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Air Commodore Gordon Henry Steege (Ret'd) interviewed by Ken Llewellyn about his service in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), 1937-1947.

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AIR COMMODORE GORDON STEEGE
interviewed by Ken Llewellyn

Cassette 1/Side A

Ken Llewellyn: This is an interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege on Friday, the 29th of January 1993 at his home at Palm Beach. Air Commodore, you joined the Air Force in July 1937. What made you become an aviator?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: I'd always been interested in the services, Navy and Army, earlier, probably having been brought up on *The Tale of the Indian Mutiny* or *How He Won the VC*, or one of those books of my father's. I had, after leaving school, three years with Perpetual Trustee Company and, having failed to get into the Navy at the age of 12, I think it was, when some 1,100 applicants sat for about 12 or so positions, and later on at the height of the Depression to make the Royal Military College, then I had three years with Perpetual Trustee Company but still was interested in the services. My father had a friend from the First World War named Sutherland, Captain Sutherland, and he'd been flying in Palestine, so by talking with him I enlisted his support and, I think probably due to him and his references, I was selected to go into Point Cook. Looking back on it, I'm so glad that it was the Royal Australian Air Force which was the service which took me rather than either of the other two.

So I went off to Melbourne for the July 1937 entry to Point Cook. On the train were Phillip Howson, * who later was deputy general manager of Qantas, C J Sharp, * who disappeared from my knowledge after the war, or really after Point Cook - I think he became a tactical officer - and Peter Henderson, who's now retired, retired as a group captain. He lives up at Bathurst. Charles I don't remember being on the train but I remember staying in the old Federal Hotel in Melbourne. It was midwinter and the place was like a rabbit warren. I think that the room that I had initially cost five and sixpence or

six shillings for the night. I was so depressed by it all that I thought I could afford another couple of shillings, so I got a room for seven shillings.

Then next morning with my bag on the tram up Collins Street and down to Victoria Barracks, where I met again Peter and his more sophisticated bunch who'd stayed in the Windsor Hotel. I wasn't too sure about the Windsor and what it was going to cost, so I opted for the Federal, which at least my father had stayed in many years previously. However, there we stood around below one of the bluestone blocks and a character in a civilian suit looked over the balcony and he said, 'Stand around there and there'll be a vehicle to take you to Point Cook shortly'. So we stood around there in the cold and misty day of Melbourne in July and the vehicle in which you rode to Point Cook was a First World War Crossley * truck with solid rubber tyres. We sat in the back of this with its canvas sides down. When one sees the buses in which people ride round in today, there was some contrast.

So to Point Cook and there we were in the cadets' mess until we were fitted and tailored for our uniforms with brass buttons for evening wear. Each night in the cadets' mess we were required to wear a dinner jacket for the old stiff collared ties, and it was rather a problem to keep them clean and attempt to clean up the back of the neck, because in those days one didn't have a new stiff shirt for every night of the week. But that was the requirement, that you dined in a dinner jacket every night.

I was posted to whichever flight it was and my instructor was a great character called Moran. * I think really one of the great influences on somebody learning to fly is a personality instructor. Fortunately, I had a very level type of personality in Ralph Moran and I was on the flight which had the Avro Cadet, which I also was very pleased with because it was a much more modern aeroplane than the old Tiger Moth which the other flight had.

Ken Llewellyn: What was it like to fly compared with the Tiger Moth?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Much more manoeuvrable, better controls. The Tiger Moth had a thing called a cheese-cutter, which was really just a spring which put a loading on the tailplane to give you a bit of bias one way or the other, whereas the Avro Cadet had in fact a little wheel which had a tab on the tailplane which controlled it, so it was a much more modern, better aeroplane. So I was delighted to fly in that aeroplane. Six months on those and then six months on the Wapiti, * in which we did all the various things: a bit of bombing and navigation and all the other things. I remember on my checkout * with Wing Commander Dad * Bladin, later Air Vice-Marshal, one always thought, 'Now, what should I do for this character? How shall I play it?' I thought, 'If I try to fly with too much elan, he's going to say, "You're a bit of a big head".' So I flew it fairly carefully following the banks of the river and when I finished he said, 'Steege, your flying's a bit ladylike'. I was horrified because I felt if he'd given me another go, I should have flown it the way I'd really like to fly.

So 12 months at Point Cook and probably home on home leave. We used to come on the brand new Spirit of Progress in those days, changing at Albury of course. Cadets of course in those days were given first class passengers with a sleeper except when you came home on your own and then you sat up all night. The station commander at Point Cook - station commander as he was known in those days - for the first of my six months there was Group Captain Hippolyte Ferdinand De La Rue, who originally had been in the Royal Naval Air Service. Then he was posted to command RAAF station Richmond, as it was known then, and he was succeeded by a very kindly gentleman, Group Captain Frank Lukis, who I shall speak about.

There are of course characters in any organisation. One of the instructors at Point Cook at that time on Wapitis was a notable figure in Australian aviation, Black Jack Walker. I remember when we were being taught to fly formation in these rather lumbering Wapitis, Black Jack Walker was the instructor behind the pilot on my right. I had my instructor of course in the cockpit behind me and I looked over to see Black Jack Walker sitting up on the back of his cockpit and, having taken the control column, the stick, out of its socket,

was sitting up there paddling it as you might paddle a canoe. It was rather disconcerting to a cadet who was trying to fly appropriately in formation.

Also there at that time was Flight Lieutenant Sam Balmer, * who was later killed in Bomber Command in Europe. Flying Officer Dixie Chapman was another flying instructor. Names begin to slip me off the cuff now. After a graduation parade at Point Cook in which ... I think there were 30 of us on that course, 30 or 33, and I think probably only three were eliminated in the 12 months we were there, so around 30 graduated.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, you came out in fact with a very good pass, so you nearly had a choice about where you would be posted?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: We were all asked where we would like to go and those who graduated towards the top of the list usually were enabled to go to the squadron of their choice. I think I was fourth on my course and I applied to go to No 3 Squadron at Richmond. So after graduation both Charles Read and I reported to 3 Squadron at Richmond. The commanding officer at that time was Squadron Leader Wally Walters, who'd been in ... the procedure was in those days that people went through the Royal Military College and then asked to be seconded to the Air Force, so Wally was one of those and a delightful character and a very good man to serve under as a young officer because, apart from his warm and positive personality, he was a fine professional officer. So I owe a lot to him. We arrived at Richmond in about July 1938. When one looks back on it now, I always had the feeling that I was at Richmond years ago, or while there I had the feeling that I'd been at Richmond for a long time before war broke out, but in fact it was really only from July '38 until war broke out in September '39.

Ken Llewellyn: Can you describe mess life in those days? I understand all single men lived in?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Yes, all single officers were required to live in the mess and very few officers below the rank of flight lieutenant, and not many of those, were

married in those days. In fact, there was one officer in 3 Squadron at Richmond who was a senior flying officer, but I think he'd had a bit of a problem by flying into some high tension wires over the Hawkesbury River and there had been a court martial, so I think that he was probably lagging a bit. He was married as a flying officer but he was the only one, and most of the flight lieutenants lived in, were single and lived in the mess.

Mess life in those days was slightly different to today. It was much more rigid. The president of the officers' mess was a Wing Commander Dell * Wilson and he as a single man, as a man who was no longer married, lived in the officers' mess and we treated him with awe and respect. When he came into the mess in the evening, everyone stood and did not sit again until he said so. In those days there were four squadrons at Richmond, so there was quite a number of junior officers and I think it was probably very necessary to keep that kind of standard among some pretty high-spirited young characters.

Ken Llewellyn: Did you have mixed functions, for example?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Well, there was a ball once a year, once or twice a year, full evening dress of course. Your guests were required to wear white tie and tails in those days and if they didn't have white tie and tails, then it wasn't appropriate for them to attend, and that was made very clear. Officers of course wore mess kit, as they still do, although I think the white tie and tails has disappeared with the times. Evenings, officers were required on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays to wear the blue with brass buttons. On Wednesday nights, casual dress. I heard it referred to only recently for the first time in many years as dog robbers. I don't know where the name came from, but dog robbers tends to be the name given to the casual dress which one could wear on Wednesday nights and Friday nights. If for any reason you didn't have a uniform or you had a guest in the mess on any of those nights, then they were required to wear a black tie.

I remember we had a young doctor report to come into Richmond, a civilian doctor, to join the Air Force not long before the war and when he was informed that he would be required to wear a dinner jacket in the mess until his uniforms were available, he didn't agree with

that and didn't want to do it. It was made very clear to him that if he didn't wear a black tie and dinner jacket in the mess at night, then he would have to dine by himself in a room outside, which he did for something like a month or six weeks. So there was a stand-off but he was not permitted to dine without the appropriate dress.

While the relationship between the junior officers and senior officers was easy, it was ... I won't say it was easy. It was very rigid, depending a lot on the individual. Squadron leaders were considered pretty senior and wing commanders were pretty well up. Group Captain De La Rue at that time at Richmond, when we saw him coming as junior officers, we'd walk round the other side of the building or round the other side of the pond to avoid him because he had a very fiery disposition and, it is alleged, was inclined to throw the telephone. I didn't ever witness that myself but I think he had some nervous problem which he (inaudible). Strangely enough, later on I met him in Madang when he was an air commodore and I hadn't seen him since I was a flying officer at Richmond and by then I was a group captain, and he welcomed me like a long-lost son with 'How are you, Gordon?', so it's amazing the change that a few years makes. But as a junior officer at Richmond, squadron leaders and above were people who you didn't treat too casually.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, what was the flying like in those days flying Hawker Demon aircraft?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Well, a Hawker Demon was a beautiful little aeroplane after the lumbering Wapiti and I remember Flight Lieutenant Curly Davis, who was later the senior Air Force officer in the prison camp in Changi, was the instructor who put both Charles and I ... he was the one instructor in 3 Squadron. He sat in an improvised cockpit at the back of the Hawker Demon, normally occupied by the observer and from which there's very little view, and he took his life in his hands while Charles and I flew off from the front seat. But it was a beautiful little aeroplane and it was the latest we had at that time, although of course when one thinks that this was only 18 months before war broke out, it was hardly anything to cope with what the Germans and Italians in fact were going to come up with. The British had gone over in UK to the Hurricane and I think their latest

fighter before the Hurricane was probably the Gladiator, which was still around in the Middle East when they'd arrived over there.

Ken Llewellyn: Can you describe the weather flight, which was rather hazardous?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Yes. The met flight, as it was known, was a responsibility of 3 Squadron. A Hawker Demon had to take off every day of the year and onto one wing strut was strapped a large thermometer which you could read from the cockpit, and on the other I think a hygrometer which indicated humidity. You would take off and at each thousand feet fly straight and level for three minutes and take a reading, then climb to the next thousand feet and take a reading. That was fine in fine weather or in weather when the cloud didn't have a low base, but the only sort of homing or positioning facility which existed at that time at Richmond was something called a Bellini Tosi * system, which was an array of radio masts and that could tell you, provided you were communicating satisfactorily with the ground station, whether you were east or west of Richmond but no exact position; it just gave you east or west.

So you would take off and fly towards the city first to gain some first thousand feet, then west back over Richmond and backwards and forwards. The only problem was sometimes that the wind conditions would mean that when you reached your maximum altitude of 16,000 feet and completed the job, you then had to get down and make sure that you were on the city side of Richmond rather than west of it where the mountains are. That in conditions of low ceiling and full cloud to 16,000 feet required some attention to the very limited instruments that a Hawker Demon had, only a turn and bank and a bubble system which gave you climb or dive. These instruments were not accurate, there was a lag in them, and it required very careful flying and then some pretty good calculation to make sure that when you broke through cloud you were going to be east of Richmond and at a sufficient height.

When the cloud base was below a certain level of course, you didn't undertake it, but I think that we used to go into cloud of 1,000 feet over Richmond, with a cloud base of

1,000 feet. Of course, by that time it's virtually on the hills. I remember Charles Read coming down one day and telling me that he had broken through on the met flight. In fact, when he came out of it he was in the Megalong Valley. The elderly fitter, I think, that he had in the back with him said to Charles, 'There were black hands coming out of that cloud and I said, "Don't take me, I'm a grandfather".'

Ken Llewellyn: You must have regarded these flights with a degree of trepidation? You had no oxygen, very little instrumentation and you might have even gone into icing?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Yes, we did have icing from time to time and that was something of a problem too, and the only way was to get out of it quickly. I've had icing and also St Elmo's fire on the struts, which is a static ... I can remember on one met flight I was at 16,000 feet, just reached the top, and I smelt a very unusual smell and I thought, 'Clouds don't smell', but I was concentrating so much on this turn and bank to make sure that the aeroplane was under control and I just happened to glance over and I saw the observer, who was Gould, a Sergeant Gould, he was standing up in the back cockpit, which meant that he was out of it from about his chest up, spraying something with a fire extinguisher. He said, 'It's all right, it's only the radio'.

The met flight was done daily every day of the year, Christmas Day included, and was only incidental to 3 Squadron's real raison d'être. 3 Squadron was an Army cooperation squadron, so detachments of one, two or more aircraft would go off to Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland to cooperate with the Army in their various exercises. I remember going off to Tamworth. Charles Read and I were sent off to Tamworth for some exercise with the Army in that area and coming back in the two Demons in that rather high country, Barrington Tops area north of Newcastle, Charles was telling the story here the other day that looking across at my aeroplane - we were flying separated, not close formation - he could see that I was having rather an erratic flight which then sort of settled down and he saw a stream of water coming from the Demon's radiator, which hung below the engine. He thought, 'Oh, my God, Gordon Steege has got a glycol leak', which means that your engine won't run for long. Then he flew over closer and sort of gave me an inquiring look

and I held up to him the speaking tube with its rubber mouthpiece, which was used normally for communication between the front cockpit and the back cockpit, indicating that I'd had bladder trouble and had to pull this from its fittings and put it through a hole in the floor and use it. Charles said at my party out here recently, 'I made sure I never flew that aircraft again'.

All these activities of course were taking place between my arrival at Richmond in July '38 and September '39, which is really only a matter of what, 15 months or so. There was one large exercise not long before the war. NZ it was called, NZX, in which one of the New Zealand ships were involved. It took place at a bay just almost at the entrance to Port Stephens, just south of Port Stephens' main headland, where the Army were going to be there in force and conduct a landing and 3 Squadron was there to cooperate with the defending forces and do reconnaissance and how many trucks, what guns we could see as the Army moved about the place. For this the entire squadron was moved up to Newcastle airfield, which was at Broadmeadows in those days and a very small airfield, on one side of which now the big heavy industry plant of Ganinnin's * is located. I'm not sure whether it was Ganinnin's then. But to get into this airfield one had to approach over this heavy industry plant. It was very, very small.

I think we had nine or ten aircraft there and the pilots were billeted in hotels in that rather industrial district in Broadmeadows. I'm not sure whether Charles Read was one of them but I remember a Woodman, * I think, was ... I can't recall the other but there were four of us in one of these hotels. In the room was a large double bed and a single bed. Of course, after flying during the day and we'd go back to this hotel, we were free at night, so it was quite a time for partying. We'd managed to invite I think three or four of the nurses from the Newcastle hospital to come and join this party and it was one of the silly things that young men of that age do. The entire party was conducted standing up on the double bed, including all the grog and the lobsters and the prawns which we had as well. Of course, Newcastle in those days had fabulous prawns and lobsters.

The next day we packed up and flew off back to Richmond. For some reason or other the exercise was run again about six weeks later. Whether they wanted to establish some aspects or lessons from it or just gain a bit more from it, but back we went to Newcastle again and we were all told to report to the same hotels because it was much easier for the administration, it had all been done before. So we went to the hotel we'd been to previously and the publican when we arrived said, 'Well, I don't know what it was or what you did with it, but I haven't been able to let that room since you Air Force officers were here last and I'm putting you back into it'. We said, 'Oh, that's all right', so we went back up to this room. There was one double bed and one single. The double bed was large enough to conduct a party on. As we opened the door - it was midsummer too - the stench was really overpowering. We could not establish what it was until somebody looked up at the light and saw the shadows of the lobster, crustacean shells and all the prawns and the flies that were up there. So at least we established what it was and got some disinfectant and cleaned it all out. But the unfortunate publican, I'm sure, would not have been able to let that room.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, you were a young 21-year-old pilot at the outbreak of war. What were your feelings when you first heard the news in the mess?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Well, it was in the mess at Richmond in the evening and I think we had been warned earlier in the day that there was to be a very important announcement coming over the radio, and of course we'd seen Germany move into Austria and the build-up of the German forces and one was conscious that eventually there was going to be a real problem in Europe. So it wasn't as if the thing was sprung on us quickly; it had been developing for years and years, especially over the years since the mid-thirties onwards.

