



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one, tape one of the interview with Mr John Harrison. Sunday 21 July 1991 and I'm Daniel Connell, the interviewer. End of identification.

Mr Harrison, if we could start off with your childhood. Where did you grow up?

I was born and educated up to senior standard in Benalla in Victoria, and that's when I think I must have been - in the 1920 year - I must have been bitten by a mad aeroplane from which I never fully recovered. I saw my first aeroplane on the ground inside a tent - two shillings and sixpence to see the aeroplane. That was Australian-built by John Duigan, D-U-I-G-A-N, at Wangaratta Showgrounds in Victoria. And he had built this thing in the Bacchus Marsh area of Victoria. The last I heard of that one, it was in the Science Museum in Melbourne. And Duigan - this was pre-war - Duigan went into the Australian Flying Corps, No. 3 Squadron.

What date was it that you saw that plane?

It'd be about 1915 - 1914 or '15. I was about ten years old. After that I saw the first airmail flight from Melbourne to Sydney, a little French Bleriot - monoplane - and the pilot was Maurice Guillaux. I'm not perfectly sure of the spelling of the name. But the first airmail flight to Sydney took a mere three days - three days - and I think it was a token affair. He carried about as much mail as you could hold in your fist.

A lot faster by train?

It would have been, yes. After that we saw the Vickers Vimy, Ross and Keith Smith fly over and after that one, Parer and McIntosh, with a rather battered DH9. This was on a railway truck at Benalla in Victoria on its way to Melbourne. They had finally pranged it at Kalkee or Holbrook area in New South Wales, just about sixty/seventy miles north of Albury. And it became then matter then of - it was not flyable so load it onto a truck. They get it onto a railway truck to Melbourne and then erect it to look something like an aeroplane for the reception at Flemington Racecourse. After that I saw various aircraft. And I remember very well the flight of four single-seater fighters, SE5s, Melbourne to Sydney, to give a show there. They landed at Benalla in - the ground there was called the Poker Paddock, P-O-K-E-R. And the legend was that it had been won and lost as the stake in a game of poker. Well, those were four very well known pilots. The leader at the time was Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Pentland. They used to call him 'Alphabetical Jerry' - Alexander, Aloysius, Neville, Dalwood, Pentland.

(5.00) They flew to Sydney, gave a very good display there and called again at Benalla to refuel on the way home. I can recall very well Jerry Pentland, he was brought into the town of Benalla by a former Australian Flying Corps pilot, David [Manbon?] and he got on the telephone to Point Cook. I can recall him then, at the telephone, he got through to Point Cook, on to the commanding officer, Squadron Leader Barry Jones, 'Pentland, Sir' and he just sprang to attention at the telephone, clicked his heels, 'Pentland, Sir'. I can remember that very well (laughs). So later on when the Prince of Wales arrived in Melbourne in 1920 I went down to Melbourne to see that lot and I think there were something like twenty-five to thirty aeroplanes flying over that day. That made quite a good show. I got off the ground myself,

ten shillings a flight I think it was in 1924 - quite a while later - in a little sixty ... little French-made, Farman biplane with a little 60-[Lorraine?] rotary engine which used to run like a sewing machine but it chucked out castor oil all over the place. After that I had another flight with the late Skipper Matthews in what had been the first aeroplane that QANTAS had. Matthews bought it after QANTAS got on to bigger stuff, and it was used at Essendon in Melbourne for joy riding for many, many years.

At this stage did you want to learn to fly yourself?

In 1924 I'd had the want-to-learn-to-fly business and I also applied for enlistment in the Royal Australian Air Force as a photographer and I got knocked back because of below par hearing, but that didn't deter me.

When did you get interested in photography? When did you start being a photographer?

1922-23.

What led you into photography?

What led me into it? The reason for that I had done a first year pharmacy apprenticeship and unfortunately I got in with the wrong boss. Most of the men who came back from the war it made men of them, this fellow it didn't. He was not the type to stay with so I got out of ...

What was wrong with him?

Very fond of the ladies. I have heard the phrase 'womaniser', which I think would be fair to use. So instead of learning pharmacy I was spending most of my first year there as messenger boy. So I got out of that lot and had ...

To ladies of his acquaintance?

Yes. So after I then got in with a leading Melbourne commercial photographer, Charlie Frazer, C.J. Frazer, spelled with a 'z', and I stayed with him for about four to five years. And then in 1920 ... I got my first press photograph published of yachts off St Kilda pier in the *Sun Pictorial* in 1924 and received a whole seven shillings and sixpence reproduction fee (laughs). After that, in 1925 the *Morning Post* was started in Melbourne, as Melbourne's fourth morning daily - *Age*, *Argus*, *The Sun News Pictorial*, and then *Morning Post*, the start of that. That was in the old Herald building which is now the site of the State theatre in Melbourne, on the corner of Collins and Russell Streets. And I became interested in aviation photography and I went down to Point Cook and photographed some of the first descents made - parachutes, training parachutes, where they were using two parachutes - one to use and another one there as an emergency safety.

(10.00) One of the men I photographed in descent was Pilot Officer Scherger. It was said at the time that Scherger, with his one thin stripe: 'There goes a future chief of the air staff', and that turned out to be correct. Scherger eventually became the first Air Chief Marshal in Australia. And it was said of Scherger, when wartime came on, that he could more than hold his own with the Yanks in three ways: he could outthink any of them professionally; he could outfly any of them technically; and he could put any of them under the table (laughs). So that

was that. I became very friendly with Scherger throughout the years and one thing led to another and I'm told that I did more flying - spent more hours in an RAAF aircraft - than any other three Chevalier[?] photographers in Australia. I was doing work then for *Aircraft Journal* and I suppose nine out of ten of the aviation assignments for the *Sun News Pictorial*, when 'Smithy' started the original Australian National Airways I did a trip, Melbourne to Sydney, with him - Sydney was his headquarters - and a photograph I made there of the *Southern Moon*, one of the Avro X monoplanes arriving from Melbourne, flown by no less than the celebrated Jimmy Mollison. This picture - the front page of it, the close-up of it, was used simultaneously - full front page on the same day - in the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney and the *Sun News Pictorial* in Melbourne. Passengers on one of the flight, they'd say, 'Hey, have you seen this photograph?'. 'Oh yes, we saw that in the paper when we left Melbourne' or 'when we left Sydney'. Well, that was something was of an a - I stutter over the letter 'a' at times - achievement. Also, I think that I was the first person to have a real photograph photographed in Melbourne in the morning, published in next morning's Sydney paper. That took some doing in those That was the Italian pilot with flying boat, a Savoia-Marchetti, De Pinedo. It is rather interesting that that particular seaplane or flying boat - it had been overhauled at Point Cook - and later on in the war, when war broke out in the Middle East, Australian flying boys there were rather intrigued to find the remains of this Italian flying boat with the crest of No. 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook on it. That rather tickled them as to how that happened. Anyway, I kept on doing the aviation photography for the *Sun* newspaper and *Aircraft Journal* and writing also for *Aircraft Journal*, monthly, from about 1928 or '29. Just before the war I did a round Australia trip ...

Just before we go to the war period. Going back to that early period in the '20s and '30s, what was special about aircraft photography? What were the special skills that you needed to be an aircraft photographer as opposed to an ordinary photographer?

First of all you needed the right camera gear for it.

What was that? - in the '20s.

Some bastion affair, instead of bellows that would get blown to billy-ho in the slip stream. Also, a matter of - what I was specialising in was aircraft in flight, formation, I mean. Became a matter there of being able to talk to the pilots in their own language as to what I wanted, and also be very much aware of what could be done safely, what was silly to ask. So that I got some kind of reputation for that - to landing on the ground, and getting the results.

(15.00) For example, what sort of photograph did some people ask for that was silly to ask for - what was a silly photograph?

Pardon?

What's an example of the sorts of things that some people would ask for that was dangerous?

Sometimes people would say, 'Oh, here's a photographer here, here's a chance of a buckshee flip, we'll cover' and they'd go silly all over the place. But what I wanted to do was to get up into place and stay there. Actually had to plan the thing beforehand. I can recall also, in 1932, a female pilot who had a round Australia flight. She wanted then to go up from

Melbourne to Wangaratta. I was flown up in the Shell Company's moth. Harold Owen, a former air force sergeant pilot, had me in the front seat and we were photographing Mrs Bonney in flight. And we were forming on her and getting the pictures because it was easy money for Owen, he knew just what he was doing. We stayed in the same hotel in Wangaratta, had breakfast the next morning, and both the aircraft were going back to Melbourne, and Mrs Bonney said something - she was rather interested in this formation flying and could she have a go at it on the trip back to Melbourne. Owen said, 'That's alright'. Well, we got off from Wangaratta and then eventually she came in to a quite good position from nearly a quarter of a mile away and tucked in quite tight on our left, portside. I said to Owen through the speaking tube, in those days, 'The girl's not bad'. He just nodded and then apparently she decided, oh, this is a piece of cake. She thought she'd change sides to form on the other side. Well, she then made the cardinal error of crossing over and losing sight of us. It is emphasised on formation flying people, if you are changing position never lose sight of your leader. She just floated across behind us and her undercarriage knocked our rudder over to about forty-five degrees. And I've never thought since how close - about eighteen inches to two feet - her propeller came to my pilot's head. We were at about thirteen hundred feet and Owen couldn't do anything. He couldn't dive away, that would have put our tail up into her. He couldn't stop in front of her, and the result was that we got into a spin with no rudder control at about thirteen hundred feet. Owen said, 'This is it' and I said, 'Oh, stick to it' sort of thing. With a tree [inaudible] bigger than about three hundred feet, he, at last resort, put on full engine and that blast of slip stream apparently pulled the rudder back into position to have some authority to recover from the spin, and we landed then without further damage. The other aeroplane, after we'd got down, she came [inaudible] what had happened and we just her shooed her away, 'Shoo, shoo, shoo', like that, so that was that. The subsequent inquiry - we all gave evidence there - and my pilot was exonerated. He'd been the leader. It was not his job to get out of the way. His job was to fly a steady course at even speed. So that was that.

Well, anyway, that was before the war. Then I carried on with the aviation photography. Used to get down there - Melbourne Cup day, photograph the course and the crowd there, and to be told you must be out of the way fifteen minutes before the Cup starts, before the horses come out. And we get this picture on the front pages of the paper the next morning. Also other times, the Melbourne cricket ground, the grand final day, or Remembrance Day at the Shrine in Melbourne, where we tried to sneak 'round there as quietly as possible in the Gypsy Moth - that sort of thing.

(20.00) Anyway, war broke out ...

Again, before war broke - a couple more questions before war. Kingsford-Smith, did you have personal dealings with Smith?

Yes, I became - well, I got on to John terms with him. It was Sir Charles from me but it was John from him. And I remember very well one occasion after one of his record-breaking flights from England, in a single-engined Avro Avian - I'm not clear at the moment whether it was the *Southern Cross Junior* or the *Southern Cross*. The arrangement was that he was to fly the thing over Melbourne for me the next morning. We were at the Menzies Hotel that night and Smithy was called to the phone. He came back to say, 'John, I can't fly the Avian through in the morning but 'Shorty' here, well, I know he'd break his neck to have a go at it'. Well, Shorty was the late Travers Shortridge who ultimately went in in the *Southern Cloud*. Anyway, Shorty flew that Avian to perfection. I told them I wanted to get a [inaudible] of

Government House in Melbourne and he did exactly what I wanted. He got into position, followed us round, and we got an excellent picture. There was a sequel to that in that many, many years later a book was brought to my notice - this picture of Kingsford-Smith in the *Southern Cross Junior* flying over Melbourne. I had just come down here to live with my daughter, from Warwick in Queensland, and one day she drove me to the National Library - this picture was credited at the National Library - and I asked to see the people in the photographic session. A lady came out and she said, 'What can I do for you, Mr Harrison?'. I said, 'Oh, this picture here in this book, I would like you to make a slight correction in your records. It's not Kingsford-Smith flying it.' 'Oh, who is it?' And I told her - Shortridge. She said, 'Mr Harrison, what would be your authority or your reason for asking us to change the records?'. I said, 'I shot the picture'. 'Oh.' So that was that. And she said, 'Just a minute, I think I've got something inside to show you, if [inaudible] like that'. She came back with a thirty-by-twenty hand-coloured enlargement - coloured with oils - of the same picture. So when my daughter called for me I asked her to come up and I said, 'Have a look at something that your dad did many, many years ago'. She was pleased with that. Anyway, we're getting back to the war years, is that right?

No, just a couple of questions. Keith Anderson's *Kookaburra*, that was an accident, I understand.

I never saw the *Kookaburra*. I met Keith Anderson once when he and Smithy flew Bristol Tourers, ex - really it wasn't Australian Airways, but he was only another part of them - Smithy was the top boy. I never met Anderson after that and I never saw the *Kookaburra*.

What about the Wapiti training aircraft? There was an accident in 1938 - the Wapiti?

What was that, please?

A training aircraft. An accident in 1938 in Victoria there - a training aircraft called the Wapiti.

Oh, I wasn't mixed up in that one.

Right. Photographers - you were working as a freelance photographer in this period. Why did you like working as a freelance photographer? You couldn't get a staff job or you didn't want a staff job?

On one occasion I had a staff job with the *Argus* in Melbourne - for twenty minutes. I was accepted and I went back to my office where I was working and said, 'Sorry, Todd[?], it's off' (laughs) - twenty or thirty minutes - that was that. Possibly my hearing was becoming worse and it was not easy to handle people, so that might have had a bearing on it.

(25.00) As a freelance photographer, how would you get jobs? I mean, what was the normal way in which you got work?

Well, I was known in the newspaper business and *Aircraft Journal*, and that was how things were. And occasionally I'd do some business with aircraft people out at Essendon.

What, they'd commission you? Normally, you'd work on commission or normally you'd get work initially and then take it to them and see if ...

Assignment sort of thing - assignment. Now, do you want to go on to the war business?

Right, yes. Okay, the war. Just before the war, what were you doing just before the war started?

The same sort of thing.

You were working where?

Melbourne. War broke out and fairly soon after that the Commonwealth decided - they had the one Minister of Defence then, one department, Defence Department - they decided with the war on their hands to split that up into three ministries: Minister for the Navy - it was a priority - Minister for Army and then Minister for Air - that was the late Jim Fairbairn. Fairbairn then realised - he started this Department of Air - and he had a large recruiting campaign. And he formed an RAAF Directorate of Public Relations. He brought in two quite high-powered journalists, one of them had been Archer Thomas, the Chief of Staff of the *Melbourne Herald*. Well, these fellows, as I said, were quite high-powered journalists but what they knew about aviation wasn't all that much. So apparently after there'd been a series of bloomers and technical things of that kind, somebody said, 'This fellow Harrison, he knows everybody in the air force, let's rope him in just sort of an assistant'. Well, they did that and they didn't last very long, then Reg Leonard came in.

What happened? Why did it fall down?

They just decided that it wasn't for them, apparently. And then Reg Leonard came in. He finished up as Sir Reginald Leonard of Queensland newspapers. He came and he said, 'Good day, John, what are you doing here?'. I thought I'd got me a sort of a writer and help for this but you're a good photographer when can you get cracking on the photographic side of it?'

So you'd been employed as a writer initially?

Yes, I had made a bit of a name for myself as a writer for *Aircraft Journal*. So ultimately - not ultimately - but soon after that it became a matter of getting more equipment. I knew very well that air force stores did not have anything remotely suitable for press-style pictures. We were then in Century House which we had to requisition for air force, in Swanston Street, across from the Town Hall. And with a rush of patriotism or whatnot I went around to Kodak - just around the corner in Collins Street - and brought myself a brand new Speedgraphic outfit which I used throughout the war.

