



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Mike Mitchell, tape one, side one.

Mike, we've got a really good outline here. Could we just go back to the beginning, perhaps, with your date and place of birth?

Certainly. 1st March 1920 in Bradford, England.

I hadn't realised England. When did you come to Australia?

Four years afterwards.

Your father, I think, had been in the British Army.

Yes, he served in a number of regiments. I think his last regiment was the West Riding Regiment. I think it was known as the 'Queen's Own'.

And I assume he'd been a first world war man?

Yes, he lost his left eye somewhere in France.

One thing to ask, in your childhood years, and the years in Australia in particular, how conscious were you, or not, of the general tradition of the ANZACs, or for that matter the British forces, in the first war?

I was quite conscious of it, probably because of my father. Although he is not listed as a foundation member of the local Kogarah RSL, he was one of the early members, in the late 1920s. And when we moved to Dubbo in early 1930s I think he was a foundation member of the Dubbo RSL. I can remember going to the RSL balls in Dubbo that he helped organise.

That's most interesting. One other thing, although it's slightly out of context: in the period leading up to the second war, how conscious were you, perhaps both within the family or just yourself, of the political events in Europe that were, in retrospect at least, shaping towards war?

Only so much as the normal family, I would imagine - radio and newspapers. But at the age of nineteen one tended to concentrate more on the normal pleasures of life than worrying about overseas.

Sure. Well, let's go back to the childhood years. I think you left school when you were about fourteen, say '34. What did you do then?

At fourteen I became a telegraph messenger at Dubbo. My parents came back to Sydney and I had to wait for six or eight months before I could apply for a transfer to join them. After about two years, working at the local post office as a junior assistant, I became a junior mechanic in training with the PMG Department and started a five-year training course.

I think an important part of this, *vis-à-vis* your later wartime work, was morse code.

It was a great incentive when you were getting £51 a year to get the £12 a year allowance if you could send and receive morse code on the sounder at the local post office, so that I had been using morse code for many years before I joined the navy.

That was really quite an incentive, twenty per cent or so.

Yes, it was. It could buy you a lot more in those days than it can now.

You had, I think, in early '39 joined the Royal Australian Naval Reserve. Was that connected with the war, or was that quite independent of the developments in Europe?

Independent of the events in Europe. Friends - some were in the Militia forces. I tried to join the Lighthorse at Hurstville. I thought they had the prettiest uniforms, I think. But they were full up so I had to settle for the navy. I didn't mind the navy apart from the fact that I accidentally got into visual signals. The fact that I knew morse code made it very easy. That was one of the most difficult things in becoming a signalman, whether you were a wireless telegraphist or a signalman. And having been proficient in it for some years I found myself instructing the other recruits with myself.

(5.00) Just turning back to your comments about the uniform of the Lighthorse, which suggests a certain boyhood romance perhaps. What was it that appealed to you about the navy? Was it a yearning for adventure or something else?

No, I think it was the fact that your annual continuous training consisted of a week or two on board ship, as well as one night a week down at Rushcutters Bay, which is the equivalent of a night out, and a few weekend training periods. It was an interest, mainly.

The declaration of war, do you remember the speech that heralded that for Australia, Mike?

No, because I was at my war station. When you're in the Reserves everyone had a war station at which they were to go when they were mobilised. I was actually working in the Chief Telegraph Office at the GPO in Sydney, in the teleprinter section, in the few weeks before I started my annual continuous training in August '39. And the older members, the technicians - or mechanics as they were then called - knew that I was going to the navy for my annual continuous training - two weeks, I think it was. And there was many a joke when they would tear off the latest overseas information which was coming direct to the newspapers through the telegraph office. Ripped the great long piece of paper up and say, 'You'll never come back from this ACT. You'll be gone for a couple of years.' I was little to know it was going to be six and a half years.

That's interesting, Mike. You were saying before that after war was declared you were fully mobilised of course, and that was just a few days after your annual continuous training began. I think you were sent to South Head signal station.

That's right. There was a what was called 'a port war signal station' at each of the Australian ports - Newcastle as well as Lonsdale and Port Phillip Bay. And at South Head it was another signal station, apart from the Maritime Services Board signal station, and we had to clock all of these ships in, the ships out, report them into Garden Island. It was an introduction to watchkeeping, to hone up on your signal skills. But it was a formal war station for many of the Naval Reservists.

> I think while you were there you did your training, or your status, was upgraded from ordinary signalman to signalman. Is that correct?

That's correct. We had the opportunity of ducking down to Rushcutters Bay to the signal school there and sitting for any examinations as opportunity arose. They didn't put them on for us but there were examinations held and if you wished to you could study and ....

> What further aspects of signal training did you complete during that period, do you remember?

The normal ones but they are all to a degree what they call 'fleet work coding' - the different signal codes, knowledge of the different flags - not only the naval flags but the merchant naval flags - their use, and of course proficiency in semaphore, morse flag, and of course light signalling.

> Besides the courses that you did while you were at - or from South Head signal station - and the work at the station itself, Mike, is there anything else that's significant of that period, do you think?

From a personal viewpoint?

> How do you remember those first few months in the navy - full-time navy work?

(10.00) Trying to get to sea and away from all those South Head (laughs) .... There were various things. Everybody was talking of the same thing: 'We can't stay here all the time'. We were getting regular leave - the people that lived in Sydney. It was a pleasant enough life. There was nothing arduous about it. We had a few extra duties apart from our watchkeeping to perform, but very few. We had the opportunity to discuss with other people, at greater length than we'd ever discussed before in the navy, as to what we should do, what we could do, and whether we were prepared to study or work hard enough to do it. At one stage I started on an officers' training course simply because the lieutenant in charge out there thought it would be a fair idea to start it up and it gave him a bit of interest to brush up in his navigation and other aspects. But then it got a little bit more serious and when the first troop convoys were being organised there was a - I don't how it occurred, or whether it was volunteered, or whether we were just nominated - but in late '39 quite a number were asked to go to - they did, they went to Flinders for a convoy signalman training course. They were the naval ratings that went on to the troopships to assist in convoy signals. And some of them stayed there for ever and a day. I met a chap two years ago at a ...

> You were saying before about, you were demobilised on 18 January '40 and for the next six months you were back working with the PMG, but I think

engineering to get into the navy, Mike. I think you rejoined on 23 July 1940. Where did you go first?

Well, I went back to Rushcutters Bay depot which hadn't changed very much: they were still kitting up sailors and I was kitted up again. And being a signalman I was still officially - well, I was remobilised as a signalman. And I was anxious to, at least, get away overseas. I'd missed out on the convoys. I certainly didn't want to go back to Port War Signal Station at South Head, and I made it well known that I'd be in anything. I certainly was. They put me on to a Danish ship in Sydney Harbour as part of an armed guard.

Yes, well, this is obviously an interesting, almost an escapade you might say. I think the point of this was to ensure that the ship actually got to its destination.

I think it was. I never ever saw the orders or was told the full purpose, and neither were the sailors that had to actually perform the guarding duties. But to my way of thinking, the lieutenant in charge carried out his noon sights and his sunset sights every day, and calculated his position so he knew where the ship was. It was obvious they didn't want the thing back in Denmark.

You were saying you went from Sydney to Melbourne, and then I think picked up jarrah sleepers in Bunbury, I think.

Bunbury, Western Australia.

The actual voyage across the Indian Ocean, this was really your first experience of being properly at sea, how do you remember that?

With a lot of pleasure. I was the sole signalman on board to assist the master in using our convoy signal books if we did get into convoys, which we did. And I performed some watchkeeping duties when the able seamen were sick. But the majority of the time I took the opportunity of learning navigation from the lieutenant, and later from the ships' officers. I improved my signalling knowledge, and I was given the run of the ship. It was very pleasurable.

It does sound an interesting period. Having reached Aden, I think you had a brief - the rest of the guard went home but you stayed aboard the ship, I think.

(15.00) Yes, it was rather unusual. The captain, I think, asked that I be left on board to asist him in convoy duties because it was the first time he was to become part of a large convoy, up the Red Sea to Port Tewfik at Suez. And the officer in charge of the armed guard apparently agreed. All the rest of them went ashore in Aden. I haven't seen one soul since. I stayed on the ship by myself. I had two Australians on board - two engineers. The rest of them were Danes. Most of them spoke passable English and they made me very welcome. I thoroughly enjoyed my time. I put on a stone in weight. They taught me Danish very forcibly at the table. They wouldn't pass me things unless I asked for them in Danish. And I continued my education in navigation and other.

