

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

This is an interview with Group Captain Hugh Birch at his residence, 61 Cross Street, Double Bay, on 15 February 1993.

Group Captain Hugh Wilson Birch, you were awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross by King George VI, you are mentioned twice in dispatches. If you counted the odds you should not have survived World War II. Do you put it down to the fact that you are an above-average pilot, skill, or was it simply good luck?

I think the fact that I had one years' training at Number 1 Flying Training School, Point Cook, gave me a marvellous background of flying and from that I think we all develop a certain skill. Later on Winston Churchill once said, 'There's nothing quite so exhilarating as being shot at and missed'.

In 1936 I applied for a cadetship in the Royal Australian Air Force and my father was horrified, he thought, well, there's no future in that at all. However, to my amazement somewhat, about December 1936, I had a letter to say that I'd been accepted for a cadetship and to report to the RAAF at Victoria Barracks on 2 January 1937.

There were about 2,000 applicants applied, wasn't there?

Yeah.

And what, thirty accepted?

I think there were thirty chosen finally. So we were then taken to Point Cook and we had a few more tests to do before we were finally accepted and then we began our training, some on Tiger Moths - me, I was one of those who were trained on Tiger Moths, and also others were trained on Avro Trainers. During that period there were quite a number of drop-outs who didn't even get to solo. We went on for another six months until we had a break in the middle of the year, and then we went on to the - rather large for us - single-engined [Wapperty] - Westland Wapperty - which is a wonderful aeroplane to fly.

At the end of 1937 we were awarded our wings by the Governor General of Australia at that time, Lord Gowrie VC. And that was a great moment; my parents came down to see me graduate and it was a marvellous moment.

In January 1938 I elected to do a seaplane course and, with four or five others, I joined the Seaplane Squadron at base Point Cook where we learnt to fly the Seagull V amphibian, the Tiger Moth seaplane, and began to do some early flights in the wooden Southampton flying boat.

Now, we were there for three months before I was transferred then to Number 5 Fleet [Cooperation] Squadron at Richmond. We had hoped that we would be transferred to HMAS Albatross, a seaplane tender, and unfortunately it was sold to the Royal

Navy and it went to somewhere in South Africa.

In Number 5 Squadron there were two flights, a cruiser flight which supplied pilots to the Royal Australian Navy - because on each cruiser a Seagull aircraft was used, mounted on a catapult, and taken to sea for exercises with the Royal Australian Navy. The other flight was a carrier flight which was meant to provide pilots for HMAS Albatross.

What happened then was that some of the pilots who were temporarily allocated to cruiser flight actually did their first catapult training at Farm Cove in Sydney. I remember very well flying a Seagull down to Farm Cove, landing alongside the HMAS Sydney, being hoisted aboard, put on the catapult and given one catapult shot with a Flying Officer John Bell as my instructor.

Can you describe that flight in more detail? because it's quite unique these days.

Yes. Once on board the catapult, John Bell - Flying Officer Bell - was seated in the right-hand seat, I was in the left, and down below, where we could see him in front of the cabin - well, at least, not in front, but on the starboard side of the catapult, was the catapult officer, Royal Australian Navy, with a flag. John Bell explained to me that when the naval officer lifted the flag we should have the engine going full bore - and we were, of course, well and truly secured on the catapult.

As soon as the catapult officer dropped the flag, we were catapulted off at around about sixty-five knots into the air. There was quite a push behind, as you can imagine - it was 100 pound cordite charge, I think it was - would be more than that - but anyway, it was quite a substantial charge that got you off.

Then I circled the ship, came down, and landed alongside the Sydney, and was hoisted aboard, put on the catapult. John Bell then got off, and I said, 'Where are you going?' - he said, 'You are the instructor' - that was after one shot. There was nothing much you could do about it because you were completely in the hands of the catapult officer, and yourself to some extent.

So the next pilot came on, he'd had no experience, and he said, 'Where's the instructor?' - I said, 'I'm your instructor' - he said, 'But you've only done it once', and I said, 'Yeah, you are the next instructor after me'. Anyway, we did that a few times.

It was quite exciting because we used to go to sea with the navy, down at Jervis Bay - Melbourne for the Cup, Hobart for the Regatta, and various other things - and we wore, of course, a very distinctive uniform in those days with gold rings and gold stipes, although I had a very thin one, being a pilot officer, the lowest form of air force life, practically.

So we did that for quite some time, then I came back to

Richmond where I was assigned to the Fisheries Division of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. It was called a Pelagic Survey Flight, and the object of the exercise was to establish the whereabouts of commercially viable fish shoals, such as salmon and tuna.

It was in February 1939 that I left with a representative from the Fisheries Division of the CSIRO and we went down to - it started off by going down to Narooma, to Eden, Flinders Island, St Helens in Tasmania, and then we did a lot of flights around Tasmania. In fact, we did, I think, the first circumnavigation of Tasmania. And we found huge shoals of tuna and, in fact, we were responsible for the establishment of the Safcol cannery at Narooma. That was quite an interesting exercise, in fact, it took right till the end of March.

Then I was asked to - I was invited actually - to take a ride in HM Submarine Phoenix. So I flew down to Farm Cove and joined the Phoenix with a couple of other pilots, and we were taken outside the heads and submerged to about 100 feet or so - it was a very claustrophobic experience, I can assure you, because destroyers overhead were dropping depth charges on us, the size, they told us, of a matchbox, in other words, a couple of ounces. It sounded like a sledge hammer hitting the side. I was put off submarines for life.

I continued to do a lot of work with the navy, and finally I went to New Guinea to do a photographic survey. We'd had an aircraft up there and it was blown ashore in a cyclone. So I went up there to continue photographing a hundred-odd square miles of the area around Port Moresby.

Was that in a Seagull?

That was in a Seagull in May 1939.

And we flew from Richmond up to Archerfield, Rockhampton, Cooktown, Thursday Island, and finally to Port Moresby where we used a tiny little strip at a place called [Kila Kila] - which is now a village, it's not an airfield any more - but the object of the exercise was to photograph possible areas for future airports for both military and civil purposes.

The Seagull wasn't a very comfortable aircraft to fly, it was a single-engined pusher aircraft.

Yeah, well, it wasn't bad actually when you got used to it, and I'd had a lot of experience so I was quite happy with it. But we used to have to climb to 10,000 feet, which is fairly high, without oxygen, every day, to start out photographic reconnaissance and photographing.

Well, I did that until the end of May until June - the end of June - when, with six other pilots, I was very fortunate to be chosen to join Number 10 Squadron RAAF, which had just been formed in Australia, and to go to England to collect, with others, the new Sunderland flying boats. So off we went in July 1939.

You went across by ship?

No, we went in a Qantas flying boat to Karachi - no - yes, to Karachi, I think, and then on to Southampton by Imperial Airways.

So you went as first-class passengers?

Of course, yeah. We also went as civilians.

We were then assigned to do our training, before bringing back these six aircraft, to the RAF station at [Calshot]. It was the oldest air force station in the world, it had been an air force station during World War I for the Royal Naval Air Service.

So we started our training on an extraordinary aeroplane, it was a short Singapore, four-engine, biplane flying boat, and I can't quite ever imagine why we were doing a training course on an aeroplane of that type, which was rapidly going out of fashion. However, we did that and we completed the course on that, and we all passed without any effort.

And finally, on August 26 it appeared that war was imminent, so we were transferred to the Royal Air Force flying boat station at Pembroke Dock in South Wales. There were two squadrons there, Number 210 and 228, were equipped already with Sunderland flying boats.

On August 26 we began our real flying boat training on the Sunderland with RAF instructors. It was only a few days later, in fact, on September 3, that war was declared and we were then in to action with - I was with Number 210 Squadron RAF doing anti-submarine patrols in the Bristol Channel, Irish Sea, the Atlantic, English Channel and west off the Scilly Islands, way out in to the Atlantic.

How did you feel, as a young man, about entering the war instead of returning to Australia as originally intended?

Oh, fantastic. We were all very young and we couldn't wait not to go back to Australia, we were terribly keen to become involved. And the Royal Air Force chaps were all very kind to us and helped us, and we soon became initiated in what we were up to.

You must remember that World War I hadn't been over all that long and so all the station commanders were old World War I pilots. In fact, one of them was Group Captain, the Honourable [Twistleton Wickham Feenes] whose grandson has just crossed the Antarctic on foot.

Anyway, on Boxing Day - we had no ground staff, of course, so on Boxing Day, finally, all our ground staff arrived and Number 10 Squadron was established as the first Australian squadron to go in to action in World War II. So we then had our own aircraft and our own Australian crews from Boxing Day 1939.

Now, just prior to that, we did a few flights, one of them I did with Flight Lieutenant [Bull Gairing]. I was his first officer and navigator at that stage and we flew right up to Stranraer in Scotland and then on to Sullom Voe in the Shetlands because they were very concerned about aircraft - German aircraft - operating out of Norway.

How did you find flying with Sunderlands? I understand most of you thoroughly enjoyed flying with four-engined aircraft.

Yeah, it was a great aeroplane to fly and it was terribly noisy, hence my deafness.

Did it have any great vices?

No, not really. They were a wonderful aeroplane, I think, I can't remember any particular vices.