This was your own camera?

My own personal property, and it's now in a glass case in the Australian War Memorial. Anyway, I'd been there about three weeks when the question came up of the Minister, Jim Fairbairn, making a round Australia trip in the twin-engined Percival Q6 which was owned by the Civil Aviation Department which came under him. And then it became a matter of somebody who'd go with the Minister and I was the one selected to do it, on the round Australia trip with Fairbairn. I was the sole companion. He flew the aeroplane.

What sort of aircraft?

Percival - named after Edgar Percival - and Australian Percival Q6 - two Gypsy 6s and would carry about six passengers, retractable undercarriage and constant speed air cruise, and by British standards a fairly [worn?] aeroplane at that time. Well anyway, on the trip the Minister flew the aeroplane and I did everything else.

It sounds like an enjoyable government assignment.

And the Minister made the speeches and flew the aeroplane and I did pretty - everything else, including when we got around to Forrest, halfway between ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two, tape one, John Harrison. End of identification.

If you could just go back a little bit.

We overnighted at Forrest. Could not put the aeroplane in a hangar, it had to camp out. I had to get the covers and so on over the engines and the cockpit. And next morning, after heavy frost, get these covers off and I then had to hand swing these Gypsy 6s, which I managed to satisfactorily. We then got into Adelaide and over to Melbourne on 1st August. And then I think it was about 12th or 13th/14th August I met his private secretary in the men's room - I think that's the word for it - of Century House, and Dick Elford, his private secretary, said, 'John, I'm sorry, I've done you out of a trip. I'm going with the boss tomorrow.' Well, that trip 'tomorrow' resulted in the Hudson tragedy at Canberra where three Cabinet Ministers and the Chief of the General Staff - everybody on board - were killed. So that was luck number two for me - I missed that by a whisker. So that was that. Anyway, we carried on with the Public Relations Directorate - this was the civil staff of Department of Air. Then as the thing grew the decision was made: these fellows should be put into uniform. Well, our Director, by that time was Leo McDonnell, a very nice, very gentle little fellow who'd been the Canberra rep for the *Brisbane Telegraph* - that chain of papers. He was made honorary wing-commander and there were various squadron leaders to flight-lieutenants. And then the problem arose, what to do with this Harrison fellow. He was air crew fit apart from the hearing. Practically a two-year paper work battle developed what to do about me. My director wanted to get me up to where the action was - New Guinea - and there were various obstacles to do this. Then eventually he decided to, 'Oh well, we'll give him commission as honorary flight-lieutenant'. Arthur Drakeford, Minister for Air, he signed that on 2 December 1942, and then there was a further delay of six months before I became the first RAAF PR photographer on a posting outside Australia. I got up to New Guinea about 28 June '42 and then down to Milne Bay. Well, by that time that part of it was more or less past tense - almost a sideshow.

1943 that would be, would it?

1943, that would be correct, yes. Well, at Milne Bay for a while, the conditions there were pretty rough.

It's not much better now.

(Laughs) That could easily be. I remember, as far as photographic work was concerned, the humidity there was terrific. Apart from the fact that you could polish boots at bedtime and they'd be covered in fog next morning, the humidity was such that the only way that we could dry my sheet film negatives was in the refrigerator which had dry air.

(5.00) There was an electric lighting plant there which was running the refrigerator and various photographic ... lighting the camp and running the electric glazing machine while the boys were making prints. They'd put them through the photographic glazing machine and they'd come out, they were bone dry and in about ten minutes they'd be as limp as a dish towel. So that's how things were. Then we moved across to Goodenough Island, about sixty/seventy miles roughly north of Milne Bay, and that was quite a different place altogether. The thought went through my mind that the climate and so on was so much better, I thought, this would be a good place, if the war ever finishes, for the cruise liners to make calls. I was then attached, it was 77th Squadron, fighter squadron. The Commanding Officer, Dicky Cresswell, who was the first Australian pilot to knock down a Jap over Australian soil, he was the CO at the time. He's now living at Garran. There's different ways to pronounce, the Canberra suburb, Garran or Garren. Which do you prefer?

Whichever you like.

I still see Dicky occasionally. And I was also doing work with the Beaufighter Squadron, 30 Squadron.

What sort of work were you doing? Were you just taking - flying on combat missions?

Getting records and stuff to send home to show the people what the Australians were doing.

Were you flying on combat missions?

Yes, I got out on some, yes.

Did you actually go with planes that went into action?

Yes. Not with Beaufighters. The CO at that time, Clarrie Glasscock, he said he couldn't see his way to it. And not long after that he didn't come back himself. So that was that. Anyway, the pictures we were doing were to show the Australian public what Australians were doing in action - that it wasn't all MacArthur. We were up against the Allied Forces - did this, that and the other. And the Australians were the poor relations - barely mentioned. The idea of the pictures and a couple of the stories that were set in there to show them that the Australians had a part also, which I think was very well worthwhile.

Who decided what sort of pictures you should take? Were you given directions about the types of pictures you should take?

The general idea was: pictures that did not breach security but on publication back here back in Australia would show people what the Australians were doing.

