



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is Ed Stokes with Reg Harris, Evacuee children, tape one, side one.

Reg, could you just begin please with your date and place of birth?

I was born in Barry, Glamorgan, South Wales, on 18th February 1930.

You were saying, I think, Reg, that this really was your home all during your childhood - pre-evacuation.

Yes, apart from one period where my mother took me to Australia for a six-month period, that was my home.

And that was when you were a little baby, I think about eighteen months. Your parents' backgrounds, could you just tell us briefly what your father and mother were doing in the years before the war?

My father was an invalid from the first world war. He was gassed on his seventeenth birthday and it created quite a few problems as far as being to hold down a job. So he had no regular employment until after the war began, then he became a postman. My mother married my father here in Sydney. I can't remember the date, but after spending several years here they migrated back to Wales where my father had his family.

And I think in the period before the war he was working as a caretaker.

Well principally, it was my mother who was the caretaker, but my father used to help in between times. He did try a lot of small jobs: paper hanging, painting, things like that - where he could get some work. But basically he was unemployed, or on the pension for many years.

And Barry, I think was a small but significant seaport.

Yes, it was quite a port over the years, with sailing ships and things like that, with docks and things like that. It also was a holiday place for the people from central Wales - the Rhonddavau and Rhonddabach, who used to come down to Barry Island to the golden sands for a holiday.

That's most interesting, Reg. Childhood memories of the area - growing up, things you did - does anything stand out?

I think it was probably the escapades. I used to do a lot of wandering down to Porthkerry Park and the beach and the docks. It was quite exciting for my youth then.

Tell us about the bluebells.

The bluebells grew in a forest down in Porthkerry Park and it's one of my fondest memories of Wales - was seeing those crowds of bluebells underneath the trees.

That wonderful English spring.

Welsh.

(Laughs) Sorry, Welsh (laughs) - British? The relations within your family, Reg, who were you closest to?

I was always closest to my mother. My father and I sometimes had strained relations. I was the child in the middle of five and I felt very often that by the time things got to me there wasn't either enough money or time for them to spend. So I often went without where my elder brother and sister had either the pushbikes or the cricket bats or the boat there was nothing left for me. And of course my younger ones were seen to be too young at the time.

The house you grew up in at Barry, do you have a clear memory of that, or not?

(5.00) Yes, I do. It was a four-storey structure where the bottom part of it was owned by the Midlands Bank - probably the whole building was owned by the Midlands Bank.
Our family had the three storeys above that and behind that building in the side street was some insurance offices. These were the buildings that my mother and father used to do the caretaking of.

What sort of things did you do together as a family? And what did home life mean to you?

I don't think we did a lot together as a family as money was very scarce. I mean I was born in the middle of the Depression, and in Great Britain at that time the Depression was very, very bad. So we didn't have a lot of money and I think it was those times when we went for walks down - it was a several mile walk down to the parks and the beaches. But they were the principal things we went to.

Another memory here.

When I was young the Welsh Baptist church, noted for its choirs and singing, was just one street around. And I used to sneak off in the Sunday evening and go round and just join in the people, and I used to love to sing.

I can imagine that. It sounds lovely. Reg, the build up to war if you like, the period of '38-'39, prior to the declaration of war. Do you have any memory of any awareness of that going on, or not?

Yes, I think, the general people were quite aware of what was going on. There was a certain amount of activity with planes flying over and - this was our planes of course - and the general talk and papers. I think most people were aware that there was quite a lot of sort of - war was coming. I don't think anyone could say there that there was not going to be a war.

Yes, that's certainly the general picture. The actual outbreak of war, the declaration of war on 3rd September - Chamberlain. I think you have a particular memory of that.

Yes, I'd gone for one of these walks down to Barry Island beach, and we used to cut across through the dockyards, across a footbridge. And when we wanted to come back about two o'clock in the afternoon there was a soldier on the gates who wouldn't tell us what happened but wouldn't let us through and we had to walk all the way back, right round, which made another mile trip on top of the other two miles, and I think we had an idea what had happened.

And then when you got home you found out?

Yes, that's right. War had been declared.

How did your parents react to the news?

At the time they were quite worried where all the kids were because Barry and South Wales are really only a short distance flying time from Europe. And they were scared that the bombers would be over in a matter of an hour or two and drop their bombs, and the kids weren't home. So that was their principal worry at that time.

The period of the phoney war, Reg, that lasted some months. What do you remember of that? What changes do you remember occurring to your life or surroundings?

Well, there was many things going on. People were told to prepare for the eventual happening - taping up windows, making blackout curtains. There was a lot of small air raid shelters built in backyards, and we had to convert the coal cellar under the bank as our air raid shelter.

It sounds like a fairly dusty place.

Of course, we didn't get a lot of coal after the war started as they called up a lot of miners and the coal production was sent to factories. But the coal place was cleaned up and it served as not only our air raid shelter, but some of the neighbours as well.

The period of the rapid build up of war, the *blitzkrieg* if you like - April-May '40 - Belgium, Holland, France fall - Dunkirk, et cetera. Do you remember that or did you only learn about it later?

No, I do remember some of it. I was fairly young, naturally, at the time. We had aeroplanes fighting above the town. We had bombing raids where we used to pick up pieces of shrapnel and things like that. Some of the towns like Cardiff - or the city of Cardiff - had massive air raids which caused much damage. And of course, I think the people knew that we were going to be on the list, being such a big docking area.

(10.00) Those raids - the bombing raids in particular - Reg, do you remember any particular raid in great detail?

No, I don't remember any particular raid in detail. Many of them were at night-time and of course we had been sleeping in the air raid shelter for quite some time. We were always tardy to get into the shelter in the daytime because it was an exciting time for children - or boys - to

see the aeroplanes doing their dogfights above the town. And of course the mothers and fathers were all wishing to get them down there in a hurry.

> At night - are you saying that you slept in the shelter as a matter of course, or only on raids?

No, it became a matter of course fairly early after the war started that we slept in there and we continuously did that until .... Well, what we did find was that the raids would start, perhaps at eleven o'clock at night. And to try and wake people up to get them out and down, say, three storeys down into the other one and then down again into the basement - having to go out into the street before you got actually back into the bank and down below - was just too much effort. So it was safer to sleep down there. So we continually did that until we left.

> Do you remember any evacuee children coming to where you were?

I don't remember any evacuee children from our particular war, the '39 war. I do remember some evacuees from the Spanish Civil War that we had staying with us in around the '35, '36, I think it was.

> That's an interesting recollection. Going on to CORB, Reg. Was it you or your parents who first heard of the scheme?

It would be my parents, of course. They heard of the scheme and they talked it over. Many times we were part of the discussions, not that they actually asked us or told us. But they said would you like to go, and of course, I loved it.

> There were family connections, of course, in Australia, as you said before. Could you place Australia on a map yourself?

Oh yes, I was quite aware of that. Geography in Britain was quite a good subject and I think I liked geography, and my mother being Australian, gave me an incentive to know particularly where Australia was.

> Tell us a bit more about your own reaction to this proposal. Was it purely, 'Here's an adventure, let's go'? Were there other thoughts?

I loved the thought of going. I think it possessed me. I even went to a church that was on the way home from school. I remember going in there one afternoon and I remember the sun being out and going into the church, kneeling down and praying that I could go. So I guess my prayers were answered.

> That's a most interesting memory. Secrecy, in all this development of your going to Australia, did anybody talk to you about the need to maintain secrecy, or not?

Not that I could recall. After some .... I think there was quite a bit of information came from certain bodies in England to Mother and Father. And it wasn't until this was settled that we were asked not to tell anyone at school.

> Do you remember any medicals or any other testing, before being selected?

No, I can't remember any medicals at all - none whatsoever. From the time I left until .... Actually (laughs) I can't remember any medicals even when I got here.

> Of course, the people who were to go were your elder brother and sister, yourself, your younger sister - a littler sister was to stay at home. How did they all greet the news? As you did or in different ways?

This is a very hard one because I don't think I really discussed it with them. I can't remember .... Actually, I think it was something I had within myself and I can't remember talking about it to them.

> Just finally on the motivation for becoming involved. During the period, as you're getting off and going, do you think there were ever any doubts on your parents' part, or not? And what was their primary motive?

(15.00)Their primary motive was to enable us - so we wouldn't be maimed or injured in the war. The bombing had increased. There was many raids over our town. The number of buildings getting blown up was increasing. And they thought that we would be far safer if we came to Australia.

> The period after the decision was made that you were to leave, Reg, and actually farewelling your parents - various preparations. Do you remember anything of that?

I'm sure that Mum and Dad extended whatever necessary money they had to try and get us enough clothes to come to England [sic]. I don't think we'd ever had so many new clothes, and clothes being made for us by my mother, and we had at least a suitcase each. I know my elder sister was done up quite well and she thought herself quite proud, being a young woman.

> This is just repeating that last question after a train. The preparations and the clothing aspect, Reg?

Well, of course, Mum and Dad not being that wealthy we always had to make do with quite a lot of clothes but because we were coming to Australia Mum and Dad did extend as much of their money as they could and we ended up with quite a lot of new clothes plus ones that Mum made for us. And my sister had quite some new clothes and a new hat. She thought herself really good as a young lady instead of being just a teenager.

> That's very interesting, especially in view of what you later experienced in Australia - we'll come to that. Any other things you remember? Were there any mementoes given, photos taken, anything such as that?

Yes, we had some photos taken. Of course, Mum took a couple of us in the backyard with our new clothes on, plus of course, we had a gas mask each, hanging off our sides which, at that time, had to carry everywhere with us. On the boat, of course, we were able to please ourselves in what we wore and things like that.

> The final night at home, do you remember that, or not?

No, I really can't. I think I was probably so excited that .... I remember the day we left - getting on the train at Barry. And it was a sad and yet an exciting sort of thing - to see your Mum and Dad left behind and quite a few tears and things like that. But at the same time I had this sort of excitement within me - going places.

> Yes, I can imagine that, the poignancy of you going off and leaving them to shoulder the burden. We might just move on over the trip to Liverpool, Reg. At Liverpool itself is there anything that really stands out in your mind very clearly, or not?

Yes, there is. We stayed at a ladies' college in Liverpool - I don't remember the name of it - but they treated us very well. And a young lady wrote in my diary '*Je vous adore*', which I didn't know what it meant until many years later (laughs).

> That's a pity you didn't at the time. Your diary, when did you start keeping that?

Well, I kept that .... Mum bought it for me to take on the trip with me and I got everyone, all and sundry, to put an entry into it.

> Was this a diary or an autograph book?

Actually, an autograph book, so there was many in it. I still have it somewhere.

> That's lovely, and then you jotted observations down during the voyage, or not?

No, just the people I met and admired and I'd asked them to write something in my autograph book.

> Anyway, so there was this fleeting encounter with the girl who adored you (laughs). The coming together of the children, how do you remember that? They must have been from very different regions.

Yes, there was many, many children. I'd probably never seen so many before. It was just a jostle and crowd of people not seem to knowing what they're doing, being told to do this and do that and get off the train here or the bus there, and it was very confusing.

> During that confusion, Reg, did you feel any anxiety for the future - any real homesickness - or not?

I had a certain amount of homesickness. No, I had no anxiety about the future.

> Well, let's move on to the *Batory*. The ship was boarded and so on. I think it set sail at night. You have a memory ....

(20.00) To my knowledge, it left in the daytime but I could be wrong, but I remember being on the boat and I remember the particular buildings alongside the wharves where we were. And there was some big birds on - actually, not live birds but carved or in stone - on these

buildings. I remember these quite well. I'm not sure what the dock's name was, but these huge buildings.

> Could you paint the dockside picture in any other way, as you got on the ship? Who was there? What was going on?

No, it was just a hive of activity. I can just remember all these big buildings alongside and opposite the wharf where we were.

> Once you got to sea - the very early part of the voyage - I think you have an early impression of roaming around the ship.

For the first few days at least, if not about a week, we seemed to be able to have the run of the boat. I think probably the crew were in utter confusion as well - having so many children on board. And probably ninety per cent of them were as adventuresome as I was. And at one particular time, as we were heading up between Scotland and Ireland, I remember going right up on the bow, on the forepeak, and looking - just balancing over and looking over at the bow going through the water. One slip and they wouldn't have known who'd gone or when.

> Was that a calm day or a moderately swelly day?

No, it was quite calm for quite some time, as the waters in between Ireland and Scotland are fairly calm at that time.

> Do you remember the convoy surrounding you? And if you do, what thoughts or feelings did it create in you?

There was many boats there, and it was exciting to see all the different boats. Many of them were just painted grey but there were quite a lot in their pre-war colours. There was white boats with orange funnels. There was black boats with red funnels. There was many boats still in their livery - I think the word would be.

> Did the convoy give you a sense of apprehension in that there must be a threat to have a convoy, or did it give you a feeling of security?

I don't think it was either. I think I was just excited about what was going on, and all the different boats.

> Seasickness, how much of a problem was it for you, for the children generally?

For me, no problem whatsoever, but for many of the children on board - many didn't turn up for the meals, others that were at the table would suddenly be seasick. It went on for some time. Some were very sick.

> I understand carrots have a .... Tell us about the carrots.

(Laughs.) If anything, I hate carrots to this day because if anybody was sick there was always these undigested carrots in it (laughs).

The discipline on board the ship - keeping all you young adventuresome people in some sort of order - how do you remember that?

As the voyage went on, I think the discipline begin to get tougher. I think some of the young people on board, twelve, fourteen-year-olds and a bit older, were getting a bit hard to handle with getting - boredom and things like that. There was many places on the boat where you couldn't go because of the troops on board. There was many places that were unavailable to you - no swimming pool - things like that. There was only a few extra activities that would keep them from going stupid.

There were some fairly tough kids, or young men, on the boat.

I think everybody that was on the trip would remember the Glaswegians, or the young Glasgow boys that were there, always seemed to be in some sort of strife. They were all large boys for their age, and they sure got into some mischief.

Do you remember the changes in the climate as you steamed south into the tropics? And if you do, what were the changes, what colours?

We went down through the middle of the Atlantic, down towards Cape Town, and we had some quite good, say, rough passages down through that time where the wind and the rain were blowing along the decks and there was only a few hardy ones like myself that seemed to enjoy being out in it. As we got down near Cape Town, of course, the weather got warmer and it was ....

(25.00) Of course, we went to Freetown in Africa, and that was quite a tropical climate, with the natives and that coming out in their canoes, and of course the jungle right up to the water's edge.

That's interesting, Reg. Cape Town, that was one of the other ports. You had a story about seaweed and lobsters.

Yes. We spent, I think, about six days where the boat had some work done to it. And during that time they tried to take us on various trips - to the zoo, to sports ground. And one trip out to a beach where I was astounded to see this seaweed which was growing, perhaps, ten, fifteen feet long, and about three inches in diameter - like long, green sausages. It was amazing. Then another time we were allowed .... We were allowed to go off onto the wharves to just walk along the wharves. And at one there was some natives, or black people, were fishing off the wharf and one was eating a lobster - and the red shell. And I'd never seen a lobster before. And a prize was to get this shell off him and put it in my cabin for some time. It made rather a nasty smell after a while.

Yes, I can imagine that wouldn't have been too popular. How did you do the deal with him? Was it a gift or an exchange?

It was gift. I sort of was able to make friends and no matter who anybody was, I just talked to them like normal people, and here they were quite friendly.

Could I just ask a question here about the attitude to the people you met during the voyage? Of course, these were all ports of the Empire, if you like. Did

anybody communicate to you - adults or other people - in any way, any attitude you should have to the people you met?

No. Nobody actually said anything at all. And this is, I think, quite good because, say, you could make friends if you felt like making friends and if you accepted people as they were, and as a ten-year-old, I did. There wasn't any black, white or brindle in that way. And if somebody was doing something interesting I was a stickybeak and went up and asked them what they were doing.

I can imagine that. On to Colombo, Reg, and coconuts. Tell us the coconut story.

When we arrived at Colombo we were taken ashore in these barges, and we were taken 'round the district in some nice lady's car, who was probably trying to show us some of the - Colombo and its environs. But all I was interested in was getting a green coconut. I'd read about these marvellous green coconuts you could drink the juice out of, and that's all I .... I must have pestered her and pestered her until she, at last, got me one. But I probably was a great pain in the neck to her.

And did you manage to pierce the coconut and have a drink?

Actually, something happened to the coconut and it never .... That sort of thing, I think somebody took it from the cabin so it didn't eventuate.

The escorts that you had on board the ship, Reg, I think yours was a Miss Thompson. How do you remember her as a person? And how much was she involved in your day-to-day life?

She was quite nice and sweet, but she was principally an organiser. I didn't feel as though she was a motherly kind. We got on quite well with her, but you did miss, probably the mother image.

And she tended to give you more the organisation of your life, rather than the emotional warmth?

Yes, that's right. She was a little remote. She might have got on better with some others, perhaps - older people. But for myself, I found that she was just that little remote.

Was there any other woman on the ship, who could, or did, give you some of that motherly love?

Yes, there was. One of the Polish crew who looked after our section of the boat. And at one time I squashed my finger in the bathroom door - at least I didn't do it, but somebody else did - and it was very painful. She gave me a nice big cuddle and ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: Ed Stokes, Evacuee children, Reg, side two of tape one.

Reg, one other thing about the ship. The danger of submarines was very real, and later of course, of raiders in the Indian Ocean. How aware do you think you were at the time of that?

I wasn't aware a great deal most of the time. There was another big liner, called the *Stratheden*, which was keeping pace with us throughout the voyage and was almost like a sister ship. At times she'd disappear down in the trough of a wave and the next minute she'd be up high again. But there was an escort, I think, on the way between Cape Town and Bombay where one night the escort raced off and we could hear some firing and flashes of light and things like that. And we assumed that they'd had some sort of battle. It didn't really worry us a great deal. We always had the confidence that we were going to win anyway.

That confidence that you were going to win anyway, as Britain did, what was that rooted in?

I think it's rooted in every British person that comes from Britain. They have this characteristic that they're going to win through any - all the time.

Just continuing from that, Reg. Were there any adults, before you left, who either directly or perhaps indirectly exhorted you to be 'British', if you like?

Yes, I think most of the adults that spoke to us before we left, or said goodbye to us, exhorted us to be brave little boys and stiff upper lip type of thing and carry on.

The period after Singapore, when the troops left, do you remember that? And did the mood of the ship change in that last period down to Australia?

I think the trip from Singapore to Australia was a kind of a 'wish we'd hurry up and get there'. After we passed through some of the islands and, I think, it was the Sunda Strait and some of the interesting parts of the islands - now Indonesia - that we passed, it was a little boring. There was nothing to see and we were back in the Indian Ocean, and we just wanted to get there.

Incidentally, do you remember in any detail any of the sights, or perhaps even smells of the archipelago - the Indonesian archipelago.

Yes, they were to me quite exciting. The islands - and I would still love to go back and have a look at some - they were like the proverbial jungle, clad with coconut trees and the yellow beach around them. And there was many of these, and the boat was quite close to them as we passed.

Did you ever see people coming out towards you? Homes?

No, there was nothing like that that we saw. There was no visible boats that I can remember once we'd left Singapore. At the islanders thing[?] .... I suppose the boat was travelling probably close to twenty knots so they're not likely to come and sell you fruit and coconuts.

Sure. Going on, Reg. Arriving in Australia, we might .... Well, first we should stop in Melbourne because I think at Melbourne there was some disappointment.

Well, disappointment in Melbourne because there was no one .... Most of my Mum's relations and my father's relations that lived in Melbourne didn't come to see us and there was no enquiries from them. And the people took us on a trip to the zoo, as they took us many times in different other places. And we went back on board the boat and on to Sydney.

(5.00) Do you remember any feelings to do with the relatives not turning up?

There was some disappointment, not a great deal. I think perhaps my sister and brother, being older, might have felt it a little more.

Well, coming on to Sydney, of course, you sailed into Sydney Harbour and you all went off to the Quarantine Station for, I think in your case three to four weeks. What do you remember of that first stay in Australia?

It was wonderful. It was very sunny, very warm. Sydney is a beautiful spot and has been for many years. And the nursing aides that were looking after us in those places took us down for a swim down to the harbour and a little beach - a little beach called Store Beach. And we really enjoyed it. They took us on the ferries and the *Queen Mary* at one time was anchored in Sydney Harbour. It was quite an exciting time.

So this really was the promise of the Australia that you'd looked forward to.

Yes, it was.

From there you did go on to the Far West Chldren's Home. You stayed there for about three weeks, and this is moving on towards Christmas of 1940. I think you heard some comments there that were a little bit troubling.

Yes, the comments were, because it was getting on towards Christmas and how our relations seemed to be a little tardy in wanting to have us live with them.

We might move on, Reg, because there is a lot more to cover. You went soon afterwards with the family by train. Your brother and younger sister went to Albury. Yourself and your sister to an uncle on a farm near Melbourne and from there you went to another uncle near Shepparton. Through all this uncertainty of being shipped around the place, how do you remember that affecting you at the time?

I was a bit lost but I still didn't feel disenchanted. I think I'd learnt a little bit more about people and I was a bit disappointed not to be able to stay with my sister. We were again split up and I was going off on my own, which I felt a bit lonely about it. But being a child, you have to do things - you're told to do different things - so you have no choice.

Did any adults, at the time, adequately forewarn you about the four children being separated and explain to you perhaps why that was necessary, or not?

No, nobody said anything at all to us - not to me. They may have expressed this to my elder sister. I'd say she was around about fifteen or sixteen and perhaps she assumed the mantle of responsibility for us. But to me no one .... They just said, 'You go here', 'You go there'.

> And so you did. Well, let's move on to the family at Shepparton, or rather near there, the Youngs. This was your mother's brother. Tell us about just the family first of all.

There was my uncle and my aunty and their only daughter who was about eight-year-old at that time.

> How did you get on with them? How easy was it to become part of their family?

I never really became part of their family. My uncle and myself were quite friendly. We got on quite well together. But my aunty was another kettle of fish. There, relations were rather strange with her most of the time. I got on well with my cousin who was a little spoilt I would say, but we were quite friendly together.

> The general closeness or intimacy in the house, and the discipline, how would you remember that?