So my first flight with anybody of importance was in January when Lord Huntingfield, who had been a governor of Victoria, came out to see us with Anthony Eden, and the Right Honourable Stanley Bruce, who was the High Commissioner in London, and Group Captain McNamara VC who was the Australian liaison officer - RAAF liaison officer - in London.

He had a formidable reputation, even in that time, didn't he?

Yes. Well, he'd had a reputation from World War I as a very distinguished and courageous pilot who had gone out and picked up an Australian pilot whose aircraft had landed, or crash-landed, in the desert, and he landed alongside it and was able to pick up the pilot and rescue him.

My first flight out of England to any foreign port was to take a spare engine to a Royal Air Force Sunderland which had been put out of action at Bizerte in Tunisia. So we flew out to Bizerte and then on to Cairo, to Alexandria, back to Bizerte - which was quite an exciting place, it was a French Air Force/Naval base - or French Naval/Air station.

On the way back we were landing Marignane near Marseille - if you remember, it's now January - late January - 1940. Well, the weather was absolutely dreadful. It was the coldest weather they'd had in the south of France for generations and we were there for three weeks when they told us to stay there for a while and help the French Naval/Air Force on patrols in the Mediterranean. And they only spoke English to us on Friday nights, the rest of the time we had to speak to them in French - it was great fun.

Anyway, finally we were getting a bit concerned and we eventually got back to Pembroke Dock before the enemy arrived in any strength in France.

Now, the next thing that happened was - oh, Dunkirk - and we did quite a number of patrols in the English Channel and

watching over all the poor unfortunate soldiers streaming back across the Channel.

We were based down at Mountbatten, Plymouth, and most of the French soldiers came in there after landing in Dover, came in to Plymouth where they were going back to France because, at that stage, the enemy had not reached the middle of France or the west coast. And they all had the very attractive-looking - looked like firemen's helmets, brass helmets and so on - and they were going back to France thinking that they would help the French to overcome the enemy. Anyway, it was very sad because they all went off and some were in a ship that sank and a lot, of course, were killed during the war. But that was in June 1940 and we were escorting quite a number of troop ships back to France.

Well, we did a lot of that escorting of troop ships off Brest, and Ushant, and on 27 June 1940 I was told to go ahead on - we were going to operate out of Plymouth that night on a very secret exercise called Operation Black Lion. I went in to the men's lavatory and saw, to my amazement, a very small man, not much more than five feet tall, covered in medals, and it was Emperor Haile Selassie, the Black Lion of Judah, with a giant Nubian servant looking after him.

So I went back and I said to the CO, 'Oh, we are taking Haile Selassie somewhere' and he said, 'No, you are taking his escort, a million pounds of Ethiopian currency, and about a ton of bofors ammunition to Malta, and you are flying directly across France to Malta. Now, there might be some enemy action across France, but right ahead of you will be Squadron Leader Guy Menzies ...' an Australian, but Royal Air Force, '... he'll be taking Haile Selassie himself.'

So we were shot at a few times going across France and landed at Malta after a flight of about - yes, eleven hours.

Were you being shot at by ground fire or by enemy aircraft?

No, by ground fire, yeah. They could have been Vichy French because the Germans hadn't reached that part of France at that time, although there might have been isolated pockets of them.

How did you feel about this secret mission? Did you feel a certain degree of excitement?

Very excited indeed; I thought, oh, this is really something else, particularly when I thought it was Haile Selassie.

Anyway, eventually we got to Malta and Guy Menzies was there, just ahead of me, and he was being decorated with the Order of the Black Lion or something similar, together with a wrist watch with the Ethiopian crest in diamonds and other jewels - and I shook his hand.

You didn't get the special watch?

I didn't get the xxx, right. Unfortunately Guy Menzies was killed later on on a patrol off the coast of Sicily.

Now I move on the July - mid July - 1940 when we were ordered to shadow some enemy transports. One of my crew sighted five Heinkel 111 bombers attacking a ship - British ship - the City of Limerick. We attacked one Heinkel with a front gun and the enemy aircraft was believed to be shot down as we saw a lot of smoke coming out of it and it disappeared in to cloud, while three other of the Heinkels were driven off.

It wasn't long after that that the tail gunner - we were about 100 miles west of Ireland - when he sighted two Junkers 88s. Both aircraft passed us on parallel courses but they wouldn't draw close. Two more enemy aircraft were sighted a little later bombing a motor vessel, but disappeared.

Round about this time we saw a couple of lifeboats - we were 100 miles west of - way out in the Atlantic - 100 miles west of Ireland when we saw these lifeboats with passengers in them. The sea appeared to be quite calm even though it was in the middle of the Atlantic - it was the middle of summer too. So I landed the aircraft and we taxied up to where the lifeboats were and gave them some food. They couldn't come very close to us; they started to come close but the mast was interfering with our port aileron and I thought, any minute now we are going to be damaged. We also felt that we might be torpedoes, which would be very unusual to have a flying boat torpedoed (laughs) out in the middle of the Atlantic. So we gave them a lot of food and other things and directed a Royal Navy destroyer to these people who were later rescued.

Now, towards the end of July we were heading for Gibraltar from Plymouth when the front gunner sighted a Dornier 18 flying boat, ahead of us about a mile, and flying very low. Well, we thought this would be a good opportunity to have a battle between two flying boats and so my copilot, Athol [Wern], thought it would be a good idea. And as we got close, of course, we could see the large black crosses and the swastika, and I told the front gunner to open up and see what he could do.

Well, we could see the traces heading toward the aircraft and one or two must have obviously hit. Suddenly in our aircraft there was a terrible bang and our front gunner stopped firing. So I said to Athol Wern, 'Look, go down and find out what's going on here - it's suddenly become very, very draughty indeed.' He went down, he came back very pale-faced, he said, 'No wonder it's draughty, the front turret's not there any more and it's been blown off, and the front gunner is ...' George Booth his name was '... is lying there covered in blood and he's not very well.' He said, 'Also there's a hole, a split, seventeen feet long in the starboard side of the aircraft where a shell or something has gone through there.'

So I went down then and gave the front gunner a shot of morphine - he was very badly covered in shrapnel - and we headed back to Plymouth where he was taken to hospital and

married the nurse who looked after him there - and he still lives in England and he sent me his best regards the other day, just before Christmas.

But we found out that the - which we didn't know at that time - that the Dornier 18 was very well armed with 22-millimetre cannon. My copilot worked out later that if he'd elevated his gun about an inch he would have hit us right between the eyes, through our front windscreen. But it took months for the aircraft to be repaired and we lived happily ever after that.

Did you manage to do damage to the Dornier?

Yeah, we hit - his rear gun was put out of action and the Sunderland was hit two places, putting our front gunner out of action. It lasted about sixteen minutes when the aircraft - the Dornier - disappeared in to cloud, smoking from the starboard wing.

Now you consider both these aircraft equivalent really.

The problem was, we were much faster, we were gaining rapidly and getting closer and closer to the enemy, which was quite a mistake. I think as we veered off he shot in to the starboard side - the shell must have gone sideways because it was an enormous tear, as you can imagine, but we thought we had the [wood] as they say.

Now, you were admonished when you returned.

Yes, because we were supposed to fly to Gibraltar and it was too much temptation, when we saw close up an enemy we thought we could easily blast out of the sky, but we made a fatal mistake there.

Later, Air Commodore, as he was, [Bull Gairing], admonished you.

Well, he said we were supposed to be flying to Gibraltar, not to be attacking enemy aircraft in the Bay of Biscay or anywhere else for that matter - and that's where it was. He said our object was to get to Gibraltar, not to shoot down or attack enemy aircraft.

And what were the formal words that he actually said? He said some things ...

He said one of the rules in the manual of air warfare was the maintenance of the aim, and your aim was to get to Gibraltar, not to attack enemy aircraft.

How did you feel about your supervisor saying those sort of comments?

Well, we felt we were a bit let down about that because we were, you know, very enthusiastic in keeping the war going and winning, so it was a bit of a disappointment.

So instead of getting a pat on the back you got admonished?

Yeah. Quite often, they were terribly boring, you can imagine, some of these convoy escorts we did, but it was very sad too when we would see some of our own ships torpedoed and sunk by U-boats which we hadn't sighted - it's because they were very clever at maintaining their position under water so it was very difficult for us to sight them, even though we were terrible careful then in watching out for (them) - and quite often the weather was rotten and we would be asked by some of the escorting destroyers, 'Where are we?' on an Aldiss lamp - signalling lamp - and we would, quite often, be able to tell them much more accurately - because sometimes they'd been days at sea, out of ports like Newfoundland, sailing through terrible weather, rough and unable to get a sight for the celestial observation.

I've got a note here, on August 6 - I'm looking at my logbook - when we saw the ship, the Geraldine-Mary - we saw it actually torpedoed, but, of course, we didn't see the submarine. That was on the 6th and two days later we saw the SS Mehemet Ali, El Kebir, torpedoed, with a loss of life; of course, a loss of stores and equipment, and food, for England.

You must have been very tempted to land when you saw lifeboats.

Well, you couldn't possible. Well, most of the time it was impossible to land out there in the middle of the Atlantic, it was too rough, though on this particular occasion it was okay, it was fairly calm - but except for a huge swell. I was very concerned afterwards because there was an enormous swell, but no waves as such, and very little wind.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Interview with Group Captain Hugh Birch, Tape 2.

