



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Geoffrey Humber, a British evacuee under the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) Scheme, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview with Geoff Humber recorded on 16th October 1990 about child evacuees and it begins in five seconds from now.

Geoff Humber, where and when were you born?

I was born in Romford, Essex, England on 15th January 1930.

Tell us something about your family circumstance. The sort of people your mother and father were and what they did.

My mother was the daughter of the town clerk of the town of Newark-on-Trent and was brought up in that style.

What sort of person was she? Was she a warm sort of person or a disciplinarian, a ...

She was a cold person. School teacher, a very knowledgeable person, a very hard person. My father, he was a Londoner. His father was a London policeman and to my knowledge he was born somewhere around the Billingsgate area of London.

Were there brothers and sisters?

I have one brother and one sister. My sister is seven years older than myself. Do you want her name?

If you wish, yes.

Betty, Elizabeth, and my brother is Leslie. He is three years older.

Was it a religious family? Was church-going part of the early life?

Oh, on occasion; not all the time.

So what was the kind of urban environment in which you began your early years? How would you describe it in British class terms? Was it working class or ...

Oh, simply working class, yes, yes.

Can you recall the sort of house you grew up in?

Yes. It was a terrace house, one of the middle ones of a group of six. In Linthurst Drive, Hornchurch in Essex.

What about school? Where did you start school?

I started school in Hornchurch but very shortly after we moved to a dormitory called Elm Park very close to Romford, on the District Underground line.

What do you mean, you 'moved to a dormitory'?

Well, a dormitory suburb, if you like, but its not a suburb of London but it's one of those towns built just for people to go home and sleep in.

Was this a State school?

Oh yes, they were all State schools, yeah.

How old were you when you first had an impression that there was some sort of trouble brewing, that there might be war?

Oh probably not till 1939. I would have been nine years old then.

Do you have a clear recollection of adults being concerned about something happening?

No, I can't say that I did.

What about the actual outbreak of war, do you remember that?

That's a difficult one to answer because the subsequent years you know exactly what happened and your memory is overlain by fact that you have been taught.

You don't have a clear recollection of some dramatic announcement and everybody being a bit shocked and alarmed, or anything like that?

Oh, I mean, I was aware of what was going on of Chamberlain going to Munich and all that but one - as a child - one never thinks that that really touches your life.

As the war started were you in an area, or as the air raids started, were you in an area that was affected?

Was I what (laughs). I lived a quarter of a mile from the Hornchurch aerodrome which was the inner defence on the north side of the Thames across the river from Biggin Hill and it was one of the main targets to get knocked out.

Do you have a recollection of the first raids and your feelings at the time?

Oh yeah, I can remember the first raids and my feelings at the time were one of excitement rather than danger. There was no feeling of danger at all.

(5.00) Were there houses nearby or neighbours who were affected or killed or wounded?

Not at that stage, no. That happened after I left.

When did you first hear the idea about children going to Australia then?

I'd already been evacuated once down to my grandparents' place in Sussex and that was in 19 .... I would have been .... Probably late in '39. And then my mother brought me back home to tell me that the evacuation was organised and I had to go for a medical and possible acceptance to go to Australia, wherever Australia was.

How did that strike you at the time? Did that sound exciting or ...

Oh, very exciting. Very exciting.

Incidentally, when you went to your grandparents at Sussex, what sort of circumstance were they in?

Oh, this is my father's father, the ex-policeman, and he was an old, quite an old man even at that time and he lived in a village. So that village was well away from any sort of effect of the war. I went to school there and the choir mistress actually lived with them so I ended up in the church choir.

Did your brother and sister also go?

No. No, I was the only one there.

Why didn't your brother and sister also get moved out, do you have any idea?

Oh, my brother did actually go with me originally but he went back after a few weeks because he didn't like the .... He didn't like being away from home and I did. So I quite happily stayed with my grandparents.

You got on well with them then?

Yes.

You smiled when you made the reference to the choir. Did you enjoy the choir?

Oh, no, no. No, it was just one of those things. Just going along with whatever was going on.

How did you fit into school there?

Never had any problems.

And how long were you there then before you were called back?

Oh, probably about six months.

Well, from that moment then when you first heard about going to Australia, how long did it take before you started to move and get ready to go?

Oh, probably only two or three weeks.

What sort of things did you do in the meantime? Were there any special preparations?

I can't recall.

Do you remember getting inoculations or anything of that kind?

No. No, I can't remember that.

What was your understanding about Australia? I mean, what did you imagine Australia represented?

I already had an uncle living here. It was simply a long way away. I had no predetermined thoughts about what it was all about. It was, I guess, if I really thought about it at all, it was only another extension of the life I'd lived. It was just a movement.

Were there other children at your school or in the area who were going to be moving as well?

Well, my brother. My brother came too, at the same time. So, just the two of us, that's all we knew from that particular area.

Do you remember the sort of things you would have been taking with you?

Oh yes, because I had a list for some years afterwards of exactly what items we had to take. So many shirts, so many changes of short pants, so many this, so many that. Yes, I did have a knowledge of that but it was only one suitcase.

On the day you were leaving home, did your mother and father both go with you to meet an escort, or how did it work?

Mmm, no, only my mother came. And we left from the Romford railway station.

Did you say goodbye to your father at home or ...?

Oh, I must have done; must have done.

Was he affected by that? Or were you affected it at the time? Did it seem an emotional moment?

No, it didn't affect me emotionally.

I'm sorry. You said you went to the station ...

Yeah. There was a group of children there but all being picked up from the same area but I didn't know any of them. I couldn't tell you how many there were now - probably ten or fifteen maybe.

And from there?

From there I don't recall changing trains. We must have done, going from Romford into London. Then we .... I recall on the train trip up to Liverpool, which all took place the same day, I don't remember the early part of the train trip but I can remember marvelling at the way the trains picked up water on the move. They had channels alongside the tracks and a scoop which they could pick up the water and keep going. That was, I remember, recalling that around the town of Crewe which is not that far short of Liverpool.

(10.00) And on arrival at Liverpool?

We .... I don't recall the Liverpool Railway Station; I do recall arriving at the school where we were billeted until we were to leave. That was .... The day I am talking about is the 1st August 1940.

You spent a few days before ...

We spent five days because the ship sailed on 5th August from Liverpool, and so we would have spent the night of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th billeted in this school.

What sort of things did you do while you were there?

I suppose we played (laughs). I've no real recollection of what we did.

Did you have any sense or concern that you weren't going home? It began to dawn on you that you were going to be away for a long time?

I knew I was going to be away for a long time and that didn't bother me at all. We had been brought up not to worry about leaving home. There was no feeling of homesickness, no worry about anything like that; that didn't worry me at all. Yes, these questions do cause you to think, don't they.

> What about your relationship with your sister? Had that had all been a wrench, or was it just something you took in your stride?

No, my sister was already gone from home. She was in what they call 'service' to a Royal Navy lieutenant's family down in a place called Lyme Regis on the south coast in Dorset or Devon.

> Had you missed her particularly or was the relationship like, as often the case, between brothers and sisters, you don't think much about it?

No, I did miss my sister because I had more closeness to her than I had to my brother. So when she left home, I was the third of the three - the youngest of the three - and my brother and I are like chalk and cheese so we don't have a great deal in common, whereas I've go a lot more in common with my sister.

> As an older brother, did he feel a need to sort of tell you what to do and assume responsibility for you as you were billeted?

Yes, yes, he did. He was always organising me.

> Did you accept it or resist it? Or a bit of both?

It never worried me. Never worried me.

> Do you recall meeting escorts and being appointed to particular people while you were billeted?

I recall meeting our escort whom I think was a Mrs Fellows and .... I recall her as being a rather motherly lady.

> Was that a matter that you appreciated? I mean, did she strike you as a likeable sort of person?

Oh, very likeable? As I said before, I get along with everybody. I don't have problems talking to people and relating to them.

> Had you been briefed at all by your parents about, you know, how you were to behave going out to this new country; the sort of things that you must do to look after yourself, all that sort of thing?

Well, I can't recall any of that. Maybe my brother was but I wasn't.

> What about your first view of the ship? Was that an impressive moment, as such?

Oh very impressive because one wants to know the name of the ship and the size of it. All these things came in as gossip amongst the children. All looking at this grey monstrous ship, although, of course, it's not big by today's standards; our being lined up on the wharf waiting to go on board; and a sense of, of the beginning of the adventure. That's where it really began.

> Were British troops already aboard or were they still waiting to board as well at that point?

I couldn't tell you which went first, the children or the troops.

> So when you went on, what kind of situation did you find yourself in as far as your own accommodation was concerned?

Oh, I think we had a cabin for four down on E deck which was right down near the engine room because the - not that I noticed it until the ship got under way - but the vibration was quite pronounced. Mainly we were confined. As soon as we got on board we had to go to our particular area. An escort looked after a certain number of cabins of the children that she was in charge of and in my case, she. And we more or less had to make ourselves at home there. We couldn't .... We weren't allowed to run around naturally because we would have been a pain to everybody if we had. So we just had to get used to where we were.

(15.00) How many were in your particular group?

I think it was fifteen.

> Generally how did they get on?

Oh, I can't recall any troubles at that stage. There were some problems a little later.

> In the first few days were there any difficulties with the very youngest children who perhaps felt homesick or just upset and had trouble settling down?

There probably were. I don't recall them specifically because I didn't feel that way.

> So how did the daily routine develop? What sort of things did you find yourself doing? Was it a particularly early rise, for example?

I don't recall the rising time, it's too long ago. But as a rather active child I probably would have been up and about anyway, no doubt exploring whenever one could.

> Evidently at first there were games and school books and things that were supposed to have gone aboard ship that didn't. So, what sorts of things did you do to amuse yourselves?

Ha, ha. Ask any ten year old child how it fills its day and it wouldn't be able to tell you. There was just so many things to do. It was all a very new life and I can recall spending a lot of time watching the waves, you know, and the other ships in the convoy. I know the escorts kept us busy with games. I couldn't tell you what sort of games. Of course, there was always this singing bit, right from the word go they taught us the ship's song and 'Waltzing Matilda'.

> Do you recall any of the words of the ship's song?

Oh, I think I probably know them all.

> Could you recite them just offhand?

Oh .... 'We heard your voices across the sea ...' No, I can't recall all of the words. I was singing them to myself on Sunday. Now I can't remember of course.

> Did you enjoy the singing and that?

Oh yeah. When you're ten years old you don't really object to much at all. You just go along with what's happening.

Was there a sense of exhilaration being at sea, looking out: there's the convoy and all that sort of thing?

Oh, for me, yes. Great excitement. Great excitement. And all the ... the wonderment or the wondering where we were actually going. Australia was an unknown place, of course. Where our next port of call would be next time we would sight land. Yes, all these things were a constant source of discussion amongst the children.

Were you having any trouble with seasickness?

No, never been seasick.

What about bed-wetting? A lot of the smaller children apparently had bed-wetting as a sort of consequence of being unsettled and ...

Remember I had a very strict mother. That was long gone. Never had that problem.

Did you have any contact with the troops at all?

Oh yes. The troops and the children to my knowledge, or the way it was for me anyway, because I was probably a bit of a free spirit, always spent a lot of time with the troops and with the crew whenever I could.

Were you supposed not to?

I think we were supposed not to.

Did you get into any strife? Do you recall any moments where maybe you went a bit too far and were to be disciplined in some way?

No, that never happened.

What was your overall impression then as to how the escorts managed their role? Were there some who perhaps were finding it difficult and having to raise their voices and it was a struggle or was it ...

Yeah. I think there were some troubles for the escorts but I never ever had any trouble with them. It's just that I'm just that sort of person that is quite happy to go along with what's

happening. So if I'm told to do this or not to do that, sure, I'll follow the rules basically. But I think the soldiers sought us out more than we made an approach to them.

And were there any scraps between the boys, boys who fell out and fought?

Never saw any. Never saw any fights at all. Everything seemed to go quite smoothly as far as I could see.

What about your first port of call then, was that an exciting moment again?

(20.00) Freetown on the African coast. Capital town of Sierra Leone. Yeah, yeah. Of course it was exciting. It was a very strange world wasn't it? It was in the tropics; the people were a different colour - not that that worried me because I'd had a black doctor in England so they weren't strange. It might have been to some but certainly not to me.

Were you able to go ashore at Freetown?

No, no. We were not allowed ashore because Freetown was in an area given over to yellow fever so .... And I don't think there was any docking facilities anyway. We couldn't have gone alongside. It all meant going ashore in boats and they couldn't have organised that anyway.

I gather there were local people came out in small boats to try and sell things?

Yes, yes, that is correct.

Were you able to get anything or ...

I had nothing to trade (laughs). Some of them traded things. I saw them trading gas masks and whatever. But I never had anything to trade and I was just happy to watch.

And your next port of call was Capetown, was it?

Capetown, yes, Capetown. Enjoyed Capetown. Still remember a great deal about it. Couldn't tell you where we went to but I can remember trees, paper-bark trees. It might have been the botanic gardens, it could have been the garden of the governor's home, it could have been a number of places, but - I don't recall where it was - but the strange plants, yes, they were quite something to be wondered at.

What are some of the other things you remember? You say you remember a great deal. What kind of things were you doing?

Oh, I mean, mainly visual things like Table Mountain and, what's it called, Signal Peak, or something like that to the right of Table Mountain. Just watching the black people. We were taken on some bus trips. I think we were there for a while.

You went to the zoo, I gather?

Did we? Oh, maybe we did, maybe that was where I saw the trees.

I gather there were also a number of formal sorts of occasions where speeches were made and so on that perhaps mightn't have been particularly interesting to a group of young children. Do you have any recollection of that?

Mmm, no I don't have any recollection of that.

So what then was the most intriguing element about visiting Capetown?

It was foreign. It was foreign but nothing was sort of out-of-place. I just took it as being just another experience, just of great interest. What is in my mind is mainly visual impact of the coloured South Africans and the tidiness of the place, the cleanliness of the place. And, of course, the docks. I guess I was mostly more interested in playing with the other children than taking note of speeches and such like.

Were you posed for photographs by members of the local media?

I don't recall. I don't recall.

And from there it was on to Colombo, was it?

No, to Bombay.

Bombay.

Mmm. Bombay was ... I remember seeing the 'Gateway to India', which is the arch; I remember seeing a British soldier or a British policeman beating an Indian with a malacca cane ...

Were you shocked?

Disturbed, yes, because one is not used to seeing that sort of thing. We were warned to stay away from the local people. Our main view of the world, apart from when we were taken ashore, was the docks and the very, very large landing stage and the train marshalling area close to the docks. One of the children got scalped there by a steel hawser which was coming up the side of the ship and he had his head out the porthole. I think eight stitches.

I gather you'd all been instructed, 'whatever you did, not to put your heads outside the portholes'.

Correct. But, of course, how are you going to stop 'em.

And from Bombay to Colombo, was it?

Yeah, I think we spent actually about a week in Bombay. I feel that that was the place where they replaced the degaussing cable that ran all the way around the ship to neutralise magnetic mines. I think with the first trouble was in Capetown but I've got the feeling that it was renewed in Bombay and from there we went to Colombo. My memory of Colombo is quite vague now. I don't recall what we did in Colombo.

(25.0)) Were you beginning to miss home at all? Or was it still too much excitement and too much of an adventure?

I never missed my home - never.

Were you writing to your parents? Were you told that, well, you should write once a week or ...

Oh yes. Yeah, we were writing but I couldn't tell you whether it was once a week. But, oh yes, we were told to write to our parents, definitely. I imagine that all those normal things that adults tell children to do, we did.

Had you got any letters at all at any of the ports of call?

I can't recall.

And then from Colombo to Singapore.

Colombo to Singapore.

> Were you impressed at all by the notion that the troops were being off-loaded to fight, or the potential of war, and that you might not see any of them, or some of them might die? Did that ...

There was no .... No sense of war at that distance. Japan was an unknown, virtually unknown nation at that time to me. No sense of danger whatsoever or why they were there other than to garrison part of the British Empire.

> What about at Singapore? Are there any elements of your visit there stay with you?

Mmm, how clever and good the - I imagine they were Chinese - boys were at playing soccer; how flat the area appeared to me; the rubber trees; the .... Certainly the different standards of homes that the Chinese lived in as compared to the whites.

> Were you hosted again formally at a number of different sorts of functions?

I don't recall that. I imagine we were because I think we were there a couple of days. But I don't recall that now.

> By the time you were approaching Australia, were you beginning to tire a bit of being at sea?

Oh no. There was a sense of loss after Singapore because all the troops had gone ashore. But .... I think after Singapore - I've got a feeling it was Singapore - that they brought the lifeboats inboard. Up to that time they'd all been out on the davits ready for anything that might have happened. But I think from Singapore onwards they were all inboard. The ship was a lot tidier and, of course, far less people 'cause 500 troops gone from the ship made a lot more space for us.

> You'd presumably participated in drills. Had you had any scares? Did you ever get the impression that you might be torpedoed and it worried you at all?

No. No, there was only a sense of excitement, no sense of danger. Yes, of course, the rumours went round the ship that we were in danger, we were being pursued but we always found that out sort of after the event. Being close to that engine room, as I said at the beginning, we always knew when the ship was trying to put on speed to .... Perhaps avoidance of submarines or whatever. Yes, we were aware of it. But I was never aware of any sense of danger whatsoever.

How were you getting on with your brother at this stage?

I didn't have any trouble getting on with my brother basically. He was a different type of person as I said to myself. I was always malleable for whatever anybody else wanted of me whereas he had a tendency to revolt against being told to do things and he had caused some trouble. I don't know what the trouble was but he had caused some trouble and by this time I think we'd been transferred to a two-bunked cabin rather than a four. But I wanted to go to the two-bunk cabin anyway because it had a porthole.

Did you get the impression that the trouble was regarded as serious or what was the impression as to ...

No, no, no. Nothing too serious, 'cause life went on just the same.

Did you share views about what you might do with your life in Australia? Did you begin to romance about travelling and exploring or ...

No, no. Had no .... Never was looking forward at that point, never worrying about what might happen. I was just going to take up where I'd left off in England. That was my only thoughts on the subject.

So as to your first sighting of Australia, what were you very first thoughts and impressions?

Ha, ha. Very flat. (Laughs) Very flat. Fremantle is not exactly the most prepossessing place in the world.

It seems some children were left at Fremantle or taken up into ...

Yeah.

Did you have any sense as to how it was going to work? What would happen?

No, no. We had been told that we were going to the homes of people who had offered ...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A

START TAPE ONE, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Geoff Humber recorded on 16th October 1990 about child evacuees and continues in five seconds.

You were told that you would be going into the homes of people in Australia?

Oh yes, yes. There was .... Any worries we might have had about the future was allayed by that anyway. One never even questioned whether they would like us or not, or never in my mind.

Did you see the process in Fremantle as to how children were selected or how they were met up with their ...

No, I didn't see anything of that because we knew that some were going ashore there. Nobody went ashore, to my knowledge, from our section but maybe they did. I don't recall that. They took us to a football ground in Fremantle. We saw our first Australian penny with one penny which caused a few laughs because they were so very different to the English pennies.

Was the kangaroo an element that you particularly noted?

Yeah. The kangaroo, of course, but we'd been taught all that on the ship. We knew what a kangaroo was; I guess we knew what an emu was. No idea of the size but we were familiar with what we were going to be seeing.

What about Australians themselves as you began to meet some, did they strike you as sounding different or being different in any particular way?

No, they didn't sound any different. Accents didn't sort of come to my consciousness until some time later when it was pointed out that my accent was different (laughs). They were very, very kind people. A very youthful sort of a people. I don't recall seeing particularly what I would call 'older' people, mainly they seemed to be younger.

What about the trip across the Great Australian Bight, how was that? Was that rough particularly?

Very exciting. It wasn't rough, no. Mmm, I think we had the *Stratheden* as company to Melbourne - I'm sure it was the *Stratheden* - and, of course, as we'd dropped off ships on the way, there goes another one, and finally we were left with just the two of us that I could see.

And then, into Port Phillip Bay?

Yes, into Port Phillip Bay. And, of course, we knew that's where we were getting off because we'd known our destination was Melbourne. We probably came through the heads somewhere around dawn. And then, of course, we got stuck on a mudbank at Gellibrand, round where the Gellibrand Light used to be, which was a bit of bad navigating. We were stuck there for a while until they could get us off. And then, of course, I imagine we came in at Station Pier - I would think we did and it could have been Princes, I couldn't be sure. And from there we were taken by - I would once again have to imagine - bus or coach to the Traveller's Aid in King Street which was there until very recently.

To that point, had you made any particular friendships that, you know, other boys that you liked very much and you were going to be sorry to part with?

Oh, I suppose I had. I mean, I had known .... John Hare was in our section and I'd known him all the way along - his sisters were in a different section, so I didn't get to know them until later - but John, I recall, right from the beginning. And I guess I did get to know most of those boys within the section and probably quite a lot outside the section too. But, in my memory, they're long gone.

So what happened at the Traveller's Aid?

Oh, it was just a case of a place where we were told we were staying until we went out to our, I suppose you could call them foster parents. And it was just a matter of living through a few days until that happened. We did, of course, get to see cable trams in Bourke Street which were only there for another week.

(5.00) How did the nature of Melbourne impress you at the time? How did it seem as a city?

At that stage in my mind nothing different to what I'd already seen in London or anywhere else, you know. Very wide streets, naturally; it was a clean place.

Did you have a good feeling about it or just indifferent? Did you have any particular feeling?

Well, it was the end of the trip and, okay, I was about to take up life again and it was just a matter of a limbo situation waiting to find out just what was going to happen.

I gather at some time there was an arrangement where there was a radio contact made with families back in England. Did you involve in that?

This is much later. This is much later. This is about 1942, if I remember. Some had .... I believe .... See, I was never involved in that; my brother was, but not me, and I had a

knowledge that it had been going on but it basically didn't involve me and I guess I was waiting until my brother got the opportunity to talk.

At the point of arriving in Melbourne, had there been any suggestion that you and your brother might be separated?

Never occurred to me. There had been no sort of suggestion about it.

And were you, in fact, separated?

No. No, we stayed together the whole time.

So, how did you meet the new foster parents as in a sense they would be?

We were taken to the home that we were to live at in a car. We had a policeman in plain clothes as our driver, there was an official - I don't know who the official was - and three children in the car. One of the children was dropped off at a house which I can still identify in Riversdale Road, Camberwell - very close to St Dominic's Church - and then there was just my brother and myself left. And we went out further along Riversdale Road to Surrey Hills and eventually pulled up at the house. And we were introduced to the people we were going to live with. I recall the policeman going to the tap in the front garden to get himself a drink. And we were taken inside, introduced to these people and we were taken inside and shown where we were going to sleep and they had ...

What sort of people did you find yourself meeting? Do you recall how they looked?

They looked homely and nice.

You mentioned a policeman. Why was there a policeman with you?

He was in plain clothes, he was off-duty just doing a job of driving. Just a volunteer driver.

So you were then introduced to the house by these people you were saying you were taken in.

Yes, they showed us where we were going to sleep, where our room was, and they had already brought in a whole heap of comics for us to read and, they'd been very well prepared for us.

And how long before you began at school?

I don't recall what sort of a day it was. It was 18th October 1940 when we went to the house. Mmm, probably only a day or two. We must have been taken to the school, or at least I was. My brother being three years older he may. What I do recall is the first day I went to school this little local boy came and collected me to take me and show me where to go. You know, took me along to the school and brought me home again and probably did that for a whole week at least and maybe a lot longer. I can't recall that now.

What was the suburb you'd gone to?

Surrey Hills.

Now, as it turns out that's almost fifty years ago but two days. Does it remain with you as a particularly important date as such, or ...

(10.00) All the dates I memorise. I know what day I left my home, I know what day I left England, I know what day I arrived in Australia, I know what day I went to these people, I know what day I left these people eventually, what day I got on the *Aquitania* to go back to England and I know what day I left England and the day I arrived back in Australia.

What do you put that down to? It's a fairly unusual ...

I've got a good memory for dates (laughs).

But it's also unusual. A lot of people don't make an effort to do that. Was it almost like a sort of something you took pride in of having a good memory?

They were meaningful dates, for the future.

So how did things start to work out in this new home?

Magnificent. They were the most marvellous people I have ever met in my life.

How long did you spend with them?

The whole time.

Up until ...?

Up until the day of 9th December, 1945, which was the day we left that house to get on the train to go to Sydney to pick up the *Aquitania*.

You mention that you had some trouble with your accent.

No, no. I didn't have trouble with it, I just became aware of it.

You weren't picked on then as some sort of stranger or ...

Of course I was picked on being a Pommy. (Laughs) Of course I was.

Were there fights? Did ...

Never had a fight in the whole time I was here.

How did you manage generally at school?

No worries. I enjoyed my schooling. I enjoyed every second I spent.

During this period did you begin to, again, have any ideas about what would happen in the future or you were still just taking everything as it came?

Taking everything as it came.

What about the first letters from home? When did they begin to arrive?

I don't recall when they began to arrive. I think they were always coming and I was always replying.

Were they important to you?

I guess they were. No lasting impression of them being important. I guess they were.

You mentioned that your brother apparently had some involvement with this radio opportunity.

That was 1942, in January of '42 when he was scheduled to talk to my parents and I recall that day very, very strongly because I don't know why we happened to be in that particular spot but it was out at the front of St Paul's Cathedral on the day of a red dust storm and we were so nicely dressed up and everything and I think the studio was in Hardware Street.

But you didn't go into the studio, or you did?

No, I was only in the waiting room.

So you couldn't see or you couldn't watch from a production booth as your brother talked to hear what he said or anything?

Not that I recall. Maybe I could; maybe I couldn't. I knew I wasn't talking.

Were you disappointed or resentful or ...

No. No, it didn't worry me at all.

Did you have any sense as to what your brother talked about and ...

No. No, I guess .... The way life goes since you always .... You've got 'How are you?', 'How are you coping?', 'How's school?'. I guess all these sort of things must have been said.

Given that you remember the troops going ashore in Singapore and how quiet the boat seemed without them, do you recall the outbreak of war with the Japanese and then Singapore falling and did that touch you at all?

Very much. Very much so. By this time of course, I guess because I was English, I'm very good at history and geography, and I know what it was all .... What everything was all about in a childish sort of a way. I knew about the British Empire, I was very fond of looking at maps, I'd read a lot - I'm a great reader. Yes, very much. I mean, up to this time though I'd followed the fortunes of the war. I used to read the papers: I used to listen to the news. And the man I was living with used to tell me what was going on from an adult point of view. I'd followed the war in the Western Desert, the fortunes of the Australians. I was very proud of the Australians. I knew all about Tobruk. All of the things that happened, I knew about them all. I was an avid absorber of information.

Had there been any particular soldiers that you'd met? Did you know any names of men who you suspected had then been captured by the Japanese?

No, no, no. No, you felt for them because you knew that they were prisoners. You also knew that our own Australian 8th Division was prisoners and a fairly sickening feeling that they should have done better.

What about test cricket? Was that being played then during the war years?

(15.00) No, it wasn't played during the war years.

What about sports? How did you find the Australian scene in terms of the interest in sports. Did that seem to be different at all from school or much the same in England?

Oh, it's all very much the same. Okay, the style of football was different. I became an avid Melbourne follower - the Melbourne team follower - from 1941 onwards of course because the season was over when we arrived but as soon as it started I was introduced to the game and became a very avid follower of it. And, nowadays, I'm an Australian Rules fanatic.

Did you play football at school yourself? Did you like the game?

Oh yes. Of course I played it. I didn't play it at the State school apart from just kicking the football backwards and forwards but when I went to the Mont Albert Central School, yes, I played football and when I went to Box Hill High School I played football and I also played cricket and did all the athletics that went with it.

Did the family you were with make an effort to sort of show you around, take you to places like the beaches, Healesville; all those sort of things?

They took me everywhere - everywhere. Through the museum, through the art gallery - I became a member of their family.

How do you think they found you and your brother? I gather generally ...

From what I know, they loved me and I loved them.

What about your brother?

No, he was different.

Was he troublesome for them?

Yes, he was more troublesome.

In what way?

He was my superior.

Did he slightly resent the assumption that they were perhaps taking the .... In a way they were *de facto* parents. Did he ...? Or could he have been troubled by ...?

No. He didn't accept that they were *de facto* parents whereas I did.

Was it particularly difficult or just a bit strained? Could you discern there was a strange element to be conscious of this at the time?

It didn't really start to occur until around 1942-43 when the real difference was starting to show up. By that time he was getting towards sixteen.

Did you discuss your relationship with the family and with each other?

It concerned me, yes, because it was a disturbance in my magnificent lifestyle.

Was your brother inclined to answer back and argue or did he just be a bit obstructionist?

Obstructionist. Probably answering back somewhat. Generally, as far as I remember, he didn't apply himself to what perhaps they required him to apply himself to.

He was still at school at sixteen?

Mmm, I think at that .... That was about the dividing line when he gave up school. He wasn't any good at mathematics and he didn't particularly like school and I think that was about the time he became a - it must have been around the age of sixteen when he went into Bethesda Hospital helping out in the dark room of the x-ray unit.

Was that on a salaried basis or ...?

Oh yes. Yes, it was a job. It was a job. I'm not too sure of the dates. It could have been '44 when that happened.

Had you begun to think at all about leaving school and starting to work?

No. No, it hadn't even occurred to me.

What about the end of the war? Well, there were two ends in a sense: there was the end of the war with the Japanese; there was the end of the war with Europe. Do you recall those moments?

Very much so. Very emotional days they were. And, of course, by this time I had .... I'd spent, what, about fourteen months at Surrey Hills State School, two years at Mont Albert Central School, and at the end of the European war, I'd spent seventeen months at Box Hill High School. And, of course, when the war with Japan ended in the August I was getting on towards two years at Box Hill High School. But my interests were mainly in the schooling itself and the difficulty one has with certain subjects and .... I hadn't given a thought to work at that stage because I expected to go on at school.

What about the actual announcements at the end of the war, can you recall where you were and how people reacted?

(20.00)I recall the feelings of VE Day and the VJ Day. I naturally was listening to the radio and was caught up in the excitement of the people I was living with. I think we did go into the city. I don't recall going in on the European finish but I do think they took me in at the finish of the Japanese war - the excitement of the people.

Were there marches? There was a fly-over I seem to recall wasn't there, at that time?

I would think there was. It is all a bit foggy now, that part of it. It comes across more as an emotion rather than as a memory.

How would you describe the emotion?

Well, it had to be the end of the adventure of living here. Then, of course, you do begin to wonder what the future is going to hold. But, I guess, my mind really was taken up with the

fact that I knew that they were going to take us back to England so I suppose I just thought I'd take up life where I left off.

How did you feel at that point about going back?

A great deal of excitement to go back to England.

Any regrets?

About leaving? Of course, there were regrets but not so many as would have stopped me going back.

Did you have any particularly good friends at that time or the fact that you had a brother in a way ...

My brother by this time was in the Australian Navy. He, I don't recall quite where he was at that time, whether he was still in training at Flinders or whether he was actually on a ship. I know very shortly afterwards he was on the *Quickmatch*, or in *Quickmatch* in the Japanese area, very shortly after the war was over. So he was away from home at this period.

One might suppose by this time you would have gathered around you a fair range of sorts of things that are attractive to young boys, maybe pocket knives, swap cards, odd rocks, all sorts of bits and pieces. Did you have difficult choices to make as to what you could take back with you?

Oh no. I just took everything I had which was all my school books and as a child you don't own all that much. I mean those were different days to today. You didn't have your 'ghetto-blaster' or anything like that. You had just mainly schoolboy things. Of course you had a pocket knife. Mainly my books and books about Australia that were given to me when all our friends knew that I was coming back. And, of course, to tell my parents what Australia was about I got a whole number of books about this country, which I was very proud of which I handed around like they didn't belong to me when I got to England and I don't recall ever getting one back looking back on it.

And did you have a pet at that time?

Yes, we had a pet dog.

Sorry to leave it behind?

I don't think I ever had the sense I was actually leaving for good. This was just another change in my life but it wasn't going to be a permanent one somehow. I guess, this is the way I felt following out what happened subsequently.

Where did you board the *Aquitania*? Was it at Station Pier or ...

No. It couldn't get into Melbourne. At Woolloomooloo in Sydney.

How did you go to Sydney then - train?

By train, yes.

Your foster parents went to see you off at the station?

Yes, yes. I think my brother might have even been there but, of course, he was in the navy and couldn't leave at that time. He had to see out his service. He'd signed on for so long so that had to be completed.

How did your foster parents react to the whole process of your going?

I think they were very sad.

Were you touched by that or just caught up in the excitement of travel?

Touched by it and caught up with the excitement of travel. Who can explain? I mean, I was looking to going back and getting to know my own parents again, seeing my sister, going back to what I think romantically I thought was a very brave country that had fought valiantly against Germany and Japan with all the traumas that had gone on during that time. I wanted to see as an older child where I came from because by the time you're sixteen you can absorb a lot more and you're more attentive to detail than you are when you're a child.

(25.00) What about on arriving at the station to head to Sydney, did you join a group of other children or how did that part of it work out?

Well, you see, right across the period of the time I was here, from the time I was in State school, there was a girl who was also an evacuee and I'd gone through State school and central school with the same girl. We seemed to ...

What was her name?

Her name was Sheila Hammond, now Sheila Slight. And we had always been great friends; we are still great friends.

So you met up with her at the station?

Met before we went to the station when we knew we were going back and once again our lives were crossing and, if I recall rightly, there was six of us to a compartment in the train going to Sydney and she was one and I was another. There were others that I knew but I can't recall who they were now.

Did you have an escort as such?

I imagine there would have been. There would have to have been.

Do you recall stopping at Albury and having to change trains in the middle of the night?

Yes, yes. I recall that. But that was expected because all through the war years the .... It was always discussed as to what a traumatic thing it was to ship anything from Melbourne to Sydney of everything having to be changed at Albury. So that was expected.

There used to be a tradition of people throwing newspapers and sweets and things out to rail gangers along the route, did that happen at all?

I didn't know that.

So, on arriving in Sydney, did you stay overnight or go straight to the ship?

Mmm, straight to the ship. As far as I know we went straight to the ship. We must have pulled into Central Station in Sydney and probably by bus from there to Woolloomooloo. Great excitement because it was a very large ship and on the other side was a British aircraft carrier which probably was the *Indefatigable* which of course took all our attention because a very large ship. That was where we discovered that we had approximately 3,000 ex-prisoners of war going back to England on board.

When did you first see some of those?

From the first moments.

How did they look? Were they recovered somewhat?

Great condition; great condition. They .... Subsequently I found out they'd spent quite a lot of time in hospital in New Zealand before they were put on the *Aquitania* to go back to England.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B

START TAPE TWO, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two of the interview with Geoff Humber recorded on 16th October 1990 about child evacuees and it begins in five seconds.

So what kind of accommodation did you find yourself with on the *Aquitania*?

Oh, of course, the *Aquitania* had been a troopship and I think there was probably about twenty or twenty-four to the cabin. Pretty rough and ready.

What does that mean?

Bare of most facilities; just the bunks.

How did the escort process work again? Were you divided up into groups, boys and girls and so on?

Oh yes, yes. We were divided up. The girls had to be in one section of the ship because with all those troops on board they had to be guarded day and night.

What about your escort? What sort of person did you have?

I don't recall who it was. I know I was the cabin captain. I was the only mug, mug enough to take it on.

What did that imply? What were the responsibilities ...

Keeping the cabin tidy, speaking for the rest of them, mainly that.

Were you able to do that? Did it work out pretty well?

I didn't have any problems.

Had you been briefed about having contact with the troops or not having contact with them or anything of that sort?

I think we were probably warned not to have contact with them.

And did you?

Oh, I was a rebel. Yeah, I spent nearly the whole trip with them (laughs). I only came back in bounds when I had to.

What were the impressions you got as to their feelings about the war and their experience? Did they tend to talk freely or rather closed about it?

No, they talked quite freely about it. They decked me out in a British Army uniform. I used to go to their mess, to their picture shows; I spent all my time with them. Probably one of the most revealing times of my life. They were wonderful men who'd been through hell. They taught me the games that they played to keep their sanity. I had ...

What sort of games? What kind of things?

I have great admiration for those men. Oh, they were mainly stupid games. They had a card game they called 'Snitch 'ems' which consisted of cutting a pack of cards, whatever number came up they counted off that number of cards and then you cut the deck again and you got that many whacks across the nose with that number of cards (laughs). I know it sounds a stupid game but probably it caused great hilarity and I absolutely enjoyed their company. I spent virtually the entire trip. I think I was more sad to leave those people, those men than anybody else up to that stage of my life.

Did you get into trouble at all for spending so much time with the troops?

Probably but I don't recall it being serious.

Do you know what sorts of entertainments or things that were supposed to be organised for the children going back?

No. Of course by this time the majority of us, I guess, were around the same age of .... I suppose they were twelve to about nineteen. As I recall there was about eighty-three of us involved in that group - something like that anyway. Yeah, I can recall plenty of times playing Bingo. I recall the first week when we crossed the Bight in a huge storm that most of them were confined to their cabins but never myself. I do recall having two very large tables in the dining room to myself as the only one that didn't get sick.

(5.00) How was the food? If the accommodation was a bit rough ...

I never had trouble with food either. I've got a stomach like an iron boiler, no problems.

How was the food? Was it good food or ...

It's food. Who takes notice of food. It's fuel just to keep you going. Whatever it is, I enjoy it.

Did you begin to share experiences with the other children as to what had become of them and how their lives had gone?

Oh yes, of course, that was always talked about. I mean, I knew that John Hare had a bad time because he was on the ship and I counted myself very lucky because of those people. I haven't mentioned their name yet, you know.

Were there others then who'd had particularly difficult times?

I know Sheila Hammond had some bad times. I couldn't relate to their bad times because I'd had such a good time.

Was there a tendency for these young people who'd got a little bit older to reflect on their experiences and come to some sort of judgment about whether or not it had been a good or a bad thing to send them out to Australia at that time, anyway?

I suppose there were. It had never occurred to me that it was a bad thing. I guess, if I had any thoughts about it at that time, it would have been that I been extremely lucky. I counted myself as being very, very lucky that I'd been evacuated in the first place, that I'd gone to the people who I'd gone to, that I had gone to the schools that I'd gone to and know the teachers

that I'd known. I really did believe that I was born under a lucky star and I'd had a great time. My life had been magnificent.

Which way did you go back?

Ah, Sydney to Fremantle; Fremantle to Capetown; Capetown to Freetown; Freetown to Southampton.

Did you have time ashore at the other ports?

No, not in Fremantle. In Capetown, yes. In Freetown, no. And only the once did we get off the ship in Capetown.

What did you do then?

Mmm, we went on a bus trip, somewhere behind Table Mountain. We were only there for a twenty-four hour period or so while we refuelled. I mainly recall the troops being loaded to go ashore and being warned to stay out of District Six. I think they brought ninety-five per cent of them back from District Six, which was the 'red light' area. I think that was the first time they'd been let go since they were captured by the Japanese, and they were a sorry lot when they brought them back. They were unloading them from trucks and putting them in cargo slings and lifting them aboard and dumping them on deck and carrying 'em down to their cabins, or actually their bunks. They were pretty unspeakable for about three days.

I gather there was some unfortunate mishap with a couple being lost on a launch taking some late ones out to the ship?

Yes. Yes, watched all that. What am I supposed to say about all that?

Did you know any of the men that ...? Had you met any of them?

No. No, they were not a couple from the group that I knew. I had one particular area where I used to go. I'd made friends with these particular troops and I just spent morning, afternoon and evening with them listening, mainly listening to them, of hearing about their experiences. Very .... I can't recall any particular stories that they .... I can recall some particular stories that they told but mainly I was absorbing their experience into my life and wondering probably how all this could have happened. I think we were all caught up at that stage and something like this must never ever be allowed to happen again. See, they were all very young men.

What were the stories that remained with you then?

Once again, I can't recall actual stories. It sort of was absorbed by osmosis into my very soul.

(10.00) As you got closer to going ashore again at England, did you start to wonder what was going to happen ...

Yes.

... how things would be?

Yes, very much wondering what would happen. Of course we had a lot of excitement in the last day. We went up the Channel in a huge storm in which most of the fun was spent leaning against the wind at an unbelievable angle. It was so stormy that when we got into Southampton water we couldn't, the ship couldn't dock on 9th January. We had to wait until the following day. It was too rough. And, of course, we were wondering: would our parents recognise us, would they be there to meet us? This was not in Southampton, this would be in London. I do recall now that you ask me a sense of great anxiety, of great sorrow because you were suddenly breaking up with people who had shared part of your life that nobody else could understand. That we were once again suddenly alone. Do you understand?

Was this departing from the troops whose friendships you'd made and also for the children or both?

Oh yes, and that and the children and that the great adventure was over and suddenly the world was starting to look a little different. It still continued for a while once we were put on the boat train of seeing all the bombed, the wrecked buildings alongside the railway line because naturally railway lines were a great guide to aircraft. The devastation all around, the wonderment at it. It was a very anxious time because we didn't know what we were heading into.

Was there a reception at dockside for the ship as such, or the troops?

I don't recall that.

Or any media interest in the return of the children?

I would imagine there had have been but I don't recall that.

So, what about then, on the train, and your meeting with your parents? Does this ...

Well, those of us that had been together as a group - 'cause you always make groups - we were still together on the train going up to London and, of course, it was on the platform where we all broke up. Once we got off the train looking for our people.

Do you recall that moment of meeting your parents again?

Yes. Yeah.

Can you describe it?

(Pause) A lot of anxiety. A very traumatic moment. I knew I would have to recognise them because they would not recognise me and I saw them thinning out, there weren't many left, and then I could recognise my parents. They didn't have the faintest idea what I looked like.

Did that hurt somehow?

No, it didn't hurt. But it was depressing; a sudden moment of depression.

How did they look?

(Pause) Lost. 'Cause they weren't getting back what they sent away. And I think the moment that they saw me they realised that there was a different person.

Did they look older?

Oh yeah, they looked older but that was all part of the same picture. Everything was so much smaller; everything was so much grubbier. When you leave as a child you leave with an idea of broad streets, large homes. After all it was the centre of the Empire and when we went back it was so much smaller, so much dirtier, so untidy but with a full appreciation of increasing awareness of what they had gone through and I think also the fact that we'd missed it. And I think for the first time some of us were not grateful for having been evacuated because those who were supposed to be closest to us had gone through a different kind of adventure. We'd gone through a very kind life and they'd gone through utter misery and devastation and dislocation of their lives. I think this was probably during that train trip up to London, it was a sort of fast growing awareness and perhaps a growing up of the two sides of our lives and the complete opposite .... Opposites that we were suddenly going from one world into a totally different one.

I do recall my mother's face lighting up when she finally realised who I was.

(15.00) Do you remember what was said in the first moments?

No, I don't. I don't. Apart from the fact that they would never have recognised me. I was four foot ten when I left and I was six foot one when I went back. I left with straight hair: I went back with curly hair. I mean, in many ways I wasn't their child any more, was I?

Was there then a sense of restraint? Almost it would be an imposition to embrace you and be too intimate?

Well, with my mother's nature, not given to large amounts of emotion, the greeting would have been very restrained and which would have suited me fine.

What about your father?

Stiff upper lip and shake hands.

Was your sister there?

No. My sister wasn't there, no.

With that sense that you've described on the train of realising what you'd missed out on, was there a vague sense of somehow having abandoned or betrayed them? Was there almost a sense of guilt that you hadn't shared with them or something?

No, that hadn't arisen at that time. Most of us hadn't struck that until we'd been in England for probably some days or some weeks in which the odd person called us 'bomb dodgers'. And I don't ...

What did you make of that when you first had that thrown at you? Were you dismayed?

Insulted. Insulted because it was rather typical of people who never thought things through. But we had been sent as children, we didn't go voluntary. We'd never heard of the scheme before we were suddenly in it. I mean it all happened so very, very fast. There was I suppose some children had objected to it but I think the majority didn't object to the idea of being evacuated. We certainly had no feeling that we were doing the wrong thing but I mean your

only defence was the fact that you'd been a child and you just simply did what you were told by adults. I don't know, there's no sense of guilt about that. Just annoyance that people would even think of saying something like that.

When you say people, were there adults said that as well as children?

No, I don't recall any adult saying that. Adults would have said that we were very lucky to have got out. But children always have a tendency to be cruel.

What about the first few days? Was it all a bit commonplace or was it sort of ...? How was that first sort of week or so, settling back in?

Oh well, it was mainly all talk.

Had your sister turned up?

My sister had been at home. Yes. She was married and had a child.

But she didn't go to the station to meet you though?

Oh no, no, no. She stayed home with the .... It was a very, very small child, oh, one year old. Yeah. And we were still living in the house we were living in before the war so everything was exactly the same as it had been. The furniture was the same, everything was the same.

You have said you liked your sister. How was your reunion with her then?

Oh well, she naturally .... She put her arms around me and kissed me and, you know, I would have kissed her back no doubt. That was more emotional than the greeting with my parents I think, although the circumstances were different because by this time I'd spent, you know, an hour or more talking to my parents.

Had there been much damage in the neighbourhood or were there people who disappeared that had been killed during the war?

(20.00) Oh well, I mean, by this time all the children that I had known had grown up too and they were going their own ways and there was naturally nothing left of the world I had known beforehand. There was some houses gone, gaps in the streets but not as badly as I had imagined from what I had seen earlier. As it appears there was a four-mile box around that aerodrome which was very heavily guarded and they were unlucky when a plane did get

through, but, of course they did. But there'd been plenty of subterfuge in which they'd apparently built a look-alike aerodrome on vacant ground where a lot of bombs were dropped but, you know, the usual camouflage subterfuge things to draw the enemy pilots off-line. So there wasn't as much damage as they had expected. I guess there was more damage to the people because the people were very subdued.

Was that a bit disturbing to you? Did it impress you at the time or that was a reflection that ...

Of course it impressed you but I pride myself on being relatively sensitive and I don't ask stupid questions. And you quickly absorbed what they'd been through and if they didn't want to talk about it you didn't ask.

Had what the troops had said to you on the way back in a way prepared you for that? Had that given you a better insight into people and how they coped with difficulty?

No, because they'd been away for most of it too.

But I mean in terms of your sensitivity towards the feelings of those ...

The reason why I always got along with people was I wasn't insensitive. From the word 'go' I've never been insensitive and .... I think the people I lived with in Australia, it wasn't a case of children should be seen and not heard, it was a case of keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut, you will learn a lot more. And this fell in with my nature anyway. You learnt a lot by shutting up.

How long before you went back to school?

I didn't go back to school.

You didn't.

I went to work. Six weeks before .... From the time of landing to the time of my first job which was in north-west London, and I lived east of London and it took two hours' travelling each way and that job only lasted ten weeks.

Doing what?

I was working in the tool room of an engineering place. I learnt a lot in a short space of time but the travelling was too much. To be at work at eight o'clock in the morning I had to get up to the ... oh, half past five and walk to the station and catch the train and, then, of course, at knock-off time which must have probably been around half past four to five o'clock, that journey had to be repeated the other way. So, you know, I was getting home probably around the seven o'clock mark. I'd have my tea and go to bed and be ready to get up at five-thirty the next morning. So that was too much, too quickly. So after that my father got me into a course in printing and very soon that was what I was doing.

Had you found yourself beginning to make comparisons with the nature of life in England and Australia?

Oh, in the first six weeks I'd absorbed that. I mean, things were worse in England during that period after the war than they were during the war because Britain was sending food and supplies to its, the British zone of Germany to feed them. So, apparently, from what they told me times were much harder in that period I was home in England than they had been during the war.

Did this reflect itself in the food? Did you find ...

It reflected itself in the food mainly. I don't recall any problem with clothes but the food was very poor compared to what we'd been living on.

Were you corresponding with your former foster parents?

Yes. Yes, I was. They .... And they were sending newspapers over of what was going on. So I was pretty kept up to date with what was happening here for which I was very grateful. Looking back it was only once again, I'd just simply moved base and I was still continuing on with my life exactly the same as it had been before. The once-a-week newspapers used to keep me well and truly up to date with what was happening with the football or the cricket or just what was happening here.

(25.00) Did you have a sense of homesickness as such for being away from Australia?

Mmm, I think it was within that first six-week period in which I determined I'd be back again as quickly as I could get back. I was disappointed, disillusioned, unimpressed, yes, a great sense of loss. Those people that I'd lived with, I did miss them immensely and I probably, well, I would have had to have made up my mind to come back at that time, that period of time.

Were you able to convey those feelings to either your parents or your sister?

Oh, I would have. Yes, I would have been talking about it the whole time. This, once again, was only a temporary break in things and Australia was where I would go back to.

What was the impression you got as to how your parents responded to that?

I was under the impression that they would be happy to migrate at that time.

So how did your actual departure come about? What happened?

Well, there must have been behind the scenes some - a lot of things said. I recall being asked by the mail if that is what I wanted to do. Obviously some of the older ones, even older than I was, had already made some inquiries about coming back and that caused them to circularise all those who had come back and ask them if they were interested in coming back again as migrants.

Who assumed that responsibility?

As far as I can remember it was the Overseas Club, which I don't recall much about the Overseas Club except that there was a club of obviously interested people who took this on and, as I say, circularised us all and sent us out questionnaires of what we would like to do, et cetera, et cetera. Filled them in and sent them back.

Did you go to Australia House at all?

Oh, as .... About this? No. No.

Were your parents affected by your enthusiasm for life in Australia?

No, I don't think so. I think my mother, being the type of person she was, would have probably been all in favour of it.

So what was the next step? Where did things proceed from there?

Oh, I mean, you just put in the twenty-one months between 10th January and 10th October of 1947 working. Just generally enjoying life that a teenager does enjoy: roller-skating, ice-skating, riding my bike, going on holidays - two or three holidays - two holidays. And then the last holiday when I knew the time was coming to come back I rode my bike all around England to say goodbye to all my relatives, some of which I'd never met. This was it. You

know, I was leaving for Australia soon and so I was just making their acquaintance and saying goodbye because I wouldn't be coming back.

> Were you beginning to have any misgivings the longer you stayed? Were you starting to drift back into feeling more about England?

I was still full of admiration for what England had done but it wasn't my lifestyle so it had to .... It had to change the other way and naturally I was still in touch with the people I'd lived with here during the war. And they said I'd be very welcome to go back to their place so I had no feeling of loss or being cast adrift. I had a future.

> What about your sister? Was she attracted at all to the idea of perhaps looking at going to Australia?

Not at that stage, no.

> Was there any contact then with your older brother? Had he come back or gone back to England?

Not at that stage, no. He was still serving his time in the Australian Navy and no doubt I was writing letters to him, the odd letter here and there but mainly through the people that we'd been with because, after all, he was still based there. When he was on leave he lived there. I don't think he had any thought of living anywhere else.

> So did you come back as an assisted passage migrant?

Yes. A 'five-pound' migrant.

> How was the voyage? What sort of circumstance did you find yourself in?

Well, I found myself back again in the same group that had gone back to England on either the *Stirling Castle* or the *Aquitania*. Before we left we were called together at ...

END TAPE TWO, SIDE A

START TAPE TWO, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Geoff Humber recorded on 16th October about child evacuees and it begins in five seconds from now.

You were saying there was a keen sense of anticipation about coming back.

Oh yeah. Great happiness about coming back. I think England had been a disappointment to us all.

What about the accommodation aboard? What sort of ...

Accommodation, where?

On the ship coming back?

Oh, the *Ormonde*?

Mmm.

Mmm, cabin for four forward, no problems. Perfect spot. Porthole looking forward; porthole looking to the side.

How many to a cabin?

Four.

Were you expected to now look after yourself or were you again with a group?

We were in with a group, yes.

Treated more liberally?

Oh yes. We were all getting older by this time and basically more responsible and, of course, the brakes on us were fewer. We were expected to behave in a responsible manner and to my knowledge that is what we did.

Incidentally, one might suppose there might have been a nice story there for Australian immigration authorities. Did they have any focus on your departure from England and heading to Australia?

Well, see, I don't know where the Overseas Club was based, whether it was in London or whether it was Australian or whether it had offices in both places. No doubt we had contact with Australian immigration officials. The one man that I do recall constantly was a Mr Nelson who was probably one of the really nice people that one could ever have met. I've often wondered what happened to him because he was the person that greeted us here when we got back. He was the one we took any trouble to if we had any troubles. In a sense, he was like an official father figure who we could talk to if we had problems.

What sort of problems? Did you have any that you recall?

No. I didn't have any problems as such but apparently for some reason or other I didn't need an official guardian even though I was seventeen I was treated by or told by Mr Nelson that even at that age I could act as the agent. I had no need for an official guardian.

What about on the voyage out, were there any particular highlights?

I had a wonderful trip out because I was with the same group that has caused me to be highly emotional today that I met last Saturday night again. In most ways we've remained friends right throughout this period of time although we haven't seen each other. And, once again, this lass Sheila Hammond, who only lives four or five minutes from this house, is a very, very close friend and has been now for fifty years. Never been one ounce of romance between us; we're just great friends. She treats me like a brother and I treat her like a sister. And her husband and I bowl at the same bowling club. We are just great friends.

Presumably there would have been other English migrants coming out to Australia who'd not had the opportunity you'd had to have a look at the place first. Did you get talking with people to find they had odd misconceptions or ...

No. We were one tight group. There were six of us in our group. We stuck together the whole time. We didn't have a great deal to do with the others. Whenever we went ashore, we went ashore together. We had our common meeting place which was in the rear bar on the *Ormonde*. 'We'll meet you there around ten o'clock', okay, so we all turn up at ten o'clock and we'd all sit around and drink cider and just enjoy ourselves.

Was it the same way back around the coast to Fremantle ...

No. We came through the Mediterranean, through the Canal. For the first time we were off the ship was in Colombo in which we had a good time.

Doing what?

Oh, we just went through the bazaars, rides in rickshaws, went to the Galle Face Hotel, went up to Mount Lavinia, went to the beach at Mount Lavinia, went through the village, the close-in village to Mount Lavinia, came back on the train, talked to Ceylonese people - Ceylonese, whichever. That was the first time I ever spoke and talked intelligently to somebody who was an admitted Communist. It was all a broadening of one's outlook on life.

What about your first sight of Australia again? Where was that?

That was Fremantle once again. The first Australian I saw was a wharfie leaning against the building with a big fat tummy and his belt underneath it, doing nothing. And I thought, 'Oh well, I'm back home' (laughs).

Did you get ashore this time in Fremantle?

Ah yes, we went ashore. We went up to Perth, we went to the pictures in Perth - air-conditioned theatre. We wandered around the shops. We didn't have any money. None of us had any money. I think between our group of six we probably had about twenty-five or thirty English pounds to see us through the entire time, and we pooled our money and we just enjoyed going everywhere together. Whatever we could afford we did. We made our money last and probably we landed up in Melbourne with about ten shillings to each one. We just had a very, very tremendous trip. We relaxed together. You know, we just travelled everywhere together. We stuck together like glue as one group. Five of them, five of that group, were are the anniversary the other night.

Was there a reception committee for you when you got to Melbourne?

Yes. The main reception was .... Or, the couple that I had lived with during the war and their sisters, their brothers - there was about .... I think there must have been about eighteen people there to greet me.

Were you starting to feel any anxiety again with meeting them or ...

Nothing. I was coming home. Not at all, I was coming home. I had had such a wonderful time here during the war. All of these people were my people, they were all my relatives in a sense. They were so close I was just overjoyed to see them all again.

Was it an easy transition back into the way of life?

Perfect. Perfect. There was no trauma. Nothing at all. It was just taking up where I'd left off some twenty-three months earlier. The man took me into the .... He asked me what I was doing. He took me into the agents for the printing machines. Within the space of two days I had a job. Within a short space after that I had an apprenticeship and life just went on magnificently as before.

Did you correspond with any of the British troops that you'd become close friends with?

No, no, no. I recall one very closely. He lived at a place in Essex called Walton-on-the-Naze but, no, there was no continuation. They didn't want any continuation from what I gathered. They wanted to get back to their homes and they wanted to sort of recover from the trauma of their lives and just sort things out. No, there was no continuation of that whatsoever.

So what about the rest of your family. Did they ultimately come individually or as a group to Australia?

Now you're getting into the hard part. Yes, my mother came out in 1949, remembering I came back in '47.

What about your father?

My father didn't come out. My mother left him. Is this the part you want to hear?

Well, I just want to get it as a wrap up. I didn't necessarily want to go into a lot of detail about matters that are private or that are painful to you but just to get a sort of wrap up as to what became of the family ultimately.

All right. My father is still alive. He's ninety-seven; he turns ninety-eight in January; he lives in south London; he married again to a woman about twenty years younger. My mother came here in 1949 on the request of my brother who had gone to England in 1948 on the Australian ship, the *Kanimbla*, which took the crew of the HMAS *Sydney* over to bring the *Sydney* back to Australia. He spent three weeks there. He was highly impressed with the family; highly impressed with England; highly impressed with everything but he was in the navy and, so, three weeks there, he loved it and he came back.

(10.00) Shortly after he got back he made a decision to get married and he wrote a letter to England saying - in the interim period he'd got us thrown out of the place where we'd lived during the war, which was highly traumatic to me and we went to live in a boarding house in

South Yarra at the corner of Domain Road and Punt Road - and he wrote this letter saying 'I am getting married. What will happen to Geoff?'. And she made a decision to leave my father and come to Australia which she did. He got married in the Easter of 1950 and left her on my hands for twenty-eight years because as soon as he realised that what I had been telling him about the family in England, as soon as he realised that what I'd been saying was the truth, he didn't want to know any more about it. And, as I say, left her on my hands for twenty-eight years. And in those twenty-eight years I would have seen him perhaps twenty times.

What about your sister? Did she come to Australia?

In 1952 my sister came to Australia. They went to live in the house where we were in Canterbury and late in '52 I got a phone call saying to me that Mum only had five pounds left in the bank, that they were leaving, what was I going to do? At this time I'd had a fight with my mother and left home. And so she was then leaving with her husband and two children after having literally absorbed whatever money my mother had. And so I went back home and I bought the house and ...

Back to England you mean?

No, this is here in Australia, in Canterbury in Melbourne. And I went back home and I kept a roof over her head for the rest of her life.

With the experience of having the family broken up during that period in the war years, what do you feel was the impact of all that in terms of whatever problems or difficulties you may have had in family relationships? What was the impact of that particular part of your life do you think?

I think I was aware before I left the first time that there was nothing between my father and my mother. There was a constant war going on the whole time and one, as a child, one is always aware of it. I think this is why I adapted to the Australian way of life and the people I lived with. And those people, I will mention their names now: his name was John Slater Adams and her name was Margaret Adams. They lived at Number 4 Elwood Street, Surrey Hills in Melbourne. They had more impact upon my life than anybody else ever had. He was the greatest man I had ever met. He taught me more about the right way to act and to treat people than anybody else. She was a terrific woman, great cook, very motherly, looked after me magnificently. He taught me all about sport, all about fair play, all about moderation, all about everything.

Dorothy Laing, another child evacuee, is left with the sense about the life that might have been. Is that sense in your own life that somehow or other it was a process of utter dislocation or was it something that you ...

No, I have none of that in the sense of leaving England. My dislocation came when we were told to leave the house in Surrey Hills due to an argument between my mother and Margaret Adams one day when I was at work and came home - didn't come home. I was phone-called to say, 'Don't go there. All our stuff has been removed and we are now living in Alma Road, St Kilda', which we did for one week before we moved to South Yarra.

> So with it all on balance, what are your feelings about the whole process? Was it a good thing to have been sent to Australia or would you rather ...? Or do you think it may have been better to have been kept in England?

The best thing that ever happened to me was to be evacuated to Australia and I'm very, very grateful to the CORB for having done so. I do wonder what life would have been like had I have stayed there but my brief time there settled any ideas I had that it might have been a good life. I was wrapped to come back and I'm wrapped that I've stayed. I love this country and I would have made a great Australian (laughs).

END TAPE TWO, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW.