



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, with Edwin Pearse, tape one, side one.

Mr Pearse, could we just begin with your date and place of birth?

Yes, I was born in Ingleburn, New South Wales, on 26th February 1901, thereby I missed Queen Victoria by one month.

(Laughs) Right. I think the family had Cornish roots but you grew up in Australia.

I was born in Australia and my family had Cornish roots very definitely, still got them, yes.

You were saying that, I think, from the early days you had a bit of the wanderlust in you.

Yeah, and we've all got itchy feet - wanderlust as it's better known.

Sydney, as you grew up in the years before the first world war, I think that was at Fort Street you went to school.

Yes, I went to school in the old Fort Street building. Fort Street building was an old military hospital put up in 1913. The date was over the wall and I've often been in trouble for leaning against the said wall and told her that as it had stood up for 100 years it would stand for another one without my help. The building though, in 1916, was kept as it was and still is there, I believe. But a new one was built out at Petersham and I'm one of the last boys at the old Fort Street school and the first at the new one.

You actually left school in the middle of the first world war, I think - 1916.

I left school in 1916. School got too hard for me.

You were saying that you'd always wanted to join the permanent navy but there was a difficulty.

Yes, I failed on the eyesight after my father had wasted money getting me coached for two years for the examination to enter the Naval College at Jervis Bay.

Why were you interested in the navy, Mr Pearse?

Because I've got webbed feet, with every finger a fish hook and every hair a rope yard like the rest of the Pearses.

Was it really as simple as that?

Yes, I never doubted for one minute that I'd go to sea. And a lot of people do, and they go to sea and face a lot of trouble and difficulties when they could have a soft, easy job on land, but they prefer the sea, and I was one of them.

I think after you couldn't get down to Jervis Bay you decided that you'd get yourself into the Merchant Navy.

You've got it exactly, that's correct. The second best was the merchant service.

Where did you go first?

AUSN Company, and as I couldn't pass the eyesight test I had to be an engineer instead of a first mate, second mate, third mate, fourth mate. And that was about the only alternative left. And the AUSN Company put up with me, they taught me to be an engineer first of all with fire gears in their workshop before they sent me to sea in their ships.

Just for the transcription AUSN is Australian United ...

Australasian United Steam Navigation, but the company has folded altogether about twenty-five years ago.

And I think you had about five years in a Sydney workshop. That was doing your basic training, was it?

Yes, that's right. That was the AUSN Company's own workshop. They trained their own boys.

What do you remember of that training? Could you outline briefly the kind of ...?

Yes, I got a set of indentures for it. I've never worked at the trade but I was taught the engineering trade.

I think you were saying, Mr Pearse, that you went to sea first in 1921 as a fifth engineer and I think the first voyage was Sydney, Hong Kong, Yokohama. Could you recall that first period at sea?

Yes. The company operated three vessels on a far-eastern trade. They'd taken over the Eastern and Australian in 1919. And I was lucky, I was one of the boys who was sent in the *St Albans*, the other unfortunates never got past Townsville or Cairns or Fremantle or somewhere.

And did going to sea live up to your expectations, or not?

Well, part of it did. But there was a lot of hard work attached to it that I'd never dreamt of, and the conditions were pretty onerous. The temperature there .... I've seen that *St Albans* which was a hot ship well over the 112 mark for a whole week down in the engine room.

(5.00) How long could men stay down in engine rooms in that kind of temperature?

Four hours is their watch. They do a four-hour watch and perspiration peels off them.

I know you were talking about the ship as a 'man-killer', I think.

She was a man-killer, yes.

What were the other challenges and perhaps pleasures, too, of being at sea?

Well, I don't know. It's an hereditary business. You see, there are men and women who .... Later on I was shipmates in a ship and we had a stewardess. She deserted her husband and two children in England and signed on a Swedish ship where I was shipmates with her, only because she couldn't help it. She had the same things that I had - webbed feet, I said before, fish hook fingers.

Well, I know you spent some of the time in the Pacific. There was the Fiji trade New Zealand ...

Yes, we had two ships, the *Suva* and *Lovuka*. I was not in the *Lovuka* but I was a couple of times in the *Suva* and I also got lent to another company for a while. I was in the *Malusia* which worked seventy-eight ports in the Solomon Islands. Actually they were mostly plantations, about five or six could be called ports. And then another one was the *Morinda* which used to operate on the southern coast of New Guinea.

Just speaking generally, Mr Pearse, it seems that that time must have been quite interesting in that you still had some sailing ships and you had the changeover from coal-fired ships to oil-powered ships. What do you remember of those technological changes that were going on?

I do wish that there were a few coal - well, not now, I'm too old - but I often wished for a simple coal-fired ship instead of some blasted injection diesel job that ought to have been sunk years and years ago and hadn't been. So many early diesel engines were very cruel ships to go to sea in, and I think I've been in the worst of them.

Is what you're saying that coal-fired engines were simply to maintain or run or ...?

Yes, very much simpler.

What else do you remember of that period when the technology of shipping and engines ...?

I remember all about it, you never forget it (laughs), yes.

Was it difficult to get used to the different technologies?

No, I'd learned the trade of an engineer - of a fitter and turner - in the company shop before they ever sent me to sea and half my work had been working on ships' engines anyway.

Just moving on to the actual purpose of this tape, which is to talk about your time in the navy. I think the outbreak of war saw you as a fully qualified engineer, and I think you were a fourth engineer aboard the *Iron King*.

Yes.

Do you remember the outbreak of war being declared? Were you at sea itself?

Yes, I was at sea, bound from Whyalla to Newcastle with a cargo of - to Newcastle to Port Kembla - with a cargo of iron ore. I remember it well. Yes, I was fourth of the *Iron King* because I couldn't get a job at the time. I already had a chief's certificate but there was a superfluity of marine engineers at the time, at that particular moment. There wasn't directly we hit Newcastle, or Port Kembla, as the case might have been. But first of all we had to black all the ports out by pasting newspaper over them so that lights wouldn't shine outside, had to switch all the deck lights out, had to make sure that when the door's open there was no light on in the inside. As soon as we got into port they put fixed switches on the doors so that the minute the door was opened the light went out automatically and that sort of thing.

But you do remember actually, Mr Pearse, that night at sea? Do you remember men talking about the news and what you thought might happen?

Yes, I sure do. The fourth has the eight to twelve watch so I missed a good deal of that first night at sea, but before I went on watch I remember looking in the chief's room and he was sitting on the floor with a table lamp alongside him and reading at an elevation of about one foot off the linoleum and his portholes were well and truly blacked out. And he wasn't very happy - he'd been in the first war.

I think you were saying that when you reached port the crew was divided between men who were ...

I'll say it was. The sympathies of the crew - some believed in looking after the nation and some believed in looking after themselves. And those that believed in looking after the nation were anxious to get into the army straight away. Those who very much looked after themselves were getting to find something a bit more safe than navigating ships around the coast. So that it began to get much easier to get a job if you were a seafaring person from that day forth.

(10.00) That's most interesting, in that there were less people to draw on who were willing to go to sea.

Yes, that's true.

What else do you remember of that early period of the war when you were still in the Merchant Navy, and how the war changed your life?

They put any ships that worth continuing to operate had an old gun stuck on the back of them. That was to fight off submarines with, if you got a chance. We practised artillery occasionally. We kept boats in a ready condition for instant leaving. For instance, one vessel I was in built a long raft and stuck it on the afterdeck - out of forty gallon drums and things like that.

You make an interesting point before, Mr Pearse, about lifeboats and, in a sense, their futility.

Lifeboats are not much good in a naval action and warships don't carry any. Later on, when I joined the navy I found that we only had about 100-odd men in that ship and we had one launch for use in port and one whale boat for use at sea, and that was all. No lifeboats. A lifeboat is for saving people and carries a lot of people and it's a big, bulky thing. And it's got to be got in the water too, and that's quite a job. Later in my life I got wrecked on the rockbound coast of Taiwan and we didn't get any boats in the water. We couldn't. They'd have been hit the surf as soon as they were lowered down, and we just didn't. We jumped in the fishing craft.

> That's an interesting story. I know that's a very treacherous coast. The years '39 to '42, you were based in Sydney where you, incidentally, I think had a wife now and ...

Yes, my family lived in Sydney. And I found it much easier to get a job. I'd been carrying around a chief's ticket for a number of years and I'd had two or three but no more jobs as chief in a ship, and a few second, but mostly I'd only been a third engineer in all that time. Sometimes a long time fourth engineer, waiting for some of the old boys to die, but ships were going out of business as a form of transport and so there wasn't much advancement in the profession, shall we say, until about then. And then everything ran for us.

> You were saying in that period, '39 to '42, that you were sailing in the Pacific. There were voyages to Hong Kong, to Japan, to the Middle East. Thinking of that period generally, while you were still in the Merchant Navy, how real was the danger from submarine and/or raiders?

A hundred per cent. Every day in the paper you'd read at least ten or twelve ships had been sunk. Two ships, I think I mentioned ...

> Yes, actually, tell us those stories. I was going to ask about two occasions when you were lucky yourself.

On two occasions .... I was appointed to a ship called the *Mareeba* and fortunately I had other things that kept me in Sydney. I wasn't able to go and a substitute went instead. Well, a German raider collected the *Mareeba*. One lifeboat's crew of her finally got, via Germany where they put in the rest of the war in camp, in a POW camp .... One lifeboat, nineteen people, reached Australia again out of about fifty-two and all the engineers were drowned. I would have been one of them. That was the *Mareeba*. And then the *Makumba*, that was the other one. Soon after I left her the man who took my place was killed. She stopped a bomb from a Japanese float plane, and that was those as well. That's twice I'd got out by the skin of my teeth. Oh yes, the danger was there all right.

> When you heard that kind of news of, for example, those sinkings, how much did it affect you at the time, in that you had but by the grace of God it would have been you?

Well, that's just the way you take it - but for the grace of God went I. But we didn't seem to worry. There was no trouble in .... We knew that the ocean was infested by enemy submarines principally and other things but we took the chance. One has the feeling that it won't be me - I'll be here all right.

How much, Mr Pearse, did safety routines aboard the merchant ships you served on in the war - how much did those safety routines get beefed up?

Considerably, I think, yes. We didn't look at the lifeboats as ornaments and it was made sure that the equipment was in them and all that sort of thing - it hadn't been taken out and forgotten or anything like that.

(15.00) Nobody had eaten the biscuits.

No, that was all there all the time - all the time. They weren't neglected. The people who could think, and I believe I was one of them, used to have a little grab bag made up which we kept of the things that we'd like to have with us when we did have a boat voyage.

What did you have in your little bag?

Toothbrushes, that sort of thing.

Were there any personal things?

Razors. Picture of one's wife, a lock of her hair, this sort of thing. I carried a lock of my wife's hair right through the war as a matter of fact. I only lost it recently.

That's very touching. The voyages you made during your Merchant Navy period in the war, how often were you escorted, how often were you ...

Not much. We were escorted when we were on the Australian coast and as soon as we got off the Australian coast and went for blue water, well, we dropped our escort. The first long hike I made then was from Bunbury in Western Australia where we loaded a lot of railway stuff, and we went from there direct to Aden. Well, we didn't have any escort for that and that was a pretty hot time too. I don't think they had enough navy to escort us anyway.

Sure. On that voyage to Aden, or other voyages you made when you were unescorted were you left to choose your own route, or were routes laid down?

No, the route was given to the old man.

By naval ....

Yes, Naval Control.

Let's just actually talk about the period in Aden, because I think it was there that in fact you experienced air attacks for the first time.

Yes.

What do you remember? How did it begin?

I remember .... There were about a dozen ships in Aden and suddenly a loud screaming noise went off. One of the smaller ones had some form of siren and this thing howled away. And the wireless operator came to me and said, 'That's air raid'. 'Air raid is it?' 'Yes.' 'Well,

where's the air raid?' And then we could see little patches of smoke up in the sky. They were shells exploding by some contact or other. There was an Italian aeroplane floating round up there somewhere and they were trying to him him - they didn't. He got away.

> I think you were saying that the Italian aircraft were coming over from Italian Somaliland.

Massaua, M-A-S-S-A-W-A [sic]. It's a port on the opposite side of the Red Sea and the Italians had that as their base and that's where they flew their aircraft from. They came down in the afternoon and took photos and that's probably what this chap was doing that afternoon. Then they got home and raided the place at night - every night - but they stayed up pretty high. I was there about a week and I don't remember anybody hitting any of the aircraft and I don't remember the aircraft hitting any of the people. So it was just a civil exercise.

> There must have been quite a lot of tension, all the same. How did it affect you or the ship's crew?

At first we were a bit scared but we got used to it. See, it went on every day and we weren't hit. It must be ...

> Good luck.

Good luck.

> You were telling a story that I think's quite interesting vis-à-vis wartime security, about the date of the convoy's departure and your dentist.

I had to go and get a tooth pulled out. It was an army dentist pulled it out. What we were waiting in Aden for was a convoy we were to be part of. And while I sat on a sandbag and the army dentist operated on this tooth of mine - pulled it out - he said, 'Oh, I think you'll be all right now. Yes. If you're not you can come and see me again but I wouldn't worry if I were you. And you're going away on Thursday, anyway.' And I said, 'Are we?'. 'Yes. Didn't you know the convoy's leaving on Thursday.' Just like that. He knew. I knew. I didn't know I was going in it, but still.

> When did you actually find out the convoy was sailing and how long did you have to get up ...?

They told me about midnight the night before, or something like to get her ready.

> So, you had time to get steam up.

Well, it was a motor ship, but to see that she was .... I was second engineer of that ship and he's the working boss - the foreman, you might say, of the engine room gang. The chief told me to have her ready for daylight in the morning, that's all.

> Where did you sail to, Mr Pearse?

Suez. Oh gee, we got attacked on the way, yes. I remember ...

Yes, tell us about that attack while you were at sea.

(20.00) There was about four aeroplanes came out of this Massawa place and attacked - they dropped a bomb ahead of us which didn't do us any harm but the ship ahead of us got a very - it was too near - and he a got a bad near miss and it made every pipe, and so forth, connection in his ship leak salt water, and they had to pump the Red Sea through her all the way to Suez. And then they got there the dock was open and she went straight on the blocks and they got to work and fixed it. And there was one alongside of us, he got knocked completely. That belonged to the Nourse Line, N-O-U-R-S-E - the *Bhima*, B-H-I-M-A. She blew the whistle a bit and put four boats in the water. The ship slowly filled. She was loaded with new trucks - new English Thorneycroft and other Austin trucks - for the war effort in North Africa at the time. And as she listed over these things broke their fastenings and rolled down straight into the Red Sea. It would make your heart break to see it happen.

There must have been a terrible feeling of loss and waste.

Yes, well, they just ran over and into the sea they went. But the four boats, we didn't stop. If we'd stopped, they'd have got us too, so we just kept going and the four lifeboats full of people, I suppose somebody made some arrangement but as long as I could see with a pair of glasses they were still floating 'round the Red Sea.

You were up on deck at this time, not down below, were you?

You bet your life. I was lucky. It wasn't my watch. The second has the four to eight watch and this was about ten o'clock in the morning.

The heat and the Red Sea, I've heard stories about it before from ships' engineers. How do you remember that?

Not too bad, that ship. She was a motor ship and she was fairly well ventilated. I'd seen steamers that were much worse.

When you reached Suez did you turn back to Australia there, or did you ...?

No, we waited seven weeks. Then we went through the canal to Alexandria - no, Port Said - and we laid there for four weeks too. I don't really know why. At every place one went to there there'd be about five wharves we were to berth at and about twenty ships waiting for them. And there was a couple of big liners there that had been - one of the *Queen*s, I think, *Queen Elizabeth* or something like that. The *Queen Elizabeth* hadn't been built then, it was the *Queen Mary* probably. But these things, every night they had to raise steam and go down a hundred miles or thereabouts away from the port and then come back again early next morning. So it was a miserable business. It meant you had to set watches every day and unset them then. The valuable ships like that - if one of those ships had been lost it would have been a big blow to the British.

Yes, it would have been quite catastrophic. Mr Pearse, we must move on a little bit to try to get to the period in the navy itself. But I would just like to ask you about a couple of voyages you made to South-East Asia, in particular when you were in Penang and Singapore, because I think this was late in '41 and therefore not long before the Japanese invaded.

That's right. It was in that same ship.

The *Westralia*.

[Inaudible] in Colombo. We'd come down from the Middle East where everything was blacked out and Colombo was the first port we came to where things were not blacked out. And the light was a gift of God, you might say. And I remember particularly that very fine hotel, the Grand Oriental, that was there then. And as I've said before, the men in mess jackets and women in bare shoulders were there and it was eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die sort of feeling that everybody had. It was quite a good feeling too, as long as it didn't reach the last sentence.

Yes, there must have been this feeling through it all, and perhaps even when you were at sea of living very intensely.

[Inaudible] It's always there, yes. You're living on the edge of it all the time, yes.

And there was a good side to that, was there?

Yes, it wasn't too bad at all. Anyhow, we didn't get stuck into port for five minutes and then go on again as we do now. If a ship comes into port now, into say, Brisbane here, she gets in in the morning and leaves again the same night.

That must be the curse of containers, I'm sure. In Singapore and Penang, was there much general talk of what might happen, or not?

Oh yes. Surely. Some of the people in Penang that I came into touch with were pretty well convinced that the Japanese were going to arrive the next day. I don't know, we didn't stop there that long.

When you were in Penang was that after the Japanese had invaded the north-east of Malaysia?

(25.00) The Japanese had invaded some place and they were coming down there, I don't remember just where. This fellow was a resident. He was what they call a sworn measurer of cargo space, or something like that, and he didn't think they were very far away.

When you left Singapore was there any move to take people aboard your ship as refugees, or not?

No, we only took out twelve passengers, that's all.

Let's move on to 1942. You were saying then then you were a junior chief in the company and looking forward, I think, to a ship of your own, but you had your wife and children. I think you initiated a move to get into the navy. Tell us about that.

Yes, I think I mentioned earlier that I was a candidate for the naval college and failed in the eyesight way back when I was a boy. But this time I considered my eyesight might be

considered good enough and I wrote a letter to an engineer captain - a four ring engineer captain - whom I didn't know. And I can't remember exactly what I put in the letter but anyhow he sent me one back and told me he'd mentioned my name to somebody or other and if I went to - Alderfleet[?] was the name of the place in Melbourne - I could find out more about it. So I went to Alderfleet and I got made .... Passed their doctor - eyesight and all ...

> Could I just pause for a moment, Mr Pearse? Why was it that you wanted to move from the Merchant Navy which was obviously doing important work in the war effort to the service navy?

Well, I'd got out of two ships at the most appropriate moment, just before they were lost, and I began to think now, we're helpless, if any armed vessel, any warship, sights us, we're gone. Whereas if I'm in the warship it's a different story. And a submarine is looking for me now but I'd be looking for a submarine if I'm in a warship and I'd have the equipment to deal with him, so I'll join the navy. I lost about fifty per cent of my income through that but I reckon I saved me life. And later on in life, what with getting medical attention at Greenslopes and other places, I've got the fifty per cent back.

> Well, I'm glad you're getting that now. You had a very amusing description, or recollection, of having a medical - the service medical.

Yes (laughs). At this Alderfleet place, because I was an officer they took me first, but .... 'Well, come in here, please', and I went into a large room where there were about twenty men in it - not a stitch of clothes on any of them. They'd been told to get completely undressed. And they had at least one, I think they might have had more than one, but anyhow, certainly one combination machine. It was a set of scales on which one stood while a sick berth attendant, an SBA as we call them, noted down our various weights. But at the same time another one - it had a sliding rod, like a calibre affair on top that rested on one's head and measured off your height. So while one SBA said ten stone six, and the other one said five feet nine. And then a third one had a tape measure around one's chest and said, 'Breathe in, breathe out'. And then a fourth one had got one's mouth open and was counting the teeth, 'Number one false, number two false, number three carious, number four sound'. So the whole lot was done in five minutes, you might say. Then I was sent to the doctor. The doctor was a little more careful but he said, 'Well, if you were a young officer' - I was about forty years old - 'If you were a young officer I'd say no, but damn it all, all right, you can go', so he passed me.

> So there you were, you were in the navy.

And I became a lieutenant in the navy.

> And you've got your commissioning certificate here on the wall, I think.

I've got my certificate framed up on the wall over there, yes. My certificate, no. I mean a commission, not a certificate. Anybody can get a certificate but they can't get a commission. That's a talisman that saved me a lot of trouble at different times.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, with Edwin Pearse, tape one, side two.

Mr Pearse, you went for your first training at ...

Flinders Naval Depot. And I got there on a Saturday afternoon and me luggage didn't - I had to wait till Monday before it arrived.

I think you have strong recollections of the importance of parade ground drill to the navy.

Yes, of course. See, a warship has to land a party of men very often. They go through the same routine drill as soldiers. Well, I had to learn all that, although I'd been in a compulsory training when I was a boy, but that was a long while ago. Yes, it was necessary, and although I was forty years old I was able to swim a mile when I left and I was only there a month (laughs).

Seriously, how much do you think the kind of discipline that parade ground bashing instilled into men, how much did that really carry over to shipboard discipline do you think?

Oh yes, it does carry over too. You can't afford .... This is what they preached into me. It won't be received very well by everyone but they told me never to mix in with the lower deck. Never to discuss personal matters with them, or things like that.

Officers had to remain a little aloof.

Officers must remain aloof. And I asked why and they said, 'Because you may be in a position where you've got to say to a man there, you get down in there. You can see there's four feet of water in it, and you're only drawing four feet two. Your nose will be out of it. Crawl along till you come to a place in the dark and feel up for a valve and shut that valve'. You see what I mean. And he'll say, 'Yes sir', and do it. But if you've been ... he'll say 'Oh yeah, I'd like to see you do it'. You see what I mean.

Was that also true in the Merchant Navy, that officers kept their lives apart from men, or did they mix in more?

Well, you've got no control over them if you don't. You went them to do what you tell them. You don't want to hear their views, and if they give you cheek back, well, the best thing to do is to get rid of them as soon as you can.

Those are interesting points, but as you were saying, you were forty years old, and you've told before some interesting stories of how you walked off other ships because you weren't seeing eye to eye with the management or the captain.

Yes, I didn't always do it. I had to do it when the articles expired. I couldn't break the articles.

Right. But obviously, I gather, you had a strong spirit or independence ...

Life's too miserable if you get pounded down by somebody all the time.

I'd certainly agree with that. But how did this forty year old, fairly independent, experienced seagoing engineer mesh into the navy that was all to do with fitting into slots and doing as you were told?

I didn't mind it. You have to fit into slots and do what you're told in the merchant service, with a lot of abuse too, and the sack if you don't. But at least in the navy it doesn't occur. We used to have a saying that we have three kinds of stripes on our sleeves. The ones who wear plain stripes, they were permanent navy officers. They were gentlemen and sailors. The ones with a criss-cross, wavy bands on them, were ex-merchant people. They were sailors. And then there's another gang with only a single uncriss-crossed. They're gentlemen, but they ain't sailors (laughs). And that's about .... Even the straight stripers knew that we could do the work but all they knew about the other blokes was that they couldn't do the work or behave like officers, either.

(5.00) So you could do the work, even if you didn't hold your fork the right way (laughs). Just going back to Flinders, there were some amusing anecdotes about bugle calls and these posts that were set up around the parade ground.

I remember the parade ground was about a mile and a half - oh, less than that. It was a very large parade ground. It had posts at intervals around - about six of 'em - and these each had a loud speaker on 'em. These repeated the bugle calls from the - what do they call it - the guard room, or something? Now, let me see, some of the orders had to be given. If one is the rig of the day, in other words, 'The rig of the day is ...'. In other words the clothes that you've got to put in is number five, or something - number two. But on account of the distance the near post had got this out but just at it finished an echo came, cried, 'The rig of the day is ...' and of course you didn't know what it was because they'd both interrupted each other. That was - there was something wrong there. It was still like it when I went away. I used to wait and see what the other people were putting on.

Just thinking generally of the men who went into the reserve officers' training with you at Flinders. Some, as you were saying, were landsmen, some were seamen. But generally speaking, in terms of their experience how would you have rated them? Or their backgrounds perhaps?

Before you could get a chief engineer's certificate you'd need about four years at sea as an absolute minimum. In four years you've learnt a fair amount, so they'd know what they were doing.

Did you do any training, Mr Pearse, at Flinders besides parade ground bashing, naval routines, etiquette, and so on?

Yes, a commissioned warrant officer came to me about two days after I got there and he said, 'For the duration of this week, you belong to me. And we'll go into this classroom.' There was no class there, only we two, and he said, 'Now', and then he preached what I've just been talking about - keeping your distance and so forth, and the reason for it. And he gave me a

high pressure coaching of what I could expect to do, and so forth, in the navy for the whole week.

> And he was just working with you as a single officer.

Yes, I was by myself.

> Why was that? Why were you not in a group?

Because we didn't have another one at the moment that was .... They didn't come to Flinders in regiments, you see. They came down there one at a time. As fast as you got clear of the gang in Melbourne you got sent down to Flinders and he might have had two next week or even three.

> Just carrying on the story a little. I think from Flinders you were sent to Brisbane, standing by on the building of three corvettes. What were you doing exactly?

Well, there's always an engineer sent to look after the building of a ship. One thing is to apply tests. Pretty well everything that goes into a ship, any fitting is tested. Well, somebody's got to witness the test. That's the principal part of it. You get a cast iron valve machined up and so forth, righto, I wonder how much water that will carry? What pressure? Well, we'll say, well, this job carries a double test - twice as much as the ordinary working pressure, yes. Now connect it up to something that's got 350 pounds pressure and let's see it do it, and there's no ...

> So the machinery that went into the ship had to be tested against its specifications?

You don't take their word for anything, that's the way .... And if you don't like it, say that's no good old boy. What they did was - and this militated against the [inaudible] a little bit because when .... They built fifty-six corvettes all together and the engineer who was looking after it would say, 'No, not that one', and there's no use arguing with him. He won't argue with you. He says, 'You heard what I said', and 'Yes, all right'. So they throw that one out and get another one off the pile, 'Yes, right'. The *Benalla* was about the fifty-third or thereabouts so there wasn't such a pile left. And what to do with all this lot that was rejected was the next matter. Well, as long as I didn't have anything to do with them I didn't care.

> Let's move on to the *Benalla*. I know Brisbane was very much an interlude, and you went down and ....

(10.00) She was finishing off and she'd been alaunch, she was afloat when I joined her. They'd painted the bulkheads - the walls - of her accommodation with some peculiar paint and then decided to scrape it all off again because it was flammable - I remember that. That set us back a day or two.

> Yes, it must have. It must have been quite exciting as an engineer, though, to go to a ship where the equipment was basically new.

Well, I knew I was getting a brand new ship - only time I ever did.

I think you were saying, Mr Pearse, that you made some quite interesting changes to some aspects of ...

Yes, it was strictly against the law you know, you're not supposed to alter anything, but I did, I opposed it quite a lot. I put piston rings into pistons that didn't have any and turned out the grooves to take them, particularly in the shuttle valves of weir feed pumps. If anybody listening to me is interested in ... well, you'll know what a .... I've never seen a weir shuttle valve that had a piston ring in it, and I've never seen one that didn't leak steam. But mine didn't leak steam, not after they had piston rings put in by E.J. Pearse. And one of my ERAs he came to see me a couple of years ago - he's dead now - and said he became chief engineer of a pretty large power plant in Australia later on in life. And the first thing he did was to get all the weir shuttle valves fitted with piston rings. He'd seen them. They never .... A weir pump will run for about six months without any trouble at all once you turn the steam on but it'll run for six years if it's got piston rings in its shuttle valve.

That's most interesting. And I know you were also telling us about the hole you made in the deck to give access to the generator.

Yes, I did that [inaudible]. The corvettes had steam generators about two inches below the deck head, one on the starboard side and the other on the port side of the engine room, and it was a physical impossibility to get near them. So I got an oxy torch and burnt a hole out of the deck so that the thing was exposed. Later on I made a piece of steel plate up with bolts and bolted it on. Now, that was copied out on every corvette.

How free were you, as an engineer officer, to make those ...?

You're not allowed - forbidden. I should have been shot at dawn.

So what - nobody knew that you had done it?

They must have because they did it to the others.

Well, perhaps they turned a blind eye given that it obviously was a sound ....

The reason for it is this. If five or six corvettes are in action and one gets badly damaged, you can say to a diver, 'Now you go along there and you'll come to a door', and when you get there you find there's no door, somebody's welded it up. You see what I mean. It's ....

Let's go on to .... Besides those changes that you made in the final stages of the *Benalla*'s building, was there anything else significant, do you think, of that period, or not?

No, she was a good little ship. We evaporated the fresh water and we had a heavy crew on her because she was used for surveying work and she had more boats than the ordinary corvette, too.

Let's turn to the period when you actually went to sea. I think it was in April '43 she was commissioned. How did she perform? How did the engines perform, once you got out into Bass Strait?

Oh, pretty good. They couldn't perform wrong. There's nothing with her. I'd had a good look at them when they were put together. Oh yes, they were all right. We used to open .... There was a clause that required the contractor to run about a four-hour steam trial and then take the engine apart and then run it a twenty-four hour and take it apart again, but she had nothing wrong with hers. She was a darn good little ship.

How did she compare as a sea vessel in terms of handling the sea conditions with some of the other smaller ships you'd been on?

Horrible. She could stick her nose down and take a dive at Wilson's Promintory and come up at Gabo and things. She was no sea boat. She was an uncomfortable thing - all corvettes were.

Why were there no anti-rolling devices built on to that ship?

They did have anti-rolling devices, they had [inaudible] keels on them and things like that and [inaudible].

What was it about the design of the corvettes that did make them so prone to roll and pitch?

I don't know.

Was it just the dimensions, or what?

It must have been .... I don't know. You can't make much of a ship when you've only got eleven hundred tons to make it. Eleven thousand you've got a chance but they were around about eleven hundred tons as far as I remember and they were about 180 - I can't remember exact length - about 180 feet long and about thirty-three wide. That's six beams to the length. You get a bit more speed if you had ten beams to the length, but you'd have a herring-gutted hull. I imagine that some naval architect drew them up, and I'm not a naval architect, and I hope he was a good one but he certainly .... I had to get over seasickness, the thing I hadn't had to do previously.

(15.00)I was going to ask about that, whether you, or ...

Yes, about the first four or five days.

And then that was it for ...?

Yes, except for a few chronics. We got one man, he became chronically seasick, and we had to leave him in New Guinea. When the ship came back we had to leave him there, too. I think they flew him home finally. Strangely enough he joined the dredge service when he got here, and he's worked in a dredge ever since. But then they mostly work in harbour anyway. They very rarely go [inaudible].

Sure. That's calmer water work, I guess. One thing I was going to ask sometime, perhaps now is appropriate. In very heavy sea, down in the engine

> room where obviously you've got a certain amount of grease and metal surfaces and so on, how dangerous was it in the *Benalla*?

No, it's not dangerous. The floors are marked off in little squares, what we called checked plate, and you can't slip on checked plate very easily. And of course every watch they wipe up the place, oh yes - that's six times a day.

> Let's just talk about the routines of an engine room and, in particular, the *Benalla*. You were listing before the personnel who made up your engineering department.

The chief engineer doesn't keep a watch, and in that class of ship the second doesn't either. The second is called the chief ERA, chief engine room artificer. He's a day worker. Now, the three ERAs did keep the three - they had three watches - keep the three watches. And they had with them two or three greasers. Out in the stoke hole, the boiler room they called it, they had one fireman and one petty officer. The petty officer was the water tender. He had to watch the water level in the boilers. He had the two feed pumps and the feed tank out in the stoke hole. He was responsible for keeping the water level in the boilers, and he was also the boss cocky. That was where a funny thing happened there. The first job, midnight, went one night and the new watch came down and it was as hot as the hobs of hell, and the stoke hole is closed and under pressure. There's a little machine shooting air down all the time, so that you don't force the draught, you induce it. Well, you don't induce it either. Closed stoke hole systems, what the *Benalla* had, well, there's only one way out for the draught to go, and that's up the funnels. It's got to go through the burning system. Now, the first thing that the stoker PO did when he looked at the water and was satisfied with it and everything else, was to send his stoker up to make hot coffee. And the stoker made a jug of coffee and brought it down. The perspiration was dripping off them both and the boss poured out himself a big mug and swallowed half of it and then he found that instead of putting sugar in it, the bloke had put some horrible white cleaning compound - I forget the name of it now. But he'd already drunk a good mouthful of it (laughs).

> That's a lovely story. The engine room on a corvette at sea, Mr Pearse, while you were steaming with the engines running were men doing any ongoing maintenance, or just simply keeping the engines working?

You don't do any maintenance to the machinery while its running, but then there's other machinery in the place that's not running. For instance, you've got - there are two steam driven generators for electricity and one diesel. Well, only one of those is operating at a time.

> So they'd be doing maintenance on subsidiary equipment.

Yes, and then there's quite a number of pumps, too. Pumps galore, for various purposes, and they are all steam driven.

> Would the ERAs and their offsiders, would they be also greasing and oiling the actual engines of the ship as they are running?

The ERA walks around and looks at gauges and he's got about thirty of 'em to look at, and he has to look at them every couple of minutes, and it's noted down in a book and so forth. He didn't have any time to waste.

And if there's a malfunction that'll come up on a reading, will it?

Yes, temperatures mostly. The thing is, if a temperature leaps up from 100 to 200 there's something wrong. You've got to find out why and that's what he's watching all the time. They call the man, the stoker, but he's not really a stoker, he's more a greaser and oiler. Now, over in one corner there's the evaporation system. One man operates that all the time 'round the clock. There are three of them, one on each watch. And his job's to make fresh water out of salt. That thing never stops in a warship because they've got big crews and they use a lot of fresh water. Now, this system is supposed to make twenty-five tons of water a day. Well, the first day that it's operating it makes twenty-five tons, the second day it makes ten tons and the third day it makes about one ton, because the steam comes off but it leaves the salt behind. And on the fourth day they have to take it apart and scrape all the salt out.

(20.00) Really, it's as regularly as that?

The same three, the ones that regulate it, that's their job to look after that thing.

So it would work in a cycle of about four days.

About four days, yes.

That's most interesting. Let me just ask you a question because I think it might give a picture perhaps of some of the colour of how the engine room operated. You're steaming along at sea, perhaps - what would your cruising speed have been?

They did about fourteen and a half, or something like that.

Something occurs on the bridge and the wanker-handle on the bridge - is put to stop or ...

Stop is just plain stop. Well, the ERA stops it.

Could you describe what he had to do?

Shut off the steam and then at the same time he's got to mind the boilers don't lift off the bed plate because they're making steam pretty hard and fast. So he's got a telegraph arrangement that rings out to them. And he bangs that thing with one hand and shuts the steam down. But there's another point, too. In the navy, and not in merchant services, they're continually varying the speed, and they have a thing that indicates how many revolutions per minute they want. And this thing will creep up fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, two hundred, two hundred and twenty and that's about as much they ever .... I could get to - the engine was designed to reach two fifty but I never had to get over two thirty-four.

From when the engines were put to stop, how long would it take the *Benalla* to lose all steerage way?

I don't know, but she wasn't very big, she'd lose it pretty fast, I think. Once they stop she's got to drag two flat propellers through the water, hasn't she?

Going the other way, from the moment you are stationary to ...

We put her astern if they wanted .... The people on the bridge, they can think you know (laughs).

That seems to be said with some questioning (laughs).

They stop - stop her. Well, they wouldn't let her slam into anything. They'd put her astern then, and the ERA down below would reverse her. By that time the chief ERA would have wandered down and even I, if I was awake, would wonder what the heck was going on and ....

How important as engineer officer was it to let your chief ERAs and the others run their own show down there, and when did you step if there was a problem?

Well, I never had any trouble with mine at all. They did what I told 'em and that was it. Every time I went down to see them they seemed to be doing quite right. I generally had the chief ERA with me - the bloke that was second - and say, 'What's all this going on over 'ere?'. And he'd say, 'Well, I'm tryin' to paint that thing. Tryin' to get it clean enough.' 'I see, all right.' He could make certain decisions like that himself.

Just turning to the specific functions of the engineer officer of a corvette, Mr Pearse.

Most of it was writing up books (laughs).

Keeping records. You were saying that - if I might just list your tasks - there was, of course, the running and maintenance of the engines and of all the subsidiary equipment, damage control ...

Routine tests to carry out. Oh, damage control.

Damage control officer, nightly ...

Stores keeper, too - stores officer for some reason.

Yes, I was just coming to that.

Normally speaking that's one of the paymasters but we didn't have one most of the time.

Right. And nightly reports on the fuel, and as you were saying stores officer.

Every day you tell the captain what the position is with the fuel. I used to make it last thing at night. And if we were in a port and I'd been told we were going to leave the next day, I'd come up to him about, before - well, we went to bed pretty late - pretty close to midnight I'd say, 'Good evening', and he'd say, 'Come in, sit down'. I'd say, 'We're ready to leave'. 'Okay, righto.' There's only once I had to say, 'Look, I won't be ready to leave in the morning'.

That must be rather galling for an engineer.

No, it wasn't my fault. A bit of machinery went ashore and hadn't come back (laughs).

> Just turning back, Mr Pearse, to those different tasks that you listed. What were the most difficult ones to perform, to complete, and what were the most tiresome aspects of that work?

You mean at sea or in port?

> Speaking generally. Let's say being at sea - you've got the maintenance and running of the ship's engines, damage control if there's action, of course.

(25.00) She was such a good job that you didn't get any worry at all much. I mean to say, if you put her on 210 revolutions and that route she'd stay there and keep on working at 210 revolutions. In fact I never had the whole eight furnaces going at once - seven was the most - and that includes the evaporating which takes a lot of steam. Yes, she was a comfortable ship and if you set her to do anything, she'd keep on doing it. But of course you get some old wrecks that can't go two hours without giving trouble, but she wasn't one of them.

> Let's turn to some of the actual activities of the ship. After she'd been commissioned in Melbourne there was a voyage to Sydney, Brisbane to Townsville. There was an interesting account, I think, of a towing mishap ...

We towed, or started to tow from Sydney an ammunition barge to go to New Guinea but when we got the other side of Newcastle, somewhere up past Port Stephens the tow-line broke. [Interruption.] Well, Morrison[?] was in command of the ship at the time, Lieutenant Commander. He was ex-merchant and he was a pretty good seaman, too. We couldn't see any sign of the blooming thing because it was pitch dark and after fooling round for quite a while Morrison decided to go on and leave it. And somebody out of Newcastle would come out with a tug and get hold of it, but that wasn't so. The following morning we got a radio telling us to go back and find it and take it in charge again. Well, that was a real circus because the greater proportion of our crew came from round the Shepparton area in Victoria and they were young lads under twenty who'd never seen a ship in their lives. And this thing when we found it, it had a heavy wire dangling down the front and it was .... The towing line must have been half manilla rope and the other half wire, and it had parted at the joint, or something like that. So anyhow, with the whale boat badly manned and rowed got alongside it or near it and it was jumping up and down about ten feet at a time in the water and it was likely to drown the whole blooming crew, but actually we did get the man on board. And after we got one man on board with a bit of rope he soon got the others on board. Then they had to get to work and pull up the wire, but they couldn't do it - it was too heavy. We then got the end of our rope aboard somehow or other and fastened it on again. I expect .... There were some pretty good sailors amongst them, not many, but there were some, and they made the thing fast and we went on towing. We were still dragging the long wire down. Well now, the approach to Brisbane, which was our next port, was covered with anti-mine devices and all sorts of things to stop the Japs getting in. And we couldn't tow this dangling wire over the top of them so we went into Coolangatta. And that's the only time I've ever been in Coolangatta or ever heard of a warship going there. Anyhow by hand, and about a hundred of the crew or thereabouts we gradually dragged the wire up and coiled it down and tied it down, too, on the deck of the thing and proceeded on the way to Brisbane. When we got there we were relieved of the job of towing the barge any further.

It must have been quite a relief. There was interesting account, when you were in Brisbane I think, of a court martial of one of the crew.

One of the sailors decided that the land was the place for him and he'd skipped. And we adopted the old Lord Nelson system, we put a notice up somewhere or other with R-U-N on it - run. It said, 'John Jones had run'. Anyhow, somebody caught him, and because he was brought back and we court martialled him.

Why was that done aboard the ship? Why wasn't that handled by the port authorities?a
Well, the port Authorities is just civilians.

I meant the Naval Port Authorities.

I don't know. Even they wouldn't come and prat their frames on a ship's internal government, I don't think. They might tell the captain that they wanted something done. We were following in the book, I'm pretty sure.

Anyway, we better not go on too long with the story, but just tell us what happened in the end.

The point about it was, though, that we were sitting round waiting for lunch and the captain said, 'As soon as lunch is over we'll get this court martial, and of course we'll find this bloke guilty and let him go. Now, he has to have a prisoner's friend, what about you, Murray?'. Murray was a barrister. He was also the anti-submarine detecting officer. And he said, 'Very well, sir'. So they fell in the court martial. I think I was part of it. And the .... 'Have you got anything to say?'. Murray said, 'Yes sir, you can't proceed any further'. 'Why?' 'Because I heard you say after we've found him guilty'.

In that he'd prejudged the case.

Yes. 'You've prejudged the case. Now, what will ...?' 'Well he is guilty, isn't he?' 'I hate to say so, sir, I'm defending him. I suggest the best plan would be to release him from detention.'

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, corvettes, Edwin Pearse, tape two, side one.
>
> Just finally on that issue. It seems, or I thought at least, that desertion was treated quite seriously in that it could affect the morale of the crew but this case seems to have been treated somewhat lackadaisically.

Yes, but when the prisoner's friend happens to be a barrister professionally and he tells you that your on a very dangerous line of thought, well, it's wise to listen to him, and I imagine that's what Morrison did.

> Well, let's press on. The ship went up to Townsville and I think it was at Townsville that the crew changed somewhat in that men who were experienced surveyors came aboard.

Yes. She'd had more equipment put on her in Melbourne to make her suitable for surveying reefs and things like that, and ports and harbours. And there was a temporary expedient operating called the *Whyalla*, also a corvette. And we went alongside this *Whyalla* and transferred the surveying experts which was another captain - Tancred came to us and Morrison went to the *Whyalla*. And Crook came from the *Whyalla* and relieved Murray and somebody relieved Garrett, so that I think of the original officers I was the only one - oh, and Whitebrook, the first lieutenant, he remained.

> Just for the record there, the commanding officer is now Lieutenant Commander George Tancred.

A regular navy officer. He died a few years ago. He became a four ring captain in the navy. I think he became OCHB, Officer Commanding Hydrographic Branch. He was a splendid man.

> I think you were saying that when Lieutant Commander Tancred took over, Mr Pearse, that the discipline of the ship was smartened up a little bit and there were other changes.

Yes, everybody had confidence in .... Everybody knew that I'd been one month in the navy and everybody knew that Morrison too, had graduated out of the merchant service. But it was a different story now. I had assimilated enough RAN, I suppose it dated back to my failure in 1913 - '14 - but anyway, I was left there. Whitebrook remained as first lieutenant. He was only a Saturday afternoon reserve officer. Tancred probably had the job of saying whom he wanted and whom he didn't want - that's my guess.

> I think while you were in Townsville the ship was also camouflaged. Do you remember that?

Yes, I do remember that. That was done .... I don't think it was done in Townsville. I think we did it in New Guinea. They were making up - a professor in the university in Sydney was designing a specific camouflage for us. But Whitebrook, the first lieutenant, didn't believe much in camouflage and so he designed his own and he put it on. And about two or three

weeks later the professor's pale blue guise turned but we decided the one we had on would do and she went through the war according to Whitebrook.

And I think the camouflage, was it browns and greens?

Yes, that's right, it was too, yes.

So that was to set her against a background of island foliage, was it?

Yes, and in creeks, like places like Tufi in New Guinea - the creek we used to head into and put the night in sometimes. You couldn't see her there. And of course another thing is, you didn't make any smoke.

So she was really set up for coastal camouflage.

Yes.

What were the other changes that were made to the ship to fit her out for survey work?

(5.00) There was a little officers' gun room, I suppose you'd call it. That was assimilated into the chart .... Actually, we drew a chart as we went of the - well, the officers did, anyway a couple of recorders. We used to take soundings by the fathometer on a line that we knew, and they called that a fix. And the captain did a lot of this. He'd be up on top getting a sight - an angle. We went ashore first of all and put up a couple of flags, two or three miles apart. Now, we knew the angles on those flags. That gave us a position, you see.

So you would take bearings from those to fix your position.

And then he used to .... He had a station pointer, the thing was called, and that showed your exact position on the chart. Now pretty frequently they'd call that a fix. They had a poem that they'd made up and is was - I don't know all of it - 'Fix, fix, flicks, six south, six thousand and six', because they were doing this all day long. The old man would say, 'Get ready, fix' - they'd fix the depth and the two points on the station pointer, and it wouldn't be a half a minute further and he'd say, 'Ready, fix'.

That's interesting. I understand a little bit about this, that kind of work of constant taking bearings and soundings must be very difficult to keep up its momentum and to be enthusiastic, given the routine.

Yes.

How did it affect the crew? How did they manage that?

They didn't matter much. The first lieutenant, his job was to keep the ship clean and that sort of thing. He didn't do any of the navigating part, the fixing - the captain had charge of that. And Crook he did some of it, and I forget who the new gunnery officer was, but Garrett had gone away, I think.

> Did the officers most concerned with the surveying - the captain and his other seamen - did they talk much about the work with you, or not?

Yes. There was a time at the end of each day when they called 'Secure', at four o'clock in the afternoon it is if you're in a port. And we used to try to get into a port, or some dog hole of a creek, or something like that, where we could put anchor down. And there were only about four or five of us and we all sat down and opened the - 'Where's the steward? Get half a dozen beers, will you?'. So he would and we'd sit down and make a good evening of it until the time came for dinner. The ratings of the ship have breakfast, dinner, tea and supper. Well, we didn't. We had breakfast, lunch, and dinner - that's right. And dinner was a bit later.

> That's interesting, those slight - I guess in a way they're class differences - there to do with eating habits. Well, we've already worked into it partly Mr Pearse, but I was going to ask you about a typical daily routine while you were surveying. But perhaps if we could begin from the beginning. As you were saying, you'd often spend a night in a creek. How would the day begin?

We used to begin those days about four o'clock in the morning. I remember now in many of the creeks - the Japanese occupied a lot of this land, it was on the coast of New Guinea - and every night at about five we'd turn round and run back for three hours .... No, wait a minute, it was later than that. Sometimes we'd run back till about half-past nine at night and that meant we had about three or four hours steaming back to be out of the danger area. The next morning though we had to back there again on the crack of dawn again so that the night was spent up with the voyage from and the voyage to and four or five hours break in the middle of the night, and that made it a bit hard, particularly for those who had to be at call like myself, for instance.

> And then the days, once you'd got back into your - you'd steam back to the survey area. Could you describe a day's events?

(10.00)I wasn't a surveyor, you know, but I could hear them yelling out, 'Fix', 'Ready', 'Fix' all the time. And then I often went into their chart room to see what they were doing. They had a big chart table about twice the size of that table square with this chart laid down on it, and they were entering down all the positions and depths that they'd got. There was another one had the monotonous job of sitting in front of a recorder and reading the depth off all the time. That used to be done at the close of day.

> So that really took up the whole day, this just steadily steaming along tracks. Incidentally for the transcription, that table you might put in as six feet by six feet - something like that - just looking at that table over there. During the day, what were you doing yourself?

Me? Not much. She had to carry a commissioned engineer and I was carried, shall we say. If you've got good smart people you don't need anything. Now, I had a writer. A writer is a secretary, you might say. He was a young fellow named Hall. Incidentally, he made himself a very rich man and he owns an aeroplane.

> It was interesting reading that letter from Mr Hall, as he is now, Mr Pearse. One thing I did want to ask you, was as an engineer officer on a corvette, how much were you involved in furthering the training of men in your department?

You have to train them a bit, but you don't .... Well, nobody ever trained me, I don't think, but you go to work there and if you're doing it wrong they tell you, and you do it right, that's all. That's the sort of thing that went on.

But you were saying in the case of this fellow, Hall, you saw some potential.

I used to have to keep a tremendous lot of books, you see. The navy's never happy unless they're filling up books and he filled up those books. He had to go around and read the gauges every morning on a slate, or something, then transfer them to paper. And I read it over and initialled it at the finish and things like that, but I didn't get the hard graft of doing it - he got it. And that was no trouble at all. Once you read his letter you realised that.

Yes, right. But in terms of the mechanical knowledge of people on the ship, were people learning more as time went on, or were they mostly so well trained that there was nothing more to learn?

[Inaudible] artificers. We had an electrical artificer. These people did all their trade jobs.

But was there any actual furthering of their training while you were at sea, or not?

No, we didn't worry about training. They'd been trained when we got 'em.

Something that I'd imagine must have been quite difficult for a small ship, given the amount of supplies and so on you could carry, was keeping the ship supplied up, both in terms of fuel and other necessities. When you were on the coast of New Guinea how did you manage that?

They had tankers in different places. And the *Dobbin* as well as being a - that I mentioned earlier - she was also a tanker. You could get fuel to burn out of her. I presume some tanker came and put it in sometimes. Tankers weren't all Australian, you know. In fact I don't think I remember meeting any Australian tanker but plenty of other British and American ones.

I think you were saying, too, that there was USN depot ships in the region.

The *Dobbin* was one of them. She was a great big thing with a tremendous big machine shop in her. She could do anything. She could grind the compass lenses. She could also grind telescopic lenses. She had equipment for everything. Right up on her boat deck she had a optician's shop with about three or four opticians sitting in it. I asked them why it was up there and they said the noise has an effect on their work. If you listen you can hear a dim subdued music playing. That's playing on purpose, and that plays in the optical shop and nowhere else. The *Dobbin* had all these things on board.

I think you were saying that a ship such as that were capable of even making quite large castings.

Thirteen tons. But there was a bigger one too. She came to Australia once during the war. What's her name? I forget it. *Fuller*? *Fulman*? Some very .... *Fulton*.

How efficient were these American depot ships, Mr Pearse?

Out of this world. Very good.

Could you give any examples of that?

Only things that I wanted made. I'd take something over and .... Now what was it? I think I got tiny holes drilled by them for a diesel injector. No other ship I've ever heard of had a plant that can drill a hole about six-thousandth of an inch in diameter, but they could. Yes.

And was the liaison between the USN personnel and yourself good, or not?

(15.00) Splendid. We laid alongside her and about six destroyers did - all on her own anchors. They didn't put anchors down. The *Dobbin* had her anchors down and gee, they must have been big'uns because she'd have not less than about six of us hanging on to her. And by gee, they were really good. They had a machine shop with about eight or ten big machines in it for machining metal - and the metal to machine, too. You didn't have to send to Australia for it - they had it.

I think you were saying that she also had quite good entertainment facilities - films and so on.

Too right she did. She had two picture shows every night, one aft of the funnel and one up on the foredeck.

And when you were berthed alongside, I ...

You went to whichever one you chose, yes. And also, she published a newspaper every day, and a pretty good one, too. Keep you *au fait* with what was going on. She had two dentists. I remember I went to one of 'em and he looked at my mouth and said, 'Who did this?'. I said, 'Captain Lusk was his name, an Australian dentist in the 2/8th AGH'. And he said, 'Well, brother, you're sure going to get a lot of grief'. I got the grief all right. Two American doctors of denistry was about the best you could possibly get. X-ray machine and all that sort of thing.

The fuel situation that you reported nightly to the captain ...

Every night - last thing at night.

What were the main factors that affected the amount of fuel you consumed? What was the maximum range?

[Inaudible] sea, or not. If you were at sea she was using a lot, but in port I used to knock both boilers off and start up the diesel. The diesel would generate enough electricity for the ship's normal port use and that's all we needed. We had an oil-fired galley, but that fire was controlled by a little tank up on the boat deck that supplied the fuel for it. And as long as they filled that up, and they had the water supply to get on.

I'd imagine when you were doing this surveying work where speed wasn't critical, you were cruising at an economical speed, how much did a corvette's speed affect fuel consumption?

It affects it all the time. A little ship like that - I can't remember what we did when we were slowed down but if we were fully extended we had about five days' endurance at the most - four to five days at full power. Every warship's like that. She can't carry that full speed on night and day. And she needs to be to put full speed on. Take an aircraft carrier taking aircraft on or off, they've got to run into the wind and they've got to get about forty knots up somehow. It's only for a few minutes but they can do it.

But in the case of the *Benalla* when I'd assume mostly you weren't cruising at full speed, what was her range then?

We went right around New Guinea and it took her about three weeks. That's about trebled what we ... and we weren't exactly crawling. We wouldn't do less than ten or eleven.

You were saying also, Mr Pearse, that you were supply officer and therefore responsible for food and clothing, and so on.

No, not clothing. We didn't have a slop chest in that little ship. Tools mostly, and equipment like paint brushes and all that sort of thing was what I got to look after.

And what about food?

No, I don't ever remember looking about food. Somebody must have looked after that.

Well, the materials that you did have to get, did you get all that from these American ships or did some come from Australia?

No, none came from Australia. If you were in Australian ports and went up the street and got it, of course, but when we - the Americans were the people to supply that. They didn't do it free, you know. I suppose we had to sign papers.

What do you remember of the period when you doing this survey work around the New Guinea coast and the Admiralty Islands and so on, in terms of the time men got for some sort of recreation - to get away from the endlessness of being at sea on a corvette?

You didn't get it at all. If there was work to be done you just kept on doing it, but usually a break came. They didn't get any specific time off. Nobody does in the navy or the army. But we didn't appear to be overworked as far as I can remember.

But were there opportunities on any of the islands, for example, for men to get ashore to do something different?

Yes, once or twice I remember. I remember we engaged in a football match once. We landed the crew at a mission in New Guinea, they were to play a football match against the locals. The locals were very keen footballers and they were watching the match, and they climbed over the fence and joined in. They finished up with three goalies - all girls - and clad in skirts

and nothing else too. Our blokes after a while got used to running over the top of them with their feet, you know, but for a long while they were a bit afraid of these women that were taking parts in it. But still, that's how it went. That was Mukawa Mission. It was an Anglican mission on the east coast of New Guinea. The only way to stop them playing football was to confiscate the ball.

(20.00) Were there many other things such as - did you do much fishing or sailing?

Yes.

Did men keep shipboard hobbies, or not?

No, they didn't go sailing unless they happened to be in a boat's crew. I remember the first lieutenant, I think he was. He took a boat out sailing one day and he had a rifle in it of course and he should have had a line through the trigger guard and he didn't, and the boat capsized and lost the rifle. That's a really serious crime in the navy. The way we had to get out of that one was to, next time we got alongside a frigate or something, we'd say have you got a trigger guard, or so, and then the next fellow we'd ask if he had a barrel or something, and finally we built a rifle to take the place of the missing one.

Really, was it taken so seriously to make it ... or was that done in jest?

Yeah, it was a court martial if you lose a rifle.

I do know that you spent a fairly memorable Christmas at a place, I think, Nuakata, near Milne Bay.

Yeah, I remember that Christmas.

Why was it special?

The historical idea is to let the officers wait on the men. This was all going on out on the deck. The captain himself had joined - it was Gale, in his time - I remember he joined in and he was relieving a fellow who had - a lower deck rating, I forget what he was - but anyhow Gale had the bangle on the wrong arm. He wears a thing on his arm. And pretty quickly they came and reminded him that it ought to be on the other arm, not that arm (laughs).

How important was it, do you think, for the men on the lower deck, the sailors, to have that sort of opportunity?

I don't think it was any good at all. It's better for them not to have it.

Why is that?

Well, it tends to make 'em cheeky. They get into more trouble then. You wouldn't think of doing it in the merchant ship - wouldn't dream of it.

Are there any other instances you can recall such as that where there were, in a kind of symbolic sense, discipline was reversed?

No, the only one I can remember is that one. It's unheard of in a merchant ship. You live the other end of the ship, or as far away from them as you can get. They don't want to talk to you and you don't want to talk to them.

> One thing I meant to ask at the start, Mr Pearse, perhaps I could just now, the general tone of the discipline on the *Benalla* no doubt did vary somewhat from commanding officer to commanding officer, but despite that was it a much more relaxed discipline than existed on the bigger naval ships, or not?

Well, I was never in any [inaudible] the bigger names, excepting the *Kanimbla*, and she was pretty hard.

> Was the corvette's discipline a more personal sort of style, or not?

The officers that we had, apart from that Christmas Day business, were real - they were professional naval captains. And they didn't relax anything if they could help it - no. It wouldn't matter if we were in that ship or the *Ramillies*, it would be the same, I think so. That's how it goes in the navy. It's got to be done. The navy is there to fight battles and you can't fight a lot of battles with people who are trying to tell you how to do it, or anything like that.

> What other general recollections do you have of the period spent in the islands around New Guinea doing this very extensive survey work? Are there any episodes that stand out?

Yes. I caught the biggest fish ever caught in the navy. There's a photo of him here somewhere but I don't know where. He was six feet four inches long. The cook who was in charge of the butchery had a steelyard and we put this thing on the steelyard and at 40 - it would only go up to 400 pounds - the tail of the fish was just touching the deck at 400 pounds.

> Sounds an enormous fish.

It was a groper. There was about a hundred-odd men in the thing and they all had about two meals off him.

> Was fishing common? And when did you do it?

Yes. Able Seaman Pike was very fond of it. We got in amongst a lot of sharks one time and he had four of them tied on at once. They were pretty big sharks, too. Then he wanted to land one on the deck and the first lieutenant wouldn't let him. They were such stinking, messy things. I don't know how he got on about those because he'd lose all his tackle.

(25.00) Did the fishing you do, was that all when you were at anchor ...

Yes.

> ... or did you sometimes trawl lines at sea?

You can't. She goes too fast. Trawling lines at sea's all right if you're in the right kind of water and you're not exceeding about four knots. But a warship is so fast that it ....

> Are there any other recollections you have of the work involved in the survey, or any incidents related to the work itself, perhaps?

I remember a group of enthusiastic young officers .... They must have asked the captain and he, in a weak moment, must have agreed. They gave their own names and their girlfriends' names to sundry points of land. And these went down on the make-up chart that they were making all the time, which goes down to Sydney. Now, the chart in Sydney - when they get that in Sydney - they edited it and the only name that they left on it was mine. So I got, as I said earlier, immortality, the same as Vancouver and Captain Cook - I'm on the chart but ...

> Do you remember the place itself, Mr Pearse? Do you remember the place - it's a little atoll I think - which has your name on it?

Yes, I know the place. It's somewhere - I don't know where - I couldn't even tell you offhand where it is. I know it's the Pacific [inaudible].

> It's south of the Admiralties, I think, isn't it?

Yes, that's right. We were working 'round the Admiralties when it happened. I know what had happened. We'd been steaming along and getting no bottom, no bottom, no bottom, and then she shelled up. And that's where we caught the big fish. Yes. This wasn't shown on any chart, so he anchored where the water was shallow enough to anchor. There must have been about forty fathoms at least, well, you couldn't anchor in much more. And he got eight stars at sunset to get the position exactly, and again at daylight next morning he got another eight to give him an absolute fix. But in the course of that evening everybody started to fish and where there's shallow water the fish come because the seaweed and stuff grows from the sun, you see. In deep abysmal water you don't get it. And that's how I came to hook my big fellow. I had one decent-sized bit of line left, and I got him hooked. And the boat was fooling around with a hand lead, trying to get some depths, to see what the water was like for depth, and we passed them down a harpoon and when we got mine up to the .... We couldn't lift him out, he was too big. They harpooned him with this harpoon. And then we got a line around his tail or something and lifted him out of the water that way.

> And it was the next day that you actually charted this little reef?

That was the same patch and they gave it my name.

> How conscious were you of the dangers of getting in close to these fairly insignificant pieces of land of going aground and so on?

I don't know. I was at sea for a good many years and I've only got ashore about twice because .... Of course, we had good equipment in that ship. She was a brand new little warship and she had all the latest equipment of the day, and so she was nothing to worry about. When you get up there with a fifty year old relic that should have been scuttled years and years ago and without any equipment at all, except kerosene lamps and things like, that's a different problem.

While you were doing the work did you ever talk of the charting work of much earlier navigators - people like Cook and Flinders - the difficulties they must have had in ships under sail?

Yes, I've often wondered how they did it. Yes, it must have been a terrible job. And their charts are pretty good, too. Quite a lot of them are quite accurate still.

Yes, they're quite remarkable.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification; this is Ed Stokes, Corvettes, Edwin Pearse, tape two, side two.

Just going on, Mr Pearse. After Christmas '44 the ship went to Darwin, and this is early 1945, and I think from there you steamed up to the Philippines. Do you know why you were sent there?

No, I don't. We got our orders: proceed to such and such a place and that was it. They don't tell you why.

What do you remember of the period in the Philippines?

That's where all the action came. We were attacked every day. I'm not likely to forget that. They didn't actually attack us - we weren't big enough. The larger ships got attacked.

Was this when you were taking part in an action, or when you were at anchor?

We were anchored alongside the .... There were several hundred ships in that big area. The Japanese bombers came over and plastered them with bombs left, right and centre. But the most place they concentrated on was the aerodrome space. Well, that happened to be .... We were the closest to the land on account of our insignificance, and so we saw a real bit of action there.

Why were you anchored?

Yes, while we were anchored, yes.

Where were you anchored?

Off the island of Samar in one of the Philippine islands.

And the ships that were massing there, were they preparing for the invasion?

Yes, [inaudible] I believe so. Yeah. For landing on whatever they were going to land on. I don't know where they landed. Didn't MacArthur say, 'I will return' or something.

Yes, of course. But you didn't stay for ...

I think we were only waiting for orders, or something, when we were there.

Well, what actually eventuated? Did you then go on to do other survey work, or were you ...?

No, we came back down after that, I think, and then we started on that big bay up near Darwin - what's the name of it? Port Essington. They were getting ready for an invasion of Singapore. That's where the British Pacific Fleet was going to rendezvous, and we were going to take soundings all over the bay and make significant ...

For - if the fleet were to anchor at Port Essington.

Well, it would. That was what they intended to do. But we didn't have to do it, the Yanks dropped their atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima and flattened them mid-August, and our attack would have been about October, or something like that.

Just going back to the period in the Philippines. It's quite a distance to steam from Darwin. Had you steamed there and simply done nothing and come back, or had the ship been used in some way?

I don't know. No, I don't think we did anything else after that. We mucked around Darwin for a while - not Darwin, Port Essington - till we were told it wasn't necessary any more. Then corvettes weren't wanted - the war was over.

(5.00) But I was referring to the period in the Philippines. While you were in the Philippines, was the *Benalla* used in any significant way?

No, I don't think so. I can't remember. There was too many ships there already. I don't think the Yanks wanted us much.

Was there some feeling amongst the crew then ...?

No, you don't care what the crew think. They don't have to think. We do the thinking.

What about amongst the officers, was there some disappointment that the ship wasn't being used much?

[Inaudible]. Everybody's disappointed if he's not fighting - you see a war going on and you're not in it, but that's .... Some earlier piece in the game, a couple of years before that, we were mustered together with a whole lot of ships that were going up to do some action. They all left, and they left us behind - we weren't worth taking. See, we could only do fourteen knots. We only had one four-inch gun and a few anti-aircraft guns and things like that, no torpedo tube, or anything like that. We'd only have been in the way.

After the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima ...

Yes, [inaudible] after that (laughs).

... the *Benalla* did, I know, steam with a little flotilla to Koepang in Timor. What was the purpose of that voyage?

We were in Darwin at the time and we went to Koepang to accept the Japanese surrender. That was about six or eight weeks after the war had finished. The flotilla went over with - the flotilla leader was the *Moresby*. It was a surveying sloop, too, but a bigger one. She was the flagship of our lot. We went over to Koepang and there their armada consisted of four small landing barges. And they came out to cede the place to us. Their ceremony was held on the *Moresby* not on my ship.

> When the ceremony was held there on the *Moresby*, I think your own commanding officer attended. What were the feelings amongst - your feelings, or perhaps the feelings of the crew generally, if you knew them - about the defeat of Japan - about the war - looking back on it all?

It was a darn good job - yes. And what's more we didn't to stay up there for the rest of our lives. But I was in Japan after that, and not much after, and I had a look at Hiroshima. And it hadn't been repaired and it was flat all right. But there was about a seven or eight storey building and the blast had blown out the concrete in it and the heat had softened up the metal frame. And it had taken a gradual curve over and then it was set in that position. How they got that down beats me. They must have cut little bits off it one at a time. At the same time, it's important to remember that Kobe was only sixteen miles and in Kobe we'd had pinpoint bombing 'round the clock for the last seven weeks of the war and we'd done about the same amount of damage that the Yanks did in ten minutes with their atomic bomb.

> Sure. Well, of course there was the terrible bombing in Europe of places like Dresden. Just going back to Koepang on Timor though, Mr Pearse. What was the general mood of the crew? What was your feeling after the surrender had been signed there?

We were glad we were all going home. A lot of us were married and had families. Those that hadn't wanted to be and other things. I remember the skipper came to tell us - Coady was in command then, I remember. He came, mustered all hands, and said, 'Well, I think it's your .... You won't be released for about two months'. They thought they could go home in about a week, you see. 'Nobody wants to get there quicker than I do.' We wanted to get out of it. We'd had about enough.

> How much had you seen your wife in the years since you joined the navy, since late '42?

Not much. I was away usually for periods of about ten months. I never had longer than ten months. I was always away. I was never based in Sydney where I lived.

> Just finally on Timor, I think you took back with you some Dutch people ...

[Inaudible] was a small Dutch warship and she was with us, and as we got very near to this place, Koepang, she suddenly let go her heels and rushed in fast. And they rushed ashore and stuck up the Dutch flag again. You've got to remember that at that time Koepang was a Dutch possession. And then they started looking for certain particular people. They had a list of some Dutch women that they wanted. So they commandeered somebody's car quickly and they found the two women too, and they exacted some well merited revenge for anything they'd suffered. So that was that.

(10.00) Well, moving on, Mr Pearse. I know, the *Benalla* sailed back to Darwin and then you went down to Fremantle. I think that was a quite leisurely cruise. I think you left the ship in Fremantle ...

Yes, travelled in a train to .... Again - you can do things wrong in the navy. I lived at Ryde in Sydney, a northern suburb, and I got out at Strathfield. And they were yelling for me all over Sydney station and of course I wasn't there. I'd got out seven miles earlier. There was a furore about that. They wanted to send me away somewhere and I'd have got a half-stripe and been a lieutenant commander in that case. But still I didn't get it. It doesn't matter.

And you went, I know, for a period to the Newcastle State Dockyard.

Yes, that was several months I was there.

But then you were posted again to sea, I think to HMAS ...

Kanimbla.

... as third engineer.

No, I was - they're not rated. I was really a watch engineer. They had four lieutenants who kept the watches. She was in four watches, that ship, I think so. Anyhow, I was the senior one of those, but you don't rate yourself as second, third, fourth, fifth in the navy. There was an engineer commander - he was the boss man. Then there was what they call the senior engineer - he was the second. And I think I'd have come about next.

And I think aboard the *Kanimbla* you made - there was a journey to Macassar and two voyages to Japan. What were the points of those voyages?

We went to Japan. She was an ex-merchant ship and we took a large number of people who were giving evidence, and some of the criminals who'd committed war crimes, and they were going to take part in these trials in Japan - and that's where they did. We took the crowd up for 'em. And then came back to Australia and I got out of the navy then.

How strong were the feelings aboard the *Kanimbla* both towards the Japanese and towards the people who'd suffered during the war?

I don't know. You get to regard it as all in the day's work.

But speaking for yourself, Mr Pearse. Were you able to forgive and forget, or not?

I can't remember, really. Let me see .... We were in distinct classes. Now, the ship's own officers - we had a lot of army officers aboard with us, and that sort of thing. We had a large place that had been a first class lounge, or something, and there was one corner of it with a little window and bar. And that part was sacred to the ship's own officers. It was the holy of holies. Well, the other officers - sometimes you could pick up some bloke, some were relations of them, and they'd take 'em in there as a guest, just as if you were a ward room guest in some other place. You can't really adapt a merchant ship to such a thing .... Give

yourself about 200 surplus officers to carry on board of a different arm altogether and for a different purpose. And not on your - I was going to say on your articles, but they don't have articles anyway.

> After the period on the *Kanimbla* you returned to Sydney. There was briefly at *Rushcutter* and then you were demobbed. Looking back on your period in the service navy during the war, and of course that really was the *Benalla*, how did it all seem to you? Had it been ...?

All right. While I was in the *Benalla* I was in a new ship and a good little steamer - a new ship - about as easy as you could get anywhere. And I was well treated and I .... I didn't get very much salary by comparison to what I would have got but at least I had safety which is more than I would have had if I'd been in a merchant ship. I'd have probably not survived. And so I'm pretty happy about it, and what's more I've been a ward of the Repatriation Department ever since. Even now I've got to go and see the doctor over at Greenslopes on 9th June, I think it is, so that all this would have cost me a great deal of money. One thing they gave me was a complete body scan worth about $1,000 any day, and it didn't cost me anything.

> Do you think that ex-servicemen, by and large, have been treated well, or not?

Yes, I think so. They are here, anyhow. Yes, I think so. I think the disability pensions might be doubled without any harm but they haven't been yet.

> Just turning back to the *Benalla* itself, that little corvette. When you left her, as you were saying, you were looking forward to being with your family, were there real regrets at leaving the ship and the crew, or not?

(15.00) Oh no. There were fifty-six corvettes and they were all pretty much the same.

> Sorry, I meant, did you regret leaving the ship's company with whom you'd served?

Most of them had left too, already. Yes, she was being taken a rotten road to be tied up and ultimately she was towed off to Japan and cut up into scrap iron.

> Is there anything, just finally, Mr Pearse that you'd feel you'd like to add to this record of being in the navy during the war that's not on tape already?

No, I don't think so, except I don't regret joining the navy. I think it was a wonderful opportunity to do, and I'm very glad I did. That's qualified me to join the United Service Club and one or two other things, and I've been very happy about it. And also, while I was in it, it gave me access to many places that I couldn't have gone if I'd only been a merchant serviceman. And I was definitely a class higher than I would have been in the merchant service. If you can behave yourself in the navy you get on. I've got a grandson in the navy now. He's only a sailor and he sleeps between two torpedoes in a submarine. But that's his own fault, I advised him not to.

> Well perhaps we might leave it there on that note. Mr Pearse, for making this tape for the War Memorial, thank you very much.

The pleasure was all mine.

Great.

END OF INTERVIEW