I think you were saying, Mike, that the during period, Aden to Suez, the convoy that you'd formed up into was severely attacked.

Yes, of all things, when everybody thought that Italian bombers weren't worth a crumpet and the Stukas were the danger, it was Italian bombers flying from Eritrea at high level - but it was a nice slow old convoy in nice straight lines. They simply flew along the lines and dropped them. The ship ahead of us was hit and did not sink while she was in sight of us. It sank later. When we passed her - we were next in line on the convoy - she was well down aft and going fast. That was our first experience, although we had been bombed in Aden a few days before, while ashore. It was my first experience of jumping into a bomb shelter.

How did that experience of seeing a fellow ship going down - the first ship you'd seen sunk - how did that affect you at the time?

At the time my reaction was to dive to the cabin to grab my camera. And I still have the photograph; but I must admit that later on we were talking about it in the mess, it started to sink in then and the fact that it wasn't all beer and skittles.

And were there any near misses to your own ship, to the *Westralia*, or not?

That would have been the closest. She was two cables ahead of us - four hundred yards - and took a direct hit. There were other bombs in the stick and I can't remember whether they fell alongside us, behind, or in front. I think I had the telescope to my eye on the commodore ship at the time - just doing my job as a signalman (laughs).

There was also, I know, this episode on a British sloop before you returned on the *Westralia*, but we might perhaps skate over that because, I guess, this is something of a side story. When you came back aboard the *Westralia*, to Australia, I think there was an interesting issue over your pay.

Well, the interesting issue on the pay was when I tried to get some, naturally the master of the Danish ship wasn't going to pay me. I don't know how he paid the rest of his crew, actually. I tried to get some money in Suez, and after two visits to the - it was HMS *Grimsby*, a sloop - the paymaster finally allowed me to have £10 on pain of death if I didn't repay it as soon as I got any money. I gave him all my particulars and whether he ever got that from the Australian Navy, or not, I don't know, but that was the last money I saw until I got back to Australia, to which time I was indebted to nearly every officer and the crew.

The voyage back, was there anything of note there, or was it just a repeat of the voyage out?

No, it was a repeat of the voyage out. We were sailing by ourselves from Aden and we sailed direct.

Well, let's go on to the more serious part of your story, perhaps, Mike. The first half of '41 saw you at *Cerberus* where you were doing your leading signalman's rate, I think, of ES3. Just *Cerberus* itself first. How do you remember living conditions at *Cerberus* at the time?

Hammocks. You didn't have the mess decks of a ship, naturally. They were called mess decks but you ate separately, you slept separately. You had your relatively small locker and the nice big rails where you slung your hammock every night. You asked me the first reaction, and I said 'hammocks'. [Inaudible] hammocks in one room was my first reaction.

But I must admit that from the balcony of that room, which looked straight out over the parade ground, I still get nostalgia when I see the same photograph.

(20.00) The hammocks were obviously something in themselves to get used to. I guess you'd learnt that right at the start.

No, I think I really learnt about hammocks in Flinders. At Port War Signal Station we had bunks. On the ship - on the *Westralia* - I had my own cabin. So I wasn't really an expert on hammocks. I soon became one - you had to (laughs).

Yes, sure. What other aspects do you remember of the living conditions, either of the, for example, messing facilities, and sports facilities, how do you remember that?

At Flinders? I don't think anybody complained about the messing facilities at Flinders, and the sports facilities were excellent. The only thing that I can remember about the sports facilities that didn't go down very well was when we were playing rugby on the centre field and it was our duty, as signalmen, to lower the Jack and the Ensign at sunset. And there were always two signalmen detailed off every day. And the catch was, when the bugle sounded and everybody stopped and faced the flag, I suddenly realised that the chap opposite me in the scrum was the other bloke that should have been pulling the flag down with me. And we got a bit of a rocket over that. Someone at the other end of the field finally realised what was happening and raced over and did the honours but it was too late, we were in the rattle.

That's an interesting anecdote. We should just put down for the record, Mike, that before the war you'd been an extremely good swimmer, and I think you'd swum at the - was it the Empire Games?

In the Empire Games carnivals when there were invitation scratch races, at North Sydney pool in 1938. We used to swim regularly in state carnivals and things like that. But I was never a champion, although I swam with them.

You were up there with them. Did you continue your swimming, and if so, how actively, in your naval period?

Only as far as when required on the ship - I did swim in a combined Greek/British navy carnival in Alexandria once. I got a couple of little medals with something written in Greek on them. I've never asked a Greek what they indicate. But water polo, of course, on the ships was a very popular sport and I was always in the water polo. I did play water polo for the Royal Navy in Alexandria against the Greek Navy. Unfortunately, they had more time to play water polo than we did - the Greek Navy never went to sea.

Right, so they had some practising time. Just a more serious point, in your recollections, say, of the men aboard the *Lismore*, how many of them would have been capable swimmers? And was anything done to encourage men who could not swim, to learn to swim for safety?

I think there were probably quite a number of the crew that were very poor swimmers. And I can't recollect any formal attempts being made to teach them to swim, or of inclination from those people to learn to swim.

Was that ever discussed, or were you ever aware that, perhaps, where at least there is an ability to swim well, the issue of suddenly being dropped in the sea perhaps takes on a slightly different perspective, in that you know if the conditions are right, at least for a time, you can stay afloat?

It must have. I can only remember one or two that I knew were very poor swimmers. I actually did try to teach them to swim at Addu Atoll which was a lovely little coral atoll in the Seychelles, and it was perfect for teaching people to swim. They would come in the water with us but they wouldn't try. And if the subject ever did come up, I think there was a certain touch of bravado about them, and they said, 'A bloody fish comes through that bulkhead over there, you won't be worried about swimming, either'. A philosophical outlook possibly but that was their attitude.

(25.00) Well, let's go back to *Cerberus*, Mike, and to your training there. The main things here - we're just referring to a document here of Mike's which is titled, 'Signal History Sheet Examination Record'. Mike, let's just run through the main aspects, or the key aspects of a communicator/signalman's work.

If we take it straight across on the Signal History Sheet and these were the subjects where you were examined at each examination, of course, on different levels for different degrees of proficiency. Fleet work: a rather unusual subject when you could go for years and years and never see the fleet, or even work with the fleet. But fleet work was generally what you were expected to know perfectly.

I think you were giving some interesting examples about turns to port and starboard. I think perhaps they illustrate the point.

Yes, the simple ones, but the ones you couldn't make a mistake with, whether it was a blue nine or a nine blue - one to starboard and one to port - the blue indicated that all ships turned together, red indicated that you turned in succession. These are the simpler ones but there were many others, depending upon the formation the fleet was in. It was very interesting from a signalman's point of view - it was the only time you got to play with ships. Sometimes you would be marching around doing marching manoeuvres and the admiral would be stood at the side calling out the orders to the ships who would have to put up - of course you were the ships marching around - you would increase speed, decrease speed, you could even do all the manoeuvres. Quite a lot fun except you never got to do it unless you were in the battleship, an aircraft carrier, then you didn't do very much of it. From what I saw of the aircraft carriers, they just went their own way and everybody got out of theirs.

That's fleet work - the automatic responses if you like. What's the next category?

I can't remember very much - it's Miscellaneous. And I notice there is no written paper, it's mainly oral. I think it had to do with such things as the VS material handbook where a leading signalman had to look after all his signalling stores. Had to know what to look for, what to keep up to date, where to get it, when to order it - things like that. That's one of the small things in it. Under Miscellaneous probably would come the Merchant Navy procedures that you had to know as well. You couldn't talk navy language to a merchant ship when you struck her. Procedure: again, I'm a little lost - it's a long time ago. Procedure is mainly, to

my recollection, office procedure - running a signal office. Where you put everything, what you hold, how long you keep it - so that you can go from one ship to the other, to a shore signal station, know your way around the place and be an efficient part of the furniture.

> I assume that signals, or where signals were all written down, as they were being taken on board or sent off a ship they would be kept as a permanent file in case of later problems. Is that correct, or not?

The majority yes, but there were limits on the length of time that you kept signals. I could tell a small story about that, too, it might be relevant (laughs). A new leading telegraphist cleaned out the wireless office when he took over. He really cleaned it out. He cleaned it out from stuff that the skipper still wanted from last month - that was going to the extreme - but legally he was wrong on that one. He should have kept that particular signal for two months. But there were times for different signals.

> Okay, well, that's Procedures, then there's Coding. What did that entail?

Oh, a variety, but again the different degrees of coding. The use of cyphers which are very similar to coding only a higher degree of secrecy. The urgency - I should have put that back in Procedures - the urgency of messages. What priorities were given to certain messages, whether it was immediate priority, operational priority. And the actual physical coding and de-coding of messages. Very little was ever signed in plain language. This was in the days before coding and cyphering machines, typex machines, et cetera, and it was quite manual, laborious, numerical. It was not only coding, it was recoding - the message was first coded and then it was recoded, and then it was transmitted and ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes with Mike Mitchell, Corvettes, tape one, side two.
>
> Going on about Coding.

It was transmitted and received. The only catch was at times with radio reception as it was then, and bearing in mind that wherever you were you were listening to Canberra - the transmitting station - for your Australian signals, the reception was not the best. The telegraphists could not always guarantee that a seven was not an eight or a two was not a three. And you had to use your imagination at times. There were probably some gaps and it's rather laborious, putting it in, decoding, recoding but ....

> What's the next category?

Buzzer, which is straight wireless telegraphy transmitting and receiving. And although we did not do it regularly - that was a telegraphist's job - a signalman had to be proficient in receiving and transmitting by buzzer. By the same time, using morse code as well, there was a morse flag which was very, very rarely used - alright for distance when you couldn't see a semaphore or light was not practical. Flashing, of course, was by anything from the twenty-inch searchlights to - well, not searchlights, not the full large searchlights, but they were

combined signalling projectors with a twenty-inch mirror, quite large, with shutters and [inaudible]. You could read them at horizon distance in daylight. Down to the little rattling ten-inch that you see on every picture of a naval ship. Down to the little boxes that we used at night when you had to use light - about your own convoy and you were only allowed - well, it was the smallest torch and sometimes it was even smaller than that.

And how far would that have reached, that small one?

One cable length, two cable lengths. Ship to ship in convoy and you would just stop it down until somebody was reading you through a pair of binoculars at night-time. Quite difficult. Very trying. Luckily we did not have to do it very much. But not an easy job.

What other categories are there now, here?

Semaphore and mechanical and hand flags - the old flashing flags. The red and yellow ones where you stand up and you can really belt it out. Two efficient operators can get a message across in very quick time, and very accurately. But the accuracy of signalling is something that's another story. I can tell you a real good one about that.

Well, let's just come back to that story in a moment. Of all these different methods of passing messages, which were the most difficult - perhaps not just for yourself but for signalmen generally, Mike - which were the most difficult to master, to be really proficient at?

I'd say the two signalling methods: morse - whether it was by lamp or by buzzer. It's just hard work. Some people never learn to get it. They never become telegraphists, naturally. But as anyone that has learnt morse will know, you never think you're going to learn it and then all of a sudden it comes to you. Within a few days you're competent.

That's interesting. Other morse men all tend to say that once you've learnt it, it's there forever. Would you agree with that, or not?

(5.00) I would. It's like riding a bike. And I think the same thing with semaphore. Semaphore could be quite difficult to learn, to get your speed up to what you should have had it up to. The difficult thing that I found with semaphore when learning it was the fact that you were reading it backwards. You started off with your right hand out - A, B, C, running it round. But when you were looking at the other bloke it was going the other way.

Yes, of course, I remember that from my scouts, although I didn't get very far. Another question about these different methods of signalling. I guess they all had their uses in different situations. But by and large at sea - you might like to break this into day and night-time - so, say, in a convoy situation where you spent a lot of your time, which were the most common methods used. If a message had to be passed quickly to a neighbouring ship, what would you reach for?

You would reach for flags first because flags were a standard method of signalling, everyone could see what was going on. You could address your message to the commodore, or the commodore could address the message to the whole of the convoy, or the fleet, and the majority of manoeuvring in the fleet and in convoy was conducted by signals, flags on

halyards. And sometimes it became rather difficult when you had different nationalities in the convoy - people that could not understand the flags, could not see the flags, didn't know what the flags represented, then it would be up with plain language to them by lamp or signal.

> I suppose the drawback of an Aldis lamp is that it's directional and can only really be read by somebody in the direct path.

Certainly. Well, that goes for most signalling lamps, but there are all-round lamps used in the navy, or there were. And they were above the bridge and could be seen in daylight.

> Just at a more personal level perhaps, Mike. As a signalman yourself, which of these methods of operating, of passing signals, did you enjoy doing most, or were they simply just different?

I don't think you can say you enjoyed them, really. I think the lamp was the most efficient. It was quick. You could confirm. If you wanted a repeat, if you weren't sure of anything, you could get it in a second. Flags, you could get in the wrong position, have the flags blowing away from you, or towards you, one could be partially furled, you didn't know whether it was or the other. Apart from the fact[?] that emergency signals, flags were as quick as anything. A large black flag hoisted by anybody was unidentified aircraft in sight. There's no quicker way of drawing attention. Somebody raises a large black flag and fires off a gun to attract attention, and the whole convoy knows about it in no time - or the whole fleet.

> That's most interesting. Well look, we might come back to that when we talk about the ship and we talk about your work on the ship, and it would be interesting to fit in where flag bins were, and this kind of thing. You qualified as a leading signalman at the beginning of June '41, and there was this possibility of going to the *Sydney*, which obviously for you was a lucky thing. You went instead aboard the *Queen Mary* to Colombo, I think to join the *Stuart*. What happened?

The *Stuart* at that time was working on the speed run from Alexandria to Tobruk. Her ex-chief yeoman, Cy Page, had been our instructor, and I think it was Cy that dobbed me in to the *Stuart*. However, I was drafted to the *Stuart* but at some time, and I can't determine when, it was changed to the *Lismore*. I found out later the *Stuart* had been ordered home and I would have been rather fortunate in joining the *Stuart* in Alexandria and taking passage back to Sydney - the navy was never that generous (laughs).

> I think, too, actually reaching the *Lismore* was something of an operation in itself, Mike.

Yes, I left the *Queen Mary*, I think in Trincomalee and took passage on the *Cornwall*.

> That was a British cruiser, I think.

(10.00) That was a Royal Navy County-Class cruiser. And it took us six weeks to get to Aden, which you can normally have done the trip in less than a week quite easily. It was interesting and it was an introduction to life on a large ship, which I wasn't particularly enamoured.

> Let's just talk briefly about that, because we'll come straight on now to the *Lismore* by way of contrast. Life on a big ship, in this case the British cruiser: what were the main aspects of it, and what was it that you disliked?

I can't say the informality. I suppose I would have to say the - not the formality or the discipline, I didn't mind that. It was just the fact that to me it was so large. That I could go on watch and I could come off and - well, I'd know the chap I'd been on watch with a little better - you could go to the mess deck, and it was almost the same thing. They were so large. The messes, even people that lived on the ship full-time, did not know the people in the next mess. And as far as anybody on the other side of the ship was concerned, they could be in another world. Sailors and seamen just didn't know each other. The same thing with the officers. You would have to be on board the ship, apart from the direct officer of the watch or the signal officer he had direct contact in, wouldn't even know who you were. It's probably the lack of - I won't say belonging but .... And they were more uncomfortable. You had a small locker. The facilities were not as good as the smaller ships. For example, fresh water showers on a cruiser were a luxury, normally it was salt water showers, even in the tropics. And you never knew where you were going or what you were doing. There was little feedback. Maybe it was the ship, I don't know.

> I can understand that. So you were really just a small cog in a very big thing - rather impersonal.

It's probably the same now.

> Well, let's go on to joining the *Lismore*. She was at Aden when you joined her, 1st September '41. What was your first impression of the ship on board which you were to spend so much time?

The lack of size (laughs). But I was agreeably surprised. The locker that I was given - we all had the same standard-sized lockers. They were more than adequate. They were very good. It was up to yourself as to how tidy you kept them inside, but outside they looked very tidy.

> How cramped were the messes on the *Lismore* - your mess in particular?

The lockers were the largest thing on the mess deck - the messes were quite small. Two large tables on either side of the foc's'le, and you have four messes there. In front of those were the hammock bins, keep going to the paint locker. Very, very small indeed.

> The number of decks in terms of the decks on the main hull, but also the superstructure of the decks: how many were there in terms of living and working spaces?