It was strange. I was expected, from when I arrived that I should be able to do what probably most normal country boys would be doing, I guess - chopping wood and bringing the cows in, getting the horses - helping out around the farm. But it was a bit hard when I look back because .... I mean, our school ground didn't have a blade of grass in it - things like this. Cows were things you really saw in picture books, so it was a bit difficult.

(10.00) When you were doing this farm work, did your uncle give you guidance? Did he explain step by step how to do it, or just 'There's the axe, do it.'?

That's what it was - there's the axe, do it. He was usually quite busy running .... He had quite a big sheep station. So many times of course he was busy. During the war farm labour was very scarce so he had much to do by himself. There was quite a lot of chooks, cows - things like that. Now, my aunty did nothing of the outside work at all on the farm so she expected me to do this and I found it very hard for quite some time.

> Tell us about the paperbark swamp - that was a swamp at least, and the bark expeditions.

Well, to start the fire they used a lot of kindling in the way of bark from the gum trees, that used to peel off the gum trees and fall on the ground and things like that. It was part of my job to keep the wood bin filled with that plus chopped wood and so forth. But sometimes she seemed to light the fire and keep it just burning with the bark and wanted more and more. And sometimes when we came home from somewhere and it'd be dark and she'd expect me to go down to the swamp where the gum trees grew and pick up this bark. And I was terrified of the spiders that I knew lived behind the bark on the trees: the tarantulas and the black spiders and things like that, and it was - I was terrified of them.

> Yes, well of course you were coming from a quite different environment in Britain. The other aspects of the bush surrounding, the ... [interruption] ... rabbiting. How do you remember that?

At that time there was many, there was plagues of rabbits everywhere and it was a good thing for many young boys in the bush to catch rabbits and sell the skins. And the kids at school taught me how to skin a rabbit and hang it up and dry it and send it off. I enjoyed that part of life there.

> The home that you lived in - the homestead - do you remember that clearly? Could you form a picture of it now? And how was it different to your house in Britain?

Oh, it was much different. Of course, the house in Britain was a average English, or British, type, stone or brick building with no trees around it, the front door straight on to the main street, things like this - even gas lamps. Whereas here, in Australia, it was what you'd call the contemporary Australian with the big verandahs right round, the tin roof, very hot. In summertime you'd bake yourself to death in the temperatures well over the hundred degrees, and in wintertime you'd freeze.

> You were there for about two years, for the record, during those summers could you cool off? Were there dams or anything like that?

Yes, I always loved the sea, and I loved swimming, and wherever I was I wanted to cool off or swim. There was the house dam which was about a couple of hundred yards down, and with the big drought that was on at the time there'd be about a foot of water in it which was green and muddy and utterly disgusting when I look at it these days, but to me it was water. And I made little boats out of timber and I'd be in there swimming, and how I didn't die of some dreadful disease I don't know.

> That's a lovely description. And were the stock using that for watering?

Watering and everything else that stock usually do (laughs).

> Yes, that does sound .... You must have been a hardy character, Reg. We were just talking about the book *Manshy* and the story of the cows - the bush cattle - coming down to water.

Well, that happened actually in that dam because, as I say, it was such a bad drought at that time and the mud was quite deep. And sometimes the young heifers would come down and couldn't get out. And by the time you found them they were drowned or died of exhaustion. The temperatures, too, were very, very high in summer down there.

> Did you ever have to kill stock?

No, I didn't kill stock myself, I was too young to do that. But I often watched my uncle kill the sheep for the household use.

> To butcher up for the house?

Yes.

You went to school here but it was a one teacher school - very different. Tell us about your first impressions of that little school.

(15.00)The school was a one-room school with an attachment on the side of it for accommodation for the teacher. But a lot of times the teacher would try and get accommodation with one of the families that were in the district. There was eight grades in the school - from your first grade right through to your Merit grade which, if you progressed that far, you got it at fourteen. And the one teacher teaching all those classes at the one time. How they did it, I don't know.

How many children were there in the school?

It varied between ten and fourteen. When I went there at first there was fourteen and it gradually dropped to about ten.

That's interesting. Could you tell us about the mood of this little school? How do you remember that?

I enjoyed the school. The teacher was quite good. He was training to be a priest in Melbourne somewhere but he was quite a good teacher, and I got on quite well with him. The other boys at school - and the girls, because it was quite mixed there - I got on quite well. Of course I had quite a strong accent - a Welsh accent - which they got quite a few laughs out, to start with. But they managed to teach me some of the Australian, so I still have it with me.

How did you get to school?

Unlike some of the others .... I remember one girl who used to ride a cow to school. Her name was Marjorie. But I used to walk or run - about two miles - it depended whether I was late or early, across the paddocks to get to school.

Different to today, isn't it? Just for the record, the place where you lived was Wahring, that's W-A-H-R-I-N-G. Was that the area or the homestead?

That was the area or district that we lived in.

And the school was?

Dargalong

D-A-R ...

G-A-L-O-N-G.

Thanks. Let's move back to the domestic side of life that I know didn't really go well in the end. Your aunt, apparently, was a difficult woman.

I found her very strange. At times she was approachable and happy, and other times she was unhappy and very strange to get along with. I know that with the different culture that I was

brought up in that I could have been very strange too to somebody brought up in Australia. But I did find it very difficult to accommodate myself to her different moods.

> There do appear to have been incidents that go beyond cultural differences and suggest a somewhat vindictive approach to yourself.

There was at times. I was very vulnerable to a lot of thing- as a ten-eleven-year-old child, and it affected me. I had no one I could talk to, no one I could turn to. And some of the things that she did .... I can understand it now, because I know some time after I had run away from there she was put in a mental home for some time because of her problems. I didn't know this till some years later.

> Tell us about the bike incident. I think that's rather telling.

As I used to run across the two miles to school my cousin who, as I say, was two years' younger than me, my aunty and uncle bought her a bike to ride to school. Now, a chap that lived not far away, on another property, his sons were going to the war and they had a bike there, not in the best of condition but it was still rideable. And they offered it to me to ride it to school, and certainly I took up the offer. But a couple of weeks later my aunty decided that I wasn't to have it for some reason or other and made them take it back. I know they could not understand why and neither could I, but I said earlier her fluctuation in moods can only be put down to being a sick person.

> The drought, as you said, was very severe, Reg, and shortly before you ran away Japan had also entered the war. Do you remember those events - the drought, the Japanese - being reflected at all in the life of these people in the bush, or not?

(20.00) Yes, it did affect them quite a lot: the shortage of labour, the incredible drought where there was very little water around, and the feed was almost non-existent - the crops weren't doing any good, and the aunty made one exclamation, 'Why don't we give it all to the Japs? There's nothing much here anyway', sticks in my memory. It sort of hurt because anybody fighting against - like Japan or Germany - fighting against us, was the main thing in my make-up.

> Yes, we'll come back to those points about the war later, Reg. But it does seem that besides this woman's moods there may have been some adult financial tensions, et cetera, that would have reflected on any stranger coming into the house, perhaps.

I should imagine it would have had an effect on the relationships because there was an incredible amount of pressure on them because of the stock .... I don't think so much of the money, because when you're on a farm, particularly if you're killing your own meat and you have access to other things like eggs and chooks, and things like that, it's not quite as hard as you may be in the city.

> That's an interesting point, yes - being unemployed in the city. You have during the period here, I know, gone on a holiday to your father's brother in Port Melbourne, in fact during the period when Pearl Harbor occurred. This family was - just for the background - I think you would say homely but poor.

> You ran away from the first family - this is March '42. Tell us what was going through your mind, if you can remember it. What did you do? Where did you go?

For some time I'd thought about it, and I made a statement, or bravado, at school a couple of days before that I'd had enough, I was going to run away. And the thought was to go back to my aunty and uncle down there, who had been quite nice - and a very happy family, even though they were quite poor. They had four children, two elder boys and two girls. And I decided early one morning I was going to run away. And off I went, taking my uncle's two new sheepdogs that he'd just bought, which I shouldn't .... I think they were more worried about getting the dogs back than me (laughs).

> Well, you did take yourself off to a local garage, I suppose, and there you picked up a lift to Melbourne. Now when you got down to Melbourne you came clean. How did the family in Melbourne react?

I think with a little consternation. It was hard to believe some of the things which I told them which had happened. They were happy to see me, but for me wanting to stay there, well perhaps that was a different matter. They did take me in to the Children's Welfare Department where I was cross-examined, as you might say by one of the chaps in there. But to cap it all, I was able to stay with my aunty and uncle there.

> But I think you were saying that through all this there was a great element of doubt at your truthfulness.

Yes, that's right. I think people do doubt children often. And I know, in my case, the things that I had said that the aunty used to do was very hard for outsiders to believe this. But they did happen, and maybe, as a child, they seemed to be exaggerated, but I know they did happen. And as I said, when she was taken to a mental asylum some years later - only a couple of years later - that things were .... I knew that they were true.

> Yes, that must have been some consolation to you, I'd imagine, although pretty late after the event. Your father's brother - this is Mr Harris and his family - could you perhaps just tell us about their family structure, Reg? And how you fitted into that?

There was Uncle Fred and Aunty Dolly, and they had two boys who were about seventeen and sixteen, and then two girls - one my age and one some years younger. Just after I went there the eldest boy got a job in the Merchant Navy and it wasn't long after that when the second boy got a job in the Merchant Navy. So that left a little bit of a space in the home and I was able to use their bedroom.

> How hard was it, or perhaps how easy, with this family, to settle in in comparison with what you'd been through?

(25.00) It was a lot easier to settle in with this family. They were more homely, they were certainly kinder, and I think things were .... They were just so much more in tune with what was going on in life - in the war, and things like that. Their two boys ....

Reg, I think you were saying that with this family you did have to do a quite significant amount of domestic chores and so on.

Yes, I did, in housework and also outside in the garden. I didn't mind this but sometimes my uncle would remonstrate with his wife about how much I used to have to do inside because he thought that the two girls should be helping his wife, rather than me, which caused a little bit of friction between the two of them over me.

Could you just tell us what you were expected to do?

Make beds, wash up, clean the floors - things like this. And then outside I'd do the lawns and a bit of gardening, clean the shed out - things like that.

You were telling a story that I think said a bit about how you were quite clearly trying to make things easy - you realised life wasn't hard - the billy cart story, but it rebounded on you.

Yes, I was told I should try and do something to earn a bit of pocket money. And so I saw this timber on the beach - this scrap timber that washed off the freighters. And I took the billy cart down, filled up the billy cart with all this timber, and it was quite a big pile of it in there. As I was coming back to my aunty's place this woman down the road, who had a disreputable character, offered me two shillings for the timber, and I thought, 'Oh, that's great. I've earnt some pocket money', but she wouldn't pay after she got the timber, so I was caught between the - it was a 'Catch 22' situation. I got home with no money and no timber.

I think there was also some resentment, you were saying, or rather perhaps teasing is a better word, with the youngest daughter.

Yes, after a while I think the younger daughter found parts of my armour where she could pierce with some of her tales to her mother, and made life starting to get a little bit hard there as it became a game for her. And there was nothing I could say to her mother that seemed to make any difference. I began to get a bit unhappy in that situation.

If you had to characterise the discipline, if you like, of this house, Reg, would you - between being relaxed, strict or severe - how would you have described it?

I think it was a mixture again of being a family atmosphere but having a certain amount to do, which - I think everybody should have a certain amount of chores to do. But I seemed to, at times, have to bear the brunt of having to do everything.

Did you, through this, begin to complain about things or did you suffer silently?

No, there was never anyone to turn to. And although I had great joy in listening to my two cousins when they came home from their war efforts on the boats, and particularly one of the cousins being torpedoed and things like that .... But I had no one to turn to tell any troubles, and of course you store these things up and I became unhappy.

You'd gone there partly through the offices of the Welfare who obviously were in some way liaising with CORB. While you were there, did people ever come - officials - to the house, or elsewhere, to visit you to make sure you were going well, happily?

I don't recall anyone ever talking to me or coming out to see me or see what was going on.

At all?

At all. Never at any time - to my knowledge.

Towards the end of this period when you obviously had become yourself quite unhappy, there was a change. Who initiated that?

My aunty felt that it would be better if there was a change. There was some discussion about it. She went to see the Children's Welfare. They thought that because I was doing fairly well at school at that time, and their financial situation, that I would be better off if I went to somebody else so I could continue on with my schooling.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Evacuee children, Reg Harris, tape two, side one.

Reg, in those discussions prior to the Welfare people being brought in, did your aunt or uncle involve you? Did they ask you your opinion or feelings at all?

No. It was still a case of the child and the parents or the overseers telling you what was best for you. There was no discussion about that sort of thing.

Well, if we could just take a sidetrack now, out of the main story. We'll come back to the Gates in a moment. I'd like just to ask you about the war. During the period with these two families, and in fact talking generally about the later time too, how much contact had there been with your parents in England, your brothers and sisters in Australia?

There was none with most of my brothers and sisters in Australia. My eldest sister had done some nursing and I think I saw her twice while I was at my Aunty Dolly's place in Port Melbourne. I had no contact with my brother or my younger sister at all. My parents - the mail was very infrequent and I don't recall receiving much mail at all while I was at Uncle Fred's place.

That's the Port Melbourne house?

Yes.

Did officials ever call on you or advise you of the whereabouts and welfare of your brothers and sisters?

No, never at any time.

So the only contact was directly from one or other?

Yes, only when, I say, my sister came to see my aunty and uncle and myself there, did we have any information on anybody.

Well, of course, during this period the war has dragged on and Britain has gone through great horrors. How aware were you of the wider world, of the events of the war, and how much did they affect you personally?

I was very aware of everything that was going on in the war. I knew, of course, my parents were there and that's all I could think of, I think. I read every paper and listened to everything. Everything at that time was pertaining to the war: the music, the songs. Everywhere you went there was blackouts. You couldn't forget it.

There were blackouts where you were in Melbourne?

Oh yes, all over - Australia-wide was blackouts, even way out in the bush, as they expected they could be raided by enemy planes taken off boats or submarines and things like that.

That's rather comical in a way - a homestead in the middle of Australia being blacked-out. Did that strike you so at the time, or not?

No, I thought you just had to do it. It was part of everything.

We'll come to your schooling in a moment, but just connecting with this theme here, Reg. I understand at Oakleigh, the school you went to later, you actually marked up the progress of the war, in a sense.

Yes, I was quite good at drawing by that time and the teacher asked me if I would do, on the board, a map of the front line and mark each day whatever information I had on the way the war was going - marking our advancements and so forth.

And did the other children take a keen interest in this?

I don't think they ever took as keen an interest as I did. I don't think anybody really - anyone around me - seemed to have the same effect on them as the war did on myself.

(5.00) Was that, do you think, because your parents were back in England? Was that the key thing or was it some other issue?

I think that was the main issue of it, but I also was very keen on topical events.

You were saying that at the Gates', and we'll come to them later, you were sometimes rather horrified at their attitude to the war.

