



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is an interview with Edward Rigney of, formerly, the *Cessnock*. It was recorded on 19th March 1990 [1991]. This is side one, tape one.

Edward Rigney, where and when were you born?

Born in Redfern, Sydney, on 7th November 1919.

Tell us a bit about your parents - your mother and father - what they did for a living and what they were like as people.

My parents were both farmers. My father started down at Kangaroo Valley, later moved up in his late teens to the Northern Rivers district. My mother was born at South Grafton, 1895. My father and mother were married at an early age, which was the usual thing in those days. She was sixteen. He was twenty-one.

Was it a strict family?

No. Her parents were Northern Irish. The father's parents - one Australian, one Irish - so they were Catholic. Although he followed the religion right through life he wasn't strict about anybody else. So after becoming teenagers and having been confirmed we were allowed to go our own way. Mostly we did, except my two sisters. There were three boys, two girls in our family.

Where did you come?

I was the third boy, second last in the family.

Were they hard times when you were growing up?

They were because it was Depression times when I was going to school. It was 1929-30 up till '33 - a lot believe right up until the second world war started - it was pretty tough times. Certainly there was a lot of unemployment and a lot of people had to go out into the bush and work on farms for low wages. I myself left school at thirteen. I finished second year high school. The headmaster allowed me to leave because of the distressful times on families. I got a job on a milk cart which I worked seven nights a week - running most of the time with milk. For this I got seven shillings and sixpence per week but that bought the butter for the family, so that was quite a thing to have within the family income. We all did some work of some sort and brought home what we could. One brother went to a poultry farm. Another brother went up to a farm on Northern Rivers with an uncle and worked there. During those years we were separated quite a bit - the family - until eventually we all got back together again before I joined the navy. This happened in 1936.

What about when you were at school? What kind of schooling did you have?

I went to Dulwich Hill Commercial High School. It was a supernumerary college, and this, of course, was aimed at commercial work: business principles, book-keeping, shorthand and all the rest.

Did you have aspirations to get into the commercial sector through book-keeping and that kind of thing?

At first I did. And it was so difficult to get into anything like that without having connections that I just finished up working as a picture framer in a factory, which was agreeable type of work - not much brain power required, some little skill. I trained for doing that.

(5.00) But then that lasted until just before I was seventeen, which is at the stage where I'd signed up for the navy which I did fancy - the ships - because quite often I'd go out with my uncle on a tugboat. He was a tug crew on Sydney Harbour, on a tugboat called the *Gamecock*, one of the smaller tugs. And I got to like this very much. And I used to go over at the aunt and uncle over the North Shore, and this was the days before the Sydney Harbour Bridge was built, so we used to go across in the ferry for one penny each way.

Was it a family that had been touched by the first world war - lost members, or had people go off to war?

Yes. My father didn't go to war, in the first war. I had three uncles who didn't survive the first world war - a total of seven uncles were away, and several cousins, I'm not sure how many. I think there were four or five cousins.

With that Irish Catholic background was there a sense of injustice regarding the poor? Was it a family concerned about social issues?

Yes, my father was a Labor man but not right into the party mould. He was more inclined to attend the rallies, and also become a union organiser at which he was quite dedicated. But he worked on the railways. He finished with the New South Wales Railways when he retired. But no, he didn't get right into politics as any impact.

But would you discuss issues around the dinner table? Was it that sort of family?

Yes, mainly led by my father and the elder brothers. There seemed to be a feeling of being used up by the capitalistic bosses, and everything must be paid for. No such thing as today's plastic money back in those days but things could be bought on lay-bys and going into contracts which, my father's idea, was not a good way to live at all.

Was there a sense that the first world war had been an imperialist war then that had seen all the young men of Europe almost turned into cannon fodder? Was there that sort of perspective?

I don't think so. I believe at that stage there was still a great feeling for the crown, the flag. There was always reference to Britain and Britannia. We, in the services, followed our commanding officers' ideas and beliefs that we were very willing to assist in any means of policing the world's troubles.

Well, at seventeen with the war starting, when did you first become conscious that there was trouble brewing and that the country might go to war?

I went to sea at eighteen, just before I was eighteen. Now, in 1938 ...

So you joined before the outbreak?

Yes, 1936. 1938 we went to England via a ship called *Albatross*, which was a seaplane carrier. They sold it in part payment to the Royal Navy in exchange for a light cruiser, HM[A]S *Hobart*. Now while we were over there in 1938 there was every sign of warlike activity. Sailors - very old in our opinion at that time, remembering that we were eighteen-year olds, eighteen, nineteen, twenty - had been recalled from the first world war - reservists. They seemed like our fathers although it was only twenty, twenty-one years ahead. We were disturbed by this, also the vastness of the navy - the large flotillas and squadrons of ships that we saw - and the dockyards teeming with activity. Now, they were doing that for a year before Hitler struck, so full well knew what was coming.

(10.00) Was there a sense that Australia didn't really have a sense of what was coming? Did you feel a bit concerned that Australia was ill-prepared?

Yes, because what we saw when we brought this news back home - did not create much of an impact amongst our friends and the people we talked to. While we were relating our stories I think they were much regarded as excited tattlings of young men who hadn't seen anything like this before.

It must have been frustrating to you then.

It was. But, of course, the officers brought it back home to us that what we had seen and participated in, and the reason that Australia was starting to build the navy again from the slack period in between the wars, was a definite sense of purpose. And the idea was we must keep the sea lanes open - that was our objective. We knew it wouldn't be long - we just knew that. And sure enough on the night of 3rd September 1939 - by this time I was [inaudible] and crew of HM[A]S
Canberra, the flagship. We steamed out that Sunday night looking for the enemy.

Well, going back a bit. From having felt an interest in the sea as a boy, going aboard a tug, to the point where you actually joined up at seventeen, what actually made the decision for you?

Well, two things: one was a shortage of work. I had this feeling that I wanted to move around anyway. And had I been able to get short-time jobs, especially along the coast, and not be settled down in one spot for a lifetime. Even though it was a long period of time to look at with the navy - when I found out it was thirteen years - that seemed a long, long time then.

So you were signing up for thirteen years?

Yes. Well, at first twelve months - until you're eighteen is not counted because as a boy you get certain allowances, not of pay, but of conditions. But at eighteen you go on to the full adult pay and straight into the more strict conditions the navy required.

Did you have to get your parents' authority to sign up at seventeen?

Yes, my father signed. He thought it would be a good thing for me, because his brother had been in the navy in the first world war, and he also had been to sea - deep sea fishing up round the Barrier Reef. He thought it was quite a healthy outlook anyway.

So how did you do that? Where did you go and ...?

Rushcutter [sic] Bay Recruiting Office - still there today. From Rushcutter Bay you go through a medical examination and a written test - simple arithmetic, writing test. That's sufficient to get you into the navy where there's further education in shore establishments and large ships - they have their education officers.

How long before or after you applied before you found out that you were accepted?

One year.

It took a year?

Yes. I was sixteen when I went down there and they said, 'You're too young'. Now, the way I found out was a policeman knocking on the door, because first of all a letter came from the navy saying to report on such a date. I didn't take a lot of notice of this letter. I didn't understand the letter, to be truthful. Anyway, a policeman knocked on the door ...

Why didn't you understand? Was it put in such a way that it was obscure formal language?

Yes, it was. It was navy type language which I didn't understand much at that time. 'Report here at such and such a time.' Well, that didn't mean a lot to me. I thought, now when the time comes, if I really am accepted in the navy, it would be written something like: your application has been approved. We would like to see you here, and the person to see. As it was, it was just a letter saying to go to Rushcutter Bay. Anyway, the policeman arrived and said the Commonwealth of Australia wants you and that was it. They sent a policeman to ensure that I knew what it was all about. I don't know, I suppose it was a boyish attitude at the time.

(15.00) Were you excited then to be joining?

Yes, because I hadn't ever been out of New South Wales and here I was going by train right down to Melbourne, which was quite exciting for a young fellow in those days. Then further than that, I had a walk around Melbourne all that day and on a train down to Crib Point, Flinders Navy Depot. And that was the first exciting thing. From there .... I joined the navy to be trained as a cook, which I thought ...

Why that? Why cooking?

I think you'll understand the reason when I say that I was growing up during the Depression era, food was not plentiful, it was very scarce. Such things as rabbits were a delicacy. And if you could get a really fresh rabbit that was something. Chicken was unheard of unless you were way out in the bush and developed your own. So that's one thing the navy had was

plenty of good food. Maybe not *à la carte* type menus but good wholesome food and lots of it.

And to be cook meant you'd be right with it (laughs).

And I was right with it. Lashings of butter, milk, cream - things like this - which I'd never known.

So what was the routine at the base when you arrived?

The initial training, the first three months, was hard training such as squad drill and rifle drill and pulling sixteen-foot ash oars on a pinnace or a cutter with twelve men pulling it. These things weigh from two to three tons. Not easy. And for kids, you felt that you were forced, you felt that you had to do it because your training petty officer didn't like to be upset by complaints or trying to mother kids. They'd like you to get in - hop in - and grow into a man so you'd be a sailor.

Did you wonder whether you'd made the right decision? Was it that hard?

At times. The most difficult thing I found was the Melbourne winters down at Crib Point, which are even colder than Melbourne. But to offset that, of course, was another luxury - steaming hot showers and as much water as you required. It was strange having to sleep in hammocks. These were slung between two rails and you slept six foot off the floor with thirty to forty, sometimes more, in a dormitory. At the time I joined there were just over one thousand staff - not staff - crew and sailors of all sorts - of all branches - at Flinders Navy Depot. At times during the war that grew to over ten thousand, so it was huge then.

What sort of uniform did you start off with?

It's what they call a square-rig uniform. It's the same type of uniform as the officers wear without the brass buttons - or gilt buttons.

Did it give you a sense of pride? Was it good to be in uniform?

Yes. We had four uniforms actually. We had our working whites and what they call number two uniform which was for just walking around and rough usage, let's say, such as at home - you're wearing not your best clothes. Then, what was called number one uniform which was of good quality serge and which, to me, always looked good. So we were initially given these uniforms and then given a kit allowance to maintain them. So as the uniforms wore out we had money to replace them from the clothing store which was, in navy terms, called a slop store. And this was pretty well handled. In fact, I suppose like the other services, everything has been thought out for so long and handed down from the Royal Navy, going back hundreds of years, that there was little left to chance. They just knew how long things were going to last.

(20.00) What about weekend leave and time off? What sort of things did you do?

As a boy I wasn't allowed leave. The only way I could get leave in the first twelve months was to get a letter from an adult relative. This I obtained from an aunt in Melbourne, which

was sufficient to get me off for the weekend, which was very good. Otherwise I was down there for twelve months without a break.

> What would you do without the break? And then, when you had the weekends, what would you do with the weekends?

Weekends, well, we'd do the usual things. Go to Luna Park. If it was warm weather down to St Kilda beach which is different set-up than what it is today - pollution was .... To start with, it was a word not used, and we didn't see much of it - perhaps there was some but we didn't notice a lot. Various things: to go to see the art gallery, museum, and these sort of .... Around the Fitzroy Gardens and parks, and so on. And the little trips up to the Dandenongs and people inviting us for ...

> So you'd go around in a group?

Not always. Anything from two or more. Occasionally you'd have four or five young sailors, perhaps one of them with a relative, and you'd all stay at that place.

> When you were on the base and couldn't get off what would you do with your time?

We were allowed out for walking activities. We could walk down to Stony Point or across to the other side of the base. Anywhere around the perimeter of base was in walking distance or even riding if you could borrow a bicycle. They were rather scarce - bicycles. Usually it was anybody below chief petty officer couldn't get a bicycle - navy bicycle, that was. And very few of us had the money to buy one.

> What about at the end of the year then when you joined the regular navy, as it were?

Then I was off to sea, my first ship being HM[A]S *Australia* - heavy cruiser.

> How did it look to you as a young person seeing it for the first time?

Very exciting to see those massive eight-inch guns. The size of the ship, going below decks, to really see that 700 men - and not crowded. The only time the ships ever looked crowded was when the whole crew were mustered together in one space, such as the quarters on Sunday, which is the church parade, or for some other reason where they might all be massed together.

> What about your accommodation in the ship? What was available to you?

We slept in hammocks in those days. This was to save space. And they were quite comfortable to sleep in, hammocks, once you get used to them.

> What about personal effects? Would you have a locker?

Had lockers, yes. We each had our own which we could lock. In fact nothing was allowed to be left around. If things were left out of the locker .... They used to do rounds in the morning, the duty executive officer, the crew officer, with the petty officer - chief petty

officer, known as the 'buffer' - would walk around the decks while everybody was at work or at their stations. If anything was left laying around such as socks or books or anything of this nature, was taken up by a work party and locked away in a large storeroom. And to get that out you had to supply a bar of soap as punishment for leaving things around. If you did this often and you run out of soap - your issue of soap - you'd have to go and buy some. And so this soon encouraged people to be tidy. And then, of course, after a while you could see the reason for it - a tidy ship's a clean ship.

What about the nature of the discipline? You said there was something of a transition from being a boy, as it were, as a junior, and then the regular.

Yes. When I first went to sea I still hadn't finished my boy's time, and my duty chief petty officer ordered a leading hand to take me ashore and look after me.

(25.00) And this leading hand was looking forward to a rather nice time because the port was Hobart and he was thinking of perhaps having a couple of beers or so, and perhaps meeting a girlfriend, and enjoying such things as he thought was good. But having to look after me was a different story (laughs) and at one stage I remember he wanted to slip into a hotel while I waited outside, and around the corner came the chief plus his brother, the petty officer (laughs). So this fellow, the leading hand, scrambled around and he was very frustrated over this deal where he had to look after me. So I helped him after a little while. As we walked back towards the ship, I didn't have any further interest and I didn't have much money either, so I just said, 'I'm going back aboard now', and so off I went. I think that made his day, as the word goes now (laughs).

What about the nature of the discipline? Was it much stricter?

No, if you did your work and kept yourself smart - clean - and carried out any orders given, no worry at all. But if you, as you say today, bucked the system, you found it very hard to beat because discipline ranged in a pattern which did not vary. It all come under King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, and whatever was written in those instructions is the absolute law. So that if you have a button off your uniform at parade and it is seen that you knew that it was off and did nothing about it, you'd probably have a kit muster, which means that everything you own must be laid out and tidy and neat and the regulating petty officer or some other PO or chief would go over it piece by piece. Anything wrong you had to repair or renew. This took up some hour or more of your spare time, and that was just a beginning. If, for instance, you come ashore and going back aboard at a certain time in the morning, say, at eight o'clock, you didn't arrive in time - overstay your leave - alright, for each hour that you are late, you're taken before the first lieutenant who thinks, alright, that's serious enough for a day's pay and leave, which occurs. It's the leave that hurts sailors more than the money because quite often you're at sea for long periods and build up money. You're not ashore for long periods so if you lose any of that time, that is the hardest cut. Other punishments such as arguing with an officer or refusing duty is regarded as a serious crime, and this can go to the commander who can order seven days' extra work or seven days' leave stopped and so on.

Did that happen to you? Did you get into any trouble?

No, not of that sort. But one time I did miss a ship at Christchurch, New Zealand. Christchurch - actually the sailing port was Lyttelton which, I think from memory, is some fourteen miles from Christchurch. Now, I didn't time the buses as well .... We were on

convoy duty which meant once that sailing date, or sailing hour, had been promulgated that's it, that's the end. So through my own lack of discipline I didn't get there in time but I caught a work boat which got me out to the ship just before she weighed anchor. I had to be taken before the captain for that one because missing a sailing time during wartime is quite a serious offence. When I saw the captain - this was the next day - with all the rushing around and excitement I didn't feel all that good and we'd run into a rather heavy sea. On top of all this I think I started to get a bit of a green tinge around me and when I saw the captain ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Edward Rigney, formerly of the *Cessnock*.
>
> So, you were saying you appeared before the captain.

Yes. So, the captain, hearing my story, after considering, said, 'I think you genuinely tried to get back in time as obvious from your managing to convince the boat crew that you had to be aboard. And also I think you've been punished enough by the look of your face' - in reference to the coming seasickness I was feeling (laughs). I was rather lucky to get out of it that way.

> Did you have trouble finding your sea legs? Did you suffer from seasickness in the early part?

No, it's only if I was taken aboard, or ordered back to the ship on recall, it sometimes happened. One time in Fremantle, for instance, we were all aboard a truck going back down to Fremantle, and this was an army - MPs - had got the orders to pick up all sailors around Perth and take them back to Fremantle. This was because of a general recall. So they didn't bother to ask who or what you were (laughs), so into the truck. The only thing is they didn't want to let their army prisoners out while they were taking us down, so it wasn't a very joyful ride - going fourteen miles with about twenty sailors and half a dozen soldiers who had been in some fight in the town and were on their way back to the military barracks. Anyway, these sort of things did happen during wartime.

> What about the MPs generally? What were they like? Did you have any run-ins with them?

No, our naval police were regulating petty officers. They were trained as police. They were under direct command of the master-at-arms. His authority was well-known by all and sundry. If, for instance, an officer got into trouble for some reason or another the only man in the ship from the lower deck who could be present and handle that, or even arrest that officer on command of a senior officer, was the master-at-arms, and so his authority was rather large. No, they were very good really - the regulating petty officers. Now, shore patrols were a different story because they were culled from mainly seamen and stokers who were the largest two groups in the ships. Not all of these, as you may imagine, were gentle in the way of handling any malcreants [sic] they picked up ashore, perhaps for not having a tidy uniform or perhaps being seen worse the wear for drink or perhaps being rowdy and generally behaving in a manner that wasn't befitting the King's uniform, as it was done, which of course sometimes developed into bouts between the shoregoing sailors and the navy patrol. They

were recognised by their webbing, gaiters, belt webbing, and an armband with 'NP' written on it. They had authority to bring back aboard any seaman or sailor or any lower deck rating who seemed to be doing things against as written in KR and AI.

(5.00) Did they tend to be fairly vigorous?

They would - not all - some. Mainly, there was a petty officer in charge of a group, depends how large the group, the bigger the ship. For instance, in the Royal Navy, with the battleships, they often had an officer, a sub-lieutenant, in charge. Because of that rank things were done much more efficiently, orders were more clear and concise, there was a sense of order about it - knowing what to do and how to do it. But some of the smaller groups, especially from the smaller ships, well, perhaps they had their own mates that they had to handle and this would create some difficulty for both sides because: I'm ashore and my mate's in a patrol, now, he is supposed to see that I'm correctly attired, not being abusive, not being drunk or even under the influence, not fighting with anybody - civilian or other sailors. I don't mean this goes on all the time but these are just the reasons for having shore patrols.

What about military police, or army police? Could they interfere or arrest naval personnel?

Not usually. No, it would have to be a very serious thing altogether because they did not interfere with each other's service unless instructed or requested by the other service.

Did you ever see or get involved in any large altercations at hotels, or anything of that sort?

That was unavoidable, especially overseas, because in some ports you would congregate fairly much together in a self-defence way. Some places, such as Bombay for instance, if you go wandering off in the back streets the chances are that you can be assaulted and robbed. Over in the Middle East, similar there, with the added incentive that we used to wear paybooks around our neck - in your pocket, if you like, but they were too easy for pickpockets, and there were some very good pickpockets out that way. These paybooks were a valuable source of information to the Germans and there was money paid for them to the people of these ports - the natives. So the thing was to try and keep together, especially at night because at night you'd just be surrounded by swarms of thieves and some of them were so clever that you would hardly feel a thing, and your wallet's gone and so on. So that if you were by yourself there's every chance that you would be knocked to the ground or perhaps even knifed - that did happen several times.

To you or people you knew?

No, people I knew, yes.

What about inter-service brawls or brawls between members of other na - or perhaps the British navy or whatever? Did you get caught up with anything like that?

Yes, such things happen too in, say, NAAFI canteens the English - or British, I should say.

Can you recall a specific instance and how it would develop - what happened?

One I remember fairly clearly was Americans, British and we started as just onlookers and spectators. This was a services canteen in Alexandria, Egypt. There was some commotion going on at the time because some Maoris present were very annoyed about Americans bombing their position. It was one of these things that happen where somebody has dropped a bomb in an area where it wasn't quite on target.

(10.00) Anyway, some Maoris actually were killed and some wounded, so we heard - I haven't read that officially - it's only what I've heard over there. So they thought the best thing to do about this was to attack any Americans they saw to even up. So taking off their big leather belts they started to wield these around. Then next to the table where I was sitting an American sergeant got up and started yelling out for them to quieten down and a British sergeant got up a couple of tables away and told him to close the big American mouth. And so (laughs) I stood up between them to try and ease things off. I said we were all here together and all trying to have a peaceful afternoon. If you want to carry on why don't you hit each other and forget about it. And they didn't hit each other, they both hit me (laughs). So I decided then that I wouldn't give any further advice about these things and so a large patrol arrived from all sources - navy and army - and sorted things out. But these sort of things used to happen, I think.

Did you get hurt?

Yes, I had a cut here where the teeth went through, but not put out of action, I was able to work. I went back to the sick bay on board and they fixed it up.

I suppose with that sort of thing, in retrospect it would have such value in terms of things to talk about, it would be looked back on as fun and maybe in a way encourage others [inaudible].

Yes, if we happened to run into those Americans and British people again now we'd have a hell of a time. We'd think it was great to talk about it, which is what we do now in our reunions. We go to the corvette reunions and there's thousands joining up all the time as they find out that this thing is going. And it just takes a word or two here and there to bring back - spark a memory - and the next thing .... The last one I went to I started to recognise people from the back of their head - people I'd been on ships with. I don't know why. I must have seen the back of their heads quite often (laughs). I'm just saying, you work with somebody, you live with somebody in a ship - especially the cruisers, for instance, in wartime are carrying 1,000 men. You could have spent two or three years aboard a cruiser and not know half of them.

How long were you in the *Australia*?

Australia, not long. I think it was less than a year.

Were you there when war broke out?

No, I was in *Canberra*. I went from *Australia* to *Albatross*. That was just to go over and get the *Hobart* and then from *Hobart* to *Canberra* - the war broke out.

What was the feeling? Was there a sense, well, now finally you could get on with what it was meant to be all about? Do you recall?

Well, at the time the feeling of the navy, just about wholeheartedly, was we should do our best to get rid of these enemies and to make sure they don't come here to Australia. That was the heartfelt feeling, and the flag meant a lot to us - the national flag, the navy flag, the British flag. We were flag conscious, country conscious - proud to be Australian, and proud of the fact that we were related to the fellows of the first world war who had done everything they can. This is the feeling you get during wartime when it starts because there is a feeling of being pumped up, such as a football team going on to the field. We went out there on the night war was declared looking for somebody to sink - that was the whole idea. Later on, not long after that, we thought we don't want to sink anyone, we'd prefer not to unless somebody is attacking us.

How many ships were you in before the *Cessnock* then?

It's four, wasn't it? Yeah. *Australia*, *Albatross*, *Hobart*, *Canberra* - four.

Did you see any action or go far afield in those?

The first action I saw was in *Canberra* when we sank a German raider supply ship and tanker. We sank those two ships in the Indian Ocean.

Which ships were they, do you recall?

One was the *Ketty Brovig*, that was the name of the tanker. The supply ship doesn't come to mind at the moment.

(15.00) Can you recall the day - what happened? How it developed?

Yes. I didn't see a lot of it because I was gun's crew which meant as soon as the alarm sounded - action stations - I had to go down below three decks, down below the big turrets of the guns. The whole system is on a base right through down to the magazine. So I was in the cordite handling room. And we have to load these cordite charges into the hoppers which in turn go up to the guns and put two forty-pound charges of cordite behind each eight-inch shell. The magazine was next door to us and they shafted up too.

Did you feel vulnerable there? I mean, the fact that if you were hit you ...

You know that if you're hit they'll do everything they can to get you out, but they can't risk any gun flashes going down through to the cordite.

Was it one of those sorts of jobs that people would prefer not to have? I mean, to be in this position?

Yes, for sure, yes. I would rather be up the masthead where I was later in the smaller ships. But for two hours I was down there while they fired eighty rounds from our particular gun, and there was four turrets firing like that for two hours.

Deafening?

Not so deafening but shuddering, the whole ship shuddering all the time. And there was no communication down to us, only a voice tube which was rarely used because of any risk of gun flash - powder flash. And bells - a system of bells. We were locked up from outside and these levers across the doors called 'dogs' to lock us in, and of course it's air conditioned - forced air draught down there. So after two hours, and you're down below waterline, it's not very warm either. So we still don't know what's going on, but two hours later we're released and up to the upper deck we find the two ...

What was the point of being locked in - that you couldn't let yourselves out? What was the reason for that?

It was in case of any buckle - buckling. And if there's any water in the ship it became watertight in that section.

I can understand the need for having watertight sections but it sounds like you couldn't let yourselves out, that you were locked in, and it was something done from outside.

Yes, that was in the section we were in. But leading to the shell handling room there's two-way dogs where you could open and go up out through the shell room, because the danger there wasn't so great of a flash coming into the magazine. From the shell handling room, yes, there was an exit.

So there was a means of getting out as long as you ...

Yes. But that shell handling room communication was never to be opened - only in a dire emergency.

So at the end of that two hours how did you find out about what had gone on?

We get up to the upper deck and the officer in charge of the gun turret was a Lieutenant Commander White, aboard *Canberra*. I pointed out at one stage there was a charge of cordite smoking in the case and he said to get it over the side. So I threw it over the side.

How would that happen?

Heat, just heat from the gun barrel. Somebody had probably pulled it out and ejected it from the gun barrel and breech, and so it smoked away and it's been put into a leather case - they use these leather cases for just carrying them around - and gone unnoticed. It was thrown out amongst the empty cases on the deck when I pointed it out, so I threw it over the side which was okay. It would not have exploded of course, but any fire left unattended for any short time aboard a warship is bad news on the open deck. So then we find out exactly what had been going on, how many rounds were fired and by which guns, and the ships that were sunk, and the reason. And then by this time they're getting the prisoners, the German prize crew who were aboard these ships. And they in turn had prisoners which were the original crews of the ships, so ...

(20.00) What nationalities?

From the tanker, they were mainly Chinese - British officers, Chinese crew. From the supply ship, they were mainly British - a couple of Australians, seamen. So they were all brought aboard, prisoners locked away. The Germans ...

> What was the attitude towards them, because the propaganda of the time, of course, was that they were almost sub-human they were so bad? Did you think of them in those terms?

We did at first, especially when one of the Germans, who was a scowling and quite a nasty-looking character, spat on a midshipman - one of our midshipmen. One of our seamen knocked him over the side of the ship, which was quite a drop from a County Class cruiser - it's about thirty feet down to the waterline.

> He was retrieved, I presume?

Yes (laughs).

> Was he reprimanded for doing that?

Yes, he was, yes. It should not have been done. Of course, a few who saw it did cheer and said it's the right thing to do. But while we disliked these Germans at first, later on they were brought down under guard to our showers. The showers in a cruiser are just little cubicles, they are largely open shower rooms so you can communicate with everybody. There may be thirty or more in the one shower room at a time, all with their own shower rose. So it wasn't unusual for us to be showering and communicating with these Germans - some of them - because they only brought down a few at a time. Then we found them to be much like ourselves, which was surprising. Some of them even understood a little English, not a lot, and a few of us understood a little German. Of course, their sentries were Australian sailors of German extract, which the captain quickly found out and had put there, and they translated what the Germans were talking about in their cell and briefed with the intelligence officer about this later. We didn't get to hear what was going on.

> Where was that action by the way?

It was in the Indian Ocean. We were on a search for a pocket battleship. And the commander cleared lower deck and said, 'Well, we don't have much chance against eleven-inch guns in a faster ship'. The ship was the *Admiral von* [sic] *Scheer*, and had been sinking these ships, relevant to what I've just been speaking. And he said, 'We'll go in at night and shadow, and go in at night and use torpedoes'. Nobody cheered, but we knew we had to do things like it.

> Why did you say nobody cheered? Was there a feeling about torpedoes?

No, the fact that we had to get so close range to a pocket battleship.

> It's a bit like being told to get in the ring with Mohammed Ali or something, is it (laughs)?

Yes, that's right - a terrier against an alsatian (laughs). Anyway, it could have come off, no doubt about it. But we weren't really sorry that we missed the battleship that night, but thinking about it later, we said, 'Oh well, it has to be done' and we came round to the thought

on the mess decks that yeah, we should be chasing it. Anyway, we got down into the cold regions and back up into the tropics and zig-zagged all over the place, and there's something like forty ships, we found out, chasing that pocket battleship but it's a mighty big ocean.

> Were there any other particular events that occurred of special importance to you before you joined the *Cessnock*?

No, the *Canberra* was mainly escort work. It was responsible for being part of or leading the convoys with all the Australian and New Zealand troops over the Middle East, sometimes as far as Trincomalee, sometimes as far as Cape Town or Aden.

> Was shore leave exciting for you as a young fellow then in those foreign places?

(25.00) Oh yes. We had places to go to, such as we had a shipboard Buffalo Lodge which we used to have in each port. We could go and always have an invitation from one of the Buffalo Lodges, which was quite a friendly thing, and it was the only floating dispensation of a lodge in the world. This made it exciting for people in different towns - for us to visit them and relate our experiences.

> Were you briefed before going ashore in each port as to how you ought relate to the local people, the local customs, those sorts of things?

Yes. Mauritius, for instance, I remember commanders saying, 'Now before you go ashore here, those of you who have not been, this place has a reputation for white rum and very friendly black people. Now, I'm suggesting to you that it's not a good idea to take up either of these advantages.'

> To a lot of young fellows that might have seemed a challenge (laughs).

Yes, well actually, luckily the way I saw it, they weren't actually black people, they were very nice people, and there were a lot of people of French descent intermarried, and of course very dark-skinned. These days, now, there's no worries about this sort of thing - what colour skin anybody is. But back in those days it was still like the thin red line and the British Empire and so on - basically we were regarded as slightly inferior in most cases.

> But a very attractive mix, and the young women must have looked extremely attractive to you as young men.

That's right, yeah, they did. And the Seychelles Islands, another place similar. These were tropical paradises to get ashore. It was all good fun and you could relax and forget about wars and things for a while, for a day or two.

> Part of the perils of these paradises could be VD. How would those facts be accommodated if a young fellow got back and found that he had a problem?

They'd be transported to the nearest hospital. Each ship had a sick berth attendant. It was only the large ships had doctors. So he'd have to be either transported to a port where there was a hospital or to a larger ship where there was a doctor.

What was the attitude? Would young fellows see it as a badge of valour almost, or was it something they were ashamed of?

It was more the latter because we were all well and truly briefed on this on joining up at the end of Flinders Navy Depot. I don't know if they still do it; I'd like to find out. The doctors down there - there'd be two doctors in attendance and they'd show films, not in any way pornographic literature but in order to let you understand how it all happened and how it come about, and what preventative measures can be taken. And some of the pictures they show of such as venereal disease was breasts being eaten away and genitals being affected and all this.

Pretty frightening.

It was, scary. And of course everybody spoke about this often and often. Then again every ship carried a supply of condoms which were freely available to anybody who wanted them. But things did happen, of course. One case I knew in particular, a shipmate of mine was getting married and he got VD from the girl he was going to marry [inaudible].

That was back here in Australia or overseas?

It was in Australia. So how that all happened .... I know he didn't get married - but how it all came about, it was a mystery - one of those things.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two, of the interview with Edward Rigney, formerly of the *Cessnock*, recorded on 19th March 1991.

How did your move to the *Cessnock* come about?

Well, my rating in *Canberra* was cook, and they sent me down to Flinders Navy Depot to take over the rating of leading cook, so that was a period of three months. Before the end of the three months I was notified that a corvette was laid down and due to be commissioned in Sydney. And each corvette has a leading cook, so it was the whole idea of Manning Department staffing these ships with crew. They'd pluck you from somewhere because you had to take full responsibility of catering for up to a hundred men or so. There was nobody you could lean on for advice, you had to do the whole lot. So I think it was rather selective, the means of putting an experienced leading cook aboard these smaller ships. Anyway, I think it was - was it January '42? Yeah, January '42, I think she was commissioned on the 26th, something like that.

How did you feel about it? Did you like the idea of going into a smaller ship?

No, I was curious more than anything. I thought perhaps .... A smaller ship always related by others as having, such as destroyers which before the corvettes came about, destroyer was the smallest - it was sloop, actually. But these destroyers and sloops were regarded as happy ships, meaning that there was less discipline in the way of dress - working dress - generally saluting up on the upper deck and so on - it was more relaxed.

Was that essentially because there were smaller crews and people got to know each other?