The foc's'le was really the seamen's and the stokers' mess. There was another deck below that, which varied on different corvettes. On the *Lismore* it would be the housing for the anti-submarine dome. There was no mess down there. We finished up with the sick bay down there - that's for'ard. Underneath the main part of the foc's'le were the petty officers' mess. There was the petty officers' mess, the ERAs' and the chief's mess ahead of them. We finished up with our canteen and our refrigerator was there. But only the two decks. Aft, well, as the superstructure came down there was only one deck - the ward room. And below there, behind the ward room, the minesweeping.

The bridge, where you must have spent a lot of your time with your signal work, Mike, how was that set up? Was it an enclosed bridge, or was there also an open, flying bridge?

Lismore was one of the three corvettes that had a flying bridge. I think I'm right in saying three. It was either three, or four at the most. From then on it became a closed bridge. But the bridge was, you might say, above the main deck, the skipper's cabin, WT office, above that the wheel house and the chart house, and above that the open bridge, and above that the crow's nest.

(15.00) Now where were your positions in relation to the bridge? For example, for Aldis signalling, or the flag bins for signalling.

Behind the wheel house, directly underneath the flying bridge. Quite close to it, all the facilities there, we practically lived on the bridge.

So in terms of day-to-day operations, you were hovering around the edges of the bridge.

From the mess deck to the bridge. You either went up through the waist or straight up the foc's'le. There was, on that ship, a direct access to the foc's'le. It was shut most of the time at sea except in fine weather, so it was usually down to the waist and back through the heads and the galley.

I would assume then that, and I guess this comes to the point about being a small ship, that you would have been in very close day-to-day contact with the captain and his officers of the watch and so on.

Continuous. It'd be an exaggeration to say twenty-four hours a day but there were times when it seemed like that. And particularly in my position, or any leading signalman, or yeoman's position, when the skipper's on the bridge, he's on the bridge.

Was there an intermediary between the skipper and the yeoman signalman or was it a direct ...?

Yes, there was a signal officer who had the executive command of the signalmen. There was the first lieutenant and the other officers had their own parts of the ship. There was a signal officer, and his responsibility, apart from control of the branch, was control of the cyphers - the code books, things like that.

What arrangements were there aboard the *Lismore*, Mike, for the destruction of classified cypher information and so on?

Certain books were always kept on the bridge and in very close proximity to them, the weighted bag, to be thrown overboard. We did not have the responsibility of deciding when it was thrown overboard (laughs). I don't know whether it was the signal officer's or the skipper's, but ....

But that was a weighted bag into which you'd put all the ...

That's right. That was the books themselves. There were certain books, and the books themselves had a lead cover - rather heavy to throw around the place and carry but they would sink if thrown overboard, by themselves. Though the other disposal of codes and cyphers and recoding sheets, as they became out of date, it was our responsibility, and we would burn them in the boiler room every month - a trip that I did not look forward to.

Tell us about that. That sounds quite an interesting little sidelight.

Interesting in seeing how the boiler worked, but it wasn't too pleasant in the tropics. How they ever survived. You'd see them surface absolutely wet through. They had a forced draught coming down but with boilers going continuously, their loss of fluid, they were continuously taking billys of water down and their salt tablets, and what they consumed while on watch, I never knew.

Yes, I can imagine it would have been quite phenomenal. Well, let's turn to some more general aspects of corvettes generally, the *Lismore* in particular. Rolling, how severe was the rolling and pitching of a corvette? People talk about it a lot. Has it been over-rated?

Well, after nearly four years - well, over four years - in corvettes, and some time in other ships. I spent some time on sloops - they were a little larger than a corvette. I never found them that bad. They rolled, sure. They were, with the wrong - a following quarter sea - they were terrible. They just used to corkscrew and down. You'd rather go into a head sea, although you'd shake like hell when every time you came down and be hit in the teeth by a wave as you were coming down, they were uncomfortable. You couldn't say anything else. As far as rolling is concerned, I'm afraid I'm a little cynical about some of the reports that you read in different journals about rolls of fifty degrees and sixty degrees - I wouldn't want to be on a ship that rolled that far ...

Yes, you were pretty well on your [inaudible].

(20.00)... on the compass, and many times when we got a real good roll up there'd be some - an officer, a signalman, an ASDIC operator on duty - would be standing there looking at the ... to see how big the roll was, and we never got past forty.

Well, that's a good enough roll, anyway. How much did the ship heel when you were turning sharply at speed?

On a calm sea, flat out, with full helm on, you wouldn't get up to thirty, but it was quite uncomfortable. The mere fact that you weren't coming back and that it was a protracted, prolonged roll and everything was thrown on to one side, made it seem much worse than it really was, but it's a very uncomfortable turn.

That's an interesting point. I mean, it's obviously quite different to to and fro rolling with seas. Seasickness, was that a problem for yourself? And what about the other men you knew?

It was not a problem for me. The first few days after you'd been ashore for a week or two, the first few days you might feel a little upset. Probably it was accentuated if you'd had a rather

severe run ashore the night before and drank and ate to excess. But for some other people it was much worse. I only know one man that left the ship because of chronic seasickness, and of all places that was in the Mediterranean. He did two trips with us. It wasn't really rough. He was an ASDIC operator. But his mates did his first two watches when he first went to sea. He was physically unable to sit in the ASDIC hut. When he came back in, as soon as we got through the breakwater, he was as right as rain. He was prepared to do - the people who had stood his watches for him - he wanted to square off with them, but he couldn't. He was just useless. But I've often seen many, many sailors that haven't been sick for months and months and months who, when you got into a decent blow, there was nobody at the mess. I remember one time escorting the *Royal Sovereign* of all things - the battleship - and a protector, a cable-laying ship I think it was, up from Addu Atoll to Trincomalee, and we got into a very severe blow. It was worse than that, though I think there were about ten of us that were still eating. The cooks weren't cooking. If you wanted something, you took a can of kippers or whatever it was - herrings - put them in the steam oven, shut the door, slammed her on, turned on the steam and took it out. A slice of bread if you could find some and that was your meal (laughs). But at that stage I think that ninety per cent of the ship were not interested in food. Next day, and for weeks after - right as rain - but it is a problem.

> That's most interesting, Mike. The food, I think is an interesting issue. I'd imagine the galleys were fairly small. How well were you fed, both in terms of the freshness or otherwise of supplies, and what the ship's cook could do with the goods?

We were lucky. We had good cooks. It varied on where you were. As you know, we spent a considerable time in Aden: that is not the best place to victual ships. Your mutton turns out to be goat, your beef turns out to be - I don't know, it couldn't have been water buffalo but it tasted like it. I know that the goat was shocking. The cooks did all they could with it. But that's only one place. You could always go to tinned food, and bully beef isn't really as bad as it's cracked up to be. If it's treated the right way it comes out as cottage pie.

> Was there much difference on corvettes, given the closeness of relations between officers and men, in the food that went to the ward room and what went to the sailors' messes?

Basically, they were eating the same food. They had an officers' cook and an officers' steward. It might have been dressed up a little better, but when times were hard, they were hard with the officers as well. No, basically, we had the same food.

> What about heat? Obviously you spent a great deal of your time, Mike, in the tropics. Both in daytime, but perhaps particularly nights for sleeping and so on, how did you get around it?

(25.00) In the tropics it varied. While you were at sea and by yourself - when I say by yourself, without a ship alongside you - it was bearable. If you had a following breeze and you couldn't open the portholes and put your little scoops and get a little bit of extra, it was uncomfortable. Of a night-time, naturally enough, when the blackout curtains went up, all the portholes were shut. The only air coming through was through our little punkahs. It wasn't air conditioning, it was just forced air through and you had to be right underneath one to get any advantage. The only place was on the deck and there were as many sailors slept top deck in the tropics as there was below decks. That could not occur on the larger ships - very few.

For the heat, well, the Persian Gulf in August is not the place to be - Aden or the Persian Gulf. We have laid on board .... I did look at one little diary I kept just before, so I was getting bored. I never kept a diary, but I did for a month and it just happened to be that time. I said it was half-past eleven at night and it's still ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit. We were laying on the decks on our hammocks, not on the bedding, but just on the bare boards, sweating. It was very, very uncomfortable. When you went ashore of a daytime to swim, when we were tied up at a little place called Khor Kuwai, the rocks were that hot that you had to wear sandshoes to walk on them. Very oppressive in places like that. But again I'm talking about the extremes. In general, we had some very comfortable trips.

> How do you remember the speed of the ship, both in terms of general cruising speed and its top speed?

I think their official top speed was fifteen and a half knots. The chief ERA and the chief stoker would probably tell you they could get more out of it. We travelled normally at about twelve to fourteen knots. Convoys were generally about ten knots and because we were zig-zagging and across the front, or at the sides, we would be doing twelve, fourteen knots. But the only time I've seen a corvette do anything more than sixteen knots was down Hooghly River, coming from Calcutta on an ebb-tide, and it's really an experience with the tide running out about five knots and you're doing fifteen. You'd wonder what you were doing, broadsiding round the corners.

> Yes, I can imagine that, that would be have been quite some speed. Going to some perhaps more personal aspects of the *Lismore*, and perhaps looking particularly at the period when you joined her. What kind of crew was it, both in terms of its composition, in terms of either permanent navy men, or wartime men, and also what was the morale of the crew?

The composition of the crew would be, I'd say, twenty per cent permanent navy. And you must remember that *Bathurst* and *Lismore* were the first two corvettes commissioned, and they had only been commissioned two to three months when they left Australia. And this period when I joined the ship was about six months after that. The rest were reserves, as I was. The morale was quite good. They were one of the first ships away. They were an Australian ship. They were seeing the world. They'd been through Singapore, to Colombo, then they had been up to Suez and back again to Aden. I'd say about twenty per cent, but initially there was probably a little, not friction, but the permanent navy people were permanent navy, and the reserves were rookies, but that, after the first six-twelve months of the war just disappeared completely.

> You were saying, I think, that there was a slight thing between the original crew and replacements such as yourself, but that that faded away after a time.

Well, when I mentioned replacement, I was a replacement - I don't think I was really a replacement because I joined her only six months after she'd left Australia. Replacements mainly started after you'd been overseas for about two years - two and a half years. The original crew had commissioned the ship, and the majority of the people, ninety-five per cent of the people that were on the ship when I joined her, had commissioned the ship, had been together for that six months. Sure, looking back, six months is a very short time, but they had worked the ship. They were looking on themselves as *the Lismore*. I was a 'Johnny come lately'. Three and a half years later I wasn't a 'Johnny come lately'.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Mike Mitchell, tape two, side one.

Mike, you were saying before about the formality of the British cruiser you came out on. How formal or otherwise were the relations between officers and men on the *Lismore*? For example, did you ever get sometimes to christian name terms with officers, or not?

Yes and no, it depended where you were, and how long - towards the end it was entirely a different set of conditions. But the thing that I would like to say is this, that formality is one thing, earned respect is a lot different, and that's the thing that they had - the majority, not at all by a long shot. And it won't be the opinion of sailors, either. As with any sailor, there were some inexperienced, there were some that learnt the hard way. But on the whole the officers got the respect that they deserved and that they earned. We were very fortunate in that the majority of the officers we had on board did just that. And the sailors got away with them ninety-nine per cent of the time on very, very good terms. It was a very happy ship.

That's interesting. Just before going on to the actual chronology of your period on the ship, Mike, would it be possible to describe a typical day at sea? And if, so how exciting, or otherwise, was that typical day?

Well, the typical day is not exciting at all. It's dull, it's monotonous. It can be very boring.

How did it begin?

Again, a typical day, may or may not include, depending where you were, on dawn action stations. Now, when does a day start? Midnight watch? As you know there were four hour watches, split by the dogs. But in general, on most corvettes, I think they resolved to the same people on the same watch, instead of having rotating watches - the seamen and the stokers generally had rotating watches. In the smaller branches of the ship people became used to doing a certain watch and were quite happy to do it, and between their branch that was quite okay. That was just as efficient and they liked it. They got to know each other very well indeed. And they would be woken for their watch, on watch for four hours - the officer of the watch, the signalman of the watch, the four seamen of the watch who rotated between steering the ship, lookout, boatswain's mate - I forget what the other one was. They used to switch around, an hour on each - the seamen. The stokers and the engine room artificers, they had their own routines, but watch by watch. The first variation, I suppose, in a day would have been dawn action stations. Again, a bore for most people, depending upon where you were, whether you had a convoy, whether you didn't have a convoy, whether you were with other ships, or not.

Was that kept to every day you were at sea?

Not always. If you were sailing alone, if you'd dumped a convoy and you were going from A to B by yourself, unless you were in a particularly dangerous area, there'd be no dawn action stations.

And dawn action stations were basically, the ship standing to in a high state of readiness.

That's right. Everybody was awake, at their action station - very unpopular.

Was that because dawn was a likely time of attack, or for some other reason?

(5.00) Yes, and the same with dusk. And there were dusk action stations as well. In between, then it would be to breakfast for most of the troops, except the ones on watch, who would have it after eight o'clock. The seamen would go about their normal duties of the forenoon. In the tropics there wasn't any organised work of an afternoon except for normal watchkeeping.

So basically it was your watch as morning work and afternoons to yourself. Were there many pursuits and activities - hobbies and so on - aboard ship to break the monotony, or not?

I think it varied. It varied with people. It varied with time. It varied with where you were and how cranky people were and whether you hadn't been ashore for a week or two weeks. Mahjong was quite popular on our ship. Cards would be played. A little chess. Reading. Someone would buy records if you could and play it on a PA system if it was possible. But now I'm talking about nice quiet times when you could afford that luxury. In the tropics I'm afraid, there was more crashing in the afternoon - a sleep in the mess deck - than there was any other organised activity.

So I suppose a lot of the afternoon was really to make up for broken nights and so on.

That's right.

Well, let's go on to the actual chronology of things, Mike. I think, that's painted a very interesting picture of the general life of the *Lismore*. [Interruption] Just one thing before we come to the chronology in terms of the signal establishment, Mike. You were saying that when you first joined, there was a leading signalman and a petty officer for the twelve months, but after that you became the acting leading signalman. That was on 1st January '42. About how many men did you have in your department, there.

Very few. There'd be three or four signalmen, a couple of coders and that was it. We worked with the wireless operators, of course, who had their own, either leading telegraphist or petty officer telegraphist, depending upon the time and whether Joe Scarlett [Petty Officer Telegraphist] had gone, or not, I can't remember. But it was very few. On the mess down below we had, in our mess, the ASDIC operators, as well. There were two seamen's messes one side of the ship, and the stokers on the other side. The usual friendly animosity between the two. And the stokers were always untidy, as the seamen will say. But that was it, there was very few people. Let's face it, there's only about eighty people on board.

Yes, sure. Well, going on to the actual chronology. We'll refer occasionally to your notes there. In 1941, the last three months, the ship was based at Aden, and much of that time, I think, was spent blockading French Somaliland. What do you remember of that work?

There were two ships, the *Bathurst* and the *Lismore* of all things. The two that left together. The first two built. And where did they finish up - out of Aden, an overnight trip to the Gulf of Tajura, and then up and down at about seven knots. We could have kept going for a fortnight on fuel. And it was just monotonous, round outside Obok, I think the name of the town, if you can call it that was - a collection of mud huts from we could see through the telescopes. But very small, and I think our largest catch would have been an Arab dhow that was nearly as big as the *Lismore*. But apart from that it was just monotony and being there. It was just a sense of a presence there to discourage trade between Jibuti and French Somaliland.

There were no large ships - no large merchant men running in and out?

No, they were just going round, straight up the Red Sea.

And were there any attacks of any sort then, either by yourself or on the *Lismore*?

No, none whatsoever to my memory. There were quite a few at times where the dhows were boarded, whether we went alongside, or sent the whaler away to board the dhows to see what they were carrying, but that was the full extent of the excitement, I think.

But I assume they would obviously have been armed boarding parties.

Oh yes.

(10.00) Well, after that period the *Lismore* then, I think - and this is just after Pearl Harbor - went to Colombo where you joined what I think was called the ABCEG - Aden, Bengal, Colombo Escort Group. Colombo was obviously very much part of the ship's story in terms of a place you worked out of often and visited often. What do you remember of the port and the facilities?

I nearly remember everything of that port (laughs). I can even think of going through the breakwater now, with the dockyards on the left, heading up towards the Grand Oriental Hotel, right at the other end where the passenger wharves were. It was always laden with shipping. Many of them merchant ships, of course. As you know, it was a prominent coaling port in the early days of, shall we say the Empire. But it was certainly busy through the war. We once took the whaler away sailing in Colombo harbour. There was nothing more disastrous, trying to sail between row upon row of merchant ships and warships. There was no breeze, there was nothing (laughs).

That's most interesting. No doubt there was quite a lot of other local boat activity on the harbour.

Yes, either we went ashore in our motorboat, and very often came back in bum boats which we hired from the jetty. If we were a fair way out and the locals wouldn't take us because they were rowing boats, then we'd have to get a signal out to the ship to please send boat and cross our fingers that we would get one.

Did Colombo become something of a second home to the ship and its crew, or not?

I think *Lismore* sailed into Colombo more than it sailed into any other port. It was definitely its overseas home port. We always finished up back in Colombo.

> What do you remember of the people and were there chances to get around then Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, and to explore a little, or not?

Yes there were. Even when the convoys - when you came back, and for fuelling - we'd get two or three days. Sometimes we'd turn round and go straight out. Occasionally, we'd get three or four days waiting for the convoy to form up. I have very happy memories, not only of the Grand Oriental Hotel and the billiard tables, but other places - the Fleet Club, the swimming club where we were honorary members, out along the beach past Galle Face, the Galle Face beach itself. There was one time, I don't know why or how it happened - I think we might have been doing a refit. We finished up in dry dock in Colombo. This wasn't early in the piece. This was longer, later. And we were given the opportunity of going up country. Myself and a seaman finished up outside Kandy towards Nuwara Eliya on a tea plantation with a couple of English people. Picked us up at the station at Kandy and entertained us and we stayed at their plantation at their home for three or four days - that was marvellous. But we did get around. Another time we went to a naval rest camp at a place called Diyatalawa. I think we had about week there. It was my first golf. There was a golf course, and we could hire bikes and ride to a place called Bandarawela, and go over the Lipton's tea plantation. Very good. The water was very cold. It was up in the mountains and there was no hot water. I'll never forget our first shock at getting under the shower.

> That's most interesting. And anyway you obviously did get around and get to know the island, Mike. Just referring to your notes at the end of '42. I was just wondering if we could, say, take about the end of '42, or that period. It would be interesting just to read off some of the destinations of your escort voyages.

Yes, it's a name that comes - that you hear, not every day but every week now, about the large American base at Diego Garcia. It's right in the middle of the Indian Ocean. You'd be lucky to find it on a map. But we went there, and it was no base then. It was just a nice big atoll with the clearest water I have ever seen. But from there to Addu Atoll which was between Diego Garcia and Colombo, Bombay, Queen [Qishm] Island in the Persian Gulf. I never know where Queen Island was but I know that we pulled into Bandar Abbas in Iran. Never realised I'd been to Iran before (laughs). Bombay, Colombo, Trincomalee, Addu Atoll again. Mostly around the Indian Ocean. There weren't too many places in the Indian Ocean that we didn't see, either then or later on. Around that period that was mostly around that area.

> And the escort voyages that you were doing during that period - this is prior to going to the Mediterranean, Mike - were they mostly - were you escorting large convoys, or small groups of ships, single ships? What do you remember of that?

(15.00) Anything from a single ship to - anything more than eight we would classify as, I think, as a larger convoy in those days, in that area. Unfortunately, most of them were very slow, and most of them had one ship that was always a nuisance, that couldn't keep up with the convoy speed. I think they always exaggerated their speed so that they could get into a faster convoy and they wouldn't be left in the five-knot jobs.

That's an interesting point. And therefore perhaps often jeopardised the other ships.

That's quite right, and quite often they jeopardised - the fact that they made their way on their own. They finished up being left behind.

How often did that happen, that ships were just dumped?

Not regularly, but I can remember it on at least three occasions that we were immediately concerned with. And then again, you'd often find - not often - but we have come across ships in the middle of the ocean and invited them to join the convoy, which they did.

I'd imagine in those situations dealing with rogue ships, it must have been very much in the signal department that the solutions were worked out. What do you remember of that?

I don't know about solutions. There weren't very many solutions (laughs). They were just trying to find out whether they were putting on an act and whether they could do better, or telling them the cold hard facts of life: if you can't keep up it's too bad. It's surprising how different nationalities suddenly lose their command of English, and trying to communicate with people that don't want to listen to you can be quite difficult.

Yes, that's an interesting point. What happened in situations like that? Would a boat be dispatched, or would you drop off and go up alongside the recalcitrant ship? What did you do?

I think it would depend on the number of escort ships, the number of ships, and the importance of the vessel concerned. It could be - it wasn't often the case - that she had some of the most, shall we say, precious cargo on board. But in most cases the convoys that we were escorting then were nothing of the value of the class of the Mediterranean convoys. They were a different kettle of fish.

Well, let's turn to that, Mike. It was in the end of April that the *Lismore* left Colombo to steam to the Mediterranean where you were based at Alexandria. And I think you were saying before that this was fair dinkum escorting. How different was it to your Indian Ocean work?

When I mentioned fair dinkum escorting, and it was more like fair dinkum convoys. Convoys to Malta at any stage of the war, whether it's prior to Sicily or after Sicily, and we had air control, or not, they were efficient, they had been in convoys before, and corvettes were very lucky to get into such convoys. We just weren't fast enough. I know the embarrassment that our - not only the skipper but everybody else felt when we were told to move up from our position on the quarter of a convoy to take up position up for'ard. We couldn't do it, the convoy was going too fast and we were flat out already, keeping up with it. It was quite embarrassing to have to tell the commodore of the convoy we couldn't do it (laughs).

Surely he would have known your speed.

Yes, he realised that immediately and he changed it, but these things happen and, well, those convoys were out of our class. It was really something to see a top convoy on the way to

Malta. Destroyers at not less than twenty-five knots charging around with bow waves coming over their foc's'le. They'd pass us like steam. To see a boat like the *Manxman*, or the *Abdiel*, which were mine laying destroyers. I was out out of Tripoli once in an RAAF truck, going down to a place called Homs. We were doing over thirty-five miles an hour in this truck and the *Abdiel* passed us on the way. You could actually see her just passing you. It was like driving down to Wollongong along the coast road and being passed by a boat. They were a special class of ship. They were built to lay mines in the Baltic Sea, to leave Scotland, get over, lay their mines and come back before it was dawn.

(20.00) That's most interesting, Mike. Let's turn to the story of one particular voyage, because this was perhaps one of the most difficult periods in the *Lismore*'s work. And this was the sinking of the troopship, *Yoma*. How did that voyage begin, and how did the incident develop?

I don't exactly know how it began. Well, it began with us picking up a convoy, I think at Tripoli or off Tripoli, of troopships that were going to Alexandria. This was a month before the invasion of Sicily. Where they were coming from, where they were going to, I don't know. I don't know the origin of the *Yoma*. But there were possibly eight to a dozen relatively large troopships - not all troopships but quite a number of them. The *Yoma* had over 1600 troops on board and I don't know the time of the morning when she was torpedoed, but she was just caught right in the middle of the convoy.

Were you on watch?

I can't remember. I don't know exactly where I was. Around there, at that time, guns going off were pretty regular - whether somebody was test-firing, whether somebody was a little trigger-happy, or not, and you didn't take much notice of a dull boom. Now and again it could have been another escort having a go at a possible submarine contact or dropping a depth charge for discouragement purposes. But I can certainly remember it going down, and I know that ourselves and another corvette, we were designated before the convoy started as rescue ship. It was our job, and we had to, if anything was done, you started getting ready to rescue as soon as anything happened. We did receive the order from the commodore of the convoy to attend to the *Yoma* and carry out rescue duties. Although we were the official rescue ship another Australian corvette was detached to assist us. We picked up the majority of them. We had over four hundred on board with our odd ninety people and it got a little crowded.

Well, I know it must have been a very difficult night with these people all over the place. Were you involved in actually helping with the physical rescuing, or were you on station as a signalman?

Both, Ed. It wasn't a night. It was a long morning and a long day. The ship went down off somewhere around Benghazi - after we'd passed Benghazi on the way to Alexandria. The first thing was, naturally, keep in touch with the convoy but they very soon got out of sight of us. We were left with the other ship. Everybody was at action stations, everybody was pulling people on board. The whaler was out. The motorboat was out. Luckily the *Yoma* had managed to get one of its very large lifeboats swung out and into the water. It was completely full and we used that. Our own sailors took the lifeboat, took 'em out of the water with that. They were spread out quite a long way, you can imagine. It was arduous work and we all took our share. This was with the skipper's permission, of course. You don't need four signalmen on a bridge when there's only one other ship in sight, and the others were

performing what we were there for. It was no good us, apart from the fact that the ASDIC was still operating, we couldn't have done very much if anybody had started anything.