They had an attitude where they seemed to get away with as much as possible - whether it was milk from the dairy, cheese or butter - these sort of things, which .... Where the chap worked he just seemed to be able to obtain these things. And their attitude was, even with their son, to get him out of the war service if possible.

And how did you feel about those attitudes?

I hated it. I thought it was dreadful; that everyone else was putting a maximum effort into the war effort. And I mean, if I'd have been old enough I would have been in there fighting, myself. But to have this attitude of trying to get away with something and get out of doing your war service - it was very negative.

There has through this story been quite a deal of difficulty and there's more to come, I know, but there was a good side to your growing up, and that was your schooling in Australia, I think, Reg. When did it start turning good?

It started turning good at the Graham Street School with this Mr Wolf who first took notice of some drawings that I did, and he gave me an encouragement to go on with them. When I went to Oakleigh School, the attitude of the teachers there was really very much like Mr Wolf, where they were all out to help you as much as they could. I enjoyed schooling very

much there. I didn't enjoy my life at home very well, but I certainly put a lot of effort into my schooling, and it paid off.

> I might skate over the story of the strap after the 'horizontal' letter. It sounds like rather the act of a man off on his own.

The headmaster of the Graham Street School was probably regimented because so many young people that had to go to war. And when I had come to Graham Street School I wrote a letter to a mate that was in the Dargalong School, and I signed myself as 'Horizontal', which they used to call me because they reckoned I was always on the level, straight as an arrow, and always on the level - that's what they used to call me. But this was taken out of context somehow by some imaginative thing from the headmaster who connotated some foul, dirty, sexual connotation which I can't even figure out to this day. But I got six on the backside for that - or on the hands - and it just really was bad.

> Those things must have niggled, or more than that. Was homesickness at those times more sever than at others?

Certainly at these times you felt yourself just on your own, and you built a shell around yourself so that you tried to protect your inner self from all these things that were going on around you.

> Pursuing the schooling just a little, Reg. At Oakleigh State School, I think you studied for your - I think they were called Merit exams?

Yes, I passed the Merit exam and did very well. Then I carried on there and they suggested I get the Merit before I tackled the entrance to the Caulfield Technical College. So I did that, and I topped the State in the entrance exam for the Tech.

> And I think you were also dux of the school.

Yes. Well, I was dux of the Oakleigh State School and I was also dux the two years that I was at the Caulfield Technical College.

> That's most impressive. And Reg, besides your studying at school - social life. How did you get along there? And were you always seen as the British evacuee, or did you melt into the crowd?

(10.00) No, I think by the time I'd reached the Oakleigh School and Caulfield Tech - I'd lost my accent and I was just as an ordinary Australian schoolie.

> Just before we go on to talk about the Gates, could I just ask you a few general questions about life in Australia. We've talked about being in the bush and so on, when you were on the farm, and you've been down in Melbourne now. Looking back on it, what were the greatest differences between the life you'd known in England and this life in Australia? I mean excluding the family aspect.

I think it was the openness of life here, the sunshine and open places. I think the promise of life that's here, it's so much better than what I think would have been back in Wales.

> And the sort of activities that you did have time for outside of school with your mates in Melbourne, what would you remember particularly?

My main activity when I was at the Oakleigh [sic] ... Port Melbourne residence of my uncle's, was to go over to the aircraft factory and sit on the fence and watch all the fighter planes and the bombers and those, where they used to build them and also repair them after the battles up in the islands. And I used to love watching those come in and out.

> I can imagine that, for a boy, doing that. Was there much money that either you earnt or was given to you for things such as visits to the pictures, lollies - treats like that?

My pocket money was two shillings a week, which was taken off me if I misbehaved (laughs), so sometimes I didn't get it.

> Do you remember going to the pictures, for instance?

Yeah, I remember going to the pictures several times, yes. I can remember seeing *Captains Courageous* and a few other films. But a lot of times I think I went off with some of the school mates and we'd spend the money on ice cream or something like that.

> So visits to the pictures were pretty few and far between.

Yes, they were.

> Reg, after the period with the Port Melbourne family, the Harrises, the Welfare people, I think, gave you a choice. Could you tell us how that was done?

My aunty and myself were taken in, went in to see the Children's Welfare Bureau, and they said there was 'x' people here that I could go and stay with, or 'y' people over there I could go and stay with. And they actually took me to the first place and then they took me to the second place. And for some unknown reason I picked Mrs Gates who had a son which was just a couple of years older than myself, which I thought would be companionship.

> So there was a choice, but obviously for a child it would have been very difficult to have made a balanced assessment, I guess. Just for the record, you stayed here for two years. How did your living with the Gateses begin - easily or not?

No, I think from the first day that I went there there was criticism of my aunty for the way my clothes were, that they were a bit tatty, raggy; and that shouldn't be so and so forth. I did resent this because, even though we'd had our differences, they were still family.

> Did things get better as time went on?

They got very much worse (laughs). There was many, many difficulties, and mostly associated, I think, with Mrs Gates being a fanatical card player - gambler - and which times, about five days a week, she'd be out playing cards - euchre parties where she would go to some other womens' homes and they would come here. There was a lot of preparation. There

was a lot of washing up. There was a lot of all sorts of things associated with these which I had to quite often do.

> The housework, did she do that and you helped in, or was it more that you were expected to shoulder the whole lot?

I was expected to shoulder ninety-five per cent of it. I had to do the cooking before - put everything on to cook for tea before she got home from the cards. When I'd got that on I had to go out in the garden and do the gardening until it was dark, and then come inside and set the table and things like that. By that time she'd come home and put the tea out. Then I'd have to wash up. Then it was either do my homework and then go to bed or, at times, have to play cards or some game of chance with her.

(15.00) I think you were saying that when you played games - cards or Monopoly you mentioned - that she was quite impossible.

Impossible (laughs) - she had to win at any cost. These games by the way, we had to buy for her for her birthday. We had to go out and earn pocket money - and that's including her son - and the proceeds of which had to buy her her birthday presents. But this particular game, Monopoly there, one night we were playing that and she was cheating, as she often did, and her son remonstrated with her, and she scrumpled up the rules so he couldn't read 'em out to her, and then she sent him to bed. And then she turned to me and said, 'I didn't cheat, did I?'. And I wouldn't answer her because I just got so stubborn that I just wouldn't agree with her or disagree with her. So she took to me with a poker and then sent me to bed (laughs).

> How often were you punished physically by Mrs Gates? Was it a very rare occasion, or not?

No, it was very often. There was never any time when you could completely satisfy her as to what you'd been doing, or whatever. She was a very violent woman, quite often.

> Tell us about the episode with the carbuncles - perhaps set in the context of going clearing for chickens.

Her and her husband did have sixteen acres of land at a place called Carrum Downs which they were clearing of scrub and things like that, and I was part of that, weekends and holidays, and sometimes taken away from school for several weeks at a time to go up and do this work, where I had to arrange to take my homework and schoolwork with me to do. And this particular time the son was up there and he had a big carbuncle on him. And his mother had given him a towel and me a towel. I always had to have the bath after him. But this particular time she came in and said that he had my towel and I had his towel and changed them after he'd used it and of course I ended up getting carbuncles - or boils - over me. Her method of treating them was very drastic for me, and it consisted of putting boiling water in a cup and then pouring it on the boil. So it was very painful.

> That sounds really, really horrific, Reg. I was going to come to talk in a minute about the episode in the church hall. But just before that, are there any other aspects of the period with the Gates that really stands out in your mind? That epitomises what you went through over that long period, over that two years?

The Gates was the bottom of the pit as far as I think I could reach with my tolerance and her violent behaviour, her attitude toward me. They wanted an unpaid slave to do all these jobs and work on their farm - things like this. And I just had to tolerate it because I'd been in so many places. The Children's Welfare were probably sick of me and trying to find places. It wasn't until she was violent outside - continued to be violent outside - in front of the neighbours who could see over the fence. They actually complained to the Children's Welfare about her behaviour. And it wasn't until they complained two or three times to them - and this wasn't just over the one instance - that they decided that they'd do something about it.

> We'll come to that in a moment - I think you went up to your Uncle Bob. Prior to the neighbours complaining, Reg, had you yourself thought of complaining? And if you had, what stopped you from complaining?

It's no good thinking about complaining unless you have some avenue to complain to, and the Children's Welfare certainly wasn't showing any signs of compassion or anything like that.

> Do you mean in your previous dealings with them?

That's right, yes. I think they regarded me just as some extra bit of trouble.

> Reg, just going on. Back at the time when you were on the first farm, I think, up near Shepparton, and there'd been talk of the Japanese reaching Australia, I think somebody had used the expression that 'the Japs might rape Australia'. What did that lead on to?

(20.00) The actual talk was on the radio, that the Japanese had said they were going to kill all the men and rape the women. Now, as a ten-year-old, or eleven-year-old - I can't remember exactly what age I was, but I had no idea what the word 'rape' meant. It's not very self-explanatory in any of the books. I asked my teacher who was, as I said before, learning to be a priest, but he was most embarrassed about it, and suggested I asked my uncle. Now of course, the time to ask these questions is usually over the tea table when everybody's having tea (laughs). So you get a very strange atmosphere with a lot of ums and ahs and really no explanation at all. So I didn't get very far with that one.

> And I think there was a later confusion with the word 'bastard'.

Yes, well, that was another word which had some connotations of something strange which I couldn't understand. And I had to wait a long time to ask my elder cousin at Port Melbourne when he came home from some sea duty what the word 'bastard' meant (laughs). Of course it was quite simple but I mean, I'd thought of all sorts of things but certainly didn't know that was it.

> What this was really leading on to ask you, was during your adolescences, and the changes - physical and mental - that are a part of that, was there anybody to give a guiding hand?

No, there was no one. Everyone shied clear of anything, any suggestion that I asked about these sort of things. They were very prudish in those days, including - as you were not part of

the family - then of course you were regarded as something they could put off till some other day.

> Yes, I guess it is true to say that even if you'd been children with their own family might have had troubles here in those days. Reg, you were saying before, that it was during the period with the Gates that there occurred an episode of sexual abuse.

While I was with Mrs Gates, and I had no one else to turn to, I was attending a class in gymnastics at the Oakleigh Methodist Church. They were holding them one night a week in the hall. And there was an older chap there who was taking the class and instructing us. And he could see that I was unhappy and preoccupied a lot of times, and he asked me my problems, and I confided in him. And he asked me to stay back after the class had gone and he would talk to me. Now, he not only talked to me but he also sexually abused me. Now, at that time I was very naive and I didn't understand - know - what he was really doing, but it just shows you what some people will do to take advantage of somebody who confides in them.

> Yes, this is the whole trap of children in these situations, that you've got to be dead certain who you're talking to, and as a child I guess you can't be. He apparently, even after this, then went to the Gateses.

Yes, he did try to help me in some ways after that by going to the Gateses and asking them what the problems were. Now, they were blissfully unaware that I was unhappy, even after all that Mrs Gates had been doing to me. But he sort of set the ball rolling, and with the people next door complaining to the Children's Welfare Department, all of a sudden there was some release in them sending me away for a holiday.

> Now, I think the story was that you were really going to your Aunty Anne and Uncle Bob, the Grays, again near Shepparton, for a holiday - not to stay.

That's correct. They thought that a holiday might be enough to suit the purpose. Now, when I went to my aunty there .... I hadn't been to them before but found them, although poor were very happy people, and comfortable to stay with. While there I was offered a chance of fruit picking with her two sons, and found that I could keep up anybody doing that job, and I decided I *was not* going to go back to Mrs Gates.

> I think you were saying before, Reg, about the fruit picking, it struck you at the time that you weren't told but asked.

That's right. I was asked by my Aunty Anne would I like to earn some pocket money by going fruit picking as her two sons were. They weren't told to go, they were asked, and it was a regular thing for them. If they wanted the extra pocket money, or they wanted to buy something, they'd just go out and were able to earn it - and this was great.

(25.00) So the whole tone of the house was quite different, it would seem. Could you talk to them about what had been going on with the Gates?

No, by this time I found that I had to keep my own counsel on things, and many things that happened to me I had to keep to myself. People just didn't believe what other people could do to others - particularly when you're in their care.

> The assumption being that they're a bit generous because you're there for a start. Is that the point?

Yes, that's right. They assume that people, because they said they would look after you or take you or whatever, that they would do that. But most of the people up to that time I found wanted you for an unpaid servant.

> You went off to work, Reg, fruit picking and I think you were saying that you found you could be independent. You were quite fit, I think.

Yes, I was very fit. The work that I'd been doing for Mrs Gates, in clearing the farm, sawing the logs, digging - things like this - gardening, I had the muscles of a man many years my senior. And I found that I could keep pace with the adults in the fruit picking and tomato picking.

> I think after this period you sent a cable, tell us about that.

It was after I'd been there a couple of weeks and realised that I could be independent, that I sent a cable to the Children's Welfare Department saying that I would not go back to Mrs Gates. This threw the cat among the pigeons and caused much consternation down in the (laughs) - I forget, I think it was Flinders Street, or where their office was.

> Did they come up to Shepparton to fetch you? Or were you forced to go down there in some way?

No, never at any time did they do anything like that. They just wrote back saying that I had to .... They wanted me to continue schooling. I mean, I had done very well at school, I admit. They wanted me to continue schooling and they were looking for a place that would be able to look after me again.

> So when you went down to Melbourne the next time, did you go back to the Gates, or had some other home been already arranged?

No, I certainly never went back to the Gates. I certainly refused to go back there - I'd had enough of torture. There was a chap and his wife, a Mr and Mrs Thomas, who were the secretary of the Welsh Society in Melbourne, and they offered to keep me on a temporary basis until something permanent came along. And that was one of the most wonderful times of my life - to be with them.

> The date here, I'd imagine, must be - given the long stays in the two places, at least - '44, or perhaps early '45? Just clarifying those dates: it was about the time of your birthday in 1946 that you went to the Thomases.

Yes, that's right. I went there on the understanding that it was a temporary place. But they were wonderful people. I was able to fit in with the family. I was treated as one of the

family, which was really remarkable, and I got on very well. And I still correspond with and go to see the daughters of Mr and Mrs Thomas.

> Just going back a moment, Reg, to the cable. When you sent that cable, did you simply say you would not go back, or did you also say why you would not go back?

No, I just stated that I would not go back to Mr and Mrs Gates, otherwise it would have been a very lengthy, costly telegram.

> When the arrangements were being made for you to go to the Thomases, did you at any point then, say what had gone on at the Gateses?

Just prior to them sending me away - or saying that I could go for a holiday to Aunty Anne's, and the neighbours had complained about the violence - that's when .... I think they knew, but they were prepared for me to actually go back and go through the same things again.

> That really is quite remarkable. Going on with the story, Reg. Here you were, at last part of a family, do you remember how you ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Evacuees, Reg Harris, tape two, side two.
>
> Reg, do you remember how this warmth, the family atmosphere, the real family atmosphere of the Thomases affected you - your feelings, your attitudes about yourself?

I felt wanted. I felt a part of the family. I had a wonderful time there. They were so kind to me. Whenever they wanted me to do something they asked me would I do it - would I like to do it for them - and they wanted to reward me for doing whatever - whether it was housework or whether it was gardening or whatever - they wanted to reward me for doing it. I mean, this was part of their family life. I felt for the first time that I was actually being asked, and it was so kind of them.

> Yes. Let's go on just to find out a little bit about what you actually did with the family.

While I was there Mrs Thomas became ill with heart problems, and in those days they used to put you to bed and see if you could recuperate that way. Now, while she was that, she couldn't do washing, she couldn't do polishing of lino - things like that, and quite a lot of other things. She used to garden. And she asked me would I do some of these things for her. I was only too happy to do them. I didn't want a reward for doing them. Just to do them for her was a reward enough, but she still made me take pocket money. She also arranged with the butcher for me to do deliveries on a Saturday morning to get some pocket money. I thought this was absolutely marvellous because it was for myself that she was doing it, not for any ulterior motive.

Yes, obviously quite different to all the other places. It was sad, obviously, that you got there when you did. Did you brood on that?

No, I don't think I brooded on anything particular in that way. I always looked ahead to certain things in life - that things would be better some time. I was growing up and I think I looked forward to some time going to work. I was still going to school at that time and still doing quite well. My sister in Sydney, who had married some years previously, had a small flat and they said that they would like to have me at some time. So round about the June that year, with Mrs Thomas getting so ill with a bad heart, it was decided that I'd go up to Sydney and transfer from the Victorian Children's Welfare to the New South Wales Children's Welfare.

Was this June of '46 or '47?

No, this is '46.

Let's just step back a moment, Reg, to the actual ending of the war. When war ended in Europe and later the Pacific, were you approached - did CORB or their representatives approach you to make it clear that you could if you wished go back to Britain?

No, not at any time was I approached, or asked. Not till much, much later was I asked did I want to go back, or said that I'd have to go back, or anything at all.

Did your sister ever say whether they might have contacted her as the oldest of the family?

No, not that I can recall. They may have done that, but I cannot honestly remember.

(5.00) However that administrative question was, what were the feelings in your heart? You hadn't exactly had a good time in Australia. Did you want to go back?

No, I still didn't want to go back, because I somehow had the belief that my mother and father would come here. I don't know why. I cannot explain it, but I had the feeling that they would come to Australia - and this was borne out, of course.

Yes, you were saying that, I think it was '47, they did come out here. If they had not, would you have gone back?

I think I would have gone back to see them, but I doubt if I could have stayed. I think I loved Australia too much.

When your parents did come out to Australia - '47. Your first meetings with them, and then when you, I think, later lived near them, and sometimes with them, in this area here near Wollongong - how easy was it to get back to know them again after all those years?

Well, of course, it was much easier to get to know my mother. I think my mother was always a fun sort of person who liked life, was happy to get along with, and it was very easy to get back into that sort of relationship. My father was quite different. I'd been Australianised in

those seven years. And I think it's well known and reported, the connotations of 'Poms', and things like this, and my father did exhibit most of these things that Australians make aspersions about, and it was very difficult. And the relationship was difficult quite a lot of times for many years.

> Reg, could you tell them about the difficulties you'd had in Australia with all these troublesome families?

I did tell my mother and father about them but I don't think anything was ever .... They knew and I think they sympathised, and they knew that they would have loved to have done something but their hands were tied. They could not say anything to the relations - or relatives - because of being relatives, they didn't want to stir the pot. They thought it best to let things lie. But I did ask my mother if she would do the same thing again, if the circumstances were the same, and she'd said never - she would never go through that trauma again of knowing of some of the things that were going on and, of course, a lot of imagination of what could go wrong.

> Reg - just to go on - I wanted to ask you some last questions referring to the whole period and particularly to CORB. How do you think the CORB experience - coming out to Australia as you did, going through what you did - changed you?

I think it alienated me from my brothers and sisters to a certain extent. It certainly made me independent and made me fight for everything that I wanted. If I had my mind set on something, I kept it to myself many times, and I would go for that goal. It certainly made me, as I say, so independent that that shell that you build around you to protect yourself sometimes works against you of course, that you can't let others in to share your inner triumphs or your miseries.

> Was it later hard for that shell to be broken, to form a close relationship, for example, with ...? Well, you married, was that easy?

To a certain extent the shell still exists. I don't think I can ever really get rid of that, of keeping things to myself. It has broken down a lot. I have a wonderful wife - a very understanding wife. But a lot of other things have happened in my life .... It certainly didn't end when my mother and father arrived in Melbourne. But, as I say, the shell that you protect yourself with is one that I don't think you can ever get rid of. You keep your feelings, your innermost feelings, to yourself.

(10.00) You've been very open today on this tape, Reg, and I appreciate that. That young boy, that ten-year-old, who saw the adventure and grasped it, if somebody could have told you the war would go on for that period, do you think you would have felt differently?

That's a very, very difficult question. I think I have a spirit of adventure even to this day and come what may, I think I have to go through with it if I think about it and want it enough.

> You've been a parent yourself - your children, of course, are older now. When they were young and if you'd been placed in the situation - your parents in Britain 1940 - what would you have done?

Looking back with the experience I've had, I would never have let them out of my sight - bombs, shells, whatever. I think a parent can provide as much protection, and I think the protection is more of a moral and spiritual guardianship than physical. I think if you can give that sort of guardianship to 'em, I think you can combat the physical side of it.

Did the CORB experience affect how you yourself were a father?

I think it did to a certain extent - is that I try to talk to my children, explain to them what is going on, and try to get their opinion on what to do.

What would you say, if you could, to the officials who established the scheme?

You may have done it with the best of intentions, but I think it was wrong.

Reg, just one penultimate question I put to anybody, is there anything you feel you would like to add to this record of your CORB story that we've not covered, that you wish to say?

The only thing that I would like to say is that if any time in the future that these things of this nature might come again, I think the thing is to stay with your kids, live for them, and try and bring 'em up as good as you can. You can't leave it and send your kids to others to have that experience that only you can provide.

This is just continuing afterwards. Reg, you were saying that in the period at Port Melbourne, that there, even more than at the Gateses, you were alone and vulnerable.

Yes. I think it was because I was in more of the family situation where I did love them because they were close to me in a lot of ways. But I was so vulnerable to what my young cousin used to say: 'I'll tell Mummy you did this' and 'I'll tell Mummy you did that', that I was in such a state that I used to burst out crying and I used to have to go away and cry, but I still couldn't tell anybody. I still couldn't go to anybody to explain or to get any comfort whatsoever. I still felt out of it. And any time I did go to somebody it always seemed to be the wrong person. It's like that woman who took the wood off me and wouldn't pay. And then this chap, when I was at Oakleigh, that took advantage of me. When I went to him for some advice and comfort, or something .... You see, they're like piranhas, they want to take from you rather than give to you.

Yes, and it was all thrown back in your face. You did keep going through it all, and with a great balance - as you seem to have in your life now. What kept you going at the time?

I think I was just stubborn. And I always have the vision of the future. Even though the future's not that far away from me today, I feel that always while there's life there's hope, and I have a vision of something better in the future.

So during the dark days at Port Melbourne you could still look ahead to something else.

I didn't know what it was but I looked forward to something better.

Reg, for making the tape with the War Memorial, thank you very much.

Thank you.

(15.00) END OF INTERVIEW