Group Captain Birch, on Wednesday July 30 1941 you were summoned to Buckingham Palace and received your Distinguished Flying Cross from King George VI. His Majesty commented that Squadron Leader Birch was wearing the only dark blue RAAF uniform among the seventy members of the services who were decorated that day; and the King also inquired if you were homesick. In fact, what were your feelings on that day?

Well, I don't think I could - I said I was homesick, you Majesty; I think I probably said I'm very fortunate to be here really, representing the RAAF, on this particular occasion, being the only RAAF person present. And he said, 'Are you getting your mail regularly from home?' and I said, 'Yes, I am very fortunate, and the other Australians here are receiving mail which really keeps us from being homesick.'

Group Captain Birch, it was coming up to the height of the activities of the Battle of Britain. What were the activities of the Squadron during that period of time?

Well, at that time we were engaged in anti-invasion patrols in the English Channel, watching for the movements of enemy shipping, particularly the pocket battleships. And, of course, we also were able to observe the activity involved in the Battle of Britain itself, we could see these Spitfires and Hurricanes, and the enemy aircraft, quite often engaged over the English Channel, and, from time to time, unfortunately, aircraft from both sides being destroyed with the pilots usually, fortunately, being able to bail out. Luckily, also, in the Channel itself, there were quite a number of motor torpedo boats and aircraft, such as the Walrus, who were picking up aircrew from both the RAF, RAAF and other allied forces, as well as from the Luftwaffe.

Was there a sense of confidence by Australians that the Luftwaffe were going to be defeated in the Battle of Britain?

Yeah, I think so, particularly when we were based there, on the very coast of the English Channel, at Plymouth, the number of crews from other countries was quite remarkable. For example, there were Polish, Hungarian, Czech, French, Norwegian, and other nationalities involved. And the camaraderie that developed, and the feeling that there was no way we could lose the war, was paramount. In fact, every evening it was almost quite moving when we first arrived there to have these crews from other countries who'd managed to escape before the enemy took over, and we, each evening before dinner, they'd play the national anthems of all the countries whose crews were at that particular station. So that was quite a moving experience really. And the camaraderie between the crews was fantastic.

During this period of time you were also starting getting involved in quite a number of VIP escort duties with the Squadron, and I think one of them, in October 1940, you flew Anthony Eden.

Yes. Anthony Eden was the Secretary of State for War, and it was on October 12 that we were ordered to take him out to Egypt. And we flew from Plymouth to Gibraltar to Malta.

Malta, incidentally, was a highly dangerous place to get to because we had to fly very close to the coast of Italian-occupied areas on the north coast of Africa, such as the island of Pantelleria where they were very heavily fortified with anti-aircraft guns, then in to Malta which itself is very close to the Italian occupied, or Italian owned, island of Sicily which was heavily fortified. It had a very large air force section there.

All our landings at Malta, incidentally, were at a place called [Callafrana] which was a Royal Air Force flying boat base. And 10 Squadron lost one Sunderland there which, unfortunately, had to remain during daylight hours, and it was bombed, attacked

and sank at Callafrana.

It's interesting also that one night, just before I left, an Italian flying boat, a Cant - C-A-N-T - twin-engined seaplane, arrived there from the Italian Air Force and it was quite interesting to meet these chaps who said they thought they were in Sicily (laughs). In fact, they told us what squadron they were from, and various other matters of interest, and we rang the letter, the Intelligence Headquarters of the air force, and they said they were terribly sorry, they couldn't come out and interview these chaps because there was a curfew.

So we wined and dined them, and they enjoyed very much being in safe hands in Malta, and they told us everything. We were both enjoying our grog so much that we completely forgot. When the Intelligence people arrived at [18] the next morning the Italian crew didn't say a word and we'd forgotten most of what they'd told us. I don't think it was terribly important anyway.

Could the Italian crew speak English?

Yeah, very good English. Also there were a few German pilots and crews who had been shot down, one of whom I met in San Francisco when I was with Qantas. He told me that he'd been flying a Junkers 88 out of Sicily and he'd been shot down by a Royal Air Force Spitfire, just north of Malta itself, and he and his navigator bailed out of the Junkers 88. As he came down on his parachute he pulled out his notebook and noted the number of the Spitfire as it circled around him. Anyway, he landed safely in the Mediterranean and he was picked up by a British torpedo boat, captured, then transferred to the United States where he spent the rest of the war as a POW.

After the war he joined Lufthansa, the German airline, and he became the manager of Lufthansa in San Francisco where I was based. He wrote to the Air Ministry and said that on such and such a date he was shot down by Spitfire number so-and-so near Malta, could you tell me the name of the pilot who shot me down. The air force wrote back and said, yes, you were shot down by Flying Officer [Haliston McCray] - with a name like that maybe that's his correct name - and this is his address - they gave the address. As a matter of fact, they said, he's still in the Royal Air Force.

So he corresponded with Flying Officer McCray and then the correspondence dwindled to just about nothing. And about four or five years later he came to Sydney and he phoned me - his name was Oberleutnant [Elson], a Junkers 88 pilot - and he phoned me and said, 'Have you got time to have a drink at the Wentworth Hotel?' So I went over and he said, 'Do you remember the episode of me being shot down?' and I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'Well, a couple of days ago ...' this is long after the war, must be ten years after the war had ended - he said, '... a voice, somebody phoned me, and he said, "Is that Oberleutnant Elson?"' - and he said, 'Yes' - the voice said, 'This is Air Marshal, Sir Alistair McCray. I shot you down.' (laughs) They had a wonderful reunion and reminisced about their various activities. He took him home for dinner to his own place in San

Francisco and they had a great time.

Have you ever come in to contact with any Luftwaffe adversaries?

Well, not of my own, no.

How did the Luftwaffe treat Sunderland crews if they ever did capture them?

They treated them quite well because we had a couple of crews - or least, not a couple of crews, but a couple of aircrew members - who were shot down and they were quite well treated. The first one was a chap called [Corporate] who was on loan to the RAF flying the three G-class flying boats that were on loan - it was a huge model of the Sunderland really, only much larger. And they were called G-class; their names were The Golden Hind, The Golden Fleece and The Golden Horn. This particular one was shot down with a vichy and one of the crew members had been with me and he was on loan to the RAF. He survived and I had a note about him the other day - he lives in England - but he was quite well treated, and I think most aircrew were by their captors.

In fact, a friend of mine who was in 10 Squadron, and now lives in Tasmania, he sank a U-boat, and after the war he met the captain who survived - the U-boat captain in Germany somewhere or other - and they got on like a house on fire.

Must have been an extraordinary experience though.

It was almost like the days of chivalry in the sense that, for example, when Squadron Leader Douglas Bader was shot down - he had no legs, of course, but he had artificial ones, and one was damaged beyond repair, and the German air force allowed a Spitfire to fly over the prisoner of war camp and drop a leg by parachute. This was unheard of later on in the conflict.

How did you view the Germans during the war? Was it hate or ...?

Not really, I don't think so - maybe the Germans generally - but we had a great respect for the German aircrew, they were the only ones we had any contact with - a probably very different attitude with the army who were in much closer conflict with them, particularly in North Africa where so many Australians were involved.

There's some sort of special feeling amongst aircrew and this is why this chivalry remains, that you all share a common element which at times can be very dangerous.

I think so otherwise you would never have an incident like Oberleutnant Elson had, or the leg to Bader.

Group Captain Birch, I'll just go back again to October 1940 when you carried Anthony Eden. I guess that was another top secret mission.

Yes. That was particularly interesting because we were the only squadron operating flights through Gibraltar to Malta, and usually Cairo, where we landed on the Nile. And on 12 October 1940 I had the honour of taking, as a passenger, the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden and the Governor General of Sudan, General [Huddleston], from Plymouth to Gibraltar, and then on to Malta and to Cairo. Anthony Eden later became the member of the war cabinet in Egypt to look after the crisis as appeared to be developing in Greece.

As we were flying from Malta to Cairo, Anthony Eden asked me if I would like to have lunch that day with the British Ambassador, Sir Miles [Lampson] who was an extremely tough character and who had threatened King Farouk that he would turn the guns - the British guns - on the palace unless he cooperated. He appeared to be quite anti-British at that time, but Sir Miles Lampson was very carriageways, no-nonsense. And I was seated next to him at lunch at the embassy as a young - whatever I was at that - flight lieutenant - at that time - and so it was quite an honour to be at that lunch with Anthony Eden and Sir Miles Lampson and other very prominent people, including the Chief of the Air Staff there, who at that time was Air Marshal Tedder, and other high-ranking bodies.

It was interesting to be in Cairo at that time, there was a lot of activity happening. I also became the expert on flying out of England to Gibraltar and Malta and Cairo, and, of course, we were the only operators then - and we brought newspapers out, which they were dying for. In Gibraltar particularly it was interesting because we landed out in the harbour, the outer harbour, of Gibraltar. In order to get ashore we were taken via British cable ship which was involved in mending cables that had been destroyed by enemy action, and we always gave them newspapers, and they responded in the quite early hours of the morning when we arrived, after having flown all night, with icy cold English beer, which was very welcome indeed.

But the flights themselves were interesting in that we flew from England - all these took place at night, down the coast of Portugal, which was lit up like a Christmas tree because they were completely neutral right throughout the war - in fact, they were very much on the side of - our side, the allied side. Any Brits or allied people who were shot down in Europe and who managed to escape in to Portugal were almost immediately picked up and taken, or helped, to get to Gibraltar where they were repatriated. And we took a lot of those people who had come - who'd escaped from - European POW camps or had just escaped back to the UK.

And I remember one of them in particular was a French admiral who - Admiral [Museliea] - who had walked across the Alps in to Portugal. He was picked up two days later by a ship - a trawler - and taken to Gibraltar and we flew him home. And he was so excited as we flew up the coast, past Lisbon, lit up when the rest of Europe was completely blacked out.

Just going back to your lunch with Anthony Eden and Air

Marshal Tedder. He must have been a bit put off by a mere flight lieutenant having lunch with this rather esteemed group.

Well, not really, when I was invited by Anthony Eden. And Sir Miles [Lambton] was one of the most charming ambassadors I've ever met. He told us all about what was happening and how he was standing up to people like Farouk. So that was an interesting period.

Now you were attacked at some stage during that flight with Anthony Eden, weren't you?

Yes, we were. It was off the Italian island of Pantelleria - we unfortunately had to go very close to it. We often did a few flights escorting Hurricanes from aircraft carriers in to Malta because it was quite a long overseas, over-water, flight, but we invariably started just north of Pantelleria and then in to Malta with maybe a dozen Hurricanes in case any of them landed in the sea. Fortunately on the trips I did there were none that did land in the sea so all was well.

How did Anthony Eden feel about being shot at?

Well, he was fast asleep. It was a pitch black night. I think his butler, who was on board, said, 'What was that noise?' but anyway, we explained it to him and he didn't seem to be worried about it because we went on and we were pretty much over territory then occupied mostly by the Brits anyway, in North Africa.

It was on the way back - there was a interesting-looking man on board. He looked like an Arab, but he was a Frenchman who'd escaped from Vichy France. In my logbook I noted that his name was Lieutenant [Deviso Gigli] who had been in the French navy and was desperate to get to England to join the Free French. And he had escaped dressed as an Arab and he had Arab gear on when I met him first - he was very tanned from his long work from France to Syria to Egypt. He was obviously very well informed about what was happening in Europe and the Vichy French, and we took him back, right through back to England, via Alexandria, north of Gibraltar, and so on.

Years later I met an Edward Gigli here in Sydney who was the son of Betty Fairfax, and I said to him, 'Did you have a relative in the French Navy?' - he said, 'Well, my father was' - and I said, 'Well, I flew a Lieutenant Deviso Gigli from Egypt back to England to join General de Gaulle. He said, 'That was my father.' So this was all those years later, a most extraordinary coincidence.

So I did a lot of flights in to Cairo and Malta and they were all full of excitement, particularly one flight I did out of Malta. A group officer, WAAF - that was like a group captain - xxx xxx - I was so impressed I called her Sir.

We did also a lot of searches for the German pocket battleship, the Admiral [Share]. Those were pretty exciting days too.

Group Captain, on March 5 1941 you got involved in one of your more famous incidents during World War II when you were involved in activity with two Junkers 88s.

Yes. Once again I had Flying Officer [Addie Were] with me as my copilot and we were searching for some British lifeboats west of Ireland when round about midday we were attacked by two Junkers 88s that came up quite close to us. The tail gunner, who was a Corporal [Abardee] and one of the midships gunners, L A C Rainbow - who died in Sydney just the other day - under the instructions from the navigator, opened fire. The next thing I knew there were bits of Junkers 88 coming past, upside down - we saw it actually dive in to the sea.

We had some bullet holes in one of the fuel tanks but they were covered in a sort of rubber compound to stop them getting in to the tank itself at that stage. So I was very pleased about this, but I wasn't too confident about the other one. So I started going down towards the sea - we were then at about two or three thousand feet, I suppose - and so got back down to very low level when the tail gunner opened up again and he said the other aircraft was on fire. So the first aircraft was quite clearly observed going in to the sea and the second one was later confirmed as having been found by a trawler - an Irish trawler - off the west coast of Ireland somewhere, quite close to where we'd been attacked. So it was a happy day for us, and we gave a sort of half victory roll when we got back.

How long did the whole incident take?

Oh, not long at all. I suppose probably not more than about twenty minutes from the time the two aircraft were sighted until the first one came in bits and pieces - because they foolishly didn't realise the amount of armament we had firing astern. See, we had two midship guns, port and starboard, and four guns in the tail turret, and they came up far too close.

Where was the patrol actually taking place?

West of Ireland, we were actually looking for some lifeboats which had been sighted by another aircraft.

What were your orders at that time with regard to attacking or getting involved with enemy aircraft?

Well, if you were attacked, okay, you obviously fought back. So we were maintaining the aim, if you like, but it was no problem at all.

Quite often on those reconnaissance flights, west out in the Atlantic, west of Ireland, we'd see the very large German land plane, the Focke-Wulf Condor which took off from the west coast of France - probably Brest - and then circled Britain, west of Ireland, north of Scotland, and down the east coast of England for weather reports back to Germany.

On one occasion - this is pretty late in the piece - we saw

this - we were escorting a convoy, and we saw a Focke-Wulf Condor pass us - they were unarmed, they used to carry a very large fuel load - and the next thing was a Hurricane was catapulted off a ship - not a Royal Navy ship, but one of the convoy, cargo vessels, without wheels. It went up and the next thing we saw it attack the Condor and blew it to pieces. The pilot then - he was miles out at sea - turned his Hurricane upside down, bailed out, and was picked up by one of the destroyers. I'd never seen anything like that before, naturally it was very unusual to see an aircraft actually shot down by somebody else. But it was good to see an aircraft like the Focke-Wulf Condor - which was spotting, of course, convoys, on its way round the track.

About this time you were getting yourself quite a reputation back in Australia, in fact, you got nicknamed Jerry Magnet because you appeared to have more contact with the enemy than any other members of the Squadron. You also became known as the Women's Weekly Squadron because of the amount of publicity you were getting in that particular magazine. How did you feel about all this attention in the Squadron?

Well, of course, to have that kind of publicity when you are on active service naturally involved a fair amount of ragging from everybody else who hadn't been subject to that sort of intense enemy activity. It was fun for a while and then it gradually eased off. It didn't really bother me much. All these newspaper cuttings and things in the Women's Weekly kept on pouring in, and we had it. One of the pilots had established what was called a Line Book for shooting a line, and all these things - and I believe it's at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, they've recovered the Line Book, which is full of all this information about what we did or didn't do, our activities and homesickness, if you like, and that sort of thing. It was mostly press, the media, that cooked up these things, like Jerry Magnet and so on, but I certainly had my share of activity with enemy aircraft.

Did you start to feel the stress at this time? because, I mean, really you can only go on for so long, you really start feeling the effects of continual combat.

Oh, I don't know, I think the pilots and crews of Bomber Command had a much tougher time than we did because they were being continuously harassed, not only by night-fighters, but by anti-aircraft fire; all their operations were at night, and also a lot of them hadn't had a great deal of operational training, and a lot of it took place in areas of very good weather, like west of the Blue Mountains - you know, places like Narromine and Cootamundra, and so on, where they enjoyed very good weather. It was a terrific shock to these young graduates to find themselves in England with terrible weather. And coming back, after a long flight over enemy territory, to find yourself being diverted from one field to another because of terrible weather, that was a real strain, I think.

Ours was bad enough, in a way, coming back to - see, the

landings we did, practically all at night and on the water. The only guides were kerosene-lit flares floating around on the water, hopefully in to wind. That was a bit tricky, I suppose, but it was always - I don't think any of us ever crashed on landing, if I can remember.

You must have become very highly skilled at landing in terrible weather conditions ...

Yes.

... literally setting yourself up in a descent landing in a black sea.

Well, see, even here, when we were operating the flying boats in a civil version out of Rose Bay, most of the flights left at night and still, the flare path was only four or five kerosene flares heading in to wind, and the same coming back at night. You hadn't any of the facilities of a land plane, of a nice runway with electric flares and radar aids, and that sort of thing.

Your crews over in England, the non-commissioned officers, the airmen, and the officers associated with the Squadron, did they used to drink and socialise together?

Oh yes.

It wasn't a strictly officer xxx?

Well, there was that situation, but that was only in the mess. But we were often invited to the sergeant's mess or the airmen's mess. You see, you spent such a lot of time together, fifteen hours on a flight, you couldn't help but fraternise later on with those crews who'd been so loyal to you and so efficient.

Did you stick together as one crew? or did you bring other crews in externally to fly? or did you try and just stick with one crew?

Well, no, we usually maintained the same crew for quite a long time, unless they were transferred to another up-and-coming squadron because of their experience. I still see some of my old crew here back in Sydney, particularly on Anzac Day and that kind of thing.

So obviously they've developed a great loyalty for their captain.

Well, I don't know whether - I suppose it was in a way, but we all got on very well together, there was a great sense of camaraderie.

Did you share your methods in England with Royal Air Force crews?

Yes.

How did the RAAF crews get on with the RAF crews?

Oh, I think they got on reasonably well. It was difficult in the very, very beginning, before the war started I think they were a bit stand-offish, but we, very quickly, when the war began, we were operating, in fact, as part, initially, of Royal Air Force crews and we got on extremely well.

But generally speaking, you didn't have RAF members flying with your xxx.

I did, I had an RAF first officer for quite a long time because we didn't have enough to go around, and also I had a French pilot - copilot - unfortunately, he was killed. No, we had quite a cosmopolitan collection really.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW

09/00