Yes. It could be dispensed with because underneath it all, the real discipline is to run the ship properly and make it an efficient unit. So the lesser amount of men is more easy to control.

How long had you been cooking before you joined the *Cessnock* then?

Five years.

Did you like it?

Yes.

What was it like as a job? What was the kind of routine you'd have - in the bigger ships, before you joined the *Cessnock*?

In the bigger ships. Well, the bigger ships, of course - the run down was a bakery, consisting of a chief petty officer cook who was in charge of the baking, then a leading cook plus two cooks. That's the staff of a bakery on a cruiser. Now in the galley end, where all the meals are cooked, there's a chief cook, two petty officer cooks, there's three leading cooks and a range of between ten and twelve cooks. Now, these work in watches which, say, beginning in the morning at four-thirty, one watch of cooks would start doing breakfast and preparing anything for the midday meal. Then at eight-thirty another watch of cooks would come on

and assist with the noon-midday - main meal. Then the breakfast cooks would go off duty at lunchtime. Then another watch would come on for the evening meal, and they'd work until seven-thirty at night.

(5.00) Apart from the cooks, were there also kitchenhands who did the washing and cleaning and all that sort of thing?

No, not in the navy. No, we did it all ourselves. Occasionally you would have somebody to help if - a shortage of cooks - then you would get seamen to help in the galley.

Which section were you in?

In both - I was doing bakery and cooking in the main galley.

How do you think it rated as a job in the ship? I mean, given where you were at in terms of your age and your rank - as a job - where would you rank it compared with other things?

It was supply assistance. The miscellaneous crew were regarded as cooks, supply assistance, sick berth attendants, stewards, because we were in square rig and we were neither seamen nor stoker. The modern navy today, everybody wears round rig - that's the sailors' rig - and they have become a part of the main unit of the ship now; the classifications are not as varied as they used to be.

I was wondering more as how you regarded it as a job, given the sorts of things you might otherwise have done.

I see, yes. I thought it was a good thing because it's a job that is very interesting, there's no end to learning really. It's not like saying, I've achieved this, and that's my level; you can keep going. Perhaps not so much in the navy but upon leaving the navy you've got a good base - a good grounding - to go on with cooking.

So you saw that and regarded it as a good opportunity. What about the attitudes of the people aboard towards cooks? For example, one gets the impression in the army there's a bit of a tradition of always condemning the food and condemning the cooks.

Yes. Well, there's the jokes, the timeworn jokes mainly coming from the first war - perhaps before then - of who called the cook a so-and-so, and these things. No, that's only ever said in a joke now. Cooks are really popular.

So there was a tradition of complaining but it wasn't a genuine complaint, more a joke than ...

Yes, it was. Not many complaints came to notice by crew, generally, in all the ships I served in, because an officer would come around after a meal and say, 'Any complaints?'. If you had a complaint you'd stand up and state it.

What sort of things might be complained of? If there was too much salt ....

Yeah, undercooked or overcooked, not enough variety or whatever, because this happened a lot during the war - there was hardly any variety.

> And I guess there'd be times where you'd just run out of things and have to limit yourselves to a fairly few basic items, would you?

Yes. I could relate, one time later, when we're talking about the *Cessnock*, if you like, about what happened when we were running out of food. But these things did occur on all ships. I'll relate one instance aboard *Canberra*. This was at Mauritius also. We had our last bag of onions - fresh onions - and spread them out on the deck and they were full of maggots so we had to turn the hose on them to wash them because they were still valuable food. And everything else by this time was dehydrated - going to be dehydrated vegetables. Now, you know what happened - the sailors who were going to eat these onions drew a big chalk line around these onions we were washing and started to bet on which maggots were going to go across the line. That's the way things were (laughs). But people were tough in that respect when you come to extremities like that - extreme circumstances.

> What about the differences in menus for the different rates: able bodied menus compared with those for the officers? Were there substantial differences?

(10.00) Generally yes. The officers had better meals and they were better serviced. They had their stewards look after them. They had their wines.

> A choice of dishes?

No, they had a fixed menu with a choice of three or four items rather than an *à la carte* meal.

> And what about the able bodied, they'd have what was decided on.

It was called general messing and it was decided upon by what used to be the paymaster and his staff. The chief cook - the supply officer - would present a menu to the pay commander and say, well, this is what we think. Now, that would also be checked by the medical staff. One of the doctors would be allocated to go through it. These navy menus were always checked on the forethought of the old days when men used to get scurvy from vitamin lack. This was one reason that they had lime juice every day. Even though it was keeping up the old traditions it still worked, particularly up in the tropics and the hot areas. So they weren't willy-nilly. They were put together with all forethought towards your vitamin and protein - a balanced diet.

> What about the captain's meal? Would he have a special meal again, or would he just have a ...?

He would eat alone, unless on occasion it was traditional for the officers to invite the captain to the ward room, and he'd accept. This was outside of action areas, of course - what was termed first degree of readiness areas. But mainly he would eat in his own cabin - his day room. The flagship, the same with the admiral. The admiral would eat alone. Have his own staff, his own galley.

> What about during, say, anti-sub patrols or those sort of things, when you were in the *Cessnock* or even aboard the bigger ships? If it was an operation that

required a fairly high stage of alert, would there be a reduced menu? How would you cope?

Yes. In battle areas it would go down to sandwiches - biscuits, sandwiches, hot drinks where possible. If they could be .... Of course, you couldn't supply to gun stations or anything like that. But as men could be relieved, if they weren't in actual conditions of opening fire with the guns or dropping depth charges and such things, it would all have to wait until after the action, and then it would be general hands to mess - where they could clean up and have their meal.

What about special occasions: Christmases, and New Years and so on?

Every effort was made to produce something extra. You'd save up items such as meats and any poultry available and make provision for Christmas puddings in particular - Christmas cake, if you had the dried fruits and requirements.

Would the officers celebrate their birthdays?

Yes, but not in a big way.

The captain?

The captain, no. He was usually reticent about his birthday celebrations; there'd be a quiet pink gin or something of that nature. No, I don't remember any huge parties going on at sea, because the story of the sun going down over the yard arm is the time to open up the ward room drinks. It's true to some effect but not a general booze-up, of course - it was frowned upon.

What about with cooks? I gather that whereas officers would have access to alcohol it wasn't available for the able bodied, but were the cooks in a position where they could have a quiet nip?

No, we didn't use any wines for cooking; it wasn't available. We could get at Christmas, of course, you'd get brandy for the brandy sauce, a bit of rum to put in the pudding.

How did the galley look aboard the *Cessnock* after the big ships? It must have seemed incredibly small, did it?

(15.00) It certainly did. It was like walking into a vegetable locker aboard the *Canberra* or *Australia* - the size of it - although they were very well-built, the corvette galleys. They are quite efficient and room to move, but of course, the thing that I had to quickly discover was how to use roll bars. We had them in the bigger ships but ...

What were roll bars?

Roll bars - for use in heavy seas, so that you've got pots on top of the stove, there's no way they're going to stay there if the ship rolls - lurches or dips. So you pack the pots in between the roll bars. They slotted at each end of the stove and a bar goes in those slots and the pot is held firmly by that. So even though, if it's full the pot will spill over unless it's got a very tight lid, the pot will not slide anyway, so you haven't lost all your meal.

Was there a rule about, say in certain force winds or gales, that you wouldn't have hot foods, or anything of that sort?

Yes, when it became unmanageable we would relay a message to the bridge from the galley, and say we're finding things very difficult here. And the duty officer would say, well, we'll check it out, or I'll ask the first lieutenant, who'd possibly call down to the galley. But if the order was given to rig lifelines around the upper deck, immediately all action stopped in the galley because we knew that we couldn't handle it anyway.

Nonetheless, were there accidents where the seas were, say, suddenly got rough or just things went wrong for whatever reason? I mean, where people got scalded.

Yes, accidents such as that did happen, not often, but they were of a minor nature really, such as scalded legs and hands. Sometimes a back flash from a burner - an oil burner. We used to burn dieseline in the bottom of the galley range. This accumulated a lot of oil lying there and suddenly it would burst into flame - too much of it - it would flash back through and either hit you in the legs or up into the face.

Did you ever get that happen to you?

Yes, the worst one I got was on the *Hobart*. Burnt on my eyes,eyelashes, eyes sealed together with the blisters and all the top part of the hair burnt off. I was taken to sick bay. I couldn't see for three days. Anyway, the doctor took a risk, as he told me, and used this new ointment - a gel-type ointment - and just patted this on my eyes. And it worked after three days.

Were there other occasions where you'd get heavy seas come up, you've prepared a lot of food and perhaps, presuming you take some pride in your work, then find that half the crew was seasick and couldn't eat it anyway?

Not often, no. There were people seasick some .... I've even known of one that had to leave the *Cessnock*. He got so sick that his papers were marked not to go to sea again, so he had to spend the rest of the war at a shore depot.

What was it like generally, then, in the *Cessnock*, having got used to the fact that you've got a much smaller work area, in terms of job and the relationship with the crew and so on?

Well, the size of the ships meant that you were in contact all the time with the rest of the crew. The galley's always central point on any ship. That's why nearly everybody in the navy knows the cooks. The cooks don't know everybody in the navy because of that reason.

Was it more satisfying? I mean, if you've gone to some trouble to do what you thought would be a good meal, would you more readily get a better feeling in a small ship - that people would express their appreciation?

Yes, that did happen, and generally would appreciate it to the extent that I meet fellows at reunions now mention things like: I haven't come across the same good bread you used to make, because this is nostalgia, it's not that I made the best bread in the world. But seeing my

face reminded them of the bread they'd eaten - thousands of miles out at sea and still getting fresh bread. You can imagine the smell of fresh bread wafting through a small ship. That was one of the pleasures of making it and getting it into the oven and baking.

(20.00) Well, another thing about the smell of food in kitchens. There are a lot of people who might regard themselves as being able to get around alright in a ship or a boat, often come undone when they go down below and get near the kitchen. How did you adjust to that extra tendency for people to be set off with seasickness?

Well, the galley in the corvettes was more or less on the upper deck, in the waist of the ship, so there's plenty of fresh air there as well as the forced air in the galley itself. There was never any worries about heavy smells such as onions, cabbage, or whatever, permeating through the mess decks. No, it always tended to waft out through the waists into the wide open spaces.

Well, the *Cessnock* went to Kenya. Do you have any particular memories of Kenya?

Kenya? Well, I have memories of the baboons throwing rocks at us (laughs). We went up to a place called Kilindini. We had been damaged in a collision with an Arab dhow at sea.

What happened?

It was pitch black at night, of course, no lights either from .... I think the dhow didn't want lights because we suspected she may have contraband cargo. We didn't stop to find out.

It sounds like it was quite a large vessel, then, was it?

Oh yes, quite large, probably about half our size. Anyway, my cook at the time, Ern Mackman, was asleep in his hammock on top of a French float which was used in minesweeping. Now, I had my hammock underneath his when the collision occurred. And the only thing I can see is a blue flash and some shouting; it was from the bridge. And the ship going down - a downward movement - this was as the prow of the ship was hanging on top. What had happened was it had come on top of Mackman's leg and broke it - smashed him across the thigh. So all I could think of was 'Mate we've being hit' - coming out of a sleep - 'we've been hit, we're sinking, I'll have to get "Mac" out of this, throw him over the side and jump in with him.'

You felt you'd been torpedoed or something.

Yeah, mine or torpedo. And I'm trying to do this when the coxswain ran up and said, 'We've been hit by another ship'. He didn't recognise it at that time - just what it was. So luckily I stopped trying to pull Mackman out. Of course, he was moaning in agony, so he had to be put ashore while the ship was being replated in dock. Luckily there was an American base at Asmara, air conditioned hospital, which was the first one we'd ever seen. And he was put in there and they fixed his leg. Unfortunately it came out shorter than the other one so they had to break it again and do it again - this is why he missed the ship when we left. But talkin' about these baboons. We went ashore while they were doing the repairs, into a prisoner of war camp we rested up there. These were Italian prisoners of war, but there were also civilians there, too - civilian Italians been rounded up and interned. So they didn't bother

much about us excepting that they'd heard that we were savages - Australians were cannibals - and showed us some of the propaganda leaflets they had about Australians. Anyway, we decided to go up to Asmara. We hitched a ride on a truck and as we were ...

How much leave did you have?

Just two days there. No, we had a week off while the ship's being repaired, and it took, I think, ten days before we took off for sea again. The baboons threw rocks at us on the way up to Asmara. And we came back and off to sea and this time proceeded to where we were going in the first place - we were on our way to the Mediterranean - so we left there.

Were there any social activities in Kenya? Did you get to meet any of the settlers who were there, or that sort of thing?

(25.00) No, by this time the Italians had been in Eritrea and Abyssinia, and they'd been rounded up, and the *Hobart* was involved in some of that action - when they took a gun ashore and helped block off one of the passes with the army. Anyway, the British Army then defeated the Italians there, but all the civilians had been evacuated further back into the country or had been taken back to Britain and other parts. So we didn't see much of any social connections with any white people. There were a lot of blacks around, Masuwas and so on.

And the sinking of the German ship, the *Rameses*[sic], was it, or *Ramses*. What happened there? Did the *Cessnock* get involved directly in that?

No, not directly.

Well, you then went on to patrols in the Mediterranean where, I gather, the conditions could be pretty unpleasant. What was it like in the kitchen where it could be hot anyway?

Yeah. This you get used to. Today, at my age, I wouldn't survive a day in the kitchen in those areas. I wouldn't be able to stand the heat but then, with youth on your side, we were all in our early twenties - well, most of us were in our early twenties - and of course, stokers and cooks were the group that had most heat to contend with. That's why we were always rather close and friendly towards each other, because we understood each other's conditions.

Well, cooks in civilian life can have a reputation - or there's a bit of a reputation for being temperamental people. In those sort of conditions that you're describing did it create special sort of tempers?

No, I remember Ern Mackman, my cook who had his leg broken, showing signs of temperament one time. And because he didn't put the roll bars up and a certain wave movement came and spilled over the stew that he'd just finished - this was a Brazilian stew, we used to term it ...

Which was what?

It was mixed vegetables in with the beef - it was a beef-based stew. It was very good food for the crew. It was always popular with them. Anyway, it tipped over. Then he had several

other pots on the stove and I just entered the galley just seeing him reaching for those others and going to tip them all over in rage (laughs) because he was so frustrated with this other thing. So I was able to restrain him from that, and I think I managed to convince him that this only meant extra work and we can't go down to the corner shop and buy another lot of meat (laughs).

Were there concessions about dress while you were in the Mediterranean as to what was acceptable?

Acceptable to ourselves, yeah. The Royal Navy were not happy about us wearing khaki uniforms but that's all we had, we told them that's all we had, anyway. Although our captain, Marchington, wore white uniform because he was Royal Navy from the beginning and he also thought that khaki is not the right colour for sailors.

Was it simply that the whites just got too dirty in the kitchen?

No, not just that. I'm talking about the whole crew, I thought you meant the whole crew.

I see, well ....

No, in the kitchen dress was white uniform, but in very hot climates you'd have to get down to something like a t-shirt and shorts, otherwise you just couldn't bear it.

But were there regulations that properly, that you ought to have been wearing other attire in the kitchen?

On the larger ships, cruisers, yes, that would have been, because they had better air conditioning also.

So did somebody just choose to do that, or there was a request made, or how did that come about that you settled down to shorts and singlets?

No, we just .... It was accepted by the first lieutenant on board the ship.

On the basis of request, or people just did it.

No, just did it, and then it was go on from there. There are lots of things like that can happen. When heavy weather came, as a matter of fact, most of us would - there were never any girls aboard of course - strip off our gear and hold on to the rails while the seas broke over the top of us. We'd go up on the combing, the breakwater combing, on the front of the ship, the foc's'le, hold on to that. And as the ship would dip like that and the water would come over. The reason for doing this was to ease heat rash more than anything else. Heat rash ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Edward Rigney, formerly of the *Cessnock*, recorded on 19th March 1991.

You were describing the nature of the heat rash.

Yes. As a matter of fact I have a photograph I can show you later of this act of hanging on to the guard rail while the sea rushes over your naked body.

Anybody slip or look like getting washed over?