But whose idea was it when you were deciding to this photograph or that photograph, who worked out what sort of pictures you should take? You or someone else?

Very largely. I had an officer there, senior to me, the late Jack Waters, who had been the editor of the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane, he was - well, senior to me - he was the writer bloke there and he would make suggestions and so on. But it was up to me as to what I could get - what I could arrange. After a while I was then moved back to Townsville.

Just before we go to that I'd just like to actually go back a little bit, find out when You described how the public relations was set up, but the photographic section, how was it organised? How many people were in the photographic section?

It started with one - that was me. I managed to have - main office for the Public Relations Directorate, what is Century House, right in the city in Melbourne - and I managed to rent a little cubby-hole of a dark room, about two or three hundred yards up the hill in Collins Street ...

Did you pay for that or the air force? Who paid for the rent?

(10.00) That's the point I'm coming to. I managed to rent this place at a quid a week, one pound a week, and I was using a lot of my own equipment and I brought some of the equipment there that had been used by Billy Brindle[?], the *Women's Weekly* photographer. Eventually some of the rental there came through for payment and we then had the Secretary of the Department of Air grizzling about this unnecessary expense - one pound a week - why could not Harrison do the work from Laverton, the air force station about thirteen miles out of Melbourne. Well, my boss, Reg Leonard, promptly jumped on that one. He said, 'Look, I want Harrison handy here. If something newsworthy pops up in the morning, I want that in the *Melbourne Herald* the same afternoon. To and from Laverton, car trips there of thirteen or fourteen miles each way, that's just not on.' He got his way. Anyway, I carried on as a one-man show, as the founder of this thing, for about fifteen/eighteen months. New buildings were being put up in the grounds of Victoria Barracks and I was asked to give a suggestion for a layout of a photographic place out there. I got three rooms, one room for negative work - film developing - another for printing and a third room for office. That went on for quite a while and then when it became too much for one man I was then able to bring in an assistant, one Vic Akers - the surname Akers, A-K-E-R-S - who had been known for many years in Melbourne as the prince of press photographers. I'll repeat that, the prince of press photographers. Vic Akers and his racing pictures were famous. He had retired but he was quite happy to come in with me and take over some of the dark room work - the printing and so on. That went on for quite a while. And then after the fall of Singapore, a permanent air force fellow who had managed to escape from Singapore, he came back as rank of sergeant, and got pushed up to WO - warrant officer - and he was put in there ...

What was his name?

Frank Marshall. He came in there sporting his one little bit of ribbon - the 39th Star - and the idea was that if ever I was successful in being posted overseas he would take over. Eventually he did take over, and I had helped him. He'd been a permanent air force photographer but purely on air force work and very little idea of what elements to make a

publishable news picture. I helped him in various ways. I loaned him exposure meters and all this sort of stuff. Then he took over but I'm afraid that in the long run He then started this studied campaign to rubbish me. I don't like saying it. There's a saying about speak no evil of the dead - he's dead now - but he did start this studied campaign to rubbish me. I'd be sending stuff back after I was based in Townsville, with trips up to Moresby, Noemfoor and Morotai and this sort of place, and my boss would be sending me increasingly tetchy sort of letters, and even ringing up 'get off your backside and do something'. I said, 'But I am doing something, sir. I'd sent such-and-such and so-and-so down'. And he said, 'Warrant Officer Marshall reports that they are not worth printing'. I said, 'Well, one lot in particular which I sent on - let me see, I'll just check up the date - on such-and-such a date, I think was excellent'. He said, 'Right, I'll find out about that'. He rang back a few days later that his reaction had been rapid and fierce and the result was that the stuff that the gentleman in charge had said was not worth printing made the front page of *Pix* and the double spread inside *Pix* - that sort of thing. Well, that made things a bit hard for me.

(15.00) The sort of photographs that you were taking, were you only taking press photographs? Were you taking ...?

There was the historical record angle of it as well, including what I think was my biggest thrill I ever had in photography. Easter Thursday 1941 we were told - one of our writers and myself - tomorrow morning you're going down to Laverton. You'll probably be flown down to an advance landing ground down near Gabo Island. We went down that way and, in addition to my own personal property - press style camera outfit - I was given on that trip an air force camera - F24 they call it - with a fourteen-inch lens to do some ship recognition pictures. This was all very secret. I was flown down there by Wing Commander Thomas, who later became Sir Frederick Thomas, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, and the second pilot with him was one, Flying Officer Law-Smith, who later became quite a big man in QANTAS. That afternoon, that's the Thursday before Good Friday, we went out about - I suppose in another Hudson - halfway to New Zealand on anti-submarine patrol. And we were told 'next morning you might see something'. Went off the next morning with Wing Commander John Ryland, who eventually retired as a group captain and became number two boy in TAA. I went off with Johnny Ryland before dawn. He shot the camp up. He said, 'I'll wake those so-and-sos up' and we did. We went out then and the something we'd been told to expect turned out to be the convoy US-Ten of the five biggest ships in the world at that time, in convoy out of Sydney. At sunrise these five ships, steaming in line astern at about twenty-five knots, *Queen Mary* in front, followed by the *Queen Elizabeth*, the new *Mauretania*, the big Frenchman, *Ile de France*, and the *New Amsterdam* - Dutchman. They made a magnificent sight. We were circling these ships at varying heights, from several thousand feet to down below deck level, looking up at them, and in close. And we were thinking that - we were close enough to see some of the gun crews with their tin hats on the stern of the ships and the troops there waving sort of thing - something like 20,000 troops, I think on each of the two Queens. They were probably thinking thank God we've got an air force for protection. They probably had visions of the people in the Lockheed Hudson [inaudible] grimly clenched teeth every inch of the way, wrapped up like teddy-bears. The reality of it was very different. Johnny Ryland, pilot, sitting there, tunic off. The shirts in those days, we used to have two collars - detachable collar. The collar off, braces down round his waist, nibbling out of a packet of biscuits with one hand and occasionally he'd just reach out to the little knob, about the size of a two shilling piece, on the automatic pilot to just alter control slightly, and we were round and round. That was a complete, as far as I was concerned, a complete photographer's picnic. I'd be popping away with the two cameras at various things and I

finished up then with some very, very close pictures - I'll show you one in a moment. The camera was handed back to the air force station at Laverton and in due course I got a note up from Laverton: 'Mr Harrison, thank you very much for the excellent ship recognition pictures, but we did not require a closeup of the bridge of the *Queen Mary*' (laughs), which I had fill in the frame of the picture. Those pictures, of course, at that time were a complete security blanket, could not be used. They were supposed to go for historical record. In the scramble at the end of the war, a lot of people breaking their necks to get home, to get out of it - demobilised - I don't know what happened, I think somebody liberated the best shots.

(20.00)I've tried since on several occasions to see what happened or to get hold of some of the top pictures out of that set - no good. I got one that I'll show you in a minute. It will give you some idea what they were like. So that's how things were there.

What about pictures of things that weren't very good? - for example, like the bombing of Darwin. Did anyone go up and take pictures of Darwin Air Force Base after it was bombed?

Not from us, no. There had been a couple of civilian photographers up there at the time. They did it, but we didn't send anybody up. One snag that we had also was the important Chief of the Air Staff - RAF man out that way -he didn't believe in publicity. I remember on one occasion a Hudson plane load of skippers who had been - ships captured by German raiders - these fellows had been put ashore at Emirau, E-M-I-R-A-U, Emirau Island. They were flown down to Melbourne and they stepped out at Laverton and I was to photograph these fellows. And one of them apparently had a cigarette between his fingers, and the Chief of the Air Staff, Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, he hung back on those pictures for several days and finally were released. But I had to go and put a pair of scissors, cut the tops off the pictures showing air force hangars [inaudible] in the background. He would not have even released prisoners of war with a cigarette in their fingers - things of that kind. Of course, by that time the picture was stone cold, but there it was. The Directorate founded a little weekly journal, *Air Force News* - I'll show you some of the pictures in a minute, the two - and I suppose I had twenty or thirty front page pictures there, which, if I say it myself, I'm not ashamed of now. That's how things were.

How did you travel around to different places? You were given assignments to travel or you'd decide that maybe I'd like to go over to there to get a picture. And so you'd just have a talk to someone to get a ride or what would you do?

There were broad indications: 'We think you should have a look at such-and-such an establishment'. Or I might say myself, 'What about my doing such-and-such?'. So that's roughly it was about a fifty-fifty blend of that - about a fifty-fifty blend between the suggestions or definite instructions, I'd like to do this, that and the other, and what I thought would make good pictures.

Did you normally take pictures of what you might call positive things or sometimes when there was an accident or something like that, would you take a picture of that?

It so happened that I was present when there were very few prangs, so that's how things were. So the negative angle of it didn't come into my line very much.

Was there a policy about the negative angle? I mean, were you supposed to shoot that sort of ... if it happened?

If I'd been there, I would have been asked to do it for court of inquiry purposes and so on - well, just here's a competent photographer happens to be on the spot. He might as well make pictures which will come in handy for the court of inquiry. But I can't recall that happening more than once.

What was the once?

(25.00) You've got me thinking on that one. I think somebody came in and put a Douglas Transport on its nose. That was rather amusing in the way. War broke out and we were woefully short of what might be called long range aircraft so the air force requisitioned all four of the DC3 aircraft, put them into camouflage and had them commissioned, their civilian captains, as air force officers, and had them on the long seaward patrols and so on. Some of the permanent air force boys were a little bit - what shall I say - twitchy about these civilians putting out pretty good performances with them and they decided that they'd like to have a go at them themselves. One of them then got to do some - do an instruction on these aircraft - [inaudible] aeroplane - they're easy to fly. And one of them, at Richmond, apparently came down and landed with the brakes on and put the first DC3 in Australia up on its beak (laughs). His face was very red after that, I'm told (laughs).

Did you ever have arguments where people wanted you to take particular pictures and you didn't think that was a good idea?

Not very often. On one occasion, I remember, up at Goodenough Island the enciphering machine, I suggested photographing this and the [inaudible] officer there was horrified, 'Oh, this is highly secret. You're not even supposed to see it.' That's about the only, well not run in, but just this is a no-no sort of thing. Otherwise I was credited with being reasonably intelligent, knew what was what from the security angle sort of thing.

You'd normally set up shots but would you sometimes do natural action shots?

Say again?

I know that normally you would set up a shot or plan a shot, but would you sometimes do what you might call a natural, unplanned photography?

Once in a while you might see something. Once in a while you might come across something but mainly, particularly with the in flight photographs - I'll show you some in a moment - it was a matter of planning beforehand. I remember at Amberley, in the early days of 23 Squadron, 'Dixie' Chapman was the commanding officer and he had a mixed squadron - two flights of Wirraways and one flight of Hudsons. I went off with Dixie, he was flying me in the Wirraway, to photograph his flight of three Hudsons. Our radio telephony was working that day and so was the intercom on the Wirraway. And Dick, he'd just get in a nice position to have the Hudsons flying where we wanted them - in formation, line abreast or stepped up to the left sort of thing - and he'd see me: 'How are you going, John?' and I'd say, 'Fine'. I'd go click, click. And he'd say to the boys, 'Right, John, do your business, that's quite good'. Then he'd say, 'Terry, up six inches' (laughs). That was a stupid request but he'd just move slightly to get up into perfect alignment. After that lot we'd done the various formations: line

abreast, stepped up, [inaudible] on each side. And Dick finally said, 'Now, loop in formation'. The boys gave the unanimous raspberry (laughs). It might horrify some people that they should do this to the commanding officer but he'd put over something in complete fun to them and they responded. I think there was only one occasion that I can recall when I was told: 'Oh look, leave the flying to us. We know what you want', sort of thing - as a matter of fact they didn't. I'd seen so many people go off at times for a buckshee free flip and not get the pictures. I think I had the reputation of arranging these beforehand and bringing home the bacon.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is second tape, side one.

We just wanted to start off with a story away from the second world war for the moment but when John Harrison was working at the War Memorial in recent years part-time. I'll leave it to him to tell the story.

After I had moved down from Warwick in Queensland to live with my daughter and son-in-law in Canberra, I had been in contact with the War Memorial, obtaining pictures for books some of my friends had written, and then the question came up that they could make use of something I had in here. And I was actually doing part-time specialist volunteer work before the scheme became official. I put in about four years - four years plus - on that. The general idea was that I would work half days - go there, take my lunch with me, and then my supervisor who lived at Kambah - that's a suburb about two miles south of where I am at Rivett here - would normally drive me home. And I would find plenty to do there with these photographs - thousands of pictures there. Many of them had been through many hands over forty years and the captions were either missing or needed fleshing out or some of them, because of censorship restrictions in wartime, were mere labels: 'This is a spitfire'. Some had a [inaudible]. They thought it was great to have somebody there who'd been there in wartime and who was able, with these captions, to write out fresh captions: who, what, when, where, and quite often why - that went over very well. And I was putting in about three appearances a week or more. I think on one occasion I got in nine half-day appearances out of ten working days and I became known as the only volunteer who worked overtime. The idea of that being that in winter time some of our staff would work back a couple of nights a week. We could then spread things out without visitors in to say how untidy they are. They could spread things out and really get some work done. I would stay on then and my supervisor would drive me home at nine o'clock at night. So that's how that lot worked out. That was very good indeed. But the funniest thing that I had to do at the War Memorial concerned, one day I was going through a batch of spanking new ten-by-eight prints of various things - just freshly printed. I came across a batch of my own air to air Boomerang fighter pictures which, if I say it myself, I still think are pretty good. I showed these to my supervisor, Ian Affleck, who would say, 'This is unusual' and he then showed it to his boss, a very reserved Englishman, one David Lance, L-A-N-C-E, Lance, who'd come out to Australia from the Imperial War Museum. Well, Lance looked at the order form: 'I say, the chappy's phone number is here. Somebody ring him up and ask if he would care to have his prints signed by the author.' Well, the somebody who rang him up explained it could be done and his reaction apparently was, 'Oh, pull the other leg'. They said, 'What do you mean?'. He said, 'I said pull the other leg. That old so-and-so's died years ago.' They said, 'No, fair dinkum. We can get that done for you.' He said, 'Oh no, don't give me that'. Finally they said, 'Look, he's sitting at the next desk. Do you want him to sign your prints or don't you?'. And the response was like a little mouse, 'Yes, please'. So that was that (laughs).

(5.00) Just to go back to the war. In 1944 I think you made quite a major trip to some of the islands away from New Guinea, or was that part of ...?

Yes, I got as far up as Manila, beyond Manila, up to Clark Field, which the Yanks have abandoned just recently because of the volcanic business, and I got some very good pictures up there. That's how that worked out. Our first tactical air force had just been formed at Morotai with Harry Cobby, Air Commodore, as the air officer commanding, and the Weda

Bay invasion was coming on. We went off with three Liberators the day before the invasion was due - anti-submarine patrol and all that sort of thing. I think we had about ten hours' flight that day. And next morning the invasion was due. We were off there, working from Palallan Island, P-A-L-A-L-L-A-N, and we could then see at dawn the ships - Australian and American - the bombardment belting the blazes out of the place and then see the troops going in in the landing craft. It looked rather quiet. We had an army major on board as army liaison officer and we were circling round and then the intercom was something like this: 'Skipper to ALO. ALO what do you make of it down below? It looks pretty quiet.' 'Very quiet indeed, sir. I'll look next time round.' Came round next time, our blokes down there that are on the beach, half of them, they're brewing up tea. There had been a practically unopposed landing. Well we kept on around and around the island - this surveillance - and then at the same time this: 'Front Gunner to Skipper'. 'Yes, Front Gunner.' 'Hey, Skip, I can see a barge over the trees. Can I do him over?' 'Next time round, Front Gunner, I'll get out a bit and give you a better shot at him.' Came round, next time round: 'Front Gunner to Skipper: how about it, Skip?' 'Yes, I will do that' said a disembodied voice from up top 'You couldn't hit a cow in the backside with a shovel' (laughs). Anyway, we carried round and I made a picture then from the Liberator of where the Liberator, stacking up the fires caused by the rocketing and bombing - rocketing by the Beaufighter squadron really livened things up there. So that was how that one worked out.

