

Australian War Memorial

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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GPO Box 345
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BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE A.

Identification: [None on tape]. This is Edward Stokes interviewing Phyllis Holdsworth about the CORB [Scheme]. The date is 28 September 1990.

... And I think there was also a family shop that your family ...?

Yes, that was our .... We owned a shop in Leeds, in the centre of Leeds really.

Right, and I think your family had that, was it until 1936?

That is correct, when I'm afraid Leeds Council wanted us out of it for road building.

We were talking before a little bit about your childhood. I think one very difficult memory was the story of the horse. Could you tell us about that?

It was a favourite horse of mine that used to deliver to the shop and it fell down dead, and I wouldn't leave it. I didn't want them to take it away - I said it wasn't dead - but in the end a policeman had to pull me away and drag me home. And then I went a bit off my head, as the saying goes - only bein' a youngster. I stripped all my clothes off and got on the awning of the shop.

Well that's very understandable. You must have been terribly upset.

I'm afraid it caused a nervous breakdown.

Did you go on at school then, or what?

Oh I ended up in hospital, and I don't know how long I was there. I only remember I had my birthday in hospital. After the winter I went back to school - the Church of England school.

Right. We might just come back to that in a minute. Or would you like to tell us about the school now?

The Church of England School was a mixed school, but I didn't like it very much (laughing). Didn't like anything in those days. I didn't like school, going to school at all.

What was the worst part about school?

Well when I think about it, it was the boys - the mixed classes - more than that. And they were big classes in those days.

Yes they were weren't they, but I think things did get better in 1936. You were saying you went to a cooking school?

Yes. Osmanthorpe Domestic Science School, 'cause that was closer to where we lived then.

And was that only girls?

Well, it was all sexes, but we were all segregated in those days.

And what sort of things did you do?

Cooking, sewing, maths and English, and a little bit of geography. That's the only things I remember of schooling.

Right. You were saying during this time - this is the period before the war I think, and perhaps before the episode with the horse - your parents were always fairly busy?

Oh yes, with the shop, because the shop was open all hours of the day - even Saturdays and Sundays, and even Christmas Day half-day.

Really? Er. Did you kids work in the shop or not?

We helped with the weighin' up of tea and sugar and things that weren't, didn't matter, puttin' 'em in bags and that for the lower prices, 'cause they came in boxes and bags - in big boxes and big bags those days - but we didn't weigh them.

Of course the period during the 1930s was the depression, life was very hard in a lot of places. Do you have particular memories of that side of things, of having to go short or not?

Well no, we never went short really with having a shop, but I remember people comin' in and `a penny worth of tea', and `two penny worth of butter' and this kind of thing - or margarine as it was in those days. But, and say, `No, we can only afford that much'. Oh, a couple of potatoes you know, just buy a couple of potatoes and say they'd make something with it.

Did people help one another much or not?

(5.00) I can't remember much of it, but later on, 'course I knew a bit more about it because my mother and father still had big debts on the shop - people that had run it up at different times.

Before we get onto the actual war part of your story Phyl, do you have any other general memories of your childhood in Britain?

Not really much. Seemed to be very happy, very - what can you say? I remember me mother and father and they did it for years and years - used to go tandem, riding on a tandem bike - because we'd be left there with me sister's nanny or my grandmother, while they went tandem riding to get away from the place for a while.

Hm, just to get some peace and quiet I guess, away from the shop.

Probably (laughing) and away from us.

Did they ever take you on excursions into the country?

Only ever .... I'm just rememberin' that. We only ever went away once that I can remember. We went to Abergavenny, 'cause my aunty and uncle - they were in the Welsh Guards - had

come home from India, and had been sent to Abergavenny. But that's the only time I ever remember goin' anywhere with them.

> Hm, that's interesting. Well let's go on to the beginning of the war. Of course, at the beginning of the war you were at home and in fact I think the war was declared, you were saying, on your mother's birthday?

Yes, that's correct.

> You were saying even before the beginning of the war you had been evacuated once?

Yes. We were sent away from Leeds to Tadcaster which is just short of York. It was from .... Our school was sent to that area, and myself and my younger sister were there.

> And all the children from your school sent, or some of them?

No, only some whose parents wanted them to be sent away in case of war. But, afterwards remembering and when they, later on when I got a little bit older, remembering where we'd been sent, I was very surprised because there was all the air fields around that area, 'cause it was a flat area.

> This is just going on. When you went to Tadcaster were you staying with families or were you staying in a hostel of some sort?

No, we were all put out to families, but my sister and I were parted and we lived with two different families.

> I think you were very upset?

Very much upset. More upset a short time later when my father had an accident with the only car we'd ever had and I couldn't get information, so I ran away - grabbed my sister as she went to school and ran away back home to Leeds.

> So what, you heard about your father's car accident by letter did you?

Yes ...

> How long did it take to make up your mind to go home?

Next day after getting the letter, 'cause I knew someone had been killed in the accident.

> That must have been very very hard Phyl. While you were at Tadcaster, you were staying with a family. Was that - apart from your sadness at being away from home - was that by and large a happy time or not? Sorry, I don't mean a `happy' time, but were they a good family to be with?

Oh. I can't remember much about it, only that I wanted to go home the whole time. That was the only thing.

Okay. The car accident happens, you decide to go home. How did you get home and what happened when you got home?

Well there was a direct bus service from Tadcaster to Leeds that passed the end of our street and I had enough money to pay for the bus fare from Tadcaster to Leeds for both myself and my sister, so we did it.

And were your parents glad to see you back, and how was your father?

My father was still in, out of hospital with a broken leg, and I think they were happy to see us, but by that time there were the wardens and everything, so there were a lot doing and we just fitted in when we did.

You were saying you went back to your original school, but I think things were a little bit different?

Yes, we did a lot more cooking but it was for showing people what could be made with the rations and the schools were open for people to come in and see twice a week, to see what you could cook with your rations and make them go further.

I think you were saying that this period at school was rather more enjoyable than before?

Yes, 'cause I loved cooking (laughing).

Do you still love cooking?

Yes I do. Haven't been able to do much but I'm gettin' back to it.

That's good. You are referring to having this operation recently?

Yes.

Right. Tell us more about this wartime cooking. That sounds interesting.

Well, as you know, rationing was brought in pretty early and you only got a certain amount of things and this, to show you what you could do with it, and show you what you could buy that wasn't on rationin'. So ...

And these people who came in to see what you were doing, did they, did you demonstrate cooking or did you just show them what you had cooked?

We demonstrated how it was cooked and showed them what was cooked, and they could have taste of everything, I suppose, and we ate what was left.

That must have been good. Well this period after you ran away from Tadcaster and before you came on the ship to Australia, I think we worked out was from about before Christmas of 1939 ...

'40.

Ah ...

Oh '39 it would be, sorry.

Yes, that's right.

Yes '39.

'39 on to about August '40 when you left - about nine or ten months. Do you have any other particular memories of that period?

I know it was a happier period, although it was a very busy period because my, both parents had joined the wardens and they were on duty a couple of nights a week - one or the other like - they didn't both on the same nights. And they also made a group up and went out each Saturday night, still on duty, and played games like Beetle drives and this kind, and cards and everything, so it was a very, really a happier time when you thought they would .... People got closer together then than ever.

Hm, that's most interesting, that at a time when there was obviously a great deal of tragedy and hardship, that people in fact perhaps were happier.

Well that's what I remember of it, but as you say, there was a lot of hardships. But seemed, now when you come to think of it, it seemed to be more in the south of England than the north of England. And, over in Europe, so it wasn't really, you didn't think, feelin' it touchin' the north of England.

Yes, you were saying about your parents being air raid wardens and so on. Were there other ways in which you think your life was changed by the war at this time?

I can't remember anything.

Well I know you did leave school after some time during this period - after about June or July of 1940. What did you do then?

Well I was looking for a job. Really, when I come to think, I didn't have long to look for it did I? (Laughing). Come to think of it. And I didn't manage to get one. So ...

Was there any bombing of the area where you lived in Leeds?

Oh not till quite a long time after, but the Leeds Town Hall did get bombed. Also, there was an unexploded bomb on the railway overhead - tryin' to think what they call that - anaduch [sic] sort of thing.

Well, like a railway viaduct?

Yes, which was just above the air raid station where my mother was on duty that night that it was dropped. But of course we'd left by then.

Were you very conscious before you left Leeds, Phyl, of news from the south of England of the very heavy bombing of places like London? Were you, did you read much about that in the papers, for instance, or not?

Oh really, up till it came .... Really bombin' of London was very little till after we left, because it was after August ...

Yes, sorry. Actually, I'm wrong in the dates really. You were leaving ...

[Inaudible]. We were on board, we were on the ships then when the bombing got heavy.

Right, you were leaving really just before and during the Battle of Britain period.

That's right, yeah.

Well let's go on to your leaving Leeds. I think you were saying you only knew about it about a week beforehand?

I think that's all I knew about it. My parents must have known before because they told us we may be going to America on a trip.

Did they tell you why you were going?

No. Didn't know at all, but we had relatives off the River Plate in .... That's further down south isn't it?

(15.00) South America?

Yeah. They had relatives there and that's where they were going to send us to. Send us, go a trip there, but I didn't know we were coming to Australia.

Could you remember when your parents - whether it was your mother alone or with your father - told you about this? Were you sitting down having a meal or do you remember where you were when they first broke this news?

No I don't, unless something was said about some clothes, that was all - that we wanted new clothes.

I think you could only take a very few clothes and money?

Yes, well it seemed - and remember it was agreed from what I was told - that we could only have five shillin's with us and one bag, and if possible to be on a what's called a `backpack' nowadays, and that was all we were allowed.

Packing up must have been, I mean, very very sad? Do you remember that?

I don't remember packin' up at all.

But from what you were saying you were feeling the whole thing was pretty grim was it?

Oh I didn't want to go because I had run away once, or been sent away, and I wanted to get on and work and everything, and stop there.

Saying goodbye to your family. How did that happen and who were you able to see?

Oh, my mother came to see us off on the train, but I don't remember ever saying goodbye to my older sister or father. But Mum said goodbye to us, when we were taken up to Leeds station, but she left before .... I remember she left before the train went out. So, hm.

And was your father in Leeds then Phyl, or was he somewhere else?

No, no just remained .... He was with Tallants Industry and he was putting the huts up for the anti-gun people and everywhere all over England. So, I don't exactly know where he was at the time.

That .... [Short break in recording]. Phyl, that train journey from Leeds to Liverpool, it must have been very difficult. Who were you with? How did it go?

I think with between, must have been between ten and twelve and we were with an escort. But other than that, I just know it was a train journey.

And with your sister Anne?

Oh yes, my sister Anne was with me.

Well you got to Liverpool and I think you spent three or four days there - exactly how long doesn't matter too much. Where were you staying?

We were taken to a school and allotted a mattress which was on the floor. Every room in the school, to my knowledge, was covered with mattresses and I don't know exactly how many children would have been there, but it seemed quite a lot.

Do you remember it being well organised or was it ...?

Yes, it was very well organised.

And what about food?

Well, it was like a school, school lunches that used to be given in England, and they were pretty good really. I think they were better than the school lunches.

There were a lot of children here together, obviously all of them going through at least similar things to you. Did people make friends much to cheer one along? How did that go, at least for you?

Well I don't know, but I think they must have thought I was a stand-off person because I don't remember gettin' to be friends with any of them. But groups that came together and knew each other beforehand, I suppose they really got together, and each escort that had them tried to make, make the groups they were with, um, make them bein' able to .... Oh, I can't think of the word I want.

> Well that's okay, just take your time. You were talking about the escorts with different groups, what, for them to feel ...?

That they were friends and everything, and mates you could say, if you'd say in the Australian.

> So did the escorts try to make the children within each group responsible for the people of that group?

Well really that's the way, yes. They were, tried to help each other all the time.

> Let's just pause for a moment and talk about the escorts because of course they met you here, or first on the train and at the school now, and of course they came out to Australia too. By and large in your memory, what kind of people were they? Well for a start, were they men or women?

(20.00) Well, there were men and women, 'cause the boys had mostly men escorts and the girls had women escorts, because even with family groups, you know, boys had to go in one group and the girls in the others. You couldn't really fault them. They were very kind, and they tried to help in all ways they possibly could.

> Were they older people or fairly young?

Well some of them would be, oh, I wouldn't say much past forty, and they'd be young adults, that you'd call young adults.

> Did you ever get very close to any one or two escorts or not?

No not really.

> Did you ever, either with yourself or perhaps looking at other people, did you ever see them giving not the love a parent can give - I mean, only a parent can give that - but that kind of love? Or was it a more distant kind of caring?

It seemed more of a distant kind of caring because they couldn't really give love of parents could. Even if they had, parents had the big family, because .... I don't know what the group consisted of, but I know it was quite a few, and you couldn't make .... I know what I want to say but I can't think of it even now.

> Favourites?

You can't make favourites of one or two because then you'd feel the others were out of it, and they'd probably feel it.

During the time in Liverpool, did you ever try to think of trying to get home or not?

Well, lookin' back on it you can say that you could have done, but you had no, you hadn't the ways of gettin' back, because you were a bit further than Tadcaster to Leeds, to Liverpool to Leeds, and had no money in my pocket kind of thing - or purse - because it'd been, ah, little bit of money we were allowed to bring was given to the escorts for safe keeping.

Hm.

So you were really stuck really, weren't you?

Yeah, sure. And I think while you were at Liverpool there were some air raids?

Every night we were in Liverpool. I'm not sure it was .... We had four that I can remember, because we had three nights at least, and I don't know what night we had just got back to bed after one raid and we had another raid.

Did you have to go to air raid shelters?

Yes we had to go to air raid shelters outside the schools.

As a child, I mean, trying to remember it as you saw it then, were air raids an exciting thing or were they an awful thing?

An awful thing 'cause you didn't know what was going to happen. You didn't really know what, you know. Well you wouldn't know what an air raid really meant.

I think you were saying before, Phyl, that when you were on the ship coming out to Australia, that you thought back to the air raids?

Mostly when we heard the broadcasts of how many [inaudible] on London and everywhere, and it made me feel very upset that they could do this kind of thing really. And I was glad in a way that my parents lived up north and not down in London.

Did you worry about the possibility that places like Leeds might also be bombed or not?

Yes, because it could come across the other way couldn't it, instead of going to France.

Do you think the people on the ship - or for that matter, the family you later were with in Australia - did they do anything to shield you from the worst of the news from Britain, or was it quite openly broadcast so the children could listen in to news about air raids and so on?

On the ship it wasn't because there were so many troops on, and I suppose they had to have it and it was broadcast, really broadcast out completely. Here in Australia, no, they'd put the news on and we'd hear it because we were in the house. Oh, we'd hear it all the time.

(25.00) Let's move on a little bit. How are you feeling incidentally?

Alright, better.

Good, well let's keep along a little bit. You left the Mersey, I think with a shipload of troops?

My word, yes.

Were you on deck? Did you see the ship leaving port?

No, we weren't allowed to be. We were taken straight down to see our cabins and to get settled in.

What, and you left before you'd come up on deck?

Oh, we weren't allowed really on deck until we got well out.

Well tell us about the cabins? What was it like on the ship and what were living conditions like?

Well it wasn't too bad I suppose. Our group was in two, two cabins, about six to eight or more in a cabin - in a small cabin - and then the escort was the single cabin.

So was the escort responsible for only two cabinloads of children?

Well I suppose in other places it might 'a been more, but ours was only the two.

What was his or her name?

Well Miss Jolly comes into my mind, but I don't know whether that was a train escort or the ship escort. I've a feeling it's the ship escort, and six in each, and I think it was Miss Jolly.

And did you call her Miss Jolly, or did you call her by her Christian name?

No we had to call her Miss Jolly.

Well let's just go on, or back rather, to actually leaving port Phyl. You were down below. Do you remember your feelings once you knew the ship was actually under way?

I don't know how to put that. I knew it was under way because it started rocking and there was the noise of what they were putting on board ship at last stopped.

Did your escort come and tell you when you were leaving port?

No, we weren't told anything like that.

So you're saying the first you really knew that you had left port was that you could feel the motion of the ship, is that it?

You could feel the motion and you could hear the engines, really, when you come to .... [inaudible] engines goin'.

> Ah, that's very difficult isn't it? I guess it wasn't too long after you'd been on board, or after you'd left port, that you had your first meal. Do you remember that? Do you remember getting together then and, with these kids who, you know, all now knew you were off and away across the world?

I remember we had a meal, but other than that I can't remember much about it at all. I'm afraid I got very seasick as soon as we started.

> Were you told anything at the meal? Did anybody stand up and welcome you on board the ship and that sort of thing?

Yes I can remember that, being welcomed by the chief escort and introduced to the deputy escort and this kind of thing.

> Just a minute, I'm turning the tape.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

> Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Phyllis Holdsworth, Evacuees, tape one, side two.
>
> So these different escorts had a kind of welcome talk? Did they tell you anything about the voyage, where you were going or about what you'd be expected to do?

He told us we were going to Australia and they would try to make it as pleasant as possible, and to keep in our groups. I think that's .... Nothing else really comes to mind of it like that, but those would be regular things that come to mind.

> Was there any talk about discipline, about the kind of behaviour that was expected and what might be done to people if they didn't behave in that way?

I don't remember anything about that - probably was but ...

> You were saying that after, once you'd got to sea, you were feeling a bit seasick. I think after a while, did that fade away a bit?

Oh a little bit I suppose, but I am prone to seasickness I'm afraid.

> Oh lots of people are - I think Nelson was too. I certainly am. What did you do in the time on board the ship? There must have been many long days?

Oh well they tried to, as I can remember, we had a lot of community singing and a guide group and a scout group was really formed, and as I belonged to the guides before I went to

that. But we had no schoolin' or anything, only just .... I suppose we had quite a few talks on what we should expect in Australia but I don't remember them now.

You don't remember anything about what they said?

No, no I'm afraid not.

What about deck games? Did you play games like deck quoits or deck hockey and that sort of thing?

No there were too many on board because we had that many troops. There were quite a few parts of the ship we weren't allowed to go. We could go on certain parts of the decks.

Did they ever take you on interesting guided tours, for instance, up to the bridge of the ship or down into the engine room?

(5.00) Oh yes, we were, by the time the trip was over all groups had been down to the engines and up on the bridge, but that was by the time .... As there was quite a lot of groups it took a while to do.

Yes I can imagine. You were saying that the troops were very friendly with the children?

Mm, well I remember they were very friendly. I suppose in a way, leavin' their own children behind, we might have been stand-ins for them.

Yes, I could imagine that, that they must have been missing their families very much. Do you remember any particular activities that you did with troops?

No I don't remember any activities that were allowed with the troops.

Well going along a bit Phyl. I know you called at various places - Freetown, Capetown, Bombay, Singapore. I think you were saying at Freetown that you were, that the place was very different to Britain?

Yes it looked a very clean green place. 'Course we weren't allowed off the ship so I don't know what it was like off the ship, but where we were anchored it looked beautiful and clean.

What about the heat? Was the heat something you remember or not?

I don't think it would be that hot really, there in August would it? I don't know (laughing).

Well I'm not sure. Well anyway, you did come on down towards the equator, and you were saying there were some ceremonies with crossing the line and so on. At Capetown you did actually get off the ship. That must have been a great joy I'd imagine?

It was. Even to just feel the ground, and we were taken all around Capetown by buses, and then we were taken to a playing field area and the Lord Mayor of Capetown was there and

givin' everybody a present - mostly books. But there was that many of us - 499 - that by the end someone else was givin' them out too because it was takin' too long.

Uh huh. Do you remember what the book was?

No I can't remember but I've still got it.

I think it was in Capetown that you wrote some letters home?

Yes, we were allowed to write one card home, but we couldn't say where we were or anything, just that we were safe and well.

Did you say anything else in that card to your parents?

I don't think so because we were told it would be censored and anything we wrote a bit wrong would be crossed out, which I think we just put in that we were safe and well, and that kind of thing what you generally write in letters.

And I guess you didn't receive any mail though?

No, never received any till we'd been in Australia, what, about, oh a couple of months.

Well going on from Capetown you called at Bombay and I think you landed again there, and then Singapore. By this stage, you know, it's obviously I'd imagine a couple of months from Britain. Had you got over the thing of leaving home? Were you looking forward to going to Australia or did you still want to go home?

I think all the time I would rather, if I'd had the chance I would have gone home, but Australia was nearer then.

Did you talk about it with other children? Did kids ever plot and plan about how they might get back home?

No I didn't anyway, 'cause, oh, I thought we'd be home in a few months, or a few weeks. Time was really - you didn't count in time, you just let it go.

I guess nobody at that stage really had any idea of the war dragging on, or continuing quite as long as it did do. Um, Singapore. I think you got off the ship again and there was a function with the troops ...

Yes. They said goodbye to us all and took us round Singapore as much as they could, with the ones that were there, and then they all said goodbye to [inaudible]. I suppose it was the big head shots, I don't know - can't remember. Said goodbye to us and wished us all the best.

And I guess a lot of those people literally within months were in prisoner-of-war camps.

Prisoner-of-war camps, yes.

Did any of them ever write to you? Did you keep in touch - do you know any of the children - with those troops?

(10.00) No. We .... That's all I have here. Oh, gosh, I'm tryin' to think of the Highland Division that came out with us and I can't think of its name now, but I know they were prisoners-of-war for a long time.

Well the ship went on from Singapore and called, as ships did then in those days, to Fremantle. Some of the children left. This was the first time you'd seen Australia.

Yes ...

Do you remember it?

I remember it very well. I thought it was beautiful and clean and bright, and the lights and everything made it .... Oh it looked beautiful just to see, really to see land again I suppose.

What do you mean by the lights? Why were they so special?

The first night after we'd landed there was the lights of Fremantle on. There was no blackouts or anything. Seein' lights in the town was like seein' the heavens lit up you can say.

Yeah, almost like coming back to life again.

Yes.

And what about the people, the first Australians you met? Were they just browner versions of English people or were they different?

No they seemed marvellously friendly people and really, oh, I don't know how to put it. They seemed as if they wanted to be friends with you and they were greeting you as friends.

That sounds a much more open thing perhaps.

In England really the north was the north and the south was the south, and you still find it today - the north are northerners and they don't want to mix with the southerners and that kind of thing, don't you. Even nowadays.

Yes, that's certainly true I think about Britain. Well of course, then you're to get back on the ship to go on to Melbourne. I think there was a storm crossing the great Bight?

Yes, (laughing), seasick again. We struck a storm and so we had to miss out Adelaide and go straight to Melbourne, so the Adelaide children had to go back - train I suppose - from Melbourne to Adelaide.

Was it a particularly bad storm? Was it, I mean, the worst one you'd had during the voyage or not?

The worst! The worst I'd ever been in really, I can remember that, and wonderin' how they'd keep things on the table when you went for your food - never knowing that they had pieces that came up to stop things on tables.

Oh yes, what are they called?

[inaudible].

Skittles or something like that.

Yeah.

Well you sailed into Sydney, I know you were saying before, early in the morning and you didn't actually see the ship coming in through the Heads up to the Bridge. But very early that morning you, I think, did cross the Bridge. Tell us about leaving the ship, about setting foot on Australia where you would live, for the first time.

Well they let the ones that were goin' straight to people, 'cause I suppose they were met there, go off first, and then we were taken off. And I don't know, it was, oh, I suppose a fourteen year old, puttin' foot on the ground that you knew you were goin' to stop there, and you didn't have to get back on the ship, it must have been some kind of a feelin'. But we weren't long before we were put in buses and taken to North Head. But goin' across the Harbour Bridge I thought it was beautiful.

And did you see much of the harbour as you drove up towards Manly and so on?

Quite a bit of it. They took us round what was - now I know it's the beach route, across the Bridge and the beach route - but it was a lot really to take in, wasn't it, for the first time?

Yes, and of course you were arriving, well, where are we - August. It must now be about at least spring and I guess getting very warm, very blue sea. The period at the Quarantine Station, I think you stayed for about ...?

Went for three weeks now, when I come to think, because we all had medicals and everything.

And you were being cared for by VADs I think you said?

Yes, yes and they were marvellous. Took us down to the beaches. Climbin' down those nowadays I wonder whether I'll get down (laughing).

So you weren't too cooped up in the quarantine station?

Oh no, no. I mean, you could play around, you could go out of it, but keep in the grounds I suppose.

Well that is a very beautiful part of Sydney there. Well I think after a short time you went - yourself and your sister Anne - to a family at Epping, but that didn't last very long did it?

(15.00) No. It seemed they only wanted one, an older child, and I was the one because my sister was too young and she was going to be sent to Gosford. And I don't know what happened. We stopped there till the March of '41 and then we were both moved up to Gosford.

And this is when you came to stay with Mr and Mrs Kirkness, Bob and Verna?

Yes.

Of Gertrude Street. They had their own daughter?

Yes, she was about a year younger than me.

Did you all suddenly become a fairly happy group or did it take a long time?

I think I was one of those that were called a bit stand-offish - though I didn't know it - and it took quite a while. But my young sister really was .... I don't know how you put it, but she really fell in more to the family and she .... Oh, in a way, with havin' a nanny I suppose at home, because of the shop, she could relate more to someone else, and so she really fitted in to the family very well.

What did Mr Kirkness do?

When we first came here he worked in, he was a shop assistant. But shortly afterwards he opened his own sawmill.

And did they ever explain to you why they wanted to have two foster children?

No, never.

Tell us what you can remember of life with a family. You know, a typical day at the Kirkness's home. Could you remember that?

Well for the first about eighteen months I was still goin' to school. I think we'd get up about, pretty early, and have breakfast and of course the usual you had to make your, you had to make your beds and your wash and everything, make sure you'd got your schoolbooks, and then school. And after school it was more, do your homework and write letters home and that kind of thing.

How often did you write letters home and how often did you receive them?

Oh, I suppose at first it was not very often, but then when those small aerogrammes came in we seemed to get more of 'em, and also our father was then up in Scotland shipbuildin', so I got them from two areas, so I got more then.

Where did you get the money for your letters and for other little spending? Did you get pocket money from the family or were you ...?

No, my letters were all posted for me, but I didn't get pocket money. Anything I wanted I had to ask for.

Things like getting some new clothes. Obviously you were growing up a bit and you were there with the family for five years and going through a lot of changes in those times as a young girl to a young woman. Clothing - was that something that you could have when you needed it or was it very difficult to get?

Oh well for the first lot the government bought all my school clothes at first, fully set us out - both my sister and I. And then it was only, well, when they were really necessary or, like, only a couple of times a year when we had the church anniversary and kind of things we were all set up for the anniversary day and that kind of thing.

I know you were saying Phyl that after about eighteen months you found school very difficult and you left, and I think you got a job in a laundry?

Yes, that's correct.

What was that like? What was it like working in a laundry?

Very hot at times, but they were a nice lot of ones working there and I suppose as long as I did my work it was good. But, nice lot of friends you made there, and havin' a little bit of money really was marvellous.

Yes that must have been great when you did get that job. And referring back to the money incidentally, I'd forgotten about that. It was only that short period at the beginning, a year and a half, where you didn't have an income. Um, when you were working there and earning some money, did you have to pay any board or keep to the Kirkness family or not?

(20.00) Yes, I paid board every week as soon as I started workin', and I tried to keep .... I got, like, my own clothes with a bit of help at times when they were really needed. But I paid for my own clothes and I tried to give Anne a little bit of pocket money.

Hm, so that was, you were the kind of good older sister to her.

Well I hope so.

Did you get time, or did you have enough money to get out and do some things with your new friends here much or not? What did you like doing?

I don't remember really doin' much at all. I loved to read and I did really start to do knittin' then, and I loved doin' that. So sometimes .... I loved knittin' and did a bit of knittin' and that, and readin'.

Did you go to the pictures occasionally, that sort of thing, or not?

Very occasionally, because I don't think they had a very good name in Gosford.

The cinema?

Yes, the cinema.

What about trips to Sydney? Did you occasionally get down to Sydney?

Oh yes, we went to Sydney. Well Aunty's mother lived in Sydney and her sisters and we used to go there, oh, pretty regular for family gatherings and that kind of thing.

Tell us a little bit about perhaps a more personal aspect of living with the Kirkness family. Obviously it was not living with your own mother and father. Did they manage, though, to give you a real family's love, or was it again a more distant thing where you were a couple of people boarding in their house?

Oh no, I think they tried their best to give us a family life. Anne, my sister, had a lovely singin' voice - didn't know much about it at the time - and she really got on marvellous with them then. But no, they tried their best but I think I was a little bit hard to do it to.

And, of course, I know you later came back and lived in Australia. Did you keep in touch with the Kirkness family later or not?

Oh yes, the whole time, when we were back in England and everything.

Well what other aspects could you think of that you might remember about that period in Gosford before the end of the war Phyl? Were there any very particularly good memories or particularly bad memories?

No not really. Oh, I suppose I felt out of it a little bit at times. I seemed to be the middle one, the one in the middle, although I was the older of the lot. Of course, with havin' their own daughter she came first, and Anne, oh, havin' a nanny and not really knowin' my parents that much, she really loved the life here and that.

Did you ever feel their daughter resented your intrusion into their family or not?

I didn't feel it in those days, but since we returned this time and different things have cropped up, I think she did.

Right. Well before we go on to talk about the journey back to England Phyl, is there anything else you would like to tell me about the period in Gosford in Australia during the war?

Well Gosford was a quiet country town. Didn't know many of .... Knew everybody in Gosford, got to know everybody in Gosford. They were a close town and a very nice town. And Kirkness's bein' a big family, they were all very close and it was really a .... I suppose it was a good time.

Did you ever get to a point where you were not thinking about wanting to go home?

No I'm afraid not, never. If anybody'd asked me in those days I'd say, `I'd go home tomorrow if I could'. I wanted to join up so I could go home, but they didn't know the reason why and they wouldn't let me.

(25.00) You wanted to join, what, the army?

I'd a joined up anything if they would let me go back to England.

Well let's go on to that. There was this hope to go back and I think some of these children, in fact, went back to Britain before the war with Japan ended. What was, what's your memory of hearing that the war, not only Europe but after Nagasaki and Hiroshima, that the war was finally over. Can you remember that?

It was elation. I was supposed .... We were supposed to sail home that day. We were told about midnight the day before not to go to Sydney, and I'm afraid we slept in that mornin' and we got up about nine o'clock and put the wireless on. And you know, it came over about nine o'clock. That day was a hectic day. I knew then why they'd left us at Sydney. It was a marvellous feelin'. I think I got the same marvellous feelin' when we landed back in England.

[Short break in recording]. Phyllis, you were saying you wanted to say this about your parents.

Well, at first I thought they hated me 'cause they sent me so far away, but now I know it was for love. It takes a lot to say that, but I know it's true.

Well you've been really good being so honest with us Phyl. You were saying that this is the first time, I think, you've really talked about this?

The first time - ever - and it brought a lot back to me that I really, I think I've tried to wipe out, but you've brought it back just talkin' about it. Thank you.

Are you alright?

Yes, I'm alright now.

Okay?

Yes.

Let's go on a little bit. Or let's go back. You were saying about the elation when the war had ended and so on, and I think you went off on the ship the *Stratheden*.

Yes, that's correct.

What was it like leaving Australia?

I had thoughts I didn't want to leave at times, but I wanted to go home. I wanted to go back to Mum and Dad. I know I was grown up, but I wanted to go home.

Do you want to tell us about the ship journey back or would you prefer not to?

Oh no, we had a marvellous journey back. The ship was pretty empty leavin' Sydney. Didn't know why until we got goin' and we went up to Brisbane and picked up troops. So we were now back as a troop carrier really. And we came down, again past Sydney, saw the lights of Sydney again and then down to Melbourne. We were pickin' up the whole time.

And did you pick up any other children or only troops?

No, we picked up children in Melbourne. I'm afraid that we missed Adelaide again and went straight to Fremantle and picked up there. And they had ...

Did you remember any of the children? Were they children you'd known on the ship coming out or not?

No, there wasn't any of the ones that was in our group comin' out. But there was more to do goin' back. Two of the lieutenants of the army gave us physical exercises and we did, well, pretty much as we liked comin' back in a way.

It must have been a very very different feeling on that ship - a ship in peaceful waters lit up at night and all the rest of it?

It was. It was a happy ship. And as I say, everything they could do for us was done, and it was a really happy ship, even .... More like home really. It was a big home that's sailin'.

That's a lovely memory. And you sailed back through the Suez Canal and so through the Mediterranean, and then I think on to England.

Yes, through the Suez Canal. That was a marvellous scene, it was the first time in your life.

It must be strange sailing through the desert?

It is a strange feelin' isn't it.

Did you get off the ship at all in the Middle East or not?

No, not in the Middle East. Fremantle, then our next stop was Singapore - er, Southampton, sorry - I'm goin' back the wrong way. Southampton and home.

Well tell us about Southampton? Did the ..

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Phyllis Holdsworth, Evacuees, tape two, side one.

Phyllis, we've got back to Southampton. Were there any friends or families down there to meet you?

Well my brother-in-law was supposed to be meetin' us but he was held up. He was in the navy so he didn't get over before we caught the train to Leeds, so didn't meet him then.

And did you get a train back to Leeds the same day?

Oh yes. We travelled up that afternoon for Leeds.

There must have been a lot of excitement on that train?

There weren't many travellin' north 'cause most of them were .... They were goin' off in different groups all through the day. Some were picked up from Southampton by their relatives.

Did you have an escort on the train or not?

No, not comin' back. There was only three of us on the train.

How did you feel as the train went up north, as you got closer to Leeds?

Very light-headed - and happy - knowin' I'd soon see the family. And seein' England, but really seein' the damage that was done was shockin'.

Yes I can imagine that. Um, and I think at Leeds station there was a great reunion?

The family were there. I didn't care about the luggage - I left it on the train, till my uncle went and got it. Just seein' them all there is a marvellous feelin'. Now I know what the troops oh, through the years, must feel when they go. I know what these must be feelin' now in the Middle East I'm afraid.

Mm, sure. So you were back home safely and your mother .... Was your father now back in Leeds?

Yes, he was back workin' in Leeds. Well he wasn't workin' in Leeds, he was goin' all over Yorkshire, but he'd made sure he was there that day.

That must have been wonderful. Settling back into the family. You'd wanted desperately, obviously, to come back, but I suppose in another way life in England was very different to what you'd been used to in Australia and I suppose sometimes coming back to a family home, however much you loved them, you may be a little bit strangers. What was it like settling back into living with the family?

Well there was really only Mum and Dad at home, 'cause my older sister had got married you see the year before. So there was only Mum and Dad, and Dad was away a lot. But it was marvellous. But bein' of the age I was, I didn't want to put a burden on Mum and Dad so I looked for work.

Did you get a job?

Yes. I was lucky and got a job.

What were you doing?

Still in the laundry work, as I was in Australia. Bit of travelling with it 'cause it was the other side of Leeds, but I got a job.

The first Christmas back in England, very different to Christmases in Australia obviously with the climate and so on. Do you remember that?

Yes, there was inches and inches of snow, and I think Anne enjoyed it better than me, 'cause she got up on top of our garage roof and was shovellin' it off.

Was it a very happy family Christmas?

(5.00) Yes, it was a very happy family Christmas.

Well, moving on a little bit, I know in 1947 - I think in '45 - you met your husband I think.

I met my husband in '45 yes.

And you married two years later?

Yes, just on two years [inaudible].

Your sister, although she was quite young at the end of the war - about thirteen - I think came back to Australia herself in 1947.

Yes, she left a week, exactly a week, after I was married. She just couldn't settle. Don't know whether it was to the schools in England or whether it was everything combined, I suppose, and she came back to Australia.

And did she live with the Kirkness family?

Oh yes, she came back to Kirkness family completely.

You yourself stayed in England and I think you began a family, had a house and so on, but you did also come back to Australia in, I think, 1952?

Yes. When we decided to come back, my husband had been .... When we wrote over askin' what the position here was, Mr Kirkness worked with [inaudible] uncle, but offered my husband a job if he wanted it in the sawmill drivin' and offered us a house we could rent. So

with bein' so uptight with the work, or no work, changin' jobs quite a bit when he came out of the army, we decided we'd come. So we came in 1952.

So this became truly home - or home for your children at least. I know you've said, and your husband was saying too, that it was rather your feeling rather than his ...

That's correct.

... that prompted the move to Australia. If you'd never come to Australia in the war, do you think you would have thought of leaving England or not?

That's a hard question to answer isn't it, 'cause really it was through the war, a friend of my husband's meeting my sister, so I probably might not have known my husband.

Sure, those `ifs' are very difficult aren't they?

Those were very difficult times though.

But perhaps what I was trying to say was were there clear and good memories of Australia that drew you back?

Oh there was clear and good memories. Just couldn't [inaudible] memories all the time. You get a feelin' for a place. As you see, we've never left Gosford since .... Well, we've left it for holidays and that but we settled here in Gosford, and my family's settled here in Gosford. My parents followed us out eighteen month after we came out.

That must have been lovely, that they came and you were really together.

Yeah, and then my older sister, who'd never been here, followed two years later than that. So we were all here in Australia then.

And I think during the years since you've been back to England a couple of times. Were they good visits?

Marvellous. I've got marvellous in-laws. In a matter of fact, in one way my sister-in-law's as good as my younger sister, if not better [inaudible].

And I think you are close to Anne.

Yes, I'm close to Anne.

Well, Phyl, it hasn't been an easy story to tell, I know, but it's really added a lot to the story for the War Memorial. Is there anything you'd like just to add that you feel you want to say to complete the story?

I don't think so. You brought a lot back to me that I'd really forgotten about, but other than that I don't think so.

Okay, well on behalf of the War Memorial and the people who will later use these tapes, Phyllis, thank you very much for making them with us.

I hope they like them. They're not much good, I know that.

No, they are.

(10.00) END TAPE TWO, SIDE A.

NO SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.