However, Wing Commander Wilson, the PMC, came in. We were all in the mess ready for this and I'm not sure whether it was Neville Chamberlain from England or Prime Minister Menzies at the time who spoke over the radio. I remember that there was some coverage about Britain's attempts to maintain the peace over the years but, Hitler's Germany being

determined eventually to a course of war and with Germany marching into Poland, there were commitments which were going to bring Britain and France into the war. It was a pretty dramatic time of course, although there'd been a build-up for some years which we'd all seen. I remember Dell Wilson switching off the radio and he said, 'Well, that's that'.

Of course, at that time most of us were not aware of any specific plans to have Australian forces, including air forces, overseas but we naturally assumed that there would be and that the war would take on the wider problems of other parts of the world as it had in the First World War. We also were at that stage not clear as to just how and whether we would all be involved as individuals. Having been trained as professional officers, we naturally all assumed that we would be required to put our professional training into effect in the defence of our country in whichever way Australia saw fit for us to be used.

Ken Llewellyn: What was your immediate reaction, or all the young men? Did they go to the bar and have a few beers?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Well, there was no great 'Here's to the next man who dies' sort of thing, but certainly we all had something to drink. It was beer mainly among young officers in those days, sometimes before dinner, sherry, and then there was a lot of speculation as to what, how, where, when. We all had some indication of what the Royal Air Force equipment was and at the same time were fully aware that Germany had equipped faster and outstripped Britain in its rearmament, so we realised that there were going to be problems. So there was a lot of speculation about which way it would go and also a general impression of course that we would, all of us, be involved.

Cassette 1/Side B

Ken Llewellyn: This is an interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege, tape two.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Following on that quite dramatic announcement in the officers' mess at Richmond where we were ... it was certainly a night in which we weren't wearing the dog robbers. I remember everybody was in their blue uniforms with brass buttons. Following on that, within a matter of days - and I was flying officer adjutant of 3 Squadron at that time, adjutant to Squadron Leader Wally Walters - I had a message to go down and report to Flight Lieutenant Jim Alexander at station headquarters. He was senior administrative staff officer to Group Captain De La Rue and one always went to the station headquarters with some degree of trepidation when De La Rue was there.

However, I called in and saw Jim Alexander and said I'd been asked to report to him and he said, 'Look, Steege, the government has decided that we need a squadron in Port Moresby, Papua, and we are taking over a couple of Qantas flying boats and there will be two Seagulls. I'm to be the commanding officer. The Qantas flying boats will come with their Qantas crews and you, with your background of being adjutant of 3 Squadron for some months now, have had some training in that field and you're the most readily available, so you're going to be adjutant of this No 11 Squadron. It's all being done with the utmost speed we can manage because it's urgent, that with the outbreak of war there are bound to be German raiders in the Pacific as there were during the First World War, and we need a general reconnaissance squadron to be there and operate in the waters of the Pacific. You go back to 3 Squadron and clean up and report to Squadron Leader Walters. He's aware and you close up your papers there this afternoon and report back to me'.

So next day I went back and sat with Jim Alexander as he gave me more details of what we were going to do and that I was required to take all the records, papers, books and so on which one would need to set up a squadron to be based in a remote place like Port Moresby. I had a rough idea where it was in Papua New Guinea but not very many service people had been there. At Richmond at that time and just before the outbreak of war, the

service had begun to call in some officers who previously held short service commissions and who at the end of the expiry of their short service commission, as was the case in those days, had then gone out to civilian life. One of these was Flight Lieutenant Phil Graham. He was a bloke around 30, I suppose, something like that. He was at Richmond back flying the Seagulls with No 9 Squadron, the Seagull amphibian.

Alex said, 'Look, I want you to go down to Rose Bay. Take these papers down to Rose Bay and meet Flight Lieutenant Bob Gurney, * who's the senior of the Qantas people, there at the Qantas flying boat base at Rose Bay, pass these over, introduce yourself and then come back again'. So, whatever I had to take down and discuss with Gurney I prepared and I said, 'I shall go down by car'. He said, 'Phil Graham will fly you down in a Seagull'. I'd seen these Seagulls operating from Richmond but never flown in them. Some of my contemporaries were flying in them but they were lumbering things with a speed of about 80-odd knots and a gliding speed of 75 knots and a climbing speed of 75 knots and there wasn't much margin, they rattled off. Of course, they were located on the cruisers in those days and were catapulted from the cruisers and 9 Squadron was their base in Port Moresby.

So I climbed into this Seagull, a big biplane with a pusher * engine and its flying boat body and wheels which tucked up underneath into the hull of the thing, and off we went down. There was Graham flying it and me sitting alongside him, there was a navigator behind us and I think a fitter slightly further aft. I knew Phil Graham had flown these things previously and had just come back into the Air Force and I'd had a few words, met him in the mess. He of course was quite a lot senior to me and I said, 'Have you had much flying in the Seagull since you left the Air Force several years ago?', and he said, 'Oh, this is my first flight', which in those days made me feel that the trip was not exactly with a pilot who was what one might call current and up to date.

As we approached onto Sydney Harbour from the north shore to approach really over the Clifton Gardens area - Taylor Bay * I think it's called - at a fair height, obviously with a view to landing on the harbour somewhere around Shark Island, which would then give us plenty of room to land and taxi into the Qantas flying boat base. But for some reason or

other, as we approached with the engine idling, the engine stopped. Graham slammed the stick forward, and of course this aeroplane glided like a ton of bricks and down we went and he slammed in onto the water, really just out of Taylor Bay.

There would have been room for him to take off and gain height and fly across to Rose Bay in that kind of aeroplane but for some reason or other, having restarted it ... and I'm not sure whether it was the fitter on the belt, with a belt around him, who wound the engine up or whether it was the compressed air starter they used. Anyway, we started up again and ploughed through a very high short chop with waves breaking over the front of this Seagull right across the harbour. It must have taken us 20 to 25 minutes - that's my impression now - to taxi across into Rose Bay. Phil Graham, without any concern at all, put the wheels down and taxied up the ramp and onto the hard stand outside this huge hangar just as if everything had been quite normal.

There we met Gurney and Hempsworth. * Gurney and Hempsworth had been pilots for many years with Guinea Airways in Papua New Guinea and they had a wealth of flying experience and managed to them out of Papua New Guinea into the really big time flying and they were captain and first officer of one of the Qantas boats on the Singapore run, beautifully equipped boats. I think they only carried about 12 passengers but the steward was in a white shirt with black tie, and I believe that to travel in those boats was the height of luxury. The only flew during the daytime of course and landed at places like Karumba, Townsville, Brisbane and so on.

But of course, Gurney and Hempsworth were really in the big time and when the government said to Qantas, 'Look, we're going to grab two of your flying boats and send them up to Papua New Guinea because it's a national emergency and we want you to provide crews for them', Qantas obviously said, 'Well, we've got a couple of characters who know Papua New Guinea well', so they told Gurney and Hempsworth that they were going to go back there and they were very boot-faced about it because they felt that, having done all their time in Papua New Guinea and got themselves out of it, that going back there was just too much.

Both Gurney and Sims had been in the Citizen Air Force some years previously. That may have been one of the reasons why they were selected. The other two, Hempsworth and Purton, * the first officers, I think had not had previous Air Force experience. However, they were there in their hand-me-down uniforms which didn't fit them at that stage, and whatever I had to do with passing over the papers and some discussions about timing and when we were going and loading and who was going to fly and what, then of course I got back into the Seagull with Phil Graham and had an uneventful trip back to Richmond.

The flying boats took with them their maximum load of spares, maintenance equipment, some Qantas personnel who'd been inducted into the Air Force, fitters and airframe people, and some Air Force maintenance people as well who were to go. They also carried a number of bombs to take with them. It was the quickest way to get some armament there for the operations which they felt they might need. In fact, they were so heavily loaded that there was not room for me as adjutant or Dean Swift, the equipment officer from Richmond who was to go. The two flying boats were provided with navigators, John Hampshire and another officer who slips me for the moment. Both these chaps were on my junior course at Point Cook and had taken the navigation road, as different to the Army cooperation or bomber or fighter road which Charles Read and I did, so they were equipped as navigators.

They were trained as navigators and while Gurney and Hempsworth, and the other boat for that matter, while they were flying the routes between Singapore and Australia, didn't carry a specialist navigator because each of them had adequate training as navigators themselves for the kind of operation, square searches, line ahead searches requiring detailed positioning over the sea many miles from land where they could fix their positions. This was something which was felt would require the specialist training of Air Force navigators.

Swift and I, my clerk and I think an equipment clerk and one or two others flew from Sydney airport in a Carpenter's * Airways DH84. This was a biplane with elliptical wings with four small Pobjoy * engines, I think they had. It was a fabric aeroplane. It had cane

lounge chairs in it and there were about eight or ten of us all told. It took us all day to fly to Townsville, where of course the two flying boats were in the harbour and we met up with Gurney and Hempsworth, Sims and Purton in the magnificent old Queen's Hotel at Townsville which Qantas had been using as an overnight staging base for some years. So these Qantas crews knew it quite well. I can remember the quite magnificent old-fashioned dining room there with the white table napkins. They were so heavily starched that you felt they would crack when you undid them, and the highly polished silver and magnificent dinner we had there that night.

On the next day in the Carpenter's Airways to land at Cairns and at Cooktown, refuel. For lunch at Cooktown, instead of a sandwich or something at the airfield we were taken by a local car into one of the old hotels at Cooktown, and then in the late afternoon across the Coral Sea to land on the old airstrip - it was the only one in Port Moresby in those days - at Kila, * which is just beyond Ela Beach and the strip finishes up against an almost vertical hill. There was just enough room for this aeroplane to land and swing at the end of it.

So that was my arrival in Port Moresby, which was quite a frontier town in those days. As an office, Alex arranged with a trader called Clay to take over part of his office which was on the waterfront, and he dealt in trochus shell. There was a great pile of trochus shell in the corner of this squadron office and the smell from this stuff was pretty overpowering. We moved from there to another house on the side of a hill which was rather larger, where there was an adjutant's office and a CO's office and also it was the accommodation for the ground staff we had there as well.

Part of my responsibilities in those days was to encode and decode the classified signals which came and went between Port Moresby and Australia. I can remember that it was a thing called a one-time pad, which was a rather complicated business of a book of pages of numbers and you had another book which had phrases and words in it and each word or phrase had also a four or five figure number against it and you took that number and put it under the other one in the book and subtracted it and you got a third number and that was the one which was transmitted and that was the number which you received and you had to

do the thing in reverse when it came back, having been given of course an encrypted key to which page you should start on.

A lot of that stuff had to be done at night, and as adjutant I was the one responsible for coding and encoding. I can remember walking back along the beach at Ela Beach at 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock in the morning, having worked for two or three hours coding and encoding. When one met a Papuan on the beach in those days, at that hour of the night I think they were required to have a pass to be out as late as that, but inevitably it would be, 'Good night, Talbuda', * 'Good night, my boy', and one never had any feeling of any problem of law and order. I was only speaking to somebody about Papua New Guinea, in which I had four years later after the war, that it's a sadder situation today where, I suppose like most places in the world, there's been rather a change in the law and order situation. But Port Moresby was quite a frontier town in those days. There was really just one hotel, I think, in those days. There was a new one which Burns Philip had just been building at the bottom and the top hotel was an old Queensland type hotel with green lattice work. Mynas * and Bulldog * would come in there after being months away and mining up in the west coast of Papua and run terrific booze-ups there.

I must say that the two flying boats before they left Sydney had to have some kind of armament, so they used an oxyacetylene torch to cut a hole in the top and, with a bit of mounting, put one of those Vickers GO guns on a ring and the gun was moved in its traverse by rubber bungees. * On arrival in Port Moresby they finished this off with some local labour by building a wooden platform underneath so that somebody could stand on this and operate this gun out of the top of the Qantas flying boat. So I was taken along on this ride and Gurney said, 'Now, come on, adj, you're a regular Air Force officer. What about you getting up there and giving it a go and see if you can operate it', without rounds in it of course.

So we took off and we flew round the place and he said, 'Up you go'. So, with a couple of people hanging onto my legs, I was out of the top of this aeroplane from the waist up and endeavouring to hang on. I found it quite impossible to traverse the gun. All I could do

was hang onto it to stop being blown out and over the tail from the blast of the four engines of this boat. I don't know whether they ever managed to fire these guns. I went out with them once or twice because, if they were doing searches, every pair of eyes counts. I can remember Alex one day, having worked in the office on codes at night and I was pretty sleepy, so I was asleep and Alex came up and said, 'This isn't the way we do a search. You're required to keep your eyes out', so I was woken up and told to get back to the window. We were searching somewhere over towards that bay towards Daru. There'd been some reporting of a submarine or something like that over there.

Also, the other role for those boats in Port Moresby was to assist Lieutenant Commander, as he was then, Eric Felt, * who was in fact the head of the Coastwatch * organisation. They were really setting up this organisation. The boats were used to take Eric Felt out to very remote parts of Papua and New Guinea. Of course, they were known separately then as Papua and New Guinea because before the First World War New Guinea had been German New Guinea, as you may know, and the south side Papua, and there were still two separate administrations. But on the north side in particular, the boats were used to go to places like Tallasia, * Manus and New Ireland, consult with a local planter or district officer, give him a radio and explain to him the requirements and some sort of primitive type code by which he could report any shipping. Of course, the work of those coastwatchers during the Second World War, the Felt organisation, has been highly commended both by Australia and the Americans in particular.

Ken Llewellyn: From the intelligence side, where did you perceive the enemy? I mean, was it Germany? Was it Japan that was going to come into the war very soon? What country were they operating from? What was the scenario at that time?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: The boats were there from a point of view of search and reconnaissance of raiders specifically only against Germany because Japan had not entered the war. We knew that in my level of service, Japan was proceeding along a very dangerous path as far as we were concerned but at this stage, while the defence organisations at these high levels may have had specific intelligence about Japan, at my

level at adjutant of a squadron, while we suspected that Japan was going to be a problem, at that stage we were concerned with German raiders in the Pacific, raiders such as *Von Luchter* * and the *Wolf* * in the First World War.

In fact, at the time those flying boats were based in Port Moresby, after I'd left - I think it was after I'd left - a German raider, the name of which slips me, sunk a British ship in the Pacific and puts its passengers and crew on one of the islands, New Hanover, I think, just west of the tip of New Ireland. In putting them ashore there, this raider with its own very small band sent this half dozen or so band ashore to the grave of the wife of a German district officer there who'd died there before the First World War. The band played that old German thing, 'I Had a Comrade'. That was given to me later when I was an assistant district officer in Papua New Guinea by the district officer at Manus Island, Ken Bridge, who was quite a historian on Papua New Guinea. He told me that story that the German raider, when it put these people ashore there, had this small band go to the grave, and they knew where it was.

Ken Llewellyn: Extraordinary story.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Small cemetery there, and played the old German thing, 'I Had a Comrade'.

Ken Llewellyn: Did you have any actual contact yourself with German ships?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: I didn't. I was adjutant Port Moresby. We had the two Seagulls there of 11 Squadron flown by Phil Graham and also Ern Beaumont. Naturally I was not trained as a seaplane pilot. The only aeroplanes I'd flown were the Wapiti, the Hawker Demon and the Abinitio * stuff. I went for a ride with Beaumont one day and I said, 'I'm not going any flying. This is irritating me'. He said, 'Would you like to have a go?' There was no automatic pilot but somehow or other he climbed out of his seat and I slipped into it. Beaumont was standing up, I remember. The aeroplane only did about 85 knots and he was standing up taking photographs around Port Moresby with his own

private camera and he was out of the glass cockpit from his waist up. I'd never had my hands on this aeroplane before and, as we were heading towards the hills, I thought I'd better turn it. I put on a bit of bank, as one would do with a Demon, and nothing happened till eventually the thing went into a turn and then wouldn't come out of it as far as I was concerned. So I was belting him in the leg and he wasn't at all worried but he said, 'Keep it over, keep it over', and eventually this thing (inaudible). So I wasn't terribly pleased with the Seagull after that flight.

I then said to Alex one day, 'Look, I'm not getting any flying'. He said, 'I'll teach you to fly the Seagull. You'd better keep your hand in'. So he put me off in the Seagull, a couple of water landings and that sort of thing. I can remember when he said, 'Righto, you take it'. I was in the left-hand seat and we were approaching onto Port Moresby harbour. I did the sort of thing that one would do in a Demon, which is a very nippy aeroplane: a fairly steep turn and come out and just land. He said, 'Oh, don't do that in this aeroplane'. It was too hefty and too slow and lumbering to do that. He said, 'Make straight-in approaches for a while'. So after a bit of this and I'd had a few flights, not very many, he said, 'Look, Gordon, you're working very hard here. Would you like a break? Would you like to take one of the Seagulls down to Samarai at the eastern end of Papua?', so I said yes, I would.

I had done a lot of sailing both in the Air Force and before. I had my own little skiff before I went into the Air Force. So, as far as the seamanship was concerned - and one has to have seamanship for a seaplane - I had some background, so Alex knew that and he was fairly confident about my handling of the things on the water, so he said, 'All right, go down and call on the manager of Burns Philp at Samarai. There is a district officer down there but the Burns Philp man's pretty big in these places, so go and call on them both and just tell them it's the first call from 11 Squadron'.

So off I went. I forget the name. I think it was Gould again who'd come up there as a sergeant observer, the same man who had been with me in the Hawker Demons because he was a trained navigator. I'm pretty sure it was Gould. We had a radio operator and a fitter.

So off we flew to Samarai at about 1,500 feet, a good height for a Seagull, right down the east coast of Papua, landed on a beautiful day there off Samarai and put the anchors we had down and went ashore and called on the ... had dinner with the ... there were three hotels on Samarai at that time. It was a beautiful island, three lovely Queensland type old-fashioned hotels. I called on Mr Orbela, * who was the manager of Burns Philp, the house on the hill higher than the district commissioner's house, as I remember, or district officer. They were called resident magistrate in those days. The assistant resident magistrate, the name slips me for the moment, but I had dinner with him and stayed in the hotel.

We set off back to Port Moresby, set to take off. There was quite a roaring north-wester blowing and the whitecaps were blowing, so I gave it the throttle. The trouble with the Seagull, you had to pull full aileron on to lift one float up out of the water. When it came up out of the water, if you weren't careful then it would swing that way because of the drag on that wing, so it was rather complicated. For some reason or other, in the chop I finished up going sideways across this chop and I had to call the whole thing off and start again. We hadn't gone very far from Samarai on the way back to Port Moresby when each of the crew said, 'Look, I'm terribly sorry. It must be the Samarai water, but we all have tummy trouble', and on that aeroplane ... I said, 'Candidly, I've got it myself'. The strong wind away from Samarai seemed to have eased up a bit, so I thought, 'A flying boat, land on the water'.

So I made an approach on the water offshore some 50 or 60 miles west of Samarai and just as I was about to touch down, the water changed to a lovely sandy colour underneath and of course I realised I was just above a coral reef offshore. So I poured on the power again and off we went till finally I put it down on the water and then there were four agonised white backsides hanging out of this aeroplane. When one looks back on it, it was a terribly remote place in those areas in those days. There we were with the engines stopped flopping around offshore all with bad tummy trouble.

So we started off and took off again and as we were approaching Abau, * which is about halfway and rather ... Abau's in Cloudy Bay at the mouth of a very muddy river. There was

a lot of mud offshore. There was a north-west line * squall as black as the (inaudible) of hell and I thought, 'I'll never get this aeroplane through that'. They used to have a trailing aerial which went out through the side of a hole with a piece of lead on it. That was probably a couple of hundred yards, which gave it a long range. So I thought, 'I'll have to get down'. My knowledge of sailing was that the best thing to do was to land right in the mouth of the river, where obviously the channel was running out to sea. As it was muddy water and I'd done a bit of flying up and down the coast with the others, I knew there were reefs, so I put it about a mile offshore, well offshore, in what I thought was the mouth of this river and then taxied.

As I got onto the water, relieved before this huge storm broke, I said to the radio operator, 'Did you get a message to Port Moresby?' He said, 'I just had contact with them when you took the aerial off on the top of the palm trees. You should have warned me to wind it in'. So there we were without any contact with anybody, so I taxied up the river because I'd heard that there was a government station there on Abau. So we taxied up this very muddy river and put out the small anchor we had aboard and a whale boat came out with a white European Australian in it and I had to wave them off to keep the oars away. He proved to be Mr Lamden, * who was the resident magistrate in this area. He said, 'Come up and stay', and when we got ashore he said, 'My God, I hope you haven't brought dysentery here'. I think he was going to ask us to fly on again. He said, 'It's terrible having dysentery around the place', and I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, I think it's only the water in Samarai'. However, he put us up and back to Port Moresby next day and Alex said, 'My God, we didn't know where you were. Somehow or other you should have tried to get a message to us'. But that was flying in eastern Papua in those days.

After some seven or eight months, I suppose it would be, in Port Moresby as adjutant with a very interesting time with 11 Squadron and now that the war had been going for some months, the service began to get civilians in who could undertake adjutant's duties and let people like me who had flying training go back to their normal flying duties. So Alex said, 'Look, there's a civilian now in the Air Force. He was secretary of one of the cigarette companies. He's coming up here to be adjutant. What would you like to do? Would you

like to stay here with 11 Squadron?' I said, 'And do what, sir?' He said, 'And fly the Seagull'. I said, 'No, thank you. I'd like to go back to 3 Squadron because I understand 3 Squadron is going overseas'. I'd heard it was going overseas somewhere and, as I'd had a background of training with 3 Squadron, I said that's where I'd like to go.

So back I flew to Seagull * with very fond memories of Gurney and Hempworth. Gurney was killed after one of the first raids on Rabaul when he flew with the Americans and crash-landed on the island of Kiriwina. Gough * Hempworth was in a Catalina which discovered the Japanese fleet approaching the Coral Sea. Purton was killed when Japanese strafed his boat in which he'd evacuated Dutch civilians from Sumatra over in Broome. I think Sims was the only one of those people to survive the war. Beaumont was lost on one of the cruisers. One of the other navigators was ...

Cassette 2/Side A

Ken Llewellyn: This will be Air Commodore Gordon Steege, tape three.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: After leaving 11 Squadron in Port Moresby probably around the middle of 1940, April or May 1940, Carpenter's Airways back to Brisbane overnight and there I met for the first time John Jackson, who was later notable in the south-west Pacific and who flew with me in the Middle East. I met John Jackson, who was in fact a grazier with his own private aeroplane and he was a member of the Citizen Air Force in Brisbane. So I met John then for the first time and old Primrose too, who was with 3 Squadron, who we'll hear of later on.

Back to Richmond, where the commanding officer was now Squadron Leader Ian Dougald McLachlan, who'd taken over from Wally Walters. He was preparing 3 Squadron for departure to go overseas, and I must say that the Air Force of the day made an admirable selection in McLachlan, because he was a professionally trained officer, he'd come through Duntroon, then some years with the Air Force. He had a strong personality and a very shrewd head and he was to lead us through the Middle East and see that we were only used in ways which he regarded were sensible. 3 Squadron of course was still an Army cooperation squadron and I was, I think at this time, promoted to acting flight lieutenant and made one of the flight commanders of 3 Squadron. The other two were Squadron Leader Peter Heath, who had been my flight commander when I'd been in 3 Squadron previously, and Flight Lieutenant Blake Pelly, who had been a member of the Citizen Air Force and had come in full time on the outbreak of war. So we were the three flight commanders.

I think we were there for about a month or so actively preparing 3 Squadron for overseas. We were to get our aircraft overseas and I can remember in the officers' mess in the evening there was some comment by other pilots who weren't in 3 Squadron, 'Well, you fellows are going to have it pretty tough over there'. The comment was that the Lysanders, with which the Royal Air Force Army cooperation squadrons were equipped in Europe

were being decimated by German fighters, that they really found it very difficult to exist in the air. Although they were a first class aeroplane for the job, they couldn't really exist in an area of air superiority because they didn't have the speed to get away, couldn't fight. Although they could handle their purely Army cooperation aspects, they just couldn't live. So we took note of this.

However, I think it wasn't long before we heard that in fact we were not going to Europe but to the Middle East. Then we marched out of Richmond in midwinter, greatcoats, gas mask hanging over the shoulder and the Richmond band playing as Kanga De La Rue - he was known as Kanga - took the salute outside station headquarters with the band playing 'Roll Out the Barrel'. By train from Richmond then, the full squadron, down to ... and I didn't know in those days that in fact you could get a train right alongside the wharves in Darling Harbour, I think it was. The ship, I'm pretty sure, was the *Orontes*, a big passenger liner with a lot of passengers aboard, so we were pretty well equipped - officers in first class, others in second class and quite a lot of passengers aboard - and off we went. I think that Air Commodore Cole, King Cole, A T Cole, who was then AOC Eastern Area, came down to the ships and spoke to the officers. I can remember him saying, 'You will have experiences that money couldn't buy'. King was a notable pilot from the First World War and quite a character, and of course he was right.

Although the departure was supposed to be secret and the docks were locked off, away up on the high ground behind a railing fence you could see hundreds and hundreds of people who obviously were not there just to farewell the civilian passengers. I think somehow or other the word had got around, so relatives of the squadron were obviously up there as well. We were escorted from Sydney south round through the Great Australian Bight by the old cruiser, *Adelaide*, which was very low in the water, I remember, and her decks seemed to be awash most of the time. When she finally somewhere over in the west on the far side of the Great Australian Bight eventually left us, she sailed past and the crew, for the first time I'd seen it, dressed ship, as they did in those days.

I think we also had six division reinforcements aboard and they had some pretty tough characters. You've got to remember this was the end of the Depression and a lot of characters really didn't have jobs, so a lot of them joined the Army to get away from one thing or another. There was one fracas aboard one night and one of the airmen at 3 Squadron was charged with breaking and glass and shoving it into somebody's face. In the scuffle he had a broken leg. I was appointed investigating officer for this and to hear it. He was a much older character, a technician, but a good tough man from Richmond, regular Air Force - we were all regulars - and he sensed that as a regular officer I was a bit horrified by this action.

He said, 'Look, Mr Steege, they're pretty tough characters. They were belting up one of our young fellows and the only way I could get it with a few of us in the bar was to do what I did. Look at me; I've got a broken leg'. I said, 'Well, you're going to be confined to your cabin for the rest of this voyage'. He said, 'Do you think I want to go out of it? Those fellows are going to throw me overboard', and he assured me they would. There was then an Army court of inquiry and the Army officer was a young militia officer without much experience and the Army character who had been involved with this business, who had a bloodied ear of course - it wasn't a bad jab but it was enough to stop him - he didn't like the way the evidence was being taken by the Army officer, so he leaned over and clocked him, so of course he went to the ship's irons. So there were some pretty tough characters aboard.

There were also some Navy reinforcements and they had a boxing match on the deck and the senior naval man aboard was a character called Green, Arn Green. He said, 'It will be conducted according to inter-service rules where the referee is not in the ring, but when the referee says "Stop", you stop'. Unfortunately, this went fine as far as the regular Navy and Air Force bouts, but when the Army came and he said 'Stop', nothing happened. The other serviceman stopped and the other fellow would clock him down onto the rack. They were a pretty tough mob.

We went to Bombay and transhipped to a troopship called the *Dilwara*. While she was a modern troopship, she'd been designed for taking troops to India and also school kids to the Baltic on holidays, so the accommodation was very cramped and we had really a lot of resistance from our people. Because we were last aboard, they were in the bottom of this frightful hold. So up through the Red Sea in convoy escorted by a British destroyer and three or four ships, including one of the very old troops, the *Somersetshire*. * An old ditty used to be sung at the time: 'Shire, shire, *Somersetshire*; the shit on the side of the *Somersetshire*'. There she was with the sloping masts and funnels raked. Up through the Red Sea and escorted by one of the long-range Wellingtons, single-engine Wellingtons, which had flown out to Australia non-stop from Ismailia in Egypt to Darwin in 1938. I remember seeing one of these things, something happened in the distance and it went into the sea, going up the Red Sea. It must have had engine failure or something. Whether they managed to get out of it I don't know, because our convoy just kept steaming on and one of the small ships raced over.

Then we arrived at Ismailia in Egypt by train from Suez to Ismailia to a Royal Air Force base, where we were given the job of erecting, putting together our own Lysanders. They'd come out in parts from England. It was midsummer and fearfully hot and, although most of us who'd lived in Australia had temperatures over 100 degrees from time to time. But the Royal Air Force were working in Middle East hours, which meant they worked through till midday, stood down and didn't stand to again till about 5 o'clock, then they worked through till about 9 or 10 at night. Through all that heat of the day they had siesta, or whatever you like to call it.

Dougald McLachlan decided that that wasn't our way of operating. We'd come to a war and we were going to operate in hours in which we would be required to operate. So the rear gunners, the observers, were given the task after lunch each day to have firing practice on a small range where they had their Vickers guns, which were the same as those installed in the back of the Lysander. The group captain commanding the base eventually sent a message to McLachlan, would he kindly postpone that stuff and do it somewhere else in the afternoon because it was disturbing his afternoon sleep. So that was moved.

Anthony Eden came and visited us there and then we got the message ... I flew the Lysander. I flew one up with a doctor to Palestine and first met Brigadier Rowell, later Sir Sydney Rowell, who was a brigadier general staff with the Army up in Palestine. Then, having flown these - lovely aeroplanes to fly - we got word from Middle East headquarters that in fact they didn't really need us to be an Army cooperation squadron because they had No 208 Equipment Lysanders out in the western desert which was operating for some time and the requirements of the Army in the western desert could be met by one squadron, they didn't need two. So we were going to be a fighter squadron and be equipped with Gladiators.

We were equipping with Gladiators, which was a much better aeroplane than the Hawker Demon of course. It was a single-seat fighter, biplane of course, very manoeuvrable, powerful engine. To us it was something pretty good. We knew it wasn't Hurricane standard but it was the best we had in the Middle East at that time and that was all the RAF squadrons had. So we flew these Gladiators and then they said, 'Look, a couple of you are going to go out to 208 Squadron and be attached for a while'. This was while we still had the Lysanders in fact. It all took place in the period of a month or so. Blake Pelly went first to be attached to the RAF 208 Squadron to see how they were operating with their Army cooperation, mainly on the ground - not necessarily to fly with them, because we were trained in our own field, but to see how they operated with the Army and so on.

So Pelly was out there for a couple of weeks and then I went out. Alan Rawlinson was already there. I remember going out by train to a place called Cassaba * and then by truck to this desert airfield. I experienced my first bombing raid there where the Italians came over one day and dropped quite a stick with their F79s * right through and they came through the camp. That stirred us all up a bit but a few aeroplanes got some ... it was a daylight raid too. While I was there we got word we weren't going to be an Army cooperation squadron but a fighter squadron. We were equipped with Gladiators, I think at Telwan. * I arrived back while the equipping was going on and then we flew out to a strip

in the desert just west of Cassaba. The name slips me for the moment - Sandy, Wadi * - and there began our first operations in Gladiators.

At that time General Wavell was organising an offensive push against the Italians. They'd moved into Egypt and in fact were at a place called Sidi Barrani and they were just a bit east of there, so they were well into Egypt, well dug in, and they had what they called perimeter camps. You could see these from the air on reconnaissance which they built up embrasures of stones and bricks. Of course, the desert was not all sand; a lot of it was flinty stone. With sandbags, they'd built up these huge camps, some of them a mile or two across. Inside there was a defensive position. They had three or four of these. There was Sidi Barrani, something else and Toomah, * which was the big one south, to protect their southern flank.

One of the first things we were required to do was again some reconnaissance, because we'd been trained as Army cooperation. We had a fighter, whereas the Lysander could not live in the air where the Italian CR42s were, because they were a very fast and very good fighter, far better than the Gladiator in fact. I did the first of those out over to Toomah, counted the number, was there much movement, yes, trucks going north to Sidi Barrani, but no indication of large movements. So a couple of those and each time the black ack-ack would open up and once that opened up, if you were a reconnaissance aircraft by yourself, you needed to keep a good lookout because any Italian aeroplanes would see it and be on to you.

Then one day I was sent out to do a reconnaissance and I think a second Gladiator was sent with me. They thought it better to do it that way. Another four were sent out to do a patrol under Pelly. There was Pelly, Boyd, Heath led the other one, the other flight commander. When we became a fighter squadron, fighter squadrons have only two flights. The Army cooperation squadron had three flights, A, B and C. That was one of the anomalies in 3 Squadron because they stuck to it as a tradition. They had only B and C flights. I had one, Heath the other. Pelly from A flight, who was the junior flight commander, went into Heath's flight. So Heath led this four. They were also on a reconnaissance too but my pair

was to go south to Toomah. I took off after them and they were going slightly to the north-west and mine was really a bit south-west.

Anyway, we were going towards Toomah, over which I'd been previously, and way down I saw an aeroplane with another one chasing it and I thought, 'My God, maybe it's a Gladiator and there's something chasing it, so it's probably a CR42'. So I (inaudible) which was the other bloke, because there was an aeroplane flying east, which was obviously going to be one of ours, so when I got down I saw the second aeroplane. I was much higher, so I had the speed. He bunted madly, he thought it was an enemy. When I flew up, hadn't quite reached the other bloke still high - I didn't know who it was at the time - he just flew gradually and flew straight into the ground with a woomph. * It was Peter Heath. I came back to base and reported it and the others had got back too. They'd been involved with a fight with a large number of CR42s. Heath had been killed. Boyd had managed to shoot down one or two, I think, of the others. He was a pretty active young bloke, Boyd. Pelly had also been involved and the character who I saw chasing the other one, he was trying to keep up with him, was Alan Rawlinson from Adelaide. He's a bloke worthwhile talking to too.

Those operations continued. Wavell was really concerned that we keep the Italian air back from our forward troops so that they would not have an indication of the build-up. The 7th Armoured Division was dug in covered with nets, white camouflage nets, so that you really couldn't see them from the air. While those patrols were going on I was sent out on another reconnaissance virtually in the same area again over Toomah because we wanted to know what the Italians were doing.

Ken Llewellyn: Can you just describe the CR42 compared with the Gladiator?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Perhaps I might come to that in a minute. I hadn't seen a CR42 at this stage. Having come back from Toomah, I had to land at a piece of the desert on a map reference to hand in my report to General O'Connor's forward headquarters because we were getting close to the time when they were going to go

forward at night and hide, go forward. It was well camouflaged and, although I'd been on the ground there once before, it was late afternoon and there was no marked airfield. I sent the other Gladiator back home about a quarter of an hour before this, beckoned him off back to Garaula, * I think the name was, this strip of sand we were on.

With him out of the way I then landed on what I thought was the place I'd landed on before. When I hit the ground I hit pieces of shale which punctured both tyres and in fact I wasn't on that piece of desert at all. So there I was, the Gladiator stopped, both tyres burst, couldn't get out of it, no sign of the Army. You couldn't really see the 7th Armoured Division dug in really from 300 or 400 yards until you were quite close to them. I couldn't see them anywhere, so I sat there late afternoon, began to get very thirsty. I understood there were some rations in the Gladiator, so I opened that up - and it's just an indication that we should have been more alert to what we were doing - knew where they were, opened them up, found a tin of peaches. I don't know that there was any water, but some dry biscuits, but I couldn't get at any water and I was very thirsty, although this was towards the end of summer. I was flying in shorts, just shorts and a shirt.

I had a revolver and I'm not sure whether I fired a shot into the can and managed to get some peach juice out. That was all I had but it was very ... and it was just ... I was on an escarpment which went down gently 100 feet or so and in the distance I saw a plume of smoke and the desert was so quiet that it was an Army truck with two blokes in it and I could hear their voices shouting and they must have been a couple of miles away. I fired my revolver in the air but they didn't hear me. Come dark, I thought somebody would come and look for me anyway, but I was dying of thirst. I had a Very light, so after dark I fired a Very light, then about an hour later I got back into the cockpit, closed the hood, and probably what I should have done was to pull the parachute, because after dark the desert gets very cold. So I was frigid, having been hot in the afternoon, still thirsty.

Then about 9 or 10 o'clock at night I heard a sound and I thought, 'What the hell's that?' It might have been Italians or anybody, except the Italians (inaudible) back with our forward tanks. It proved to be someone from the 7th Armoured Division looking for me. One of

these fellows pulled out a brandy flask and I drained the lot of it, not because I needed alcohol but I wanted a drink. So they took me back and put me into a big of a dugout in the desert in the stones with a bit of a groundsheet over the top and I was billeted with a fellow called Major Ruding Bryan. * He'd been the Army liaison officer 208 Squadron, so I'd met him. That was nice, so he bedded me down and it was cold as hell during the night, just sleeping on the ground.

He said, 'We'll have breakfast in the morning. Better come over and meet the general. I'll lend you my shaving gear', and I said, 'Oh, I'll have a shave when I get back to the squadron'. He said, 'We're having breakfast with the general'. So a shave in cold water standing up with this Englishman who had only bum fluff on his face, against my hard whiskers. So there was General O'Connor, we had breakfast with him. Then I was picked up by ... I think we got a Lysander from 208 Squadron back. The aeroplane wasn't damaged much but for two broken tyres. So with a egoistic flight commander, I was pretty sensitive about that, having landed in the wrong place but it was very difficult.

From then on we were concerned with fighter patrols, making sure the Italians didn't get over the 7th Armoured Division until finally the push started. Then we leapt forward, leapt forward. Outside Sidi Barrani one afternoon when the fighting was still going on, I think there were two or three others with me and we found an Italian reconnaissance aeroplane, just one, and I went in to attack it. I think it was called an RO37. It was a biplane, Army cooperation stuff, and he was obviously reporting on the fighting that was going on. So I went in to attack it and as I went close, in the back cockpit there was some character standing up and he was waving something white. It shook me for the moment and diverted me so that I pulled away again and I thought, 'My God, that fellow knows he's going to be knocked off, so he's surrendering'. I think it's pretty obvious what it was.

At the same time Gaden, * who was flying on my right, he went straight in and the thing went straight in. It was only about 1,000 feet up anyway. Next day we went into the same area. The British had taken thousands of prisoners and there were great green camps of them and close by we looked and saw about a dozen CR42s, the first time I'd seen them.

They were a beautiful little biplane. The bottom wing was only about six feet. It was a very short stub wing. The top wing wasn't much more. It had only one set of struts of course. It was much faster and could climb much faster. Dougald McLachlan, the commander, said, 'I'd like to come on this one', although I regarded his role as commanding the squadron, seeing that we were used in accordance with his good judgment while I led the squadron, which I did. He said, 'I'll fly behind you, I'll fly with you'. He didn't say 'I'll lead it' but he knew I had more flying experience in that field than he.

We saw these things. They were dive-bombing British forward troops and Dougald said, 'Look at them', and I said, 'No, no, wait a minute. Let's get up into the sun from the west'. So we did. We managed to gain some altitude because some of them were higher than this. When they were diving and pulling up, they were pulling up vertically far higher than we were. They had a very fast rate of climb. Anyway, we got up as far as I thought we could before we went in and then we had quite a dogfight. Dougald McLachlan certainly knocked one and I think I got one damaged, later confirmed. There were a couple of others there and it broke them up completely; they pissed off. There were more of them than we were.

When we moved on a few days later outside Bahdia, * where we were investing * the fortress of Bahdia, where there were thousands of battalions, we were again doing an offensive patrol over our own 7th Armoured Division before they attacked Bahdia. You could see our tanks; they'd move, stop, move, stop. We were climbing up to about 15,000 feet. We did have oxygen, I think, in the Gladiator. Yes, I'm pretty sure we did. So we're about 16,000 feet and out to the west I saw five things that looked like big frogs coming towards us. I'd seen the S79 in their bombing raids. It was a three-engine bomber. They were coming towards us and we climbed madly and they saw us and started to turn away. That's what that painting is there. As they turned away, I just had enough climb to make their speed but they were fast and I was just holding them and firing madly into them and obviously peppering them, because when you hit an S79 the back gun would go up. He'd let go and the thing would flip up.

So a couple of those characters were hit and one of them was streaming brown smoke. He'd been hit, he was losing oil. Then I was being hit by the five back guns before a couple of them were knocked, or at least one of them was knocked. So if you've got five people aiming, somebody's got to hit you. There were flashes coming off the metal parts of my aeroplane as their tracer bullets hit it and there was quite a flash on the forward wing strut on the starboard side and it was hanging by a bit the size of a sliver of a sardine tin. At that stage I ran out of ammunition, so I thought, 'There's only one way for me to get out of this'. As I turned to go away and down without ammunition, wondering why the other five fellows of my formation weren't with me hammering it, I'd called, 'Come on, come on', as I looked over my shoulder I saw a tremendous dogfight going on. We'd been jumped by nine or 12 CR42s.

To cut the story short, Gaden, the fellow who shot down the aeroplane a couple of days previously, he was shot down and killed. Lex Winton had a bullet go through the back of his hand on the stick and he had to bale out with one hand. Wilfred Arthur baled out. That's three aeroplanes gone. Boyd and Gatwood were both so badly damaged they had to land in the desert. Bracegirdle * managed to land and refuel somewhere and get back. So it was called Black Friday. When I landed back at our airfield I hadn't realised just how the fight was going. There was one aeroplane flying round on fire. It was just going round and round with flames coming out of it. There was another one burning and going down to the ground. There was one parachute in the air. I just saw this back up there a couple of miles away. While I'd been chasing this bombers this fight had been going on.

When I got back to the airfield I landed and the aeroplane slewed and they could see both tyres were shot through and one strut was damaged. It was like a sieve. However, I wasn't hit. I said, 'Oh, the boys are just finishing them off', the sort of silly thing you would say, but we'd had so much success so far that I felt that, but of course I hadn't realised the numbers involved and that was it. So it went on and on, nobody came back, till Bracegirdle turned up in the afternoon. So we learned a very good lesson from that. Never go in until you make sure there's not somebody else on top of you. Those CR42s were

much higher and as soon as my formation started to go for the bombers, down they all came.

Ken Llewellyn: How did you regard the Italian pilots?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: I thought they were very good. They were manoeuvrable. They had a good aeroplane but they didn't use their aeroplane the way the Germans did. The only way the Gladiator could get away with it was because it was more manoeuvrable. It wasn't as fast, it couldn't climb as fast, so the initiative was always with the CR42. But the Italians would stay and try and dogfight with the Gladiators and of course, being more manoeuvrable, while ever they tried to turn inside us, while ever we could turn inside them, provided they stayed there. But these chaps who came down were pretty well skilled that day and they caught my formation completely unawares, so they hit two for a start, bang, and then took the others off.

Generally we found them, what shall I say, honourable. In fact, one of these characters of that day came back, one lad who was inclined to be a bit excitable, and said, 'Somebody was going to shoot somebody in a parachute'. When Arthur got back he said, 'Bullshit. It wasn't. It was me. The fellow flew round me and waved'. So it shut the excitable boy up. But they had a good aeroplane and it was far superior to the Gladiator, but when they came up against the Hurricane it was a different proposition.

Cassette 2/Side B

Ken Llewellyn: This is an interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege, tape four.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: I have been talking about the CR42 and the Gladiator. The Gladiator, as far as the British service was concerned, was the last of their biplane fighters before they went into the Hurricane. It was a radial-engine aeroplane with an enclosed cockpit, it had two guns which fired through the plane of rotation of the prop, two 303s, one each side, and another 303 in a pod under each wing which converged to an aiming point to coordinate with the aiming point of the two guns which fired through the cockpit. So at a certain point you had four 303s at, say, 300 yards range or 275 range, whatever it was, in which all of these guns were locked on to the target. Before and beyond that, they were converging and going away again.

It was a very manoeuvrable aeroplane by its standards of the day, high rate of climb and beautiful to fly and very manoeuvrable. On the other hand, the CR42 made by the Italian firm, Caproni, * was a later development. It was a later technology than the Gladiator. It had a short stub wing only about six feet either side of the main fuselage. The fuselage was smaller. It had a pronounced inward stagger of the struts. I think it carried only two guns and I'm not sure offhand whether these fired through the prop or whether they came from underneath the wings, but they were a cannon-type gun with a much larger calibre than the British 303. So when you were hit by anything from a CR42, it was ... and they carried explosive bullets, small explosive shells. It was faster, it could climb much faster and it had a much higher ceiling. I can't recall the engine but it was a radial engine anyway. Because it was a smaller wingspan, faster, it couldn't manoeuvre as well as the Gladiator. So in fact the Gladiator was able to cope with the CR42 while ever the CR42 would dogfight with it but that always left the initiative with the Italian, who would be higher. He could break off the fight if he wanted to because he was faster.

They were flown by very capable pilots. One only has to see the record. They flew in the Schneider * Cup. They were great racing drivers, rather flash, I might say, in their

capability of handling aeroplanes in the field. They were very good. However, if I could say so, they didn't use their aeroplanes in the same way that the Germans used the 109 against the Hurricane and the Kittyhawk. The Germans had the same sort of balance: faster, fly higher, much higher ceiling, much faster rate of climb but less manoeuvrable. But the Germans wouldn't dogfight. They'd come and go, go away again, come and go. So they always had the initiative, whereas while ever the Italians fought with us, we were able to survive, shall we say.

Ken Llewellyn: You also mentioned the Marquetti, * your three-engine Marquetti.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: The Savoya, * the SM79 Savoya Marquetti, was probably the largest bomber of its type in the world at the time. It was a three-engine bomber, quite fast, as fast as the Gladiator, it had a considerable bombload and a good ceiling. In those days most air forces went up and down in cycles. At the time of the Italian rise to power in the Mediterranean about the time of the Ethiopian war, they had this wonderful fighter. They had the Savoya Marquetti and in fact I think it was Bruno * Mussolini who was a bomber pilot with the Regia Aeronautica, * it was called, described bombs exploding like cauliflowers on the unfortunate Abyssinians of course, who didn't have any defence against them. Nevertheless, it was a very capable bomber in its day. It wasn't later up to the Lancaster.

For daylight bombing, as a lot of them were used there, it was fine provided it wasn't intercepted even by Gladiators, but the Gladiator could barely cope with it in speed. When the Hurricanes came in of course, they just could not use it, could not use it in the daytime anyway. It was also used at night and, furthermore, those aeroplanes, or the civilian version of them, were used in fact to fly from Libya right across the Sudan to Ethiopia. When the British were fighting the Italians in Ethiopia, they were used to fly a dismantled CR42 all the way across at night. So they were an aeroplane of some considerable capability.

Following on that Black Friday where we virtually lost three out of the six aeroplanes - four got back, I think, eventually, were riddled and had to be repaired - then Wavell's magnificent push moved on through Libya, through Cyrenaica and down south of Benghazi to the line at El Agaila, * where the British stopped and held. They'd virtually run out of push at that time. It was held there because about that time Rommel arrived in Africa and it was also just before that, when 3 Squadron was at a base called Martuva, * which is below Durna, * we were re-equipped with Hurricanes. One of the RAF squadrons had re-equipped with Hurricanes, and of course they changed completely the air war against the Italians. When they had the Hurricanes the CR42s just could not cope with them at all. The Hurricane was shrewd enough to fire. It had eight guns and was shrewd enough to ... the pilots were especially trained to hit, go away again, hit, come back. As far as bombers were concerned, I saw one Hurricane shoot down three S79s in a daylight raid and from then on they just didn't ... three or four went down. You could see one after the other because with that terrific burst of firepower the Hurricane had, it could knock them off.

So we really didn't see the Italians again after the squadron arrived at Benghazi. We were based there and we used to operate through a small field known as Ajdabiya, right down at the bottom of that gulf, and over the forward line at El Agaila. The first German aeroplanes I came across in a Hurricane were 12 JU87s in formation returning home after a bombing. There was John Jackson, myself, and I think the other chap was a South African pilot. We made quite a mess of them because there was no fighter escort. A couple of days later, however, Peter Jeffery * went down with Jock Perrin, * who died recently in New Zealand, and Alan Gatwood, who was on my junior course and part of the organisation, who was a very capable fighter pilot, they were down there and they found JU87s virtually in the same place, and I'm afraid they were caught the same way as we were with the Gladiators near Benghazi, because hanging around higher up were some Messerschmitt 110s. It's the first time they'd appeared. This was a twin-engine aeroplane and it's fast, quite as fast as the Hurricane but not as manoeuvrable, but the point is they jumped our own Hurricanes, shot Gatwood down, who was killed. Jock Perrin was also shot down but survived with very minor injuries - he managed to crash-land - and Peter Jeffery got back to base. I remember meeting him at the airfield. Peter Jeffery was the CO

of the squadron and had taken over from Dougald McLachlan. He arrived back and he said, 'Oh, they got Gatty'. So that was the first of 110s.

The next air battle I was involved with, I think, was down south of Benghazi once the Rommel push had started and our own Australian troops and others were moving back and we were told to take off from Benghazi. I took the squadron off from Benghazi and to land back at a place called Gotta Sultan, * which on the map was a strip in the escarpment in Cyrenaica, greener country, not desert country at all. So we found 110s and JU87s bombing and strafing our retreating troops, so we had quite a fight in our favour that day. I sat behind a 110 and I was just holding him with everything going. I couldn't gain, couldn't do anything at long range. He was going home fast and we knocked a couple of JU87s and a 110 that day but they broke it up quickly because there was a full squadron of Hurricanes and they didn't attempt to dogfight on that day.

Anyway, as the squadron drew back - it's a long story, without going through the details - more reconnaissance over advancing forces and we got back into Sidi Barrani. I'd been out with a patrol earlier in the day and when I got back Peter Jeffery said, 'Look, the Army are very interested to know what's going on. They haven't got any information. We know they're retreating madly and they've got a feeling that something may be coming up from the south-west through the desert'. I forget the name of the place now. He said, 'They really want a Hurricane to go out because it's the only thing that'll live out there through 110s'. So I said I'd go because, as senior flight commander, (inaudible) to go.

So I flew off way down there and could see the dust coming up. Coming back in an area which I thought was really where our own forces ... I could see a few trucks and something on the ground and I flew round and round in the Hurricane low level right on the ground to get a good look and as I looked over my shoulder, I saw eight black specks in the sky and I thought, 'My God, 110s. I'm caught now'. Then I realised that I was over a forward German position and they had a light anti-aircraft gun which exploded at height, so I was able to get straight back and say, 'Hey, you realise they're here'.

Also in fact, earlier that morning I'd been out with three others on the same sort of reconnaissance: get out and see what you can see. Do it from altitude; don't get too low down and get caught. Again, slightly further west of this I saw a column moving up from the south. It was probably 80 or 90 miles south of Durna on the coast and really approaching it from due south or slightly east of south. So I told the other two to hang around up top and cover me while I went down and had a look. As I flew down fast past it, I could see these people baling out. I still remember it. One was a very tall man. He must have been an officer, I think, with a grey greatcoat and draped across the gun carriage - it was an artillery unit moving forward - was a swastika flag with the red and white. Looking back on it now, I suppose what we should have done was go away again and come back and try and strafe it, but my instructions had been for that day, 'Don't get involved in anything at all. Just find out what's going on and come back quickly so we can brief the Army in what was going on'. So from there on the great push back from Sidi Barrani back to Cassaba where we were based.

Then 3 Squadron, after almost a year, was taken out of the western desert and given a rest in Palestine based on Akea * and then they began to send pilots home to Australia, for example, Jock Perrin and several others, and bring in some new pilots. 3 Squadron was being re-equipped with the Tomahawk, which was the American predecessor to the Kittyhawk. I was engaged then as probably the most experienced pilot of the squadron to supervise the training of putting these people off. The trouble with Akea was it was a couple of narrow strips of tarmac in a field; you couldn't land off the field. Some of these chaps were quite new, straight out of training school at Kenya. They had great difficulty in keeping the aircraft straight. It was a long aeroplane which sat up with its nose in the air and, once the tail came down, it would tend to (inaudible).

They'd damaged a few of these, which horrified me and I said, 'We've got to change our ... better training than this, make sure that there are wheel landings and things like that'. So fortunately I got out of 3 Squadron because I had a call to go back to the Middle East. I certainly didn't want to be responsible for a squadron that was pranging a lot of aeroplanes in training because every one you prang, it's one more you've got to shoot down. So I was

told to go down to the Middle East and report to Dougald McLachlan, who was then our liaison officer in headquarters Middle East. He said, 'They're sending all those original fellows home. You don't want to go home, do you? You like it here, don't you?' I said, 'Yes, it's all right. Why?' He said, 'You're going to command the first of the Empire Training Scheme squadrons, No 450. It's on its way from Australia'. So I said, 'That's fine'. Dougald said, 'I thought you'd like that'. He said, 'Go back and clean up with 3 Squadron, then go to Abu Swia', * inland from the canal slightly. He said the squadron would arrive in a few days. So there I was and, sure enough, it came off a train. It was No 450.

My brief was that this was the squadron I was to command. They were all volunteers and they were all really highly qualified tradesmen who'd volunteered. Of course, I'm speaking now of mid-1941 and the war had been going since September '40, so these chaps had all volunteered, a lot of them from Newcastle and they were fully qualified tradesmen and all sorts of metal tradesmen and things. So I said to Dougald McLachlan, 'Look, these blokes, the highest rank's a corporal and none of them have been in the Air Force for very long. Can I take a few senior NCOs from 3 Squadron with me just to show them how the system and the service operates?' He said, 'Sure', so I picked some of those. He said, 'Well, don't pick the eyes out of the lot', so I got some goodies and one or two roughies and a defence officer who'd been one of the original observers. I think he was my only other 3 Squadron officer who came with me.

So then 450 Squadron arrived with an adjutant, an equipment officer, a couple of cipher officers and an intelligence officer and no pilots. My instructions in writing were that the pilots had to come from RAF squadrons. These were Empire Air Training Scheme pilots who'd gone through and were with RAF squadrons and they were to come out and man this, the first of the Empire Air Training Scheme squadrons. So that was my brief. While we were waiting for the pilots and just getting the squadron going, the Syrian campaign broke out and I got a call up to Middle East and they said, 'Look, we need another squadron for the Syrian campaign. You've got the ground staff. There is a Royal Air Force squadron, 260. Their pilots flew off a carrier to go into Malta but the carrier had to

back off at extreme range because Malta was under attack. When they flew off, most of them crashed into the sea or on the ground at Malta, didn't quite make the airfield. Their pilots have been flown into Egypt and their ground crews are coming around the south coast by ship. So we have pilots and you've got a squadron which doesn't have pilots. What about marrying 450, 260? It will work, won't it? You'll make it work?', and I said, 'Yes, we have to'.

So they said, 'Right. We'll send you a Hurricane pack up down to Abu Swia and we want you to take that up and go straight up to Akea outside Tel Aviv and there you'll match up with the pilots. They'll fly the Hurricanes up and their squadron commander is Mount. You'll like him. He's a very ...' So off we went. I drove up in the squadron station wagon, which was brand new, very proud of that, with my equipment officer and the adjutant and I think one of the others. When one thinks of the awful situation in Palestine today, it was mid-year again, very hot. When we got level with the village of Beersheba, on the hill according to my map, we had our lunch of bully beef and a couple of biscuits out of a tin and somebody threw the empty bully beef tins out and a couple of small Arab boys came up and started picking them up and I said, 'Don't eat out of that, you'll cut your tongue. Haven't we got any more? We can give them a little bit to eat'. So somebody had a couple of extra tins that we gave these kids but they still picked them up. I said, 'What do you want those for?', and they said, 'After the war, bomba * for the Jew'. That was mid-1941. On that day driving up there, somehow or other somebody said, 'Have you heard the news? Russia has come into the war'. So it's all a matter of timing.

Then we went to Akea, met up with them. I flew one of their aeroplanes out to Amman in trans-Jordan * and my ground staff went out by road. So I flew into Amman, which was an airfield. It had been a Royal Air Force base way back and they flew off from there in this Syrian campaign till we moved up to Ryak. * We were the only squadron to be based in Syria during that campaign. Then to Ryak in Syria where we sorted out French equipment and they said, 'Well, it's time for you to go back now to Egypt and we'll line you up with pilots'. I'm cutting the story reasonably short to try and get by. So back to an airfield outside Abu Swia in the desert where we waited for pilots. So they began to post them in

and they were all lads straight out of the training school in Rhodesia, none of whom had ever been flying in operations before. One or two had been flying in England but not in operations and I got one sergeant pilot who had been in operations but was really operationally tired, so there was only me who'd been ... and I had a flight commander from Australia. We were still short of pilots by about eight or ten.

Middle East kept ringing me and saying, 'When is the squadron going to be ready?' I said, 'When I get the Australian pilots'. So eventually I got a call, would I mind going out to the western desert to see western desert headquarters, which was then out just east of Tobruk. I went out there. Air Marshal Cunningham was away that day, so I saw his group captain, one of the Beamish * brothers, a great big heavy boxer-type bloke. He said, 'You'll have to have RAF pilots', and I said, 'Look, Air Marshal Williams has been through here recently and he's given me very strong directions that I am to take only Australian pilots. I've had my brief from him'. He said, 'But this is an Empire Air Training Scheme squadron and therefore it's regarded as just another RAF squadron'. I said, 'Well, that's not my brief. I've been told by Air Marshal Williams that that's the case'.

He said, 'Oh well, we'll do what we can but we can't pick the eyes out of the RAF squadron to make sure you're all Australian'. So off I went back. Strangely enough, we had one Australian on the headquarters there, a fellow called Atwell, * an accountant by background but he was quite a bright chap and later he told me, 'After you'd gone Beamish said, "We can't have that fellow Steege coming up here and talking politics to us".' So I went back there and within a week or so I got a call to go up to Middle East headquarters in Cairo to be there at 9 o'clock to meet Air Marshal Cunningham. As I explained previously, they used to work in the morning and in the afternoon and the evening, free. So there was a pretty important chiefs of staff meeting on there at night. Cunningham was commander western desert. Air Marshal Tedder * was the ... and of course the Army and Navy (inaudible).

So I sat outside and eventually a staff officer came out and he said, 'It's all right. The air marshal wants to see you. He'll come out of the meeting'. So out he came, first time I'd

ever met him. Delightful man, Air Marshal Maori * Cunningham, very good looking, a man of great charm. He said, 'Look, Steege, we need your squadron'. I said, 'Sir, I need some experience anyway but in any case, I'm told I've got to have Australian pilots'. He said, 'Well'. I said, 'Well, those are my instructions from Air Marshal Williams'. The nearest thing I've seen to him getting slightly heated. He said, 'Look, Air Marshal Williams, he's not the whole answer to this', and I said, 'He's been through here and those were his instructions'. He said, 'I can tell you when Air Marshal Williams goes back to Australia, he'll be less than a pilot officer'. I said, 'Yes, sir'. He said, 'I'll do the best we can but you may have to take perhaps a Canadian or somebody'. I said, 'I am the only one who's ever been in air combat, apart from one sergeant pilot'.

So in a few days, sure enough, they produced a few more Australian pilots straight out of flying school and also a Canadian flight commander. So off we went up to the western desert and we were given a week or so at Cassaba, where I'd been originally with 208 Squadron, to work up this squadron, train them, get them into some formation flying, ground attack and strafing and so on and brief them about air combat, the main thing being that we were obviously going to be doing a fair bit of squadron formation work, the kind of discipline that one needed. However, Air Marshal Cunningham sent down one of his wing commanders saying, 'Look, are you ready to come up yet?' I said, 'Give me a couple more days', and he said, 'All right'. Later on I found out when we got up there to the western desert somebody was pressing Air Marshal Cunningham for another RAF squadron to be brought up and asking for some more days. He said, 'Give them a few more days. Steege asked and look at the bunch he brought up'. So 450 Squadron started off with a very high reputation.

Anyway, there I had 450 Squadron. Most of our work with 450, the Germans had the 109 by that time and air-to-air combat was very difficult. The Germans didn't play like the Italians did. They'd hit and go away, hit and go away, and they had the capability for the initiative all the time. So a lot of our work was the full squadron perhaps with another squadron. Cunningham organised his forces and used them well. He had a couple of South African Boston squadrons, so we would stack two or three squadrons of P40s all

around them with Kittyhawks and send these Bostons off and bomb the fighter airfields in daylight. Of course, we could see the 109s taking off when we reached them but with a mass of P40s weaving round the Bostons. We didn't ever lose a Boston and lost very few P40s, because the only way the 109s could attack was to come and pick and go away again and the fighters had a sort of focal point to operate around and keep them going on the way home. So it was quite interesting to see a string of Boston bombs falling across a fighter airfield.

So 450 Squadron achieved a terrific record. The chap who took over from me was Squadron Leader Alan Ferguson and he led it on, and others too with 3 Squadron, to sister squadrons, 3 Squadron being my old squadron, the regular Air Force squadron, right up through to Tunis and over to Italy where they both saw the end of the war. I think the wonderful thing about 450 Squadron was that its airmen all joined up to be part of this Empire Air Training Scheme squadron and they were posted to it and they stayed with it. 3 Squadron was a regular Air Force squadron and so its personnel were turned over. They'd come over and they'd go back to Australia. For some reason it was a complicated arrangement. But the 450 people, rather than be posted away to an RAF squadron with an increase in rank said, 'I want to stay here. I'll stay with my mates'. So some of them saw the war out with the one squadron and were there with it for four to four and a half years right through the war.

When my time came to leave 450 Squadron after a year in command, the last five months of it in the western desert, I was posted and I went up to see Air Marshal Cunningham, for whom I had the highest regard, and he said, 'What would you like to do?', and I said, 'Well, I'd like to go to the staff school at Haifa', and he said, 'Right, I'll fix that. What do you want to do after that?' Of course, by this time the war had broken out in the Pacific out here and I thought it just better to say, 'Well, I'm not sure at this stage, sir'. So off I went and I had six months at the staff school at Haifa in Palestine where it was mainly British Army but with I think about 20-odd RAF wing, where we studied the application of our services to the war and its operations.

After six months there I came back to Australia after two and a half years in the Middle East, through Egypt, Libya, Cyrenaica, up through Palestine, trans-Jordan, Syria, Libya, back into Palestine again to defend the town of Haifa with Hurricanes while 450 Squadron was resting. We'd do that and give the squadron ... after some intensive operations, they'd pull it out for a while and put it on air defence of one of the cities because the Germans were bombing Haifa and Tel Aviv from the islands they'd taken from the Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean.

Then at the end of that I was posted from Australia back to Australia. I arrived out here I think a couple of days before Christmas Day in December '42. After some leave in Sydney, which I hadn't seen since July 1940 and of course found it full of Americans and what they were doing out here, I was posted to command a fighter sector in Brisbane, which was rather a letdown, I thought, because it was a long way from the war and the only aeroplanes it was tracking were transport aeroplanes coming across the Pacific into Brisbane. I'd had my rest, as you might say, at the staff school at Haifa and was ready for more operations, so I wrote in fact to eastern area headquarters and I asked them if I could be posted back to the Middle East rather than stay on in a fighter sector, as I was a fully trained fighter pilot and I didn't like being in a fighter sector.

Cassette 3/Side A

Ken Llewellyn: Interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege, tape five. Air Commodore, before we go any further, you mentioned about Air Marshal Williams' insistence on having Australian pilots in your squadron.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Yes, and the great problem of course as far as the RAF was concerned, Air Marshal Cunningham, he said, 'Look, if I pull these Australian pilots out of our RAF squadrons, I'll be picking the eyes. They're the great strength in them. We just can't do it at this stage', and it was that stage when I pointed out to him that I'd had specific instructions from Australia and from Air Marshal Williams that he said, 'Look, when Air Marshal Williams goes back to Australia he'll be less than a pilot officer', indicating that the RAF didn't see eye to eye with Air Marshal Williams.

However, some time later, it may have been only a month or so later, when Dickie Williams came back through the Middle East, I think on return to Australia - I think he'd been in the UK - he came out to the operational airfield we were on at Gambut * near Tobruk and he said he'd like to see the squadron and I got some notification from them. When he arrived I said, 'Look, sir, we don't really line up everybody together in a large mass too often for very long here because it makes a good target if anybody should be strafing'. He said, 'Yes, I understand that but I'd like to see the pilots quickly and the men'.

So we arranged it very briefly, spoke to the men first and then the pilots lined up. As he went along the line he came to the only non-Australian in the squadron, who was Flight Lieutenant Chuck Cantrell, * who had 'Canada' on his shoulder. At this, Dickie stopped and turned to me without speaking to Cantrell and said, 'Who is that?', and I said, 'It's Flight Lieutenant Cantrell, sir. He's one of the two flight commanders'. He said, 'Well, what's he doing here?', and I said, 'Well, sir, the RAF could not provide me with another Australian flight commander and they needed the squadron very badly'. Then he turned aside to me and he said, 'Well, I gather he won't be here for too long and you'll get an

Australian to replace him'. My approach to all this was that it was Dickie Williams who was going to pay my rent after the war, so I said, 'Yes, sir'.

Having pointed out to headquarters eastern area that I was a squadron commander with some fighter experience of two and a half years in the Middle East and running a fighter sector didn't appeal to me terribly much and not only that, I felt that I had been rested at the staff school at Haifa and was ready for an operational appointment, I didn't get much joy out of them. One of the responsibilities of the command of the fighter sector in Brisbane was in relation to the WAAAF. There were hundreds and hundreds of WAAAF in Brisbane. They worked in the signals section and clerks and clerical work and all sorts of things and did a magnificent job, and of course they were involved in the fighter sector. They were all billeted in a huge old boarding house on the Brisbane River, hundreds and hundreds of them, or there appeared to me to be hundreds and hundreds of them.

One of my responsibilities was in relation to their barracks and how they were run. I found this rather embarrassing because I had a WAAAF officer and I used to get her to do it mostly, because a lot of them were shift workers and to go through and inspect these things when there were girls in their late teens or early twenties and some of them asleep in hot weather and the doors open and so on, so really I used to ... and of course, all the washing was on the line. Eventually the director of WAAAF, Group Officer Clare Stevenson, I was told was coming up to Brisbane and would naturally come to see me.

So she came and she said, 'Do you inspect the WAAAF barracks, which is your responsibility?', and I said, 'Well, I've been down there once or twice but I leave it to the ...' She said, 'Let's go down', very strong, lively woman. She said, 'Right, come with me', and we walked through and she was flinging open doors and there were girls half-asleep in the hot weather and various stages of undress, and of course the lines had all their underclothing on, and as she pushed through it I was getting wet scanties in the face. She said, 'Do you come down here once a month?', and I said, 'Look, I don't really. I really oughtn't to be in this job, responsible for so many WAAAF. It ought to be a married man here'. I explained that I'd written to eastern area headquarters saying that I was rested and I

ought to go back to a flying job rather than sitting there in Brisbane just tracking transport aeroplanes coming into Brisbane.

She said, 'Look, you come round to Lennon's * Hotel and have a drink with me this evening'. So I went round to Lennon's and I went up to Clare Stevenson's room. She was very smart. I gather she was a director of Berlei. She died only a year or so ago. She was a director in her own right, I gather, of Berlei. She sent for a jug of beer and newly appointed Wing Commander Steege sat there and had some beer with her and she took her shoes off and sat on the bed and said, 'Tell me about it'. I said, 'Look, I can tell you this', after I'd had a beer or two. 'If I don't get out of this job very soon and back to a flying appointment, I am going to seduce one of your girls in the middle of that operations table'. She thought that was a great joke and she said, 'Look, I'll have a talk to Snow Lashell * when I go back to Melbourne and see what can be done'.

Do you know, within a week I was posted to the south-west Pacific to command No 73 Wing, so I thank Clare Stevenson for that. When I say Clare Stevenson really set in motion my move to the south-west Pacific, in fact I was posted to command 114 Mobile Fighter Control Unit, which was forming at Camden and which was to go to somewhere in the south-west Pacific. I had heard the codename 'Ginger' but exactly where it was I wasn't sure. So I went down and saw this Mobile Fighter Control Unit. While certainly it was going to an operational area, generally fighter pilots such as myself felt that fighter control units were all right for people who were being rested or who were operationally tired and weren't going back to operations, but one felt that you didn't want to be in them for too long because you had the indication that you were no longer operationally capable to command operational units. This doesn't at all denigrate in any way from the very important role they had or from the efficiency and the dedication of the staff and commanders who operated in them, but as far as I was concerned I felt I should be commanding a flying unit with my background.

Anyway, off we went. At that time we were moving to Papua New Guinea in concert with No 76 P40 Squadron and No 79 Spitfire Squadron under command of Wing Commander

Jock Perrin, the P40s, and Wing Commander Alan Rawlinson, the Spitfires, both of whom had flown with me in 3 Squadron in the Middle East. So I went to Jock and said, 'Look, I don't want to go on this ship. What about I fly one of your aeroplanes?' He said, 'Sure, we need an experienced leader for one of the formations. I'll send one of the pilots by ship'.

So off we went and we flew through Brisbane and I led a flight of four and down to Milne Bay, to Port Moresby. Of course, the last time I'd been in Port Moresby was with 11 Squadron in the middle of ... when I left in May 1940. There were vast changes in Port Moresby, full of American and Australian troops, American aeroplanes on the ground there. The place was still being bombed occasionally. Milne Bay had undergone a lot of bombing but at this stage apparently the Japs had been convinced that operations under Wing Commander Wilfred Arthur, that it wasn't a payable proposition, so that had eased off a bit. So off we went to Milne Bay.

Blake Pelly was running the wing in Port Moresby and he was so concerned about the possibility of aeroplanes being lost that he said, 'We're going to have a Beaufighter or a Beaufort escort each flight down'. I said, 'Blake, that's a waste of time as far as I'm concerned. I've been flying up here before. I know where Samarai is, I know where Milne Bay is. If it's bad weather, I'll come back'. He said, 'Well, that saves us sending an aeroplane with your lot'. We went down the coast, flew over Mullins Harbour, through the gap and onto the old strips at Milne Bay, where I met my old commanding officer, Group Captain Ian McLachlan from Middle East days, and also Air Commodore Hewitt, * whom I doubt whether I'd ever spoken to at Richmond because he was regarded as a pretty remote little wing commander. He was the operations wing commander at Richmond under De La Rue when I'd been there out of Richmond.

That was the beginning of an association with Joe Hewitt which I will always value. I came to regard him as a most capable man and probably one of the best of our operational commanders. The Americans thought extremely highly of him. I could see it was going to be a good time for me under command, although I still commanded a fighter control unit

which was then being set up on Goodenough Island. Dougald McLachlan flew me over with an Anson. He was going to be based there. He was CO of a wing. They were going through an unusual time of changes. The fighter control unit was based there. 76 and 79 Squadron moved over to Goodenough, where 77 Squadron was also based, and that formed a wing.

After some time there and the weeks were flying past, they said that there was going to be a landing in the Trobrian * Islands because the Americans really needed a base there, so 114 Mobile Fighter Control Unit was going to move over there with 76 and 79 Squadrons, leaving 77 at Goodenough. My advance party went over there and I borrowed a Kittyhawk and I think I landed the first P40 in the Trobrian Islands at Kiriwina and in fact went to see the grave of Bob Gurney, who I mentioned earlier, who was one of the Qantas people who'd crashed there.

That fighter control unit was set up and Blake Pelly had come down from Port Moresby and was appointed to command the wing with me under Blake with the fighter control unit. Then eventually Joe Hewitt and I think Dougald McLachlan behind him, or Dougald in particular, said - I'm pretty sure this was the basis and I'm not speaking with any ego at all - 'Look, Steege really knows more about fighter operations than Blake does, although Blake's a good organiser, but he hasn't had the operational background of two and a half years in the Middle East. Steege will command the fighter wing and Blake will go over to Goodenough to command a wing which is being formed of Beaufort squadrons'. In fact, when this happened Blake was building up Kiriwina developing strips, and he was very good at that kind of thing, with a view to eventual operations, the Americans going through and operating against Rabaul.

I remember Blake at the time saying, 'I'm pretty sorry', but I said, 'Look, Blake, to tell you the truth, I don't want you to feel I've come in under your chin and tried to get ... if you like, I will ask if I can take the other wing', and he said, 'No, no'. I think he realised probably that as far as leading fighter operations was concerned, I just had a bit more background.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, what was it like up there as a senior commander working in New Guinea? I mean, there was a lot of arduous tasks to carry out in very difficult conditions.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: At Kiriwina of course, which was being developed later on with a view to the Americans being able to raid Rabaul, the B24s could reach Rabaul from the mainland of Papua New Guinea but their fighters, the P38s, could not go to Rabaul, fight and get back to the mainland of Papua New Guinea, so they had to have a refuelling base. This was the strategy behind them moving into the Trobrian Islands and putting the Australian squadrons in there to defend the base while it was being built and also to operate against targets in that area directly north in New Britain. The P40s of course could not quite reach Rabaul.

I took over the wing and Wilfred Arthur at that stage was a wing leader, an arrangement I didn't agree with because I felt if there was to be a commander of the wing, he was the fellow who should lead it and command it, not have somebody who really was doing more of the operations than he did. However, I had Wilfred, who I knew and who'd been in that fight with me and I had a great regard for him, but within a matter of days or a week or so of my taking over, Wilfred was taking off in a P40 just before dawn one morning on some operation and a Spitfire taxied out just in the half-light and there was a collision on the runway and he was badly burned, very badly burned. In fact, he was in hospital covered in plaster and I used to sit there and read to him during the day and the only book I had to read was *The Water Gipsies*. I remember him saying, 'When they take this mask off in the morning and scrape my face, I can't stop screaming'. The doctor said, 'If this fellow has to go through Port Moresby, I don't think he'll survive. What can we do?' We had a Beaufighter squadron on Kiriwina and we fitted out the Beaufighter so it could take off from Kiriwina and fly direct to Townsville. I've got a photograph somewhere of Wilfred being loaded into this thing to go off. That began the operations from the island of Kiriwina.

Kiriwina in the Trobrian Islands, the native people are very attractive, the girls in particular. Whereas a lot of the other people in Papua New Guinea wear longer grass skirts, these were the inventors of the original mini skirt, colourful and chic and attractive. In addition to supervising the build-up of the base to provide two strips on the south and two strips on the north strip, four strips all told, I had Joe Hewitt's support to operate against the Japanese base at Gasmata * and Cape Hoskins. * In fact, I can remember one occasion leading 60 Kittyhawks, each with 250-pound bombs, bombing and strafing those points.

But you ask about conditions. Just after taking over the wing the Beaufighter squadrons, which earlier had been at Goodenough and which were now at Kiriwina with me, were pressing for the tour of duty up there to be shortened to allow them to get back to Australia. I knew that there was an undercurrent of feeling in the squadron, so I got them all to meet up on the north strip and went up to talk to them. I said, 'How many people have you lost recently?' They said, 'Six months is too long to be here. We're bound to get a lot of people knocked off'. I said, 'Well, how many people have you lost recently?' They hadn't in fact lost many. They had a lot of narrow scrapes but the Beaufighter they had and the way they were using it, which was strafing of Japanese barges supplying points on New Britain, was such that they were invariably able to get away, low level out to sea and just outrun the (inaudible). So they hadn't lost too many but there was apprehension all the time.

Furthermore, the CO of the day was tired himself. He'd done a very good job and tired. I said, 'The pipeline will just not stand it'. They said, 'In the Middle East people get down to Alexandria for a weekend every couple of months'. I said, 'I appreciate that. You can't do it here. On the other hand, a lot more people are knocked off over there than you people are here'. This was going on and I said, 'I will try to get you a seven or eight month tour with leave in between, but you cannot think you're just going to be here for six months and then go home because the pipeline and the reservoir of pilots won't stand it. Furthermore, I fly as much as any of you bastards and I'll stay here for 12 months'. That shut them up, I

think, because nobody ... when I got back to my headquarters I thought, 'My God, I've committed myself to 12 months, stay up here without leave'.

I flew down, talked to Joe Hewitt, explained the situation. I said, 'The CO's got to go'. He said, 'Right, Gordon. We'll have to get somebody up from south'. I said, 'I suggest we allow the flight commander to take over'. He was an Australian who'd been in the RAF but, because he belted his flight commander in the mess one evening, he was court martialled. His father was a Sydney doctor. Bob Maguire. * He had a broken nose but he was very handy with his fists. I'd spoken to Maguire and I said, 'Do you reckon you can handle the squadron?' He said, 'Yes'. I said, 'How are you feeling? Are you fresh?' He'd been there for six months anyway himself. He said, 'No, fine, I'm right'. I'd give that to Hewitt all the time. He would listen to his wing commanders and if you said something and you felt it could ... he'd say 'Go ahead'. So Bob Maguire commanded the Beaufighter squadron. So there was that kind of problem.

We also had some in some of the other squadrons. The Spitfire pilots who'd been in England weren't too keen to fly out over the water for very far. From Kiriwina you couldn't go anywhere until you'd done what, 150 miles over the water and come back again. As far as I was concerned, I was very confident in the P40 that it was a good reliable aeroplane and great ground attack aeroplane and there was no problem with that. But the Spitfires, I always sensed, the Spitfire 5s, they were not much at ground attack, they couldn't carry a bomb and I sensed a lot of the pilots who'd been in England didn't have the same approach to flying over water as the P40s did.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, what about the airframe working in the tropics? I understand they had trouble with the Spitfire and even problems with the engine working in the tropics.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Spits, I can't comment too much. I had the Spitfire squadron in (inaudible), both there and later on in the Admiralty Islands. I flew it but didn't really like the Spitfire. It was heavy on the ailerons as far as I was concerned.

Furthermore, at that stage of the war we weren't seeing Japanese aeroplanes in the air. There were a lot of Japanese aeroplanes in Rabaul but at that stage they'd been pushed back. They were doing some night bomber stuff and they did one or two big raids with Zero escort, bypassing Kiriwina right over as far as Dobaduray. * It had a tremendous range, the Zero. The Spits were getting reasonable ... but as far as just sitting on the ground at Kiriwina and waiting for somebody to come, a sort of air defence of Great Britain stuff, to me it was pointless. I believed always you've really got to go out and take some offensive action, and that's what we were doing with the P40s.

You mention the problems of flying there. Certainly it was a long flight over the water to New Britain and then if you were hit there, you had to get back over 50 miles of water, I think it is. I'm guessing now at the distances. I can remember the same sort of situation existed with 76 Squadron, whose commander had been in the Middle East, the CO who'd taken the squadron up there. He was tired and after a while indicated that he'd like to go south. I think he may have had other problems as well. Again I saw Joe Hewitt and I said, 'That bloke ought to go and he ought to go quick'. He said, 'Right'. I said, 'We'll send him out right away?' and he said, 'Yes. We'll get somebody'. I said, 'No, there's a chap here called Lowden'. He said, 'He's only just been made a flight lieutenant. He's a flying officer'. I said, 'It doesn't matter. He comes from Papua New Guinea and he'll never be worried about the country'.

As far as I was concerned, I enjoyed the, what will I say, the drama of this tropic country. Some of the troops used to say it was a dreadful bloody place. Certainly it was hot and humid and pilots flying in ... we were all underweight because of perspiration and humidity. Once you got to altitude it wasn't too bad. Talking about flying over the sea, I remember that the fighter sector, who'd taken over from me, a man called Danton, * who'd done a magnificent job of it too and he was very capable in that field, he said, 'Look, the CO of 76 Squadron's been hit over Gasmata and he's obviously going to bale out shortly'. So I went into the fighter sector and we heard Lowden talking. He said, 'Yes, I've been hit', and he'd got about 70 or 80 miles south. He was going to bale out into the sea between the south coast of New Britain and Trobrian. He said, 'Here I go now. I'm going

to be a very wet cadet'. Very shortly we had a Catalina flying boat which was part of the wing at Kiriwina for search and rescue services out and also an American motor torpedo boat, also under my command. We picked this bloke up out of the water. He'd had a couple of P40s round him for half an hour and replaced by a couple more from Kiriwina. So there's certainly the over water stuff.

One raid on Gasmata, we came back and one of the squadrons said, 'One of our young pilots hasn't come back again'. I said, 'What happened?', and they said, 'He must have got separated in that storm'. We were weaving our way right on the water through the storms back to Kiriwina and he said, 'It looks as if he's gone'. Early next morning we got a message from the American base on Woodlark * Island to say that he was there. So I flew out to Woodlark, which was way to the east and there's a long line of islands. Kiriwina is at one end and Woodlark at the other and in between there's a lot of small ones. I said, 'How the hell did you get out there?' He said, 'I flew south till I hit some islands and I turned east'. I said, 'You're lucky, but why did you turn east, because Kiriwina is the westward island?' So there he was, but he'd made it to Woodlark Island, which was about 40 minutes flying from Kiriwina.

This flying over the water, there was another lad, a sergeant pilot, hit over New Britain and his squadron saw him bale out. I'm not sure whether I was with them on that day or not. When he got back they said, 'So-and-so's in the drink'. There were a couple of pilots flying round him. They stayed as long as they could and they saw him in his dinghy. Of course, that night we couldn't search for him. He was some 40 or 50 miles out to sea from south of New Britain. Next morning we sent an entire squadron out separated to sweep the area to see if we could see him. It was very necessary for the morale of pilots to know that if they went into the sea, you would do everything you could to pick them up. So all that day we searched for him with the full squadron. Every time we sent a Catalina out, we had a fighter escort in case the Japs picked it up. The next morning, two lots again and couldn't see a thing of him.

I'm not sure whether it was the second day or the third day but I said to Danton commanding the search, 'The amount of flying hours going on, it's terribly strange. We know where that lad went in but we can't find him. We've had people over it for a full day and now it's the second day. I'm afraid this is about the last one we can do really. We'll just have to write him off', because it couldn't go on indefinitely. At the last moment late that afternoon, one of the pilots on the outside wing of this squadron of twelve in the area looking for this character at sea level sighted the dinghy. So we sent another lot out to circle him while the squadron was there and got a fix on it. I'm not sure whether the radar could get that far. Anyway, we got a couple more out to him and then the Catalina went out and picked him up. I've got a photograph of this lad somewhere around the house. He was a young bloke about 19 or 20. He was barefoot and he was sunburnt. This American pilot with the amphibious Catalina standing with him on the strip at Kiriwina and I said to him, 'You're a very lucky young man', and he said, 'Sir, I knew you wouldn't give up the search till you found me'. It hit my conscience because only an hour previously I said, 'I'm afraid we're going to have to give it up after this'.

The real object of the Americans going into the island of Kiriwina and putting our squadrons there was to provide a staging base for their P38s, and this was building up. The expression was, 'Let the Japanese ripen on the vine till we're ready'. So there was a lot of planning, which is covered in Air Marshal Hewitt's book, *Success in Adversity* or *Adversity in Success*, whatever it is, without going into too much detail of it here. The Americans sent out teams of people to be set up there for planning and my wing was responsible for the turnaround of these fighters on the way to Rabaul and on the way back. We had to get 100 fighters on the ground and off again in an hour on four strips, which was some task. There was to be no reference to it in any signal communication whatsoever and I personally took the operation order which only my clerk and I saw down to Milne Bay and passed it over to Joe Hewitt and he took it up to General Kenny. He said, 'That's fine. Let it go as it is'.

Then towards the end, I think it was about October 1943, they were ready to go. We were all set to receive these fighters. We had to get all of our aeroplanes off the ground and into

the air not only to provide cover just in case the Japanese were on to it, but also to provide ground space for 100 extra aeroplanes. I was in my operations room knowing the raids were going to take place on this day, these first raids on Rabaul, and John Danton ... no, I was down in the tower, that's right, on the strip waiting for the arrival of these first P38s. The first of the P38s started to arrive. They streamed in one after the other onto these four strips and they were each given a mug of coffee and a jam sandwich or something like that. Danton rang me up and said, 'There's a blip 15 miles wide on the screen', and 100 Liberators came over. It was the largest raid in the south Pacific at that time.

So off they went to Rabaul and those two or three great raids on Rabaul really knocked it out. Australian Beaufighters were involved as well, I may say. On the way back the Lightnings came in and one or two Liberators which had been shot up by Zeroes came in to Kiriwina and there were three or four more big ones which went through Kiriwina until they reckoned that Rabaul was sufficiently contained. With the inherent flexibility of air power, Kenny was then switching his entire bomber force on to targets on the mainland at Nubia * up near Wewak - Nubia in particular was one big Japanese airstrip - and Wewak. So he'd strike that, then he'd strike Rabaul again, then switch it back over here. Really, by the end of 1943 Rabaul was pretty well contained and our work then was again hammering Japanese airfields on the island of New Britain further east to see they couldn't use them.

Cassette 3/Side B

Ken Llewellyn: This is an interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege, tape six.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: During the development of the base at Kiriwina for these big raids on Rabaul, I received a message from 9 Operational Group that Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was going to come to Kiriwina. He turned up on the airstrip with one staff officer. Air Commodore Hewitt was not with him and normally Air Commodore Hewitt would have accompanied a senior officer. I presume that Joe was otherwise involved with 5th Air Force in Port Moresby or some other commitment. However, I'd only met Bostock once when he just happened to be passing through the Middle East and I met him briefly in one of the hotels just enough to say 'Good day'. I didn't know him, but quite a serious man. I found him rather humourless, I would say.

However, I think he came up to look at the headquarters and while he was there I said, 'We've got a fighter control unit', and I described the operations and what we were doing and he said, 'We're going to change the name of the fighter control unit and call it something else'. He gave me one or two other changes and I said, 'Oh, yes'. At that stage I understood 9 Operational Group - that's Joe Hewitt's organisation - to be responsible directly to Air Force headquarters and that Bostock's responsibilities were RAAF command and units operating from Australia but not 9 Operational Group, although, as I understood it, he had aims and designs to be involved with the command and control of 9 Operational Group. But as I understood it, at that stage he didn't have it. However, within about a week who should turn up on the airstrip but Air Vice-Marshal Jones, the CAS, with a staff officer. Again, Air Marshal Hewitt was not with him and he said, 'Steege, I understand Air Vice-Marshal Bostock's been here', and I said, 'Yes, he was here a week or 10 days ago. He told me they were going to do so-and-so and change the name of so-and-so'. He said, 'We are not'. That was the first impression I'd had that there was a very distinct difference of opinion between those two senior officers.

About the time of the raids on Rabaul or just after, I had a letter from Joe Hewitt, a personal letter, to say that he had been posted out of 9 Operational Group. He didn't say much but I suggest that he was very disappointed with it and it certainly surprised me because I had a very high regard for him. I knew that he'd flown over Rabaul with the Beauforts at night and with Catalinas at night on their operations. As a commander of course at his level, he was not really required to do that and in some cases perhaps shouldn't have done, but he was a man of great moral courage and a man of great physical courage. I found him a commander who, as far as his wing commanders were concerned, would listen to what they had to say and then give you a free hand. He'd check firstly to see whether he agreed with you and then you were right. As far as appointment of squadron commanders, he'd take your word for it.

I'd had some experience in the Middle East with commanders such as the first commander western desert, Air Commodore Colishaw, * fine man, Air Vice-Marshal Cunningham, Air Marshal Brown in Palestine, trans-Jordan, so I'd seen three good RAF commanders, plus in fact people like Tedder and all those. So I had some basis on which to work. With that basis, in my view Hewitt was a first class commander. I know that he was highly regarded by General Kenny, General Wordsmith, * the fighter commander, Brigadier General Freddie Smith, the boy general as they called him, Hutchinson and General Kenny's chief of staff, whose name slips me for the moment. He was very highly regarded by the Americans and I feel that later on history didn't give him a fair go. Pelly commanded the Beaufort wing and I commanded this fighter strike wing. I had over 100 aeroplanes based on Kiriwina and we had the biggest striking forces in that area under Joe Hewitt and we'd operated with some appreciation of the Americans as well, and yet neither Pelly nor I were consulted in the history of air operations in the south-west Pacific. The account of Joe Hewitt's removal doesn't really give him a fair go. I don't think it does and I think that if Pelly and I had been consulted, we'd have had rather more to say in strong favour of him, without going to the full details of it.

During this build-up with the first of these great raids in the south-west Pacific, there were constant visits from Major General Wordsmith's headquarters in Port Moresby - he was

commander 5th Fighter Command - from Brigadier General Freddie Smith, who commanded all the P38s at Dobaduray on the north coast of New Guinea, and also from General Kenny's staff. I think I've got a photograph somewhere of General Kenny, Joe Hewitt, Group Captain Ian McLachlan, me and Wilfred Arthur on the rough strip at Kiriwina while they were discussing the plans. I always had the impression that Joe Hewitt and Dougald McLachlan and his predecessor, Bill Garing, * in particular all had a very good rapport with the United States 5th Air Force in Papua New Guinea and were very highly regarded by them. I'm sure that Hewitt and McLachlan were highly regarded, and Bill too for that matter, by the American staff.

Early '43 it was apparent that the Japanese were pretty well sealed up in Rabaul with those great strikes there and the strikes against Wewak and Nubia on the mainland of Ongerup, so MacArthur's staff planned to bypass Rabaul and leave it, as the saying was, to die on the vine. They were going to go into the Admiralty Islands. The strip in the Admiralty Islands was quite adequate for Zeroes but not good enough for Lightnings and the American P40 squadrons, one or two who still had not yet gone over to Lightnings, were committed elsewhere. So it was arranged that 73 wing with 76 Squadron from Kiriwina, 79 Squadron Spitfires in Kiriwina and 77 Squadron from Goodenough would go into the Admiralty Islands as soon as possible after the landing and in fact that the ground staff of the first squadron would go in with the first wave to take the strip and set it up. One of the problems was that the Admiralty Islands was at such a distance from the fighter bases on the mainland of New Guinea that they could not cover it for a long time, so they wanted fighter defence in there early.

It was decided that the best arrangement would be for 76 Squadron's aircraft to fly in and that 77 Squadron from Goodenough, their ground staff would go in by sea with the first wave there. I flew with 76 Squadron, Ian Lowden's squadron, into Finschhafen, where we were to remain until we got advice that the Americans had taken the strip, Momodi * strip, in the Admiralty Islands, and then we could fly in low level being led by ... they wanted to make sure. They said, 'We insist that we send our B25 with you to bring it in low level all the way'. So it was arranged that way. We sat at Finschhafen for a day or so in tent

accommodation. They had just pilots and aircraft and we got a message to say, 'Yes, you can land on the strip'. We were taxiing out and a jeep came roaring up to my aircraft, as I was leading the formation, and the American in it said, 'You can't go yet. The Japanese have retaken the strip'. If he'd been 20 minutes later, we'd have been on the way and perhaps we should have been able to be recalled but the Japanese had in fact put in a counterattack.

So we were there for another 24 hours till the Americans cleared the strip and we went in late one afternoon. When we arrived there it was a very short strip and I told the ground staff to put up two markers about 50 yards apart, yellow like tents, at the very end of the strip and briefed all the 76 Squadron pilots that if they didn't hit the ground between those two markers they were to go round again because we didn't want any prangs on a short strip. Anyway, I arrived there with 76 Squadron and the ground staff were refuelling us and I said, 'We'd better go down and see the American ground force commander'. When we landed the howitzers were on the sea side of the strip. The strip runs parallel to the sea and very close to it and the Americans were all dug in between the strip and the sea. It was only a matter of 100 or 200 yards, so there were slit trenches everywhere and howitzers were firing across our aircraft when we landed.

I got into a jeep with Ian and they said, 'Follow that road down there and you'll find General Chase's * headquarters', down this muddy track down the side of the strip. I met this very bright and likeable American commander of the task force of the United States First Cavalry Division. He said, 'I'm mighty glad to see you boys. One of these American fly boys flew over here and said there were very few people here but there were 5,000 angry Japanese waiting for us on the beach when we landed, so we're very pleased to see you fellows'. So we chatted for a while and the sun had just gone over the palm trees and he said, 'You can't go back down the other end of the strip now. Immediately that sun drops, everybody goes below ground level and anything that moves at night is shot at. We've had Japanese coming through the line. First some of our men were sleeping in hammocks between the palm trees and they were getting knives through them at night as the Japanese came through. So you really can't go back at night. Look, there's a slit trench

in there'. So they gave us a couple of things and Lowden and I ... and we were so close to the rocks and the sea that there were small crabs scuttling over us during the night.

Anyway, at the crack of dawn Ian Lowden and I drove back to the strip, so that was the beginning of our occupation with the United States forces in the First Cavalry Division in the Admiralty Islands.

On one side of the strip there was a huge bunker which had been a revetment for Japanese Zeroes and the Americans' CBs who'd landed - they were the airfield construction engineers - had set up a machine gun nest on that side of the strip and the Japanese would come out of the jungle all yelling 'Bonsai' * in the middle of the night and these CBs just kept spraying them and spraying them and the Japanese kept coming and coming and the dead there were as high as this ceiling is now, great heaps of them. Whether the Americans were interested in blooding their troops in their first combat operation and getting them used to the sight of dead bodies I don't know, but they never ever buried them and they just rotted away in green pools of slime and great bloated faces. As one wave came through and were shot, another one would try to clamber over the dead ones to get on top of this revetment, so this great heap of bodies stayed there. Of course, 76 Squadron's hut was just across the strip, a bit of a dispersal shack they had where the pilots were on stand-by, and of course the big blue-black blowflies over on the Japanese were something that we didn't take to too kindly.

Ken Llewellyn: Air Commodore, you're one of the few fighting men in Australia who have fought the Italians, the Germans and the Japanese. How do you feel about the three forces immediately after the end of conflict and sitting here in retrospect?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Well, the Italian Air Force in North Africa fought honourably and their fighter pilots had quite a bit of dash and they had of course an aeroplane which was superior to the Gladiator. By the time 3 Squadron got the Hurricanes, one of the RAF Hurricane squadrons had virtually decimated the Italian Air Force. Their bombers were capable and as far as I was concerned, they were the enemy but ...

Ken Llewellyn: They fought according to the Geneva Convention?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: They fought honourably as far as I saw them. As far as their ground forces were concerned, I think that they were obviously badly led, probably badly equipped and their entire strategy played into the hands of General Wavell, who was a master really. We've seen some criticism of Wavell in the press recently arising out of some comments he made many years ago about the fall of Singapore, but we have to remember that Wavell ran that first push right through from ... pushed the Italians out of Egypt, through Libya, right back into Cyrenaica with very limited forces, picking up I think really in the first day or so of the operation something like 130,000 prisoners. So as far as their ground forces were concerned, probably their equipment and their generalship may not have been all that it was, whereas Wavell's forces were brilliantly led in that campaign.

As far as the Germans were concerned, I saw them only in North Africa. They were professionally very good, they had a magnificent aeroplane in relation to the P40, a magnificent aeroplane in the Messerschmitt 109, both the E and the F, and I may say that Bob Gibbs is worthwhile talking to because he had a lot of direct combat with them in that field. They had great capability there. One of the pilots from my 450 Squadron was taken prisoner, having been shot down in his P40 from 450 Squadron, and was taken into the pilots' mess at Martuba, * where the German intelligence officer talked to him like an uncle, so they were all pretty well received while they were with the Luftwaffe, our people, I think.

As far as the Japanese are concerned, by the time I got to the south-west Pacific I did not have any air combat with Japanese. We were really on ground attack stuff. I saw Japanese aircraft bomb Kiriwina and Goodenough at night following on our raids. The only Japanese really I saw were not in air combat. I strafed them at Goodenough and at Gasmata and other bases on New Britain and I saw plenty of dead Japanese on the ground, particularly, as I've mentioned, in the Admiralty Islands, but I had no experience of combat with them in the air. However, I did have from 1947 through 1950 four years as a patrol officer and assistant district officer with the administration of Papua New Guinea, during

which time I had a lot to do with native people who had been subjected to the Japanese during their occupation of New Guinea. I'm afraid my opinion of the Japanese military people has been coloured very much by personal accounts from Papuans and New Guineans who were quite truthful and whose reports I respected and take as gospel. So my opinion of the Japanese military machine has been coloured by that and also by the accounts which are authentic of aircrew and others who were caught by the Japanese and beheaded.

In the first few days in the Admiralty Islands, not long after this first wave when 76 Squadron's aircraft flew in and 77 Squadron's ground staff had gone in with the first wave to support them, then the ships arrived with the ground staff of 76 and 77 flew in. 79 was coming later. I had all these two squadrons of troops on the ground without tents and it was raining at night - lovely days of course, this blue south Pacific weather. Fortunately, the weather wasn't too bad but there were no cooking facilities for them and after a week of this I kept pestering the Americans, 'When are those ships going to be unloaded?', because they were all sitting in Siadler * Harbour, a tremendous flotilla, a great fleet of cargo ships and cruisers and all sorts of naval shipping.

I had a very bad earache, a tropical earache, which was troubling me. I was blowing off one day to Brigadier General Chase, the very good American task force commander whom I mentioned I first met there, and somehow or other I let it slip and I was angry and I said, 'This wouldn't happen in the British Army'. With that he said, 'Perhaps you ought to try and go up to the general's headquarters - he's ashore now - and see if you can get some satisfaction there'. So a couple of days later I went up to General Swift's headquarters. He was a lieutenant general and I gather that he'd dropped a rank - he was past retiring - to come back and command the United States First Cavalry Division, which has quite some historical record.

So I went into his tent to try and broach this subject of getting our gear unloaded and I said, 'Look, I'm very concerned because I'm getting a message from General Wordsmith to go and cover the ships bombarding Hollandia and my radio stations are still on the ships in the

harbour and I'm getting them too late for the operation'. I didn't press the point that my troops were all without tents because he could well say that his soldiers were that way too, but I could see that the Americans were really interested in cleaning up the thing with great speed in the Admiralty Islands. At that stage we had our aeroplanes on stand-by and the Air Force could wait. I think his staff had a lot to do with it. However, I was pressing the point and then he said, 'Look, you make these ridiculous comparisons. Now, whose ships are they?', so I said, 'Well, sir, I presume we're all fighting the same war'.

I forget what the finale was but I saluted and went off and I was followed out by an Irish-American lieutenant colonel, I sensed the type of character who was not overly fond of the British, and there were a few Americans like that. So this lieutenant colonel walked out. He had an Irish name and he walked down the path to me and he said, 'You shouldn't talk to a general like that'. Tom Carlyon, from the Melbourne family of Carlyons, who was my senior admin staff officer, had been tugging at my sleeve during this rather hot interview as if to say, 'Don't go too far'. However, talking with this Irish-American lieutenant colonel, I let him have it then. I said, 'This is ridiculous. Why can't they bring a ship into Hyani * Harbour?', which was a small harbour. He said, 'General Kruger says that anyone who brings a ship into Hyani Harbour is a fool'. I said, 'Well, there's been an Australian destroyer in there. Is General Kruger a sailor?' He didn't like that very much because General Kruger was a very fine general in any case.

With that I saw General Swift come out of his tent and walk down the path. He was a white haired old gentleman and he wore full length riding boots from the Cavalry Division and I thought, 'He's going to let me have it now'. As he approached I said, 'Sir, I'm very sorry. In the heat of (inaudible) I made some undiplomatic remarks which I sincerely regret'. Before I got any further he said, 'It's a man that apologises and a gentleman that accepts', and out shot his hand. So from then on, whenever they had a little function I was invited up to dinner with the old boy and he was really a first class gentleman. I regard my association with both the United States Army and the United States Air Force with great warmth and great pride because they were professionally marvellous people.

When the Americans had sorted things out in the Admiralty Islands and virtually cleaned out the Japanese, there wasn't much for 73 wing to do other than just ... the Japanese had been isolated of course in Rabaul and Manus didn't look like being subjected to any kind of air attack but we were escorting convoys with fighter aircraft against possible visual sighting of submarines, daylight attack. I mentioned earlier that because of some operational fatigue in the Beaufighter squadron at Kiriwina, I'd committed myself to saying, 'I fly as much as you bastards and I'll be here for 12 months', and having said that I was committed to it.

So from the Admiralty Islands after 12 months, I flew down to Madang and said to Air Commodore Lucas, who was then commander 9 Operational Group, 'Is it okay if I go on leave?', and he said, 'Yes, go by all means. Take your own aeroplane and make sure you take a No 2 with you'. The day before we were to leave Momodi on Admiralty Islands, the Spitfire squadron commander came and said to me, 'We've got a sick aeroplane and every time it goes on the ground it'll go unserviceable. If we send it in the normal way it'll have to go to Madang, to Nadzab, * to Port Moresby. If we put a huge tank on it, it can accompany you two all the way from Manus to Horne * Island'. That was a long flight, even for a P40. It had never been done before by a single-engine aeroplane. He said, 'We've checked it out. It can make the distance all right'. I said, 'Well, he's got VHF and we have HF and he can't talk to us'.

Max Bott * talked me into it. He said, 'You can use the old hand signals. After all, it's just a ferry flight'. So off we went. We took off and did an hour's night flying from Manus, two P40s and one Spitfire, with nav lights of course on, and we crossed the coast of New Guinea near Kaka * Island just about dawn and I think I was at about 20,000 feet on oxygen reading a Penguin propped up and straps off and I saw a very high mountain with some white stuff on the top and I thought, 'Gee whiz, that looks like snow. It would be nice to go down and have a look at it'. But I had a 100-gallon belly tank, which made the aeroplane a little bit unstable and it took a long time to clamber up there and I thought, 'We'd better stay where we are', so on we went.

Not long after that I suddenly had a sensation of loss of power. It was quite a shock really. I looked round at all the instruments as I was buckling up my straps at about 20,000 feet just in time to see the oil pressure dropping. It was slowly drop, drop, dropping and the aeroplane would not maintain full power but, by reducing the power and descending slowly, it was flyable and with the speed well back. It was the morning build-up of huge clouds and I was right over the centre of Papua New Guinea and I thought, 'Having flown the P40 in the Middle East and here for a year, I'm going to go down in the centre of Papua New Guinea and I'll never get out of it', because I don't think one would up there. Perhaps today you might, depending on what sort of trees you landed in.

The morning build-up of clouds was coming on, so as I was gently descending I was calling, 'Mayday, mayday, mayday. Fennel * Red One is going down, on track, centre of Papua New Guinea'. I was calling Port Moresby and Manus but no answer, no answer. Eventually I said to the other P40 pilot, 'You keep calling because I've got to fly the aeroplane'. So he kept calling and they were weaving slowly around me because I had reduced airspeed. Eventually I saw a river through heavily timbered country and I thought, 'If I can bale out over a river I'll get in the dinghy and somehow get down to the sea', because we carried a dinghy under the mat.

The aeroplane flew I think for 30 to 35 minutes from the centre of New Guinea coming down slowly with no oil pressure whatsoever, oil pressure right off the clock. About that time I broke through some cloud and saw the Gulf of Papua just ahead and underneath, so I thought, 'Thank God. I'll bale out because the other two will fly to Port Moresby or somewhere and get a Catalina and they'll pick me up'. At that time I was just about getting ready to bale out and I saw through the cloud a confluence of two rivers, one joining the other, so I turned back that way and I could see a strip of mud. I had 10,000 cigarettes in the back of the aeroplane and some silk stockings. You could get a lot for cigarettes and silk stockings in Sydney in those days, especially if you'd been in the islands for 12 months.

So I abandoned the idea of baling out and dropped the 100-gallon belly tank and at that moment the crankshaft must have broken in the aeroplane because a tremendous vibration set up and I was hanging onto the stick with both hands to keep control of it, no power whatsoever, so I was on the glide then from about 4,000 feet and over a huge river. I turned and went through some cloud, gliding to come back onto this mud bank, and of course slightly misjudged it through the cloud and came out over the jungle. So only with a split-arse turn was I able at the last moment to turn again and crash-land on this mud bank. I was concerned naturally at hitting anything and the aeroplane catching fire and I could hear it spitting because there was no sound, wheels-up landing. Whether it was the mud hitting the metal aeroplane or whether it was red hot I don't know, but I got out of that aeroplane and virtually passed it on the run.

Then the two other aeroplanes came and flew around me and I wrote in the sand, 'Send a Cat', with my big sheath knife that we carried, assuming they'd go on to Horne Island, which is where we were heading for. So off they went. With that a native with a spear came out of the bush on this low, flat, muddy island and I thought, 'Well, this is where I finish up with a high voice', because I knew that I was up in the Fly River area. He came to me and I had some cigarettes in my pocket, so I gave him a cigarette and he pointed and then one or two more natives began to appear. The old boy kept pointing to my aeroplane and pointing out to sea and pointing down as if an aeroplane went down, and I thought he was referring to my aircraft. Then more natives appeared out of the jungle and I gave them all a cigarette.

Shortly after this the Spitfire came back and flew around me and puts its flaps down as if it was going to land near me. There were great logs. I couldn't have put the same thing down on that place even if I'd had power to do it again. It was just good luck, through these huge logs that had come down the Fly River. So I waved him off again and he went to look for a better place further upstream about half a mile away. I walked up to meet him and it was Paul Sabeer, * who was a flight lieutenant in 79 Squadron. My first words were - and you'll have to excuse the English - 'What the fucking hell are you doing here?' I'm a group captain, he's a flight lieutenant. He said, 'Didn't you see the other bloke go

into the sea?’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘Yes. We set off for Daru after you wrote “Send a Cat” and we were right on the water because the morning cloud had come down’. So they were underneath the cloud, this morning mist on the river. He said, ‘Suddenly he put his nose up as if he was losing speed or lost his engine and he splurged into the sea’.

So I’m pretty sure what happened. The other bloke was Hurley * and he was a flying officer. He was probably concerned about his group captain going down. He knew there was drama. He was obviously flying on his 100-gallon belly tank which would have cut out about then and he’d forgotten to switch over, and you needed 200 or 300 feet and the thing ... I said, ‘Did he get out of it?’, and he said, ‘No’. I said, ‘Well, what are you doing here?’ and he said, ‘I’ve got a sick aeroplane. I haven’t known what’s going on but I know something’s ... I can see you safe on the ground, so I thought, “Here I am”.’ I said, ‘Nobody knows where we are’.

Anyway, later on that morning about 8 or 9 o’clock - it happened about 7 in the morning, I suppose - I got back into my aeroplane, switched on the radio and I heard the tower at Townsville talking to an American aeroplane ...

Cassette 4/Side A

Ken Llewellyn: This is an interview with Air Commodore Steege, tape seven.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: There I was on the sandy mud bank, low tide, at the junction of the Barmu * and the Fly River. I'd crash-landed my P40 and got away with it with tremendous luck, having come through this low morning cloud over the jungle trees and not being lined up with the beach and then with a split-arse turn managed to put it down in between those huge logs that washed down the Fly River. Some of them must have been 50 feet long and perhaps four feet wide with their roots sticking up in the air. I think that if I'd tried to do it with full power and able to control the aeroplane, I probably wouldn't have made it again.

Hurley, the other in the P40, had been concerned about his group captain No 1 and been calling, 'Fennel Red One is going down on track in Papua New Guinea', and what else he was saying. I wasn't listening to him but he was trying to give a rough idea. The Spitfire pilot of course hadn't been able to talk with us because he was on UHF. Hurley had gone into the sea. The Spitfire had made an approach and crash-landed on the beach about half a mile or so further up the Fly River from me, further up Barmu Island where it fronts onto the Fly.

There were quite a lot of natives there and they appeared to be quite friendly. Later on I assumed they would be but my first impression was a little bit anxious as they came out of the bush in that area, knowing the Fly River had some history. They then took us round to their village. All this occurred because we'd taken off about half past 4 in the morning, so it would then have been about half past 7 maybe by the time I pranged and by the time we were walking through the village. We were up to our knees in black oozing mud as we left the sandy beach and walked round to this low level muddy island. There was one native who seemed to have appointed himself as our guide and, as we got into this bit of a native village which was on stilts on the low level mud of the river, and obviously we could see

that the tide came up under these houses at night, he pointed to the house he was taking us to and said, 'Government house'.

I later learned of course that the patrol officers in Papua New Guinea establish a house in various areas which they stay in when they visit villages for court cases or census or on their regular patrols from time to time, and this was one of those. Adjacent to it on a little walkway was a tiny little house which this chap pointed to and he said, 'Sheet-house'. I could see that that was on stilts, so I realised that at night certainly one couldn't go down the steps and walk around in the muddy water at night because we could see the crocodiles in the river.

However, after being there for a while in this village I thought, 'We'll go back to those aeroplanes'. So we got the natives and we went right back again just to see if there was anything else that we hadn't ... I don't know whether it was on my mind or not but when I got to the aeroplane I thought, 'I'll try the radio'. The P40 had a long-range HF radio and sometimes you'd get what was known as skip distance. You couldn't get stations locally. We hadn't been able to get anybody in that hour of the morning. We'd called Port Moresby, Finschhafen, Dobaduray, and at that altitude one really should have been able to pick up somebody. Maybe they weren't listening at that hour of the morning. But we couldn't get Moresby, we couldn't get anybody.

When I went back to the aeroplane I turned the radio on - I could hear it was humming - and put it on to 'Transmit' and called, 'Mayday, mayday. Fennel Red One is down on Debeery * Island at the junction of the Barmu and Fly Rivers in Papua New Guinea. Fennel Red One and Fennel Red Three are down on the beach. Fennel Red Two has crashed into the sea', and I heard the tower at Townsville, which was manned by the American Air Force at the time, came back immediately and he said ... at that time there were aeroplanes calling the tower at Townsville at Garbord * trying to get permission to land. There was always a stack of American C47s and one of these characters came up and said, 'I've been in the circuit here for half an hour waiting to land', and this tower man

said, 'Get off the air, get off the air, there's a mayday. Fennel Red One is down in Papua New Guinea'.

I talked to him as I'm speaking to you now, as clearly as that. I explained exactly where we were, what had happened, and I asked if they could get us picked up some time. I ran another watch with him about 11 o'clock and at 12 o'clock the battery faded out because the tide was coming up into the cockpit. Not only that, the battery wouldn't hold all that power. Then the tide came up in the cockpit and we went back to the village for the night. Then it began to rain, typical Fly River rain. It poured. Late the next afternoon we could hear a Catalina burbling around somewhere but it obviously couldn't get in over the land because the mist and cloud was right down over this low, swampy village.

So we were there that day and all the next day and on the third day the weather lifted a bit. On the second night, I think it was, second or third night, I heard some voices about 10 o'clock at night. I looked out and I could see a hurricane lantern on this muddy, low tide river, and in came two Australians. One was Ted Hicks, patrol officer from Daru, and the other one was Penny, * who was a medical assistant. He said, 'We got a message to say you two were down here. We wanted to be the first to come and rescue you. We're quite pleased about this, to find you still here. Anybody hurt?' 'No'. Penny was a medical assistant.

They had a bottle of grog they brought with them in case, so we knocked that off sitting in this hut and I told them the story of what had happened. The patrol officer, Ted Hicks, said, 'There's been a murder just a couple of villages up here. I've got to go up and investigate it'. He was an Angau * patrol officer based at Daru. Ted Hicks said, 'We're very keen to conduct this rescue and the district officer over at Daru is Mick Healy', * a very well-known Papuan family for a couple of generations with brothers up there in the district service. Mick Healy remembers you from when you were in Port Moresby with 11 Squadron in 1939 and we're going to put on a big party for you when we get you back over there. We'll have a dance'. I said, 'Who would we dance with?' He said, 'They've moved all the mixed race people from Port Moresby to get them out of the way of the American

troops and based them all on Daru'. I said, 'I'd love to come to Daru. What about this dance though? I don't fancy dancing with people in bare feet'. He said, 'They won't be barefoot. They wear sandals'.

So off he went the next morning and left Penny, the medical assistant, with us. Then a Catalina suddenly appeared, an American Catalina, and it landed in this very narrow river - magnificent job. But we'd seen the tide go out in this river and seen the tremendous snags in it and I thought, 'My God, they're going to wreck a Catalina and then there'll be another aeroplane gone'. So I waved him off because in any case I was quite keen for a little adventure at Daru after 12 months in Papua New Guinea, so I was quite prepared to go back by launch to Daru. So I waved the Catalina off. I might say that our entertainment there, we couldn't go out of this little hut at night because the water would come up underneath from the river and you could see the phosphorescence when a crocodile was moving around the place and we could see them during the day, huge things, in the river. I've still got the Smith and Wesson which I was pot-shooting at them for fun, with the limited number of rounds we had, and living on the mud crabs. Furthermore, as far as going out of the house, you had to use that 'sheet-house' at night. You wouldn't want to go down into that knee-deep water under the house with those sort of things around.

So the Catalina took off and I thought, 'Thank God', because I held up chunks and pointed to the water and he rammed it on and took off and went away again. I said to Penny, 'That settles that. Now we look forward to coming over to Daru. They know we're all right and they probably know we've been picked up'. That afternoon I heard this burbling and I wondered what the hell it was, and of course it was a Catalina at idling speed and it was drifting sideways and swinging around. It had landed further up the Barmu River and was drifting down to us, so I said, 'There's only one thing to do. These fellows are determined they're going to pick us up. If we don't get off now, the river's gone down even further and they'll rip the guts out of it'.

We grabbed our parachutes and jumped into a couple of small canoes, which would only take one. I didn't give a thought to crocodiles. I was a bit uneasy about them because both

Paul Sabeer and I got alongside the Cat and scrambled in, waved to the natives and I raced up to the cockpit. There was a nice big American doctor aboard and he said, 'We were going to get you boys', and I said, 'Just a minute'. So I raced up to the cockpit, Navy Catalina, and I said, 'For Christ's sake get off quick because you've only got a few inches of water and there's tremendous snags and you'll ruin the Cat'. He didn't wait. He just let the thing go and off he went back to Port Moresby.

Ken Llewellyn: So what happened to the silk stockings and the cigarettes then? Were they finally used for this social event?

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: They were in fact. As I'd got them so far onto Debeery Island, when we moved round to the village I took them with us. Ten thousand cigarettes were really only in a package about 18 inches wide by perhaps two feet six high because they're in packets of 20. The silk stockings didn't weigh much, so I grabbed these with my parachute and we all went off in the canoe and I threw these things aboard. So in fact I still had the silk stockings and the cigarettes when we got back to Port Moresby and in fact did get them to Sydney, where they were put to very good use.

Ken Llewellyn: There's also a story about the lost pilot. The other pilots were very concerned about his whereabouts.

Air Commodore Gordon Steege: Yes. After 10 days leave in Australia I picked up another P40. There was always one which had to be transported somewhere and I flew that thing back. I went into Townsville, had a night at Townsville, and then to Horne Island and I flew across to the Fly River and dropped out of it some sweets and things for kids over this native village and then right round the Gulf of Papua back to Port Moresby and from there by the usual Nadzab back to Manus Island, where I was met by Ian Lowden, the squadron leader commanding 76 Squadron. He said, 'It was bad luck about Hurley', and I said, 'Yes, it was bad luck'. I explained what had happened. I think that Hurley had been flying on his 100-gallon belly tank and forgot about switching it over until it was too late

and of course the aeroplane was just chug, chug, chugging and he lost height and went into the sea.

He questioned me quite a bit: 'Was he washed up? Was his body washed up?' I said, 'Paul Sabeer flew round and round him in the Spitfire before he crash-landed up the beach from me and said he didn't get out of it, just went down with it, so he's on the bottom of the Fly River somewhere'. A couple of days later Ian kept pressing me: 'Have you heard any more?' I said, 'You'll never hear anything from there, Ian'. He said, 'The boys are very sorry to hear about Hurley', and I said, 'Yes, but a war's on, people get missing and go off like that'. So he plugged it to me again. I said, 'Ian, you're a squadron commander. What are the fellows concerned about?', and he said, 'Well, the night before you left we had a dib around and Hurley had 300 quid of our money in his pocket to buy grog to bring back to us'. I said, 'I'm sorry, no further news'.

Really, the final sequel to that story is that after I'd resigned my permanent Air Force commission in 1947 and was in Papua New Guinea, in 1948 I was based at Kairuku, * which is an island west of Port Moresby and a very old established government post. While I was there I got a letter from a lady who signed herself the Reverend Eva Marsden and it was headed on that cheap notepaper, 'The Mission in the Mud'. She said, 'I am located on Debeery Island. We were evacuated during the war but we've come back here to our mission and our people after the war. I heard about your episode here and I understand that you're now a patrol officer with the administration. I'm just writing to tell you that Flying Officer Hurley's body was in fact eventually washed up on the beach and our people have buried him in the little cemetery we have here on Debeery Island'. I don't know whether the 300 quid was still in his pocket or not.

[End of interview with Air Commodore Gordon Steege.]