After that I went up to Manila and there wasn't very much on then. The Yanks had been driven out of it and we were living with the American press people at a building on Taft Avenue, and could see the ruins of the Manila City Hall and so on - the Yanks were. After that I came back to Australia.

How did you find the Americans? What was it like working with the Americans or working alongside them?

Some of the Americans were okay, others were a bit condescending: 'You, Aussies, you can fly alright, if you only had some ships to fly. And those Beaufighters of yours' -which they called 'whispering death' - 'they're sure good ships' but otherwise a lot of the Americans were rather condescending of us. That's about how things were.

After I was back in Sydney, out at Richmond, doing shots where the paratroop training - army boys doing paratroop training - I got a good set of pictures there.

(10.00) And I happened to be in Sydney on the night when the news came through about the first atomic bomb being dropped, and then the second one. So, of course, everything was - well, every man for himself, put it that way. I got myself on the train back home to Melbourne, every bit in one piece to see my wife and kiddies again. I made the mistake then of - I think, arriving about 15th or 16th - of then making myself known to my boss in Victoria Barracks. I knew that our second child was due any tick of the clock. And he said, 'You're going back up to Darwin'. I thought, 'oh, fair go'. I said, 'The war's over'. He wanted to send me up to where Harry Watt was making a picture, *The Overlanders*, with Chips Rafferty. And I said something like, 'Oh, fair go, the war's over, I'm home in one piece and we've got a second child due any tick of the clock'. He said, 'You're going or else'. He was talking about court martial and so on. Well, eventually, on the Saturday morning I said goodbye to my wife, about eleven-thirty in the morning, out to Essendon, flown to Adelaide that night, then up to Tennant Creek or thereabouts on the following day and the second boy was born about eight hours after I left Melbourne. And a signal arrived for me when I was out there with the

film unit: 'Kettle arrived with spout' (laughs). Anyway, Chips Rafferty, I met him in air force at Milne Bay when he was on entertainment or amenities officer [inaudible] arranged things for the troops, to keep up morale and so on. Well, Chips was taller than I am and he had that long drawl, and the cattle in the pictures - Chips' famous line was, driving the cattle through things, he said, 'If we keep going, we'll have those cattle climbin' flamin' ladders' (laughs) in his long drawl. Well, that was that lot. After that I came back to Melbourne, became a spare part for several months. I was demobbed on, I think, 31st March 1946 - I avoided April Fools Day by one day - and I then started doing aerial photography again for Allen Studios which had been taken over by a former air force wing commander who then had me doing aerial photography quite a bit - well, mainly in Gypsy Moths from Essendon, doing assignments for various people as far down as Geelong or Castlemaine or down the Melbourne industrial suburbs. I remember one day we were flying around the former Kodak factory at Abbotsford, just out of Melbourne, in a Tiger Moth with a Chinese-born pilot, Roy Goon, who was the politest man I've ever met and one of the best pilots. And running rough at three hundred feet and Roy says, 'It's time we went home'. We went home. On my other day down at, I think it was the Cheetham Saltworks, somewhere between Geelong and Queenscliffe, it was open slather there in those days. You could get down quite low, and in some pictures, with the [inaudible], you could see inside the front door (laughs).

Back in wartime, talking about low flying. One day, it was on mainly recruiting propaganda demonstration, a flock of Oxfords there - I think about eighteen Oxfords - when we would drive in the train of these eighteen Oxfords, we got some very good shots. I went out another day, I was flying with the same Royal Air Force pilot, Squadron Leader H.J.F. Le Good, L-E G-O-O-D, his nickname was 'Speed'. We were flying in an Anson over - right in the city of Melbourne, and about two hundred and fifty or three hundred feet. There was supposed to be the parade of WAAAF, Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force [sic], and something happened there.

(15.00) It was a rough day, I was kneeling down at the midship's window of the Anson and there was a bad bump, put me on the small of my back, bump, on the Anson floor. The camera did not fly out the window. Speed just lent over his shoulder, 'What sort of bump? What's the matter, John?'. I said, 'This is too rough, go home, take me home. Well, you're wasting time'. So that was that.

Just talking about that war period. How did you feel about your period during the war? I mean, had it been what some people used to say: a good war for you?

A what?

The war, how was it? Was that an exciting period? Just summing up, was that a good period for you as a photographer - the war period?

Yes, I felt that I was not able to be air crew because of the deafness but I felt they were making use of the special skills that I had in aerial photography and the fact that I had a pretty good grasp of the whole air force structure and knew most of the top people from the Chief of the Air Staff down. So that I felt I was doing a useful contribution in that particular way.

Right. Mr Harrison, thank you very much.

That's alright.

Yes, that's good. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW