TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, with Bill Geaney, tape one, side one.

Bill, could we just begin please with your date and place of birth?

At Bondi Junction, 21st June 1920.

I think your father was a fitter. Did he work around there?

Yes, my father worked at Fletcher's Foundry which was in Woollahra.

How many brothers and sisters were there?

Two brothers and two sisters.

I think you were saying that you left school when you were about fifteen.

That's right.

What did you do then?

As as matter of fact I was fifteen and a half when I left and I went straight into where my father worked. He was fitter and I'd become an apprentice moulder - iron moulder.

Did that also involve going to techs and so on?

Yes, definitely had to go to tech. Went to tech in my own time, those days. Today it's different - you have a day off to go.

Yes, that's right. They were pretty tough times, of course. That was just after the worst of the Depression, I guess.

As a matter of fact I was lucky to get a job, those days. I think it's only because my father was working there. As a matter I didn't want to go into a foundry. I wanted to go to Wilster Backer[?] Factory and learn the printing game, but I couldn't get in there - times were tough.

Yes, sure. Just a couple of other things about your boyhood years, I guess. The tradition of the ANZACs, the Australians and New Zealanders in the first war and so on, were you particularly conscious of that, or not?

Well, actually speakin', I must have been conscious, otherwise I wouldn't have joined the Naval Reserve before the war. So I think I must have been conscious of that aspect.

Do you remember, did you go to ANZAC ceremonies, that kind of thing?

Not really, but I liked marches so I think I would have been watchin' 'em.

> One other thing, although of course you were quite, in the last years before the second world war broke out, were you at all aware of the political events in Europe? The rise to power of Hitler and so on?

Yes, those days, because as far as newspapers go you heard a lot about Hitler. You heard a lot what Mussolini had done in Abyssinia and so on. So it was always front page news. The point is, it was always in your mind, as the sayin' were.

> And what about ...? Of course, the Japanese had been in China for quite a long time. Did that ever get into the newspaper?

Not so much as Hitler so much. You thought, well, that was farther away 'an us, and they had a big population. We didn't think it would affect us in any way, more like Hitler as far as Europe went.

> Let's just turn to the Naval Reserve. I think you were saying it was 1937 you joined the Reserve. Why did you do that, and why not the Army Militia?

I thought, well, bein' a Bondi boy, close to the surf and so forth, I thought that the sea would be, but I didn't give the other two services a thought. Like at heart I was a navy boy.

> Were there any connections with the navy in your family?

No, but at the time, my three mates and I, we all went down and joined at the same time, the Naval Reserve. As a matter of fact, two years later, before the war broke out, they had a rugby union team goin' at the Naval Reserve and actually speakin' my three mates and I finished up playin' rugby union for the Naval Reserve depot.

> That sounds good. Well, in the Naval Reserves, how much time did that involve, and what did you really do?

We went down there one night a week, and we went on a fourteen days' cruise once a year. Like I done two cruises on the *Yarrow*[?] of fourteen days, before the war broke out.

> And I guess that involved training in basic seamanship, did it?

Yes, it was basic seamanship, yes. At that time gunnery hadn't come into it.

> Tell us about the basic seamanship. What did you do there in terms of learning basic seamanship? Was that book learning, or actually getting out in boats and ...?

No, all practical, gettin' out in boats. How to pull an oar, how to climb a Jacob's ladder, all basic seamanship, like, the ropes and knots and so forth, splices, like all what an able seaman should learn, or should be able to do.

> That's interesting. The gunnery, when did you begin gunnery training? Was that while you were still in the Reserve?

That's whilst I was still in the Reserve. But the point is, I wasn't qualified as a seaman gunner at the time. You did a gunner's course to get your badge. As far as seaman gunner goes you had to go to Flinders Naval Depot to gunnery school.

I see, and I think that happened after you came back from the merchant ship at the beginning. So at the beginning of the war you just had a basic ....

Just gunnery training, but no official rank as a seaman gunner.

Well, the declaration of war in September '39 was just after you had been called up. Tell us about being called up. And also if you remember the declaration of war?

Yes, I remember that quite well. Like, a chief gunner's mate from Rushcutter came and knocked at the door. I always remember his name - Gilmore[?]. And he said, 'You better pack your bags and hammock, and actually report down to Rushcutters Bay tomorrow'. So I said, 'What's all that about?'. He said, 'You're being called up. We're bein' mobilised.' And so next day I reported down to Rushcutters and they gave me all the equipment as far as new sea bag and all extra uniforms and so forth like that. Issued me with a hammock.

So you didn't really have much time to wind up your own other life.

One day. But the point is, as I said earlier, I could have got out of it if I wanted to because the foundry would have been declared an occupation where you couldn't get out of. But seein' I was called up early, I was able to hoodwink 'em. And before they woke up I'd been sailed away.

(Laughs) You were a bit of a lad. The actually declaration of war that came after you'd been called up, Menzies' announcement of course, do you remember that?

Yes, I remember that. That was on a Sunday night. That was Sunday night and I was around Bondi Junction when they brought out special newspapers declaring war had been declared. To me, I was in uniform, 'cause I'd been called up ten days previously or so.

Do you remember your feelings at the time?

Not really. I was nineteen years of age and just thought, well, they've called me up. I wonder what type of ship I'm going to finish up with. And that was the main thing I was thinkin' about. At the time I was on *HMAS Penguin* which was only a depot ship and I was waitin' to get aboard a ship - that was the factor.

Well, of course, it didn't take you long to be setting off on a voyage round the world. This, I think, was the *City of Kimberley*[?]. Tell me about that.

I was down at Rushcutters and all of a sudden they were getting actually gun crews to join the merchant ships that were in Sydney - the British merchant ships - and they were puttin' six-inch guns aboard them aft. And I was fortunate enough to be able to join one of those ships with the leadin' seaman gunner, and also another AB, but he was a seaman gunner, and I was an able seaman but had not gunnery rate, but had qualifications as guns went. And the three of us joined the ship at Pyrmont. It was a large merchant ship, white officers crews with

Laska[?] crew. And we knew we were goin' to England because it was an English ship going home, but we didn't now it was going to call in all the ports of call before we got to London. As far as we went it was a Cook's tour.

> Yes, well, it was really quite an amazing voyage. It must have been exciting to leave Australia, but were there any other feelings as well? Was there any apprehension?

No, I just thought, oh, this is lovely, aboard a ship and seein' ports that I don't have to pay to see, and that was it. Our first stop was Hong Kong. We were in Hong Kong for Christmas 1939.

> Really. Bill's just shown me a lovely fifty year old chest here, camphor chest. Where did you buy that?

I bought it in Hong Kong. As a matter of fact the bum boats came out to the ship, really, and we bought it aboard the ship. And I'll tell you a funny story about that. I had a pair of dungarees which I knew I wanted some two more pair made. So I said to the chap, 'Make 'em exactly the same size as this one I'm giving you, will you?'. And he said, 'Thanks very much'. In about two hours he was back again and he brought them back okay but he brought 'em back with the patches already on 'em. (Laughs).

> So he'd done an identical copy.

Exactly.

> That's lovely. Hong Kong, of course, was your first port of call outside Australia, I think.

That's right, yes.

> How did it strike you? How did it affect you?

I must say - wonderful. To think that I'm seein' places which I never thought I'd see, before or still, the sayin' were.

> Were there any people there who talked about the possibility of the Japanese coming down through China?

No, didn't speak anything about that, no.

> Then of course, you went on and I think Singapore, Colombo, Suez and on to the United Kingdom. What were you doing during the voyage? How did the days work out while you were out at sea?

There was three of us aboard the ship and whilst we were in waters which we thought we might see U-boats one of us had to be on watch all the time. So we actually had four hours on and eight hours off. There was always someone standing by the gun all the time. And it was Alaska crew, but the rest of the guns' crew was made out of the white officers, plus actually two cadets which were aboard the ship.

I see, but you three were in charge.

We were the gun layer, the trainer, and also breech[?] worker.

Did you have any sightings or any hostile incidents?

No, no sightings whatsoever, no. We were fortunate.

And what do you remember of the other ports on the way over?

It was all knew to us and very exciting. And the only main trouble was, we didn't have enough money to spend what we wanted to buy ashore (laughs).

I think the gun was a six-inch gun.

Six-inch gun, yes. Six-inch gun coming back from the first war, the 1914-18 war.

Did you periodically practice or fire it off, or did it just go unused for the voyage?

No, we fired a couple of practice rounds to see if it was working, and it worked, with a big bang (laughs).

Well, just going on to the end. I think you were saying that the greatest possible danger was in the English Channel. What was the problem there?

With floating mines. See, at that time - whilst we were in London they put acoustic[?] around our ship - but the point is, when we sailed up the English Channel the first time we had none of that acoustic gear to stop the magnetic mines. So the point is there was always the chance of us runnin' into a floatin' mine. But once we got to Tilbury docks we were right and they brought the buys aboard and put acoustic all around the whole of the ship.

I think from there you went on to, across to the United States, through Panama and across the Pacific. Were there any particular incidents during that part of the voyage?

No, the only thing that we heard of later, which we didn't know at the time, was the time that the *Gras Bay*[?] was sunk down of Puerto Rica. We were within a couple of thousand miles of that but we didn't know that was happenin' till many months later. The point is, we could have been one of the ships they would have got, but we knew nothing about that so we had nothing to worry about.

It must have been quite a feeling to have sailed, and at such a young age, right around the world and back to Australia. How did you feel coming back to Australia? And what did you hope for from the navy?

I could have stayed aboard the ship and did the round trip again. The point is, gunners on a merchant ship didn't appeal to me. I wanted to get aboard a fightin' ship, as the sayin' were.

The three of us, actually, put in when we got back to Garden Island, to be discharged from that ship and go back into general service.

I think that did happen, didn't it?

Yes, I went to Flinders Naval Depot where I did a seaman gunner's course. And after seaman gunner's course I did a LR3 gun layer's course.

Let's just talk about those courses and *Cerberus* for a moment, Bill. First of all *Cerberus* itself, what were living conditions like? How well set up were you in your messes and in your barracks?

We were in A Block which those days, they hadn't taken in the big influx as far as the recruits were going to come in a couple of years later, see. There were still A and B and C Blocks which later they put on other blocks. But the point is we had plenty of room there and as far as gunnery goes, well, I was doin' a gunnery course, and that's all we did all day. The gunner's mate just kept us moving around the guns and stripping guns and so forth. And went out for shoots on the old, I think, with the *Ormail*[?] - or they had a gunnery boat down there which we went out for practice shoots and so forth.

Tell us about the .... One thing first, in studying guns, naval guns, was there much theoretical work you had to do about trajectories and distances and the physics of guns, or was it more practical - what the guns themselves can do?

Oh no, theory comes into it as well as practical. When you're passed out for your gunnery examinations you had actually theory papers to fill in as well as practical papers. Oh no, definitely more to it than that. The point is, you had a chance at every type of gun because you didn't know what type of ship you was going to be sent to. You could have been sent to a cruiser, a destroyer, or a corvette. You was trained in every type of gun.

What were the main kinds of guns at *Cerberus*, Bill, that you handled?

Down at *Cerberus* itself they had the big six-inch gun which we used to do all our gun drill on. Then you had your HA guns and then you had your Oerlikon and your Vickers guns which you had to strip down and put together, as the sayin' is. You had to do it nearly blindfolded, as the sayin' were, to be any good.

And did you have to be able to - I mean, obviously with bigger guns the work's quite specialised, the gun layer and so on. In your training did you just concentrate on one role or did you have to know how to do any role for any particular gun?

No, you had to have a role to know the whole set-up of all the guns but when I did the LR3 course, that was gun layer. If I was drafted to a ship, any ship, my role would be as a gun layer, because that was the role that I was trained to do more so than just general purpose gunnery.

If you had to look at the quality of training over the whole period at Flinders, there, and you rated it from poor, to quite good, good, very good, excellent, how do you think you'd describe your training, given what you did with it?

I think any chap that's gone through the gunnery school at Flinders Naval Depot comes out a good strict gunnery man. Let me say, they bring out the best in you.

No reservations?

No reservations. Gunner's mates have to do their job, so you just acknowledge that. As long as you did the right thing by him, he did the right thing by you.

At the end of this training, what was your rank?

AB, able seaman. I was an able seaman before I went down there. You have to be an able seaman before you can do a gunnery rank.

This is just going back to pick up on something about the voyage on the *City of Kimberley*. You were saying about civilian clothes, I thought that was quite interesting, Bill.

Whilst we were in Glasgow we found out that we were going to New York and the naval authorities found out we couldn't go ashore in uniform so they allotted us thirty shillin's to go ashore and buy civilian clothes. We went ashore and bought civilian clothes and a tie and a shirt. The shoes were okay 'cause we could wear our black shoes. And when we went ashore in America, or New York, we went ashore as actually a member of the crew and not naval men.

You wouldn't buy too many clothes for thirty bob these days.

No, not those days. But it was a lot of money, thirty shillin's those days in 1939 - or January '41.

After the period at *Cerberus* you went to Sydney, I think, to stand by for the *Lismore*, which was about to be commissioned. Where were you posted until the ship was actually commissioned, and what were you doing?

We were standing by at Garden Island on the *Penguin*, *HMAS Penguin*, which we were actually going from *Penquin* each day to the *Lismore* and coming back to the *Penquin* each night. We were bein' billeted as far as *Penquin* went.

What were you doing during those few weeks before the ship actually commissioned?

We were storing ship - bringin' stores aboard, ammunition, everything. The ship was being commissioned so you can imagine the amount of gear that had to come aboard from everything - for the stokers' gears, and depth charges, and guns and so forth, and food.

And you were involved in organising it or transporting it?

No, we were just bringing in the barges. The trucks were coming along side and unloadin' it on to the wharf and we had to get it aboard.

Well, of course the ship's commanding officer was Lieutenant Commander Crawford[?] who, incidentally, I think, had a lovely nickname.

'Tanglefoot'.

(Laughs) Apparently he was tall and gangly. Just a small sidelight, how many of the men on the ship did end up with nicknames?

You had your surnames which as far as navy goes everyone .... Palmer was a 'Petal of Palmer', and White was a 'Knock of White' - all those, and ...

'Spud' Murphy.

'Spud' Murphy. It all goes back to their surnames. Some of 'em might have got different names along the way. One chap, his name was Goodacre, so he got 'Sweetbum' (laughs).

What about you?

No, I was just 'Bill'.

Let's talk about the commissioning itself, Bill. I'd imagine it must be quite a special moment for any naval person to commission a ship. How do you remember ...?

I remember it well. We went out with the dockyard crowd and we were still flyin' the red Ensign, the white Ensign hadn't been actually hoisted. And we were sailing up the harbour and we felt real good aboard the ship. It felt good outside the heads. Then we went for speed trials and so forth like that. There was no gunnery involved with the working up as far as the speed trials went. It was just the dockyard chaps makin' sure that the engines were working - everything. And we did that and we brought them all back again and a couple of days later Captain Crawford decided to accept the ship as far as an RAN ship went. And then we had our commissionin' ceremony, the red Ensign come down and the white Ensign went up. And it was pretty proud - the boys - to think that we commissioned our first ship, as the sayin' were.

Well no doubt it was a spic and span occasion. Were there bands?

No bands, just the boatswain's pipe.

This is a wartime commissioning. After the actually commissioning, I think, you went to sea and down to Jervis Bay where you did your working up trials. Tell us about those. What sort of things did a new corvette have to be checked out on?

Now we were commissioned we had to go through all our gunnery and torpedo training and signalmen, and the sparks had to all work up. It was all a working up period. It took a lot of good timing to work out everything right as far as your guns and your torpedo men and like how quick they could load the depth charges on to the throwers and so forth.

What were some of the main things that you had to work out in a working up period with guns? What did you have to check?

Well, knowin' where everything was as far as the ammunition boxes and where everything were. The main factor was, once the alarm went off, was to get to the guns as quick as you possibly could. And that was the most fact of actually working up period, actually make sure that you got there very smartly and nothing along the way went wrong.

Were there ever any difficulties in being called to action stations in these trial situations with men who were slow or lazy, or whatever, or did people just naturally respond very well?

We were all a young crew and we all responded pretty quickly, I think. We were all keen, I think that was the main factor.

What about mine sweeping? Did you do any mine sweeping trials?

Yes, we did mine sweepin' trials and that was funny 'cause none of us had ever done mine sweepin'. Even the permanent men we had aboard the ship, they'd come off cruisers and so forth, and they'd done no mine sweeping. So it was something knew to us all. We got out the davits okay, and we got 'em back in. But I think we could have been a lot smarter doin' it the first time. And the sea didn't actually help us on the first particular day, either. We had a very big swell going and the old sayin' - 'these corvettes would actually roll on green grass'.

I was going to ask you about the rolling of corvettes, and the pitching, too, perhaps. People generally describe it as being very severe. Is that an exaggeration, or not?

No exaggeration whatsoever. I don't know which is the best, to be actually driving into it, or gettin' the swell from port to starboard, or both ways. But they're not - they're good sea ships but they knock you around a bit.

Was seasickness a problem for you or for other people?

No, the only seasickness I had was that I had too many the night before, but other words [sic] I had no problems (laughs).

Well, I'm sure there were a few of those around. There was, of course, down at Jervis Bay, this very tragic incident that led to the loss of three lives. How did that begin? What was going on?

We'd been down in Jervis Bay still doing working up trials when liberty was given and the liberty chaps went ashore. And this particular night I was duty watch aboard so I didn't get ashore. When they were coming home at eleven o'clock that night there was a bit of a large swell blowing in Jervis Bay and as the motor boat left the wharf at Jervis Bay it got into a big swell and just nosedived down. And the three chaps that drowned, they must have been caught in the canopy of the motor boat because the chaps astern were able to get out of the boat and either swim ashore backwards or swim towards the ship. There was a loud roar and everyone aboard our ship. The quartermaster must have noticed it, gave the alarm. They

tried to get the whaler away as quickly as possible. Some of the chaps didn't even wait for the whaler. If they saw some chaps strugglin' they just dived overboard and went to their rescue.

How far was the *Lismore* anchored from where the boat went down?

It wouldn't have been that very far off the wharf. I suppose no more than 200 yards.

You were really quite close. It was obviously a tragic incident. I think you were saying that over a number of days the bay was dragged and the bodies, very badly decomposed, recovered. Where were they buried?

I don't know for sure. I don't know if we took 'em ashore to be buried, or actually buried at sea, but it's so long ago I just forget now. All I can remember, mine was the tragedy of the drowning and the days that we spent actually draggin' for the bodies. We were usin' our whaler with grapple irons and just draggin' the bottom. Personally speakin', I just forget where they were buried now.

Well, perhaps just turning to a different aspect of it, that perhaps was of more effect for the ship anyway. What was both the short and the longer term effect on the crew, seeing these young fellows gone?

What actually dampened us was to think we'd only just been commissioned and a new ship and we were all proud of the ship, and a thing like this - such a tragic thing to happen so soon. We knew we were headin' overseas somewhere or some time. We just thought, well, a very bad sign to start off with, isn't it. As it worked out - unfortunate for those three men - it turned out to be a happy ship.

Yes, and a lucky one, too. Was the captain able to do anything specific to counteract the depression that must have settled on the ship after that?

No, I think for the two or three days that we were dragging for the bodies, I think that took our minds off the actual tragedy, 'cause all we wanted to do was actually retrieve the bodies, and I think that kept us more active than thinking about anything else.

Just being active and doing things and so on.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Idenfication: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Bill Geaney, tape one, side two.

Bill, let's just go on to talk about some general aspects of the *Lismore*, as you experienced her. These are things that probably affected your whole time on board the ship. First of all, the ship's size. You'd been off around the world on this 5,000 ton merchantman. How the size of the corvette first strike you?

Very small to look at but when you looked at the corvette and looked the merchant ship, they were two totally designed different vessels altogether. Seein' we commissioned it, we weren't pickin' faults with it. I mean to say, we just said that's our ship and we'll be happy with it.

And I think that was the summing up of most of us. I think some of the older chaps that came off cruisers, that might have gave them a bit of a sudden jolt - comin' from a cruiser down to a corvette. But they all got used to it and I think we were all pretty proud with the work it turned out to do.

> Let's just talk about the actual design of the ship for a moment in terms of the arrangement of the decks, the size of the messes and that sort of thing. How do you remember that? How well thought out were they as small ships?

They were thought out in this respect, you only had a minimum of space to do with it and the seamen's mess were on the port side, the stokers' were on the starboard side, and .... Well, you didn't have a lot of room but you got by with what you was allotted to and I think you got used to the size. It might have been a bit cramped for space when you first started off but seein' at one stage half the crew were on watch at one stage and the other half were down below. It would have been a different story whilst we were in port when we were waitin' to go ashore, we were all tryin' to get the first liberty boat. A bit of moving around there to get into the bathroom and so forth and get to your locker, but otherwise you got used to the space.

Well then, of course, you could have been on a submarine (laughs). The messes where you slept and where, of course, I think you ate as well, how were they set up during the day and how did they change at night when the hammocks were going up?

No, the mess stools and the mess tables were there permanent all the time. You just slung your hammocks over the mess tables or along the corridors, or just outside the corridor. Some of the chaps didn't bother about slinging their hammock. They just laid their hammock on the chairs alongside the bulkhead which were permanent where the other tables on the other side, they were loose. There was no problem as far as sleeping goes. You always had your same space. The same space where to sling your hammock.

> I think you were making an interesting point about new men coming into the mess, that men hung back with their hammocks, so to speak.

The stages, they all had their permanent spots where to sling their hammock, and the new chap, or new drafee[?], would come aboard. He showed a bit of knowledge if he waited till all the hammocks had been slung and then he'd ask where's a spare one. And one of us would say you can have that one. And after that, that was his permanent spot.

> That's an interesting recollection. Rather than so many barged wouldn't have gone down too well in the mess.

That's true.

> Let's just talk about the ship's armament, because of course that was something that affected you. I know it did change later on. This is perhaps at the time of commissioning. What was the actual armament?

Very poorly at the time that we commissioned the ship. It was a four-inch gun forehead, which is an old 1918 gun, and we had a couple of Vickers guns either side of the bridge. And that was our only armament barrin' the depth charges that we carried.

You had no anti-aircraft gun?

No, anti-aircraft gun. The only anti-aircraft gun we had at the time was the two Vicker guns. We had a Lewis gun, also.

What was the arrangement of the magazines on the ship? How big were they? Were you as a gunner involved in the running of the magazines, or not?

Yes, one of my jobs was to take the temperature of the magazines every day, as far as the cordite goes. Cordite has to be kept at a different temperature all the time, otherwise it would go off with heat and everything. And you had a log book that you kept the temperature of the cordite each day, which was entered in a book.

I see, what, if it was too hot or cold you could make adjustments, could you?

Make adjustments, or come to the first port of call where you could get more cordite. Get rid of that cordite and get some fresh stuff aboard. But over the period of time we didn't have to ditch any of it. It worked out pretty good.

I would assume access to the magazines was limited, that only certain people could go down into those areas.

No one wanted to go down there for any reason why, because if you was told off to go down there as far as action stations, that was the only time a person went down there, really. And when you went down there you had to put on special sandshoes to make sure you didn't have a spark. You couldn't go down with ordinary shoes on or anything like that - cause a spark.

Was it difficult to get men to work down in the magazines? Did they really prefer not to, or did they accept it?

Let me say, they had no idea to accept or dis.... Once they're detailed off, well that was it. If that was their action station, that's most of it. But most of it, the ammunition men, they came from the cooks and stewards and so forth. The stokers had their own parts they had to do and all the gunnery ratings had their own stations where they went to. It was mostly supply chaps that looked after the magazines.

I see, so of course, in action stations cooks and so on wouldn't be slaving over the galley.

That's true.

People talk a lot about corvettes being very rolly and very boisterous ships, is that really correct, or not?

Well, they sail pretty well in a calm sea but there's not much of 'em and they get tossed around a bit. But you get used to it. Like if it gets too bad we had to put lifelines out along the [inaudible] deck and slide along the lifelines, especially if you wanted to go aft from coming out of the mess, and you got the 'greenies' coming over all the time. You see a greeny comes, well, you just stop walking and just hold on to the lifeline. You know you're going to get wet so you have to stay put.

> Yes, I'd imagine with any sort of sea running the afterdeck of a corvette would be a fairly exposed spot. Did you have strict rules about when you could and couldn't go on deck and lifejackets on deck and so on?

When you around deck all the time, especially if you've closed up stations, you've got your lifejacket around your body all the time - that's a must.

> What about in off-duty hours, were men free to wander round the quarterdecks and the other decks and bask on the forecastle, or not?

Yes, while you're off deck, and as long as you're not the closed up and first degree of readiness, during your four hours off, well, you can do anything you like. You can just rest around, sun bake to get a good tan up - something like that - play cards, play tombola, write a few letters.

> Were there many hobbies or spare time activities that men got involved in?

We were lucky - I'm speakin' about Singapore, now. For the two months that we were there we had a good cricket team and we challenged everyone for a game of cricket that we were there. As a matter of fact we played against the Gordon Highlanders and their barracks were where the Changi prison camp turned out to be later. Little we thought that twelve months, or six months later, the chaps that we were playin' cricket with, or against, would be wiped out to a man, at that time.

> Sure. The ship, I'd imagine - and you did spend a lot of time in the tropics - must often have been very hot, and you didn't have air conditioning. How was the ship cooled, and how effective was it?

The air conditioning we had was a forced blower to come through some vents but you'd open the portholes and put out some chutes to try and pick up a bit of wind. The only trouble was that you didn't know when the ship was going to change course, and sometimes it changed course and it brought in a big greeny through the porthole. And it used to upset some chaps that were layin' asleep on the mess deck table, all of a sudden to be splattered with a big greeny coming through the porthole.

> I was going to ask that about how the ship heeled when you were turning at speed. What would you put on the maximum angle that she'd go over on a hard port or starboard turn at full speed?

I think she could nearly turn in a length and a half, because there wasn't much of her. She went over pretty smartly but fifteen knots is not a great speed, not like a destroyer. When a destroyer went full speed ahead, well, they'd cover the whole quarterdeck as far as a wash goes.

> The general morale of the crew when you joined the ship and perhaps during the period in which you stayed on board, at least for the first captain, how do you remember that? Was morale good, or not?

Yes, we had a good crew. She was a happy ship. There was no arguments with anyones and no, the morale was very high.

> And what about the relations between officers aboard the ship and men? Of course, on bigger ships relations no doubt had to be quite strict and formal. Was that the case on the corvettes, or not?

No. As far as a corvette goes, we didn't have to dress as far as the gear of the day. We could get around in any type of gear that we liked. The only time we had to get into uniform and look respectable was if we were enterin' harbour, but whilst at sea we'd get around in any gear, 'specially the tropics where we were all the time, especially around India and up the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, round the Indian Ocean.

> When you say any gear, do you mean navy rig or civvies?

Oh no, just a pair of shorts and sandals. But if you went on watch you had to have the dress of the day - the rig of the day - when you went on watch. But working around part of the ship, you could wear anything you liked.

> With the officers, no doubt you always called them 'sir', but were there times when that would breakdown and people would be relaxed and were on first name terms, or not?

No, never had first name terms. It was naval breeding as far as we went and they didn't expect it and we didn't expect to do it to them. No, they were an officer and that's all there was to it.

> The general background of the crew, I think you were saying you were fairly lucky in having more than your fair share of a regular or permanent reserve men.

That's true.

> How did that work out?

We were the second corvette to be commissioned. The first one was the *Bathurst* and I think Navy Board was tryin' to do the right thing by the first corvettes to give 'em a good, reasonable crew. And our crew was made up of permanent navy men like old RAAFers[?], which had done their time and come back into the navy, also naval reservists and there were very few chaps that had never been to sea before. So we were fortunate in that respect that we had a stabilised crew from the word go.

> Let's just turn to a few other details of the general working up period that you were talking about before going overseas. When you were working up, were you only doing that by day, or did you also exercise at night?

Oh no, aboard a ship it's a twenty-four hour day. You didn't think if you were going to be attacked it was going to be daylight. We did the night shoots and we also did collision courses at night-time - getting out collision mats and so forth. Even bein' hit by flares and so forth, we had to get the buckets of sand and throw 'em around the deck. The only trouble

later was actually clearing it up. Sometimes we tried to get out of it and not throw sand there. They'd say, 'Throw the sand about'. 'No.' 'Yes, we did.'

> Bill, with your gunnery crews, obviously it's a different thing firing guns at sea on a moving platform to on land. What sort of training did you do with your guns at sea? Did you shoot at moving targets - drogues and so on?

Yes, when you're doin' practice shoots, especially when you're in gunnery school, you have practice shoots as far as HA guns. A lot like an aeroplane draggin' a target behind, and also you had your ship towin' a target. The main thing was not to hit the target but go as close to the target. If you hit the target, that was bad shootin'. Another the crews aboard the ship pulling the target, they didn't like them gettin' that close, either (laughs).

> [Inaudible] that wouldn't have been too popular. Of course, you were also doing mine sweeping and anti-submarine work at times, and I guess that was part of your working up, too, was it?

Yes, as matter of fact they were laid down as mine sweepers but the majority of our work was actually patrol work - anti-submarine work actually. We had the ASDICs aboard and plenty of depth charges and so forth.

> Just finally on this point about getting from working up and getting to the point where you could get into rapid action stations. When the ship was at a high pitch of training, how long would it take to go from just ordinary cruising to total of closed up action stations?

Very quick time. I just couldn't put it in minutes or seconds, but before you could say, 'Joe Blow' we were at our guns, 'cause we didn't know if it was fair dinkum or not. Didn't know if ASDIC had picked up a sub or something like that, so it's self-preservation to get to your action stations straight away.

> Perhaps just one final thing to talk about before we move on to some of the actual events, Bill. I don't know if it's possible, but if there was a typical day at sea - I realise some wouldn't have been - but a general day of the sea when you're doing escort work and so on. Could you describe how that day would begin, and what different people would be doing?

Depends what watch you were on. We'll start off from the morning, from four to eight. They'd come off at eight o'clock and they wouldn't turn to for another four hours, so in that four hours they could do what they like. If we were in a zone where there was nothing to be worried about they'd give you a paint and brush to tidy up the gun, or tidy a bit of the ship's work, or did a bit of dobyin'[?], as the sayin' is. But if you're doing closed up all the time - four on and four off - well, there's nothing else you do. You just do your four on and then you just come down and get the four hours' rest. But if you're in cruisin' stations you have four on and eight off, well, you always find a little bit of a job they give you to do. A bit of splicing, or tidying up the guns - givin' them an oil all around, or something like that.

> How often was it that you really were closed up for some period of time, where you'd be doing four on, four off?

When we were convoying, all the time we were closed up, four on, four off.

> Just a general point about watch-keeping. With its ongoing thing of watch-keeping, getting some relaxation, did you get worn down by it, or did you get enough time to sleep and rest for watch-keeping not to be a burden?

Your body seems to get acclimatised. You just accept it, the four hours that you have on and the four hours that you have off. You seemed to get keyed up to that and you don't notice it. All you know, is that .... The only thing that used to make us sore was that if you'd done your four hours on and they did sight something and sound the alarm bells, well, you had to close up. You might be closed up for an hour but by the time you come back off again, that's only three hours you've had off, so you had to take the good with the bad.

> So on a day like that then you'd really get it cut into. Bill, you were just making a point about the best role in a sense for corvettes.

We were more of a - as far as convoying goes - we were more of an anti-submarine ship. If we struck anything bigger than us, well we could do nothing about that, but we were more than a handful for a submarine - one in, one out with our ASDIC and our depth charges that we carried.

> But you were saying that there was a certain level of boredom with some of the escort work in that you didn't have a lot of submarines to contend with.

Yes, when you're just sailing along, four on, four off, four on, four off, day in, day out. It gets boring but you just acknowledge it and you have to take it. And you just wait until you get back ashore again and make up the best for it.

> Keeping an eye on that next port. Let's just go back now perhaps more to the story of the ship during your period. After the commissioning and the tragedy at Jervis Bay, I think you then went up to Cairns, to Darwin, to Singapore. I think you were saying all during this time you were still working up, working up.

That's right.

> What sort of things were you doing?

We were still working up as a ship's fighting crew. We all had to get used to our gun positions and what we do, and as far as attack goes, collision courses, anything like that. That keeps us busy. Otherwise if you didn't do these working up things they find something for you to do so the best way to find it out for you is to bring you up to a very efficient fightin' ship. And that was the idea of all this working up business.

> I think as you were travelling north, up to Singapore, you were with the *Bathurst*. Were you generally working up together and testing each other out, or not?

The *Bathurst* sailed with us and stayed with us for a long period of time. It came to Singapore with us where we did patrol work with the *Bathurst*. And then when we went to

Colombo and to the Seychelles Islands, the *Bathurst* was still with us, and the *Bathurst* was even with us when we were in the Red Sea.

> That's interesting, Bill. After reaching Singapore, I know you spent a few months in the general area there, patrolling, escorting. What regions ...? Where were you sailing to? In the South China Sea, or through the Straits of Malacca[?] to the Indian Ocean?

No, we didn't go down to the Straits of Malacca. We were out around the straits, actually, the voyages into coming up to the straits. We were just doin' patrol work. As a matter of fact we did a bit of mine sweeping around that way. Of course there were floating mines around and we had our first kill there. We had a floatin' mine, and we all got our rifles out - .303s - and had a great time tryin' to sink it, and all of a sudden, up she went and we got it. And that was the first floatin' mine we'd seen. We'd brought it to the surface.

> By cutting the wires.

Yes.

> Besides that, in that two months' period it was generally within, fairly close to Singapore, was it?

Fairly close to Singapore 'cause Japan hadn't come into the war. We just thought that there might have been some isolated German subs around the vicinity. There was nothing really, we were afraid of. We didn't expect any trouble any rate. We just took it for granted. We were only out for a couple of days, and we'd come in for a couple of days. Our two months there was quite good.

> So you had plenty of time to sample Singapore's ...

Also, those silly Indian bus drivers that used to take us from the gravin'[?] docks - the naval docks - into Singapore which is roughly fifteen miles. They used to think they were the only guys on the road.

> (Laughs). Well, after that period the *Lismore* went to the Red Sea force, and I think you were based at Aden. What were the main tasks during that first period based in Aden?

We were still only patrolling. Anti-submarine work mostly all the time, and again we'd pick up a convoy from Aden which might be goin' up to the Persian Gulf - they were all tankers. We'd wait outside and we'd bring 'em back. Sometimes we'd take 'em across to Karachi then we'd come back to Aden again. But it was convoy work all the time. If it wasn't convoy work, it was patrollin' anti-submarine work.

> During that period, if you had to estimate the average length of a voyage, I mean some were obviously longer than others, but on average were you talking about numbers of days or numbers of weeks?

No. I can tell you a good story. At one stage we were at sea for five weeks. As a matter of fact we went into Colombo Harbour and we said, 'Oh, this is good' - the breakwater. The only

thing that came out was the ammunition ship which we didn't want any of, and then the oil barge, but no canteen stuff. The poor old chaps that were smokin', after four weeks they were just like the Indians - passing their cigarettes round like a pipe of peace. And we were at sea for five weeks that time, only because we thought we were coming back into port but another convoy would be coming out and they'd say take that one away. That was our longest period.

That's interesting. I mean, that was exceptional.

Exceptional, yeah - a fortnight, three weeks.

Was a more average sort of time?

That's right, yes.

Well, I know it was during this time, too, that you were running this blockade on French Somaliland[?], I think near Djibouti[?]. What did that really involve?

We were just cruising up and down looking for these dhows that were supposed to be carrying food and ammunition into the free French that were ashore there. We'd come alongside 'em and stop 'em and search 'em, and if we found any guns aboard we'd take them in tow, or we'd keep 'em all together. And after a while we'd tow 'em back into Aden. But it was more of a find and search. We didn't get that much out of 'em, but I think it was a deterrent because they knew they couldn't get passed us. The *Bathurst* was also involved also.

Yes, sure, so perhaps they wouldn't have come with bigger loads. The crews of those dhows, that you boarded, how did they react? Were they very hostile?

They were Arabs and they used to have women aboard and everything. Oh yeah, they didn't like bein' actually stopped, but when they saw a machine gun bein' pointed at 'em they didn't do much. They just, they had to do what they had to do.

I think it was also during this time that you yourself got dengtue fever.

That's true, yes.

How did you catch it, and what was done for you?

I think I caught it when we were up the Persian Gulf because when we came back I was ready to go ashore this particular day. We were goin' ashore to have a game of soccer. I was all in my football rig and laying on the mess deck table, and all of a sudden I just fell off the stool. The next minute, the sick bay attendant came up and took my temperature. I think I was about 103, 104, something. They rushed me ashore to the hospital there and found out that I had dengue fever, and to relieve the pain from my spine they fluid from my spine. The nursin' sister said, 'Well, I'll give you some brandy'. And I said, 'I don't drink any brandy, thanks, Sister'. And the two English sailors on the other side of the bed said, 'We do' (laughs).

And so they got their tot, did they? But after that period in hospital, did you recover fully?

They sent me ashore, English shore-based, *HMS Lankor*[?]. They put me on light duties, so I reported aboard the ship and I told 'em I was on light duties. And they said, 'There's no light duties aboard here, but if you like you can come aboard instead of stayin' at *Lankor*, and just go to action stations when you have to. So I said, 'Well, that'll do me'. And so I cam aboard and had a good fortnight's rest, doing nothing all day.

That must have been a nice change.