> It must be extremely distressing, I'd imagine, to see a ship sink, especially with so many men aboard. How did the incident affect the crew of the *Lismore*?

Well, we talked about it often, Ed. It was a very distressing trip. When we picked up as many as we possibly could, we didn't leave anybody that we could see, we headed at top speed to Derna, a little place just near Tobruk. There was a military hospital there and we unloaded them there quite a few hours afterwards. The majority of them were quite okay, they were on deck. A lot of them were distressed, the ones that were down below.

(25.00) Our sick bay attendant, I pity him his job. A number of us were helping him. There were some wounded there that were very, very distressing. We did pick up a couple that were beyond help. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to get rid of them, either. And they were just laid on the mess deck and it was rude awakening for some of the young sailors that had just joined the ship - not that we'd had that much experience but we were a little older than they were. That was very distressing. And it was very distressing to run out of morphine and everything else because we were only a small ship, carried so much restricted supplies, and I think our sick bay tiffy got through all of his supplies in the first hour. They were all over the ship. Everybody was doing the best they could. It was nice to belong to a ship which worked so well. We were glad to get rid of them and we all sat down afterwards and thought, well, we're not so badly off after all. It was quickly - not forgotten, I don't think anybody would forget it - but it's not an experience you'd like to repeat.

> Well, thank you for telling us that. That's a very clear description. Mike, I know after, or in late September '43, the ship again left the Mediterranean, back to Colombo, and here again I think there was more escorting work - Suez, Aden, Mombasa, even Burma I think. What do you remember of that period - this is the period before the refit in South Africa?

Very busy. Everybody was thinking it's about time we went home. The majority of us, of the original crew, and I then classed myself as an original - I'd been on it over two years, and a lot of the original crew had been relieved at that time. There were many of us that had been on board for well over two years and looking for reliefs that never came. Others were being relieved, and the ones that weren't relieved were getting a little bit toeier every time we got to port and no relief.

> Was there any active resentment about that, or was it just a level of mild frustration?

I think it depended on the individual. We were all old enough and ugly enough to realise it was a fact of life, and to know why we were not being relieved and others were being relieved - you learn a lot of things under conditions like that. But some people did take it more harshly than others. It was relieved by the fact that we were at sea most of the time. We didn't have any .... I can remember one bloke leaning over the side of the ship once when we went back into Trincomalee and there's the British fleet that was going over to become the British Pacific fleet then, I think. Still in the same place they were when we'd left the harbour two months before and we'd been in about four different countries and got back and the same ships were in the same place, blowing the same bugles, with the same canvas awnings over

the top. There were some sarcastic remarks about the British fleet then, and the battleships and what they did while the little buggers did all the work. But frustrations such as that - that didn't help sailors that were at sea for a long time and had been away for a long time.

> Yes, I can imagine that. Well, just going to one voyage of that period. We mentioned Suez, Aden, Mombasa, Calcutta, and this, I think, was general escort work. You also went to Burma once where there was an interesting incident.

Well, I don't know the end of the story. But we picked up this convoy, of all places, in Aden, via Bombay, Colombo for refuelling - that's all it was - to Burma. We didn't land in Burma. We were heading for a place called Budge Budge, and for the life of me I've looked on maps since, and you'd need an Admiralty chart to find Budge Budge. I know that we were going up river to Rangoon, but that was the wrong time to go there - they were evacuating Rangoon. The two corvettes that were in the convoy group, the escort group, were both running low on fuel. I don't know how it was decided - whether we tossed a coin, or not, to decide who would refuel from who, and the other one would take his chances up the river. We either won or lost the coin, I don't know which. We refuelled from the other ship, nearly emptied her and went on to Calcutta. What happened to the other ship I don't know. I'm sorry I can't remember but you'd try to find out in the next week, and the next trip, and then you're off again to Colombo and you've forgotten and you can't find out and something else happens.

> That's an interesting example, I think, of both the degree of movement that your ship was involved in, Mike. Well, some time after that - I think early '44 - that you escorted a British destroyer to South Africa. I think that ship had been damaged and you yourself were due for a refit.

Yes, I don't know which came first, whether it was just by chance that we were to escort the *Paladin* - was the destroyer's name.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Mike Mitchell, tape two, side two.
>
> The ship's name, I think was the *Paladin*.

That's right. It was a British destroyer she'd been on an attack on a submarine - a surface attack on a submarine. Not having had much success with her guns she just decided to ram. I know it's real hero stuff and all that but the only thing it did to the *Paladin* was make such a mess of it that I'm sure that everybody on board a corvette decided right then and there that a corvette would never take on a submarine in trying to ram her to the bottom. The *Paladin* was out of action. We had to escort her to Mombasa and then down to Durban to have her bow fixed. It taught us a lesson. But we were on our way to Port Elizabeth for a six-week refit. The six-week refit lasted three months for various reasons and it was the most enjoyable three months of our young lives.

> Yes, you were saying that you were rather feted by some of the local British people, at least.

The British people and some South Africans, but predominantly British because they had organised the local Navy League who in turn organised trips for sailors to be billeted either up country in farms or as we were, we were fortunate enough to have a week or two in Johannesburg, all organised by the Navy League at Port Elizabeth. It was most enjoyable. We were there for ANZAC Day. The ship's company and other services had a field day in Port Elizabeth that day. One thing rather unusual about Port Elizabeth, it was known as the most British town in South Africa and we were fortunate that we went there. The anti-British feeling which rubbed off to anti-Australian to a certain extent but not as much, was not as pronounced there as in other places. But at midday every day the whole town stopped - all the cars, all the buses, all the trams stopped at midday for either thirty seconds or so as a mark of respect for the people that were away fighting in the war. And this, in a country that was rather anti-British at the time.

> That's most interesting. Well, after the refit, with the ship no doubt well refurbished and so on, you sailed to Durban. And then there's another list of ports - destinations rather. We have Mombasa, I think Aden, the Persian Gulf where the heat was extreme, Bombay, Aden, the Seychelles, Karachi, Calcutta. What places, Mike, stand out from those escort voyages? Were there any voyages that really stand out in your mind?

Probably the Seychelles after the Persian Gulf. Aden had a very bad name - the something of the British Empire many years ago, and it's the most barren place. They say at Aden if it ever rains on a ship she'll never sink. It only rains about two days in a year in Aden. The Persian Gulf, although being out of the tropics, is very, very similar to Aden - rocky, desert, hot, hot, hot in summer, cold in winter - as we are all learning now with the crisis in the Persian Gulf. We're all learning much more about it. Apart from that, it's a place to keep away from. To go from there to the Seychelles Islands, Mahé was the capital, I think - or Port Victoria. They talk about something being the 'jewel of the Pacific' - I think the Seychelles is the jewel of the Indian Ocean. Mountains at the back, coral reefs, a lovely little harbour on a little town at the bottom. Lots of tortoise shell. Women with loose morals. Unfortunately, the highest incidence of the most virulent venereal disease known - that was our warning from the Resident Medical Officer. But a beautiful place. And to have a few days ashore there as compared with Aden - it was going from the sublime to the ridiculous. Sorry, I had it back to the front - the ridiculous ...

(5.00) It does sound a wonderful place. And the voyages during that period, does anything stand out in terms of the work you were doing?

A rather unusual trip from the Seychelles to Colombo in company - we were escorting eight Fairmile launches. The Fairmile is a very small - it's not a motor torpedo boat - it's just a motor launch used for a variety of reasons. Some of the Australian Fairmiles finished up as Roylen Cruise boats out of Mackay, so they weren't very big. They were quite small. They had two petrol engines in them. The Fairmiles were loaded to the gunwales with petrol. They were most unreliable. We had trouble on the first night and finished up coming back to the Seychelles. We had trouble on the second night when one of them had carburettor trouble, and then blew up. Unfortunately, the engineer officer was killed on board it. That slowed things again. I think we finally took off with eight of them in various degrees of tow. They broke down one after the other. One with one engine gone, one had to have - oh, both engines gone. It was the most frustrating voyage we ever had. And the route, there was

nothing fancy about it. We were on the equator and all we did was sail due east until we hit Addu Atoll which is on the equator. I don't know how many days it took but it seemed twice as long as whatever it was - a very frustrating one. We felt very sorry for the air force people who were running the Fairmiles, I believe. They weren't used to long open voyages. They weren't used to cooking for so long. We thought we were badly off - they were terrible.

> Yes, it does sound like that. Well, just for the record, Mike, I know it was in July '43 that you'd become an acting yeoman yourself. Then on 20th October '44 you left the ship finally bound for home. When that time came, I'd imagine there might have been a mixture of feelings. What were your thoughts?

I was glad to leave. I must admit, for the first time in all the years that I had been away, I thought that after South Africa when we got back to Colombo and as we used to say, back to the home port, that I would eventually be relieved, and there were others on board who were away longer than me. But it was not to be. We were at sea again, and again, and again. And every time we came back, everybody would be looking for the signal with our reliefs in. The captain did his very best - he was a wonderful skipper - but he couldn't do any good. We learnt afterwards that our reliefs had arrived in Colombo but had been snaffled by another ship while we were at sea: so again, I was getting to the very frustrated, very annoyed part. It did get to the very cranky stage. It alternated, I had enough sense and was old enough to realise that I couldn't do much about it, the skipper couldn't do much about it - I was in the bloody system and it was hard luck. I was still alive so why worry, let's go ashore and have a beer. But when it did eventually come I couldn't get off quick enough. The ship was still in Colombo for a week. I was sent ashore to the pool, which was about - not the swimming pool. It was out in the jungle - a little camp, a tented camp where you waited while in transit, waiting for a trip home. You never knew how long you were going to be there - whether it was a week or two. They posted up the roster every morning. You'd go there - and you wouldn't want to know - we were on the roster one day and by the time somebody had told me I was on the roster, I raced over to see it, the names had been scratched off - the three Australians from the *Lismore* had been scratched off. Well, we couldn't do any good with the naval officer in charge of the camp so we sought permission, and were granted it, to go and see the naval officer in charge at Colombo, and our own skipper, Steele[?], to stir things up a bit.

> It does sound from both your story of your leaving the ship and this period in this transit camp that there was quite a lot of local manipulation, and that decisions made in Australia, for example, about replacements to certain ships, didn't always eventuate, with a lot of people on the spot interfering to get their own way.

(10.00)We were biased, naturally, in thinking that, but, by gee, there was an awful lot of things that .... It was locally .... We were taking passage on the *Devonshire*, a British cruiser which was leaving for Fremantle from Trincomalee within two or three days and there were others taking passage as well. I don't know what happened. We did get back, but I can tell you there was an awful lot of talking and complaining. I don't know what happened but we finally made it. We were on the train that night - everything packed - on our way to Trincomalee, and it took us all night to get there. But no, we didn't have time to really .... [Break in recording.]

> Well, Mike, we might just skate over the journey back to Australia, although for the record, I think you came back on the British cruiser, *Devonshire*, and then entrained across Australia. I think you married very shortly after coming back to Australia.

Yes, we'd been engaged for two or three years and I couldn't get my wife out of it. She had everything organised before I arrived (laughs). But it was [inaudible], it was only a matter of letting them know, I think. I wrote from Western Australia, or got the message from Western Australia - I couldn't let them know before that - and, well, it was a long time waiting, but we were enjoying our relatively short honeymoon. We didn't realise it was going to be as short as a recall notice to go to Flinders - another course (laughs).

> And this, I think, was where you did your V/S2 - a higher signal course. Is that correct?

That's right, yes. It was about two months after that.

> But your wife was able to come down and live near *Cerberus*.

Very fortunate, old navy, my wife's father was [inaudible] Royal Navy, Royal Australian Navy in 1912. One of his friends was still in the navy, and in Melbourne, and he put me in touch with someone in Flinders that had half a house to rent, so we moved in. I was very fortunate being able to get naval leave for the two months that I was in Flinders - being home every night. I had some duty nights but it wasn't too bad - it sweetened the pill.

> So that was a good start to married life. Well, February '45 - we might just cover this period more briefly. But for the record, 21st February '45 you joined the *Whyalla*, and back to the corvettes. I think you went up into the Pacific. Could you just tell us about that briefly?

Well, I joined the *Whyalla* as a yeoman. They don't normally have them because it was the senior officer of the 21st NSF then. Commander Read, a permanent navy commander, as senior officer he was entitled to a yeoman, hence I was on the *Whyalla*. I was almost supernumerary. They had a good signal crew on board and we got along very well together. I spent twelve months on the ship. We travelled north straight away to Brisbane then to Manus Island and joined the British Pacific Fleet. We were one of the task units with other corvettes in the British Pacific Fleet, but mostly attached to the fleet train - the oilers, the supply ships that stooged out in the Pacific. Shore leave was practically non-existent, as it was to all ships in the US 7th Fleet, or the British Pacific Fleet. All you did, was go to one of the larger atolls, such as Manus or Ulithi, steam in there, find yourself a tanker, fill up with oil, find yourself a supply ship, fill up with food, and get ready for the next convoy. There were some ...

> Were there any moments, though, of - any lighter moments when you got off on the islands or relaxed a bit?

There was a very light moment when we were on Manus Island when peace was declared. The Americans had what they called a recreation island. It was a very small island in the middle of the lagoon. It had one building on the island from which I can remember, apart from basketball courts, baseball courts, things like that where you could go ashore and just play sport if you wished to. And you had two chits which allowed you to get two bottles of

beer which you could drink on the island and enjoy yourself as well you may. That day they just opened the doors of the refrigerator - it was a walk-in fridge (laughs). That night I think we were swimming between ships. It was something to remember. They're the lighter moments, but other atolls weren't so pleasant.

(15.00) Well, it must have been a wonderful feeling, the knowledge that the war finally was over. You went from there up to the Philippines, I think, destined for Hong Kong.

Yes, this was after - not VP Day but when the bomb was dropped - well, it was VP Day - and arrangements were being made for the formal surrenders in the different places, as you know, in Timor and Singapore and Tokyo and Hong Kong. They took place some time after. And in that time we were sent to Hong Kong and our job there, via the Philippines, was to sweep a channel into Hong Kong for the fleet to come into Hong Kong to accept the surrender ceremonies, et cetera. We didn't do very much minesweeping. We just - it was very lucky. It was the one you dream about. We mineswept a channel that didn't have any mines in it, so that was quite a bonus. After that we spent a few days in Hong Kong harbour and then two of the ships left for Australia and they split the ships up, those that deserved to go home, those that had been away for the longest time, were sent on to the ships that were returning, and the new replacements took over.

You yourself came back to Australia, I think.

I came back on the *Whyalla*. It was lucky to be one of the ships that came home. We came home via a leisurely route with very little to do, via the Philippines, Thursday Island, Townsville, and Brisbane.

I know when you finally came back to Australia you'd spent a very, very large time overseas - most of your naval service. You'd been to so many places. Looking back on it all, how did it seem to you as it wound down?

There were times I thought I was hard done by, and there were times I thought I was very fortunate. After many years of reflection, I was lucky in more ways than one. I had an opportunity to see many places that I wouldn't have seen before - would never have seen. I've had the opportunity of going back to many of them that I wouldn't have done. I've often wished, and being philosophical, that maybe my son-in-laws and my grandsons could have had - I'd never wish them to go to war - but the discipline, the fact of living with men, the tolerance that you have to learn, the tolerance that you get from others, and the respect you get from other people that you can earn. There is something that I wouldn't have done without. I don't think it's hurt me at all. I don't regret it at all. I certainly don't regret being on the corvettes.

That's most interesting, Mike. Well, just finally .... Perhaps we should add that you were demobbed in June '46, and of course later went back to work for Telecom and did some Colombo Plan work, too, in Malaysia and so on. Just finally, is there anything that you feel that you would like to add to the record that's not been said already about your time on the corvettes?

Not particularly, Ed. I think to be a corvette sailor once was to be rather unusual - but when you think that there were so many of them built - that I have read somewhere that nearly half

of the Royal Australian Navy served on corvettes, it's not so unusual. But the fact that they were all the same size, all the same, I think the majority of corvettes by their size, by the fact that you knew everybody from the skipper down to the lowest ordinary seaman, they all knew you. You knew you had to live together. If you didn't live together properly you were made to live together (laughs). It was an experience for everybody that served on them. Maybe it was just the same on the larger ships but I don't think so.

> Right, well on that note, Mike, thank you very much for making this tape for the War Memorial where it will be much appreciated.

Thank you, Ed.

END OF INTERVIEW