No. At one time - I had a dangerous habit, I realised later - where I sometimes I used to put my hammock in the waist of the ship, which was not far from the galley, and on a perfectly calm night that was terrific. The sea was right there. There might be stars and moonlight on the water and all that - something you'd see in Hollywood films. But some nights you'd wake up and there's the sea has risen and the ship's rolling. And your hammock is rolling out way over the sea; as the ship goes that way, your hammock goes that way and if any of those clews - that's the little lanyard ropes on the end of the hammock - if any of them had broken on one of those outward swings, there was no leading cook (laughs); he was shark bait.

Give you a start?

Yes. Well, I decided that I'd find a different place for it in future, and not put too much faith in the calm sea and a corvette.

You were making a point before though about the crew generally and khakis.

Yes. Well, that was objected to several times. For instance, a commodore at Aden - Royal Navy, and remembering that this group of corvettes belonged to the Royal Navy, Australian built and Australian crewed but belonging to the Royal Navy - he objected to people in his area being dressed in soldiers' uniforms, the way he put it. So our captain said nothing he could do about it because the Australian authorities had decided to issue khaki uniforms when the ships were up in New Guinea and they still had them. The commodore didn't accept that answer as being good enough, so sent us back up to the Persian Gulf for another run - extra run.

Of how long?

It was for another month it took for up there. And that was regarded as punishment by any of us - the Persian Gulf. Another time was in the Mediterranean and it was objected, when we were ashore in Alexandria on shore leave - just daily shore leave - walking around the dockyards in khaki uniforms. It wasn't appeasing to the Royal Navy authorities there either.

So what did crew members think of these sorts of protests from the British?

It was generally laughable and in our minds we still regarded ourselves as nothing but Australians and with all the rest of the Australian Navy back home - not back home, they were all overseas somewhere or other, but meaning around the tropical areas of Australia, were all wearing khaki uniforms. But of course, down in Sydney and Melbourne and so on, still in the blue uniforms.

With that you were under command of the British in that area. What was the feeling, generally, about the British do you feel?

Yes, it was quite good but they were so different to us in lots of respects. They had more discipline from their petty officers and chief petty officers than we had. Our chiefs and POs could get their orders executed just as efficiently but without a lot of navy regulation - authoritarian verbiage. (5.00)This is the way we looked at it anyhow. It was more free and easy.

What about saluting when you were ashore?

Some officers, we knew, you better salute in order to keep you out of trouble. Mainly, they didn't worry a lot about it.

What about the British officers?

Yes, this is one of the big differences between the two nations.

No, but I mean would you salute the British officers normally?

Oh yes, we had to but mainly we didn't.

I've had Australian servicemen - army men - who've told me that the tendency was to avoid saluting unless they saw an officer had a girl on one hand and a package in the other, and then they'd march across so they'd have to salute (laughs).

Yes, things like that did go on, yes. I remember one time an air force group captain was talking to us and our commanding officer walked past - this was in Bombay - and he turned around and came back and he said, 'You didn't salute me' and the air force captain - he was just in khakis without insignia - and he said, 'No, mate'. He said, 'I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to my crew' (laughs). So away he went, and this air force group captain, who really out-ranked him, said, 'What's the matter with him?' (laughs). Anyway, we thought it was a good story.

What about the nature of the patrols? The minesweeping and so on? Were there times when it was just sheer boredom?

Often, yeah - monotonous. Boring and also time consuming and energy consuming, because you had to concentrate so hard - things could go wrong. If a wire fouled up, such as happened, I think, *La Trobe* one time - probably other corvettes - wire broke and fouled up a propeller. It run over its own wire, as a matter of fact, and they had to get divers down to work on it for two hours, and there's Japs all over the place but luckily they didn't spot them. But these sort of things you have to be on edge about.

Did you have other duties other than your galley duties?

Yes, and especially in *Cessnock* - I was one of the regular masthead lookouts which meant I had to climb up the masts and get into the little lookout, crow's nest. I had a buzzer alarm down to the bridge.

This is looking for mines mostly?

Looking for mines and any sign of submarines - periscope - and aircraft; a lot of it was aircraft. I had to report the .... I had a large pair of binoculars to report the location of aircraft, whether they're coming from red or green, or fifteen degrees or thirty or whatever, and an estimate of what type - bombers or fighters.

Did you sight any of these when you were on duty?

Yeah, and reported same.

Was the ship ever attacked by dive-bombers or enemy aircraft?

Only in Moresby. We've had aircraft overhead but not attacking us - attacking other ships. At one stage, sinking an ammunition ship, which you can imagine is - it was only a mile off us - you can imagine a 10,000 ton American liberty ship with ammunition going up, there was quite a racket. And it lifted the *Cessnock* a couple of feet out of the water - the concussion. And anyway, it was unfortunate, there were no survivors. That was at the invasion of Sicily. On the morning watch on lookout I reported a mine 400 yards dead ahead and reported this to the bridge, of course, and they got on the job quickly and took evasive action - went hard to starboard as I suggested. And the next thing he's got the sharpshooters lining up on the mine to sink it. The idea is to put holes through, underneath the water level - the waterline - and sink it.

(10.00) But one of the twenty millimetre cannon shells must have struck one of the horns and up she went. So I came down out of the crow's nest and back to where my hammock was and this time it's smoking and there's a large part of a collar of a mine in it. So I was lucky I was on duty. I had to get new ropes and everything to fix my hammock up.

I gather the crow's nest could be uncomfortable if you were attacking and the ship were giving off a fair amount of smoke. Did you find yourself in that sort of ...?

Yes, that happened, but, of course, smoke was frowned upon at any time and especially in a degree of readiness - even galley smoke wasn't allowed. So the only time smoke was heavily used was if they poured it on deliberately to take evasive action or screen bombers, or other means. This was used to good effect the time we went out in the Atlantic and bringing in a large convoy and the Germans attacked a smaller convoy. They got the wrong message. And luckily for us, I suppose, because we had seventy-five ships to look after and the smaller one had forty-five, I think - forty. So how they got out of it after, I think, more than thirty bombers involved - all the ships threw over smoke floats and also made smoke from their funnels from the boiler room, so the whole area was covered in smoke and they shot a few planes down. But the rest of the planes went back and reported that many ships were sunk - they were fooled by the smoke.

Would there be a danger of collision in that sort of situation?

Always a danger of collision, it's a matter of Aldis lamp signalling, radar, where fitted, and blasts on the siren - bells. Noise is one of the safety factors. But there were collisions, yeah.

Did you have any collisions with the *Cessnock*?

No, only that one with the dhow.

Or near misses?

Yeah, near misses. When we were going around at night, because that was the order of the day in Sicily - at night-time, go round like a circus. Scores of ships all in a mighty big circle going the same way, all going clockwise, all night, and that reduced the danger of collision, which was good because including in it, roundabout, was a hospital ship. So nobody wanted to see that hit ....

I gather you also went to Beirut. Did you go ashore in Beirut?

Beirut? Yes - several times there, Beirut.

It used to be regarded once as a wonderful place, sort of Paris of the Mediterranean. How did it look in those days?

It had a lovely beach there - good clean water - not the heavy surf of our coastal beaches but nice little waves and nice clean white sand. There was a bit of high-rise density of flats at the back of the beach, a little bit like Surfers' but not quite as - you still get afternoon sun there. That was always one of our favourites when we get ashore, was to get to a nice beach. I suppose it's the Australian way of life, because what you're thinking of is what's back home in Australia - Bondi Beach and St Kilda, or whatever.

How often were you getting mail and, managed to find its way in?

At times it could be between three and four months, other times coming fairly regularly, by that I mean maybe once a fortnight. But quite often it went to four or five months - one time it was five months.

Would there be formal briefings in the ship about the course of the war and how things were going?

Yes. On the smaller ships it would probably be when we got to a navy base - a British navy base - and there would be briefing from an intelligence officer. On our own bigger ships, of course, they did it internally with their own intelligence officer there.

When you were going ashore at a place like Beirut and so on, would you be provisioning as well?

Yes.

As a cook, could you make representations to, would it be the purser who'd look after supplies, as to what you'd like them to get and so on?

Supply assistant. They'd have authority to go ashore with a navy order.

(15.00) Would you try unusual things? I mean, were you at all adventurous in the sorts of foods that you might get?

Oh, quite often, yes, if we could get something that's a little bit out of the ordinary, yes.

What would you regard as out of the ordinary? Goats' eyes, or ...? (Laughs.)

Goat was the only thing we could get up round the Persian Gulf area. We used to provision at Aden and Bandar Abbas, and places like that you could only get goat or camel which is very unlovely meat, I can tell you.

Did you have problems with some people adjusting to the foods? Did you get outbreaks of bad stomachs and that sort of thing?

I was the worst case because I was eating less food than anybody else, and at one stage I was taken ashore to hospital in Bombay. Our skipper called over - this is from the *Lismore* - called over a doctor from a merchant ship. And he said, 'Well, there's no way you're going to look after this fellow; you've got to get him to hospital' because ...

What was wrong? Why were eating ...?

Lack of vitamins, iron deficiency. Why I wasn't eating is because the food was so terrible. I don't mean it's cooked in a bad way - the raw material itself to me was ...

Be a wonderful joke for the crew - the food was that crook even the cook ... (laughs).

I told them later. I felt guilty about giving it to the men - that's how it was, but we couldn't get anything else.

Did you disguise it by lacing it with curries and that sort of thing?

Yes, we tried all of those things. And another thing we managed to get hold of some soya-links; these are American sausage-type things - very highly seasoned - and there's about four to five to one of these large tins. And they used to cut those up and use them for seasoning effects in different meat dishes. Poultry - couldn't get any at all. Fish - occasionally, if we could wangle a depth charge. But you're only allowed one a month for practice. You could use a hundred a month in actuality in action, but only one a month for practice, so we had fish once a month (laughs). Sometimes it would last for several days - the supply.

Would there be opportunities to just fish at times?

At times, but I'm afraid we never won any medals at fishing. I don't know if we were in the wrong place at the wrong time or whether all the fish had been bombed out. We didn't seem to do any good up around there.

What about sharks, were there many sharks in that area?

They do have sharks in the Red Sea, I've seen, but I don't remember in the Gulf - I do remember large turtles and sea snakes in the Gulf - but I can't recall sharks. Huge basking sharks in the Red Sea, about forty foot or more long, and extremely large manta rays. But as far as fishing goes, I think not .... Although at one time closer to home, up around the

Thursday Island area and so forth, we used to get plenty of fish there, because we used to give them to the Chinese who I found, to my amazement, were not good fishermen. They're not patient enough to leave a hook in the water for a long time. I always thought Chinamen had all the patience in the world, but not with fishing. So we'd give them queen fish, which were a very nice eating fish, in exchange for a bottle of beer or a bottle of whisky - these are tankers with civilian crew. That didn't happen all the time, but it did happen occasionally.

> Would you get involved with the negotiations at some of these places for the provisioning?

No, that would be done by a sub-lieutenant going ashore with the supply assistant whose job it was to procure all our supplies. I would been in charge from the time it came aboard, for purposes of quality, and its keeping standard, and whether we could hold so much, or whether it could be frozen for any length of time, because if we couldn't freeze it, it was no good taking it in warm climates. It's alright down south in the more temperate places.

(20.00) But we had to freeze everything. Say, for instance, we took some fresh milk to sea, it would have to go in the freezer after - a certain amount would go in the freezer straight away. Now, of course, that would form into an ice block and so the thing is, when it melts, you're not getting it melted back as straight milk again.

> Water and ...

Water, yeah - there's a separation. So had to train everybody how to look at that. It's still good milk. It's still a good product, but don't expect to take out a frozen lump and think you've got just pure milk.

> With the Americans and the PX system and the massive amounts of supplies and equipment they were moving around, there were quite legendary stories about black marketeering and all sorts of rackets. At a lesser level, with provisionings, did you ever hear of people who used the opportunity to do a little fiddle?

No, this happened towards the end of the war more, I hear. This was up around Japan and Korea and perhaps the Philippines, but not so much in the Indian and Mediterranean areas that I [inaudible].

> What sort of things are supposed to have happened in the Philippines, or near Korea and so on?

Well, selling sugar for instance, which is in short supply - and soap. This is only hearsay. Sugar and soap were used from stores in exchange for money and jewellery. I didn't hear of any other items - and salt, I think, was involved, too.

> Incidentally, your friend who'd been injured and put ashore at Kenya, and had his leg operated on. Did he rejoin the ship?

No, he was sent back to Australia. I didn't ever find out what happened to him. I did hear that he'd been sent back to Australia. I imagine, with the injury to his leg, he would have been either put to a shore job or discharged medically unfit.

So did you stay with the *Cessnock* until the end of the war?

No. They had a change around of crews when it was decided that the ships that were with the Royal Navy - that was eight, it was twelve altogether, I think, but as far as we were concerned it was two groups of eight. And they were going to go back to the Eastern Fleet which was getting ready to come across to the Pacific area, and which did happen. So some of these ships then formed up with the British Pacific Fleet in connection with the supply train, they called it, taking .... As this massive movement towards Japan started, the logistics were amazing - huge. So, everything had to be done. First, the attack ships allied with the bombers - the air force and marines in liaison with the American forces, of course. But behind them had to come all the suppliers, and as you realise, nothing can happen without supplies or I don't think it would keep happening. So the corvettes were put again on escort work and minesweeping to keep up supplies, to keep the war machine going. And some of us from the *Cessnock* finished up on the *Lismore*, some on other ships. Then back home to Australia via - after I got out of hospital in Bombay, as a matter of fact.

How long were you laid up, by the way?

I was there for just on two weeks. Then I went to the Admiral's staff - they had nowhere else to put me. At one stage they wanted to put me in the army and I objected to that, of course - this was the 14th Army in Burma. And they agreed that they couldn't do that to an Australian, so ...

This was the British authorities?

Yes. After I left hospital I went to the British base. They don't really want Australians because they regard them as abrasive to the discipline, generally - not all, I mean, but that's their idea. So it was decided to send me to Naval Headquarters and from there I went down to rejoin *Lismore* at Colombo.

(25.00) Were you disappointed not to be going back to the *Cessnock*?

Yes, in a way. In another way I wasn't because they'd changed skippers. I had more admiration for our skipper that I knew than the one who was taking over, probably not a lot of reason for that - it's just the way I felt. It wasn't a big issue but it meant that I wasn't unhappy about going to *Lismore*.

What sort of ship was the *Lismore*?

It was a very good crew ...

No, I mean class, what class was it?

Class? The same, corvette, yeah. And she was in the other group of corvettes. There were four in ours and four in the one *Lismore* was in. She had a very good skipper, he was very popular with the crew. And when we got to Melbourne - this is when I was getting married, Peg and I were married - he gave leave to all the ten men who'd been overseas with the *Cessnock* for a long time, which was two and a half years - gave them all leave - but, of course, were recalled the next day to go out and look for a submarine which was reported.

So, of course, we went out and didn't find it, but there apparently had been a submarine there - a Jap - so back home. But anyway, we went to Sydney from Melbourne and that's where I left *Lismore*.

The *Cessnock*, of course, went on for the surrender in Japan. Were you sorry to have missed that in a way?

Well, I was sorry to have left the *Lismore*. The navy does some strange things in their Manning Department. They took me from the *Lismore* to put me on a ship called *Yandra*. The *Yandra* was used as a radar and asdic training ship. It used to go up and down the coast of the Barrier Reef, right up the top - Cape York - and back down to Sydney. Now, that's the ship I was aboard when the war ended. We were 400 miles east of Brisbane when the war ended.

Did it seem a bit of an anticlimax in a way?

It did, yes, although we had been expecting it to end. We didn't know with such suddenness of the atomic bomb - just like a film snapping - everything just stopped like ....

Yet I gather you stayed on in the navy until about 1949.

Yes, November 1949.

Why did you stay with it?

Well, I was in the permanent navy. I had signed up for that time.

I see. Would you have got out at war's end if you hadn't had that commitment?

Probably would have, yes. But after those number of years in the navy you feel uneasy about rejoining civilian life, and that sort of makes you reticent about saying, okay, I'm going to step ashore and that's it - just step into the new world. It takes time to - especially after wartime as well - it takes a long time.

I take it from references you've made to contacts with former seamen and that, that the association and the years have been of great importance to you throughout the remainder of your life.

Yes. We're seeing it now. We discuss it in these terms, that there's not a lot of time left for us, so now's the time to be easy about it and talk about the good times.

Was there also a sense that, in a way, it gave an importance to life - a meaning to life - of a sort that just generally isn't about?

That's right, yes. There's a camaraderie and a togetherness of a brotherhood, and that link of the sea itself.

END OF INTERVIEW