Very good. As a matter of fact, I'll you a funny story. The captain called me into his cabin one day - 'Tanglefoot'Crawford - and he said, 'How are you going, Geaney?'. I said, 'Quite good'. And he said, 'Sit down there and tell me how you feel'. So one of my mates, Franky Sykes[?] come into the ward room - the captain's cabin - to get the keys of the armoury. And he saw me sittin' there and he couldn't get back to the mess quick enough, and he told all the chaps in the mess. He said, 'There's Geaney up there with Tanglefoot Crawford, sittin' in his armchair, smokin' a cigarette - which I don't smoke - and havin' a beer' (laughs).

That's an interesting comment on the captain.

Yes, he was a good skipper - a good sailor.

Let me ask you about that. From your point of view as a seaman and gunner, what were the qualities that made a good captain, both in terms of being a seaman and leading men?

Captain Crawford, before he joined the navy, he was a reservist before the war, a lieutenant commander, and he was on one of the big passenger ships. He was Chief Officer aboard the *Awatea*, so he had the qualifications as far as a good captain and a good way to handle men, but he was a good navigator. We lost ourself a couple of times in big storms, only for - well, our navigator would have lost us only for Tangle come up and rectified him very smartly.

Sorted him out.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Bill Geaney, tape two, side one.

Bill, just going back to this view of the qualities of skippers - commanding officers. How conscious were the men on the mess decks of the qualities of their officers? Were they discussed a lot? 'So-and-so's a good seaman', 'So-and-so really doesn't quite know what's doing.'

Yes, that came up quite a few times. As far as our skipper goes, he was first class, but one of our - actually two of our officers - we didn't have much hope in 'em because they're only volunteer seamen, or actually yachtsmen, and they weren't up to the qualifications as far as good navigation goes. But in the end they worked themselves out. They got better as they got along. To start off we weren't too impressed with 'em and they thought they were a lot better than they were, but we summed 'em up.

> After the period in the Red Sea force, I think you went back, December '41 through all of '42 to April '43, into the Indian Ocean, and I think this was mostly escort work again. How do you remember that period? What sort of work were you doing?

It was quite good when the weather was good because we were escortin' from - we were picking convoys up from Karachi, Bombay and Colombo and takin' 'em down to Diego Garcia where the Royal Navy had a big force station there all the time. They were mostly tankers we were takin' down there all the time, for 'em to fuel the fleet that was layin' there. The British fleet came out once, but they came out too late. We were in Singapore Harbour on Easter Sunday, I think it was '41, when the Japs come over and actually bombed Colombo. But the British fleet weren't there at the time. The British fleet came out later. But the Japs never put in a - sight again till they got the *Hermes* and the *Cornwall* and the *Gloucester*[?] in the Bay of Bengal. And they kept that British fleet down around Seychelles and Diego Garcia and most of the ships we took down there were always tankers to supply the ships down there - keep 'em supplied.

> I see. Generally, the convoys in this Indian Ocean period, how big would they have been on average? I mean, how many ships?

Sometimes we'd only have a couple of tankers and other times when we went up to the Persian Gulf we could bring as many as twenty out from the Gulf, but some of 'em would break off and go to Karachi, others would go into Bombay, and others would go up into Aden. So, sometimes we might only finish up with half a dozen, or actually two of 'em. We'd escort 'em as far as Karachi, comin' down from the Gulf and into Bombay, and then across to Aden.

> The speed of the *Lismore*, I think, was about fifteen knots ...

It was fifteen knots.

> ... flat out. Did many of the convoys reach that speed or were you normally slowed down by other ships?

They wouldn't give us the ships, otherwise if they were faster than us, because it would be no good of 'em actually convoying with us. The speed of the convoy was always detailed by the slowest ship in the convoy, which with most of our convoys, seein' they were tankers, they used to travel around at twelve or fourteen knots.

> I see, so only just a little bit slower than ...

Yes. Another thing, we were always ahead of 'em and zig-zagging across, but there wasn't only us all the time, we had other escort vessels with us, to us. Sometimes we'd have six corvettes, or if they weren't corvettes they were sloops from the Indian Navy.

> On the convoys, of course you were manning your own guns and so were the other escorts. Did you, as permanent naval people, have any direction over the gunnery crews on the merchantmen?

No, the thing is that we were only convoyin' 'em. If we sighted anything, they would have nothing to do 'cause, of course, the escorts would take .... Well, the only thing we would see would be a submarine around that area where we were, because there was no battleships or enemy ships of that size around that area. They were all submarines that would have been the targets for the tankers.

> Just two particular voyages of this period that you've mentioned - one was the episode with the ammunition ship. This must have been a fairly anxious few hours. Tell us about it.

We were takin' this ammunition ship down to Diego Garcia and halfway down there the ship breaks down with engine trouble and it had to hove to, and we were the only escort for this one ship. And so we're doing a circle, a circle, for twelve hours, and we're hopin' that nothing pops up and knocks off the ammunition ship because we'd go up also because you just imagine the explosion of a full - a full of ammunition ship - and we were only patrolling half a mile away from it, doin' a complete circle all the time - as far as ASDIC went. So we would have been within range of that ammunition ship going up. And when we got the signal that everything's under way, I think, everyone aboard our ship said hooray (laughs).

> Time to break out a tod of beer (laughs) - sounds like it. You were making an interesting point, too, I thought about some of the armaments on the *Lismore* itself, in particular the depth charges - being a fairly small ship.

We would have been a good target if we would have been hit by a torpedo 'cause we carried anything between seventy, eighty depth charges. And each depth charges holds 300 pounds of TNT, so that would be sent up very smartly if a torpedo were to hit us. 'Course if you, as you know, the depth charges are always primed and they would go off as the ship went down. It was the first thing we used to do when we went to action stations - to make sure the depth charges were primed. And whilst we were doin' that sweep we were closed up 'cause we had to be closed up. Well, those depth charges would have been primed if we would have been hit with a torpedo also. The least depth charge would have been set for fifty feet. So we would have only had to go down fifty feet before we copped our own depth charges.

> And I guess being a small ship - on a bigger ship they'd be further from the centre of the bridge and so on. Another incident you were talking about was during this period when you were doing a little bit of mine sweeping and your wire cutter broke and got wrapped in the propeller. Tell us about that.

Yes. That was in the Gulf off Aden, we were doing some mine sweeping and one of the wires broke and tangled up around our screws. And aboard the ship that time we had no divin' apparatus or anything like that. And Chief Stoker Voss[?] and a stoker, they dived overboard and they had to dive - you can imagine how deep they were diving to get down to the screws - and with an 'acksaw and so forth - the best cuttin' equipment they could get - and that went on for twelve hours and eventually they got it cleared, got the wire cleared. We were all stationed around the ship with our .303s to protect them just in case there were sharks around. But the amazin' part about it - even in our book, *The Lismore*, it's mentioned in that - but no one got any praise from the Navy Board or anything about the good work that they done, those two chaps.

> On that particular occasion.

On that particular occasion.

> That's most interesting, because I would have thought the captain, being the kind of guy he appears to be, would have ...

Well, he may have made comment but the hierarchy didn't follow it up.

> Yes, I would have thought that would definitely have been a Mention in Dispatches, or something.

Yeah, for sure. Yes. Like me say, they weren't doin' for twelve hours. They did it today to dusk, and then first thing in the morning got stuck into again, but it was a period of twelve hours that the ship was laid up for there.

> That's most interesting. Well, there must have been great jubilation on board it once again when you got going.

Good swimmers (laughs).

> Just a thing to bring in at this moment. You have a ship's mascot. It's rather a nice story, I think. Tell us how you got hold of the dog.

When the *Waterhen*[?] was sunk in the Mediterranean they had this Italian dog of the fox terrier, they had that aboard as a mascot. And when the *Waterhen* went down this stoker, Ben Hogan[?] was his name, he joined us in Port Tewfik - we were layin' in Port Tewfik and he joined us as a crew member - and he brought Stuka[?] with us. And we had Stuka aboard the ship over two and a half years. And then we put him ashore in Colombo because the poor dog started to get battle happy, with the alarm bells going off all the time. He used to run around and frighten himself. Then we put him ashore in Colombo when the dockyard chaps took him. We come back a few months later, he recognised us all on the wharf but he wouldn't walk up the gangway (laughs).

> So he was having a good shore life there. He obviously knew where his bread was buttered. I was just going to ask you briefly about Colombo. Obviously it was very much the home base for the ship. What do you remember of the port, of the people, of the island itself?

Well, readin' about the reports that the trouble having in Colombo, you wouldn't think it was the same place that we were stationed at, because the period of time that we were there, the people were friendly, we had no trouble with 'em, no trouble when we used to go ashore. As a matter of fact there was a rest camp there called Ditawalla[?]. We had two fourteen days leaves up there which was quite good. And another time some English tea planters took a lot of the crew up there and we spent with 'em. We found Colombo a good hospitable port of call.

> And it was always very busy, I think, too.

Well, ships coming and going all the time. As you know, it's a breakwater harbour and ships had to be tied up fore and after. And Easter Sunday when they did have the Japanese raid

there, a lot of the ships couldn't get out through the breakwater because they were tied fore and aft. But there wasn't that much damage done really.

> Lieutenant Commander Crawford had been with the ship all the way through this period but he was replaced about this time by ...

At that time we were talkin' about Crawford, that was when Lever[?] actually took over.

> That's right. I was just going to come to that. Lieutenant Lever took over. Did the mood of the ship, or the style of the running of the ship change much when Lieutenant Lever took over?

It changed in this respect that he was a great one for boxin' - Lever - and durin' our spells when we weren't doin' anything, he'd organise boxin' amongst the chaps aboard the ship on the forecastle and there were some funny bouts amongst them, but everyone was happy. But as I said before, when he joined it, we was pickin' up a good crew. At that particular time we started to get a couple of [inaudible] changes too, at that particular time when Lever took over.

> Yes, and by this stage there must have been quite a lot of the original crew who were fairly anxious, if they could, to get back to Australia.

Most of 'em had been away over two years by that particular time.

> Did you ever feel that being a little ship that you didn't get quite such a good, or quite such fair treatment, from the naval authorities; that when replacement men were coming from Australia, they were going off to other ships, not to you.

We didn't give it much thought 'cause the reason why we looked at it - we couldn't get relief till a chap of our same ratin' came and relieved us. When I was relieved I had to wait for a AB gun layer to come and relieve me. I just couldn't get relieved by an AB 'cause they'd want another gunnery ratin' as far as replacement went. And that was the main trouble, I think, 'cause you had to wait. If he was an AB without no ratin' whatsoever, you had a better chance of bein' relieved more so than bein' a specialist ratin'.

> One of the other things about this period, and this is just before going to the Mediterranean, was the introduction, I think, of radar to the ship, and also the armament was improved. Could you tell us about that, Bill?

At that time we still had the old four-inch gun, but we had the Oerlikon guns, and also a pom-pom - a pom-pom on the after deck. Where they put the pom-pom used to be our spare propeller. So they got rid of that and put the pom-pom there. And the Oerlikons made a big difference - which were a good anti-aircraft gun. But the old four-inch was still no good for ack-ack gun, but it was still a deterrent as far as anything else goes. But we were better armed as far as anti-aircraft went than we were before.

> Was it hard to get the crew worked in to using the new guns? Was that difficult, or not?

No, because the ones that took over were all gunnery ratin's. They knew Oerlikons and they knew pom-poms. It was just a matter of .... No, no trouble whatsoever.

> And how much did getting radar affect how the ship was operated and could fight if need be?

It could pick up an aircraft before the lookouts could see it, and I think that was the main factor about it. We also got other ratin's which we didn't have before. We got coders which we didn't have before, and that built up the size of the ship as far as men went. Where it was only around about the ninety, so we're gettin' around about the hundred. But they found room - still found room.

> That must have been extremely crowded. I mean, they really are quite small ships to fit that number of men in.

As far as the hundred - the hundred would be the maximum. I don't think it got up, but at times it felt like a hundred - it could have been the middle nineties.

> Did the mood of the ship change at all with more men on board - that it was a bit less personal, or was it still small enough for people all to know one another?

No, I think what was happenin', with the extra men comin' aboard, the old hands like myself, we all knew we were gettin' relieved very shortly so we put up with the bad time, as the sayin' were, because we knew we wouldn't be put up with it much longer - seein' replacements were comin'.

> Let's move on the to Mediterranean, Bill. I think it was 3rd May when the ship reached Aden, and then Alexandria was to be your base. I think there was a mine sweeping flotilla formed. How much mine sweeping did you in fact do?

We did very little mine sweeping, but I believe they did a lot for the invasion of Sicily, but I wasn't on the ship then. But I believe they - that was the 21st .... They formed the 21st Mine Sweepin' Flotilla, and I believe they swept all the bay before the larger troopships and everything came ashore, but I wasn't there at that particular time.

> Of course, you then really did go on with more convoy work in the Mediterranean. How did that compare with the convoy work you'd been doing in the Indian Ocean in terms of length of voyages, size of convoys, and so on?

They were shorter voyages because you're only takin' 'em from shorter trips, where in the Indian Ocean you were going right from the Seychelles, right up to the Persian Gulf and around to Aden - bigger distances. They were shorter distances. But a lot of that came after I'd left the ship. A lot of 'em, they were takin' convoys from Alexandria to - some went to Gibraltar, some went to Malta. But as I said, I wasn't aboard then.

> But you were there in the earlier period, and I think you were there when the troopship, the *Yoma*[?] was sunk.

That's true, yes.

It must have been a very difficult thing to live through. How do you remember the ...? How did it begin for you?

We never seen so many bodies. We were actually draggin' aboard the ship, but we were just wonderin' where we were gonna put 'em all. But once they were aboard they found their own little spots, and everything like that. I think we were fortunate to get the number that we did get aboard.

What sort of condition were the men who were being brought aboard in - physically and mentally?

I think the main factor was that they were glad to find a steel deck under 'em. I think that was the main factor.

Yeah.

There were so many rescue ships around 'em so I thought, they'd only be thinkin' it was only a matter of bein' picked up and put aboard a ship.

What were you yourself doing during the rescue?

Throwin' out cargo nets to let 'em climb up the ship's side and everything, and throwin' ropes over, draggin' 'em aboard and givin' 'em a hand to get aboard.

Did you have your own boats out?

We had to drop our whalers to pick 'em up - oh yes, for sure.

What else do you remember of that ...? I think it began in the early morning, didn't it?

I just couldn't tell you now. It was daylight. It wasn't darkness.

And how crowded was the ship when it was all over and before you could get to port?

We had over 300 aboard. We took 'em back to Alexandria, and I say, that was a big crowd aboard.

There must have been quite a deal of trauma in seeing the loss of some lives ...

I don't think there was too many. We didn't get the full figures as far as the loss of lives, but the number of rescue ships that were there, I think, I think they would have got quite a good percentage of the troops.

Bill, how much of an effect do you think the incident had on the crew of the *Lismore*, perhaps particularly the younger sailors?

I don't think that it made any effect. It was just a day's work, as the sayin' is, all at the back of their mind would be, try and bring as many aboard as possible - the quickest way.

Once you had got them on board, you set sail ...

We set sail to .... We had nowhere to put 'em, so we couldn't put 'em all in the mess deck. They had 'em on the forecastle, they had everywhere aboard the ship. But as a matter of fact we couldn't give 'em much to eat because we didn't have much time to get back into port, so I think at the back of their minds, they weren't worryin' about their stomachs, it was to think they had been saved.

I know you left only a few weeks after that incident to come back to Australia, via Alexandria, but just before that, is there anything else of that period in the Mediterranean that you think's worth recording - any significant, or unusual, or perhaps funny?

No. As a matter of fact I would have liked to have been on the ship and actually done the invasion of Sicily but I wasn't there, so .... But I thought that - at that time, we didn't know that was gonna happen. All I knew is that I'd got a leave ticket to go home and that was all I was thinkin' about. I was gettin' rid of me 'gippo'[?] pounds and buyin' Australian pounds.

Well, tell us about the reaction when you did hear you were go back. Was it complete elation, or was there a little bit of regret at leaving the ship?

I think it was both. At one stage I didn't want to go and then another time I wanted to go, so I think it was a bit of each. I didn't know which was .... When it sunk [inaudible], I said to myself, 'I've had enough time over here'.

You went to Alexandria, and I think you there shipped to ...

Went to Colombo.

And from there by Dutch ship home.

The *Van Outhorn*[?].

I think there are a few interesting comments about the Dutch ship.

Yeah, 'cause they were white officers and Javanese crew, and they had a little pop gun on the stern of the ship. At that stage the wireless operator was picking up submarine sinkings all around the Indian Ocean at that particular time. And we'd worked it out, we didn't who the gun crews consisted of as far as the ship went, but we knew who was gonna to take over the gun that we sighted a sub. We didn't sight anything, but we got to Fremantle and we had the choice of stayin' aboard the ship and goin' around to Adelaide on the *Van Outhorn*, or goin' across overland by train. We all said, 'We've been away nearly three years now. We're not gonn get sunk now. We'll go by train.'

Yes, that's interesting. It was quite a journey around the Nullabor though, isn't it?

Yes. And it wasn't a proper train, either. It was a troop train. I think they only carried stock. But we had a funny story. We stopped at - oh, where's that? The big gold place in Western Australia?

Kalgoorlie?

We stopped at Kalgoorlie and we were able to get along to a local pub, and to buy all the bottle beer we could carry. The only trouble is, we didn't have a refrigerator (laughs). There's nothing worse than drinkin' warm beer (laughs).

So I guess you got into that pretty quickly (laughs). You got some leave, I think, in Sydney, for six weeks or so.

That's right.

What was it like coming back to the city that you'd left some years before?

It was great to be home. I got to Central Station and my young sister was WAAF. She was workin' in George Street - Dymock's Building. So I rang her up straight away to let her know I was home. She rushed around and I had to go to Balmoral Depot from there for that night. And then I got to Balmoral and they gave me the leave. I had to come back the next day and then I had six weeks leave for the time that I'd been away.

It's not long really, is it?

We had some leaves whilst we were away - recreational leaves. And even from Port Tewfik we went to Cairo a couple of times. So, we'd been to Cairo and we'd had a couple of leaves in Colombo. And we had a few boiler cleans which took over a week, so every now and again we had a fair bit of a rest.

I think you were saying that you kept rather quiet about your gunnery qualifications, and you were at Balmoral for about a month, but when your documents caught up with you, you were then posted to another ship.

Yes, they said, 'You're posted to the *Penqwah*[?]'. I said, 'The what? I've never heard of it.' They said, 'It's an ex-Chinese river boat'. I said, 'What the hell's that?'. They said, 'It's down at Walsh Bay', so I go down to Walsh Bay with my bag and hammock and to make it worse I looked at it - a coal burner, it was. I said, 'Oh, my God, to come and join a ship like this'. So I got particulars very smartly. They said it's just come down from Port Stevens where it's been up there training the *Westralia* and *Kinimba*[?], and salt landing ships, as far as barges went. And they said it's going to New Guinea for six weeks or so and coming back again. So I took all me blues with me. That six weeks turned into two years. It turned out to be - she was a construction ship. And we built the depot at Dreger Harbour. And we had a lot of carpenters aboard and bulldozers and all that type of gear. But it was another happy ship, but I'd sooner been aboard another type of ship than layin' around New Guinea all the time, because by that time the battle zone had been pushed further north.

So you were rather left behind doing the donkey work? What sort of guns did she carry, and how many gunner people were with you?

She was better armed than the *Lismore*. She had the four-inch HA guns. She had the Oerlikon guns. She had pom-poms. She was a lot better as far as firin' power went. But it was only all in self-defence because she wasn't an angry ship.

And I think you yourself were the captain of the four-inch gun.

That's right, I was captain of the four-inch gun, yes.

How many people would that have involved? I mean, in the guns crew and the people supplying the ammunition?

You take in all your magazine hands and everything like that, you're lookin' at about a dozen. But the actual gun crew was only your layer, your trainer, your breech worker, and your talker, but the rest were all actually ammunition carriers, 'cause the ammunition locker was a fair way back from where the four-inch gun was on the forecastle. It wasn't built as a warship. They had to put the ammunition locker where they could.

Well, I think you were still aboard her at the end of the war. Is that correct?

That's true, yes.

When you heard the news about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki and so the end of the war, how did you feel? What went through your mind?

Well, I don't know really. I didn't know, like to be glad or happy, or just thought, well, I'm gettin' back into civilian life again. But I'd been tied up in .... This was nearly six years now and you just got into a pattern that you was actually used to and I think you had to get into civvy street to realise where you wanted to be.

When you were demobilised, how easy was it for you to work back into civvy street?

I went back into the foundry game at first and I stuck that for a couple of months but it was too hot, so I went and joined the merchant navy for three years. I stayed in the merchant navy till I was married. I just thought it wasn't right to be at sea and be married, so I paid off and I didn't go back to sea again.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Bill Geaney, tape two, side two.

Bill, you were saying about leaving the merchant navy after you married. Were there any regrets - after all these voyages you'd made around the world and to different places - were there any regrets about leaving the sea, or not?

No, all I can say is that as far as my service in the navy, it was well worth it and if I had to do the same thing over again, I'd do the same type of service that I did. I had no regrets whatsoever. It was a good training life and it helped me in my management as far as running

the foundry later, to handle men, to pick out men. And I think that was the backbone of actually handlin' men in civilian life, it goes back to my training in the navy.

> Yes, I'm sure there must be a connection there in terms of that ability to get people to do what's needed. Bill, just finally, is there anything else that you'd like to put on this record that hasn't been said, that you feel you'd like to add to your record of your time on a corvette?

One thing stands in my mind. The battle fleet was down at Diego Garcia and the *Royal Sovereign* was there and then the little *Lismore* was sent down there to be an anti-submarine device for it. It helped it go from there to Trincomalee. By this time we'd been at sea for quite a while so we said, 'This is a good job. By the time we get to Trincomalee, the battleship will lay there for months 'cause they don't go to sea much. This'll do us.' So we got to Trincomalee, got as far as the boom, the *Royal Sovereign* went in. There was a convoy coming out and we had to pick up that convoy and take it to Calcutta, so we didn't get the good leave after all (laughs).

> That does seem to say a lot about the story of the corvettes, which .... It did spend an enormous amount of time at sea, didn't it?

They were a proper work horse - the proper work horse. They were coming and goin' all the time. The only thing that saved us - sometimes when they couldn't get fuel oil.

> Did men in the corvettes slightly look down on people in bigger ships, or not?

No, I think the opposite way. I think that the chaps in bigger ships looked down on us, 'cause they said, 'What type of ship's that?' (laughs). And we used to think, fancy bein' aboard a ship like that - this'll do us - no dress of the day every day.

> Well, I think I know where I would have preferred to be (laughter). Bill, on behalf of the War Memorial for making this tape for their archives, thank you very much.

A pleasure to do it.

> Great.

END OF INTERVIEW