, after a fight we started to go home and saw these obviously aircraft burning on the ground, so I went down to investigate and my number two at the time was a chap called Sergeant Scott, Derek Scott, who was Tiny Cameron's best friend, and we saw Tiny there and Tiny was running out and sort of saying everything was okay, you know, round here. So if I hadn't have gone down and landed 'Scotty' would have anyhow, so I went down and landed and picked him up. And the Tomahawk had a very good hatch in the back which was all sealed, and so he just threw a parachute in there and put him in the place of the parachute and sat on top of him.

How difficult was it to land a plane in those sorts of conditions, and to get off again safely?

Well, it wasn't terribly hard to land or take off again except that it was pretty impossible to look round and see what was happening in doing this, that and the other. And it was very difficult having landed to taxi and in fact I got out and sat on the wingtip and let Tiny taxi the thing in. But it's just a matter of luck whether the terrain was good enough or whether it wasn't; you didn't have time, you know, to play around and find out too much about it. But you do these things in the heat of the moment and that's it.

Sure. Well, moving on a little bit, Peter. I know this again had been a basically successful period for No. 3 and I think partly as a result of that the squadron shortly before you left, or left as Wing Commander, received the first Kittyhawks, this is going into December '41. When news came that you were to go back to Australia, how did you greet it?

Oh, I was very happy about it. I'd had quite a long period there and I was a bit weary about it all.

Mm. In that you were weary and you'd done your bit and it was time to go?

(25.00) Yes. Well, I'd been, what was it, been eighteen months at it from when we started, this was when we sailed.

Do you have any final thoughts about the last month or weeks with the squadron?

In what way?

Just generally, anything that you think is significant.

No, I don't think there's anything significant there. When I was posted I insisted that Rawlinson come out too, and he was the last of the original pilots. I'd let Arthur go not long before that, but Rawlinson had done far more than I had and I didn't think it was fit for him to stay, so to that degree I suppose I depleted the squadron a bit. But the next CO was a man who was senior to me, a permanent air force cove who'd had a lot of flying experience and things and should have been able to cope with it admirably because he had a lot of experience in the squadron and it was just a matter of following them until he learnt the tricks of the trade.

Right. I think it was interesting that on your journey back from the Middle East, I think you were saying you came back on the last of the Empire boats, you went via Singapore to pass on some tactical knowledge to the people there.

No, I came out of Singapore on the last Empire boat out of Singapore. But no, I'd been asked to, because it was Tedder's old command in Singapore and we'd just had the chaps out from England, and so with my knowledge of their tactics and our tactics in the desert he thought it could be helpful to Singapore. But by the time I got to Singapore it was too late for them to do anything really; they had virtually no aircraft left and they were confined to the island. And I don't think anybody was very interested in being told anyhow at that stage.

This fellow from the Middle East. Of course much of the, or a significant part of your later war years were spent, well, there was a period setting up 75 and then Mildura OTU. I think you were saying that No. 3 Squadron really did contribute very significantly there in terms of later training of other men.

Well, it contributed very much so in that they were the only people other than the Singapore chaps who'd had any experience of combat at all. And I don't mean that just from an air crew point of view, I mean it also from the ground staff point of view; and how to handle these types of conditions and whatnot. And you were getting people that had come back from combat position who were dealing with people who were really in a lovely peacetime attitude and they don't realise the urgency of things. And if you wanted an aircraft and you wanted it very quickly and so on you went to one of your own boys because, you know, he understood what it was all about.

Sure. Just a final thing, we should end here, Peter, but something I like to ask anybody. Is there anything you feel you would like to add to this general record of your time with No. 3 Squadron, the war generally, anything that you feel should be said that's not been said?

No, I don't know that there's anything to say that hasn't been said before.

Right. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial, Peter, thank you very much for taking the time to make these tapes.

Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW