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INTERVIEWEE: WING COMMANDER JACK DAVENPORT

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

This is an interview with Wing Commander Jack Davenport, recorded at his home in Mosman, on 24 March 1993.

Jack Davenport, you started your career in a bank. Did you ever conceive of the activities that would befall you when you joined the RAAF on January 1 1941?

No, I'm quite sure I didn't; I'm not sure what I would have done had I known. But I'd, at the beginning of September, had been called in to the army, having been in the territorials or the militia as it was called then, and I was an instructor, instructing the first batch of AIF, determined to go overseas. And then, as an instructor, they suddenly said, no, I could not go, so I quietly went and joined the air force.

Did you ever consider joining the army or the navy?

I was in the army for that period from the beginning of September right up until the day I joined the RAAF.

Had you flown before you entered the RAAF?

No, I had not.

What attracted you about flying?

I guess it's excitement, it was something new, I think we all look up in to the air, even today, and see aeroplanes and think, isn't it wonderful the way they stay up. I liked the thought of it.

You left Australia in 1941 and trained in Canada. What were your feelings about preparing for war in Europe?

We were all very young and I guess that a major consideration was to get there and become involved. One didn't contemplate the possibilities of anything happening to you. That was what it was all about. I think it made people try very hard and apply themselves far more than otherwise would have been the case.

How did you find your training in Canada? I mean, it was probably bitterly cold when you were going through your flying training.

Yes, Canada was cold to begin with, but then very hot. I was in the mid-west and at new station.

What was the name of the station?

Macleod in Alberta. And there were mainly Canadians, but of course, there were two intakes of Australians.

We had our conflict with the Canadians in some respects. They liked everything to be very hot at night, and we had trouble; we'd switch the heating off, they'd switch it on, we'd switch it off, they'd switch it on. So we solved that problem by putting a boot through the window, it got quite cool then.

Did you have any preconceived ideas about the type of aircraft you wanted to fly when you finally got to Europe?

Yes. I was rather keen to fly a multi-engined aircraft. I thought that this had more potential, I thought you were flying with somebody else for whom you were responsible and who had some responsibility towards you. I think there was some comfort thought there too, probably.

How did you rate yourself as a pilot when you were presented with your wings?

Not as well as the instructor did.

So you were being rather modest about it?

I was rated highly.

So it's a wonder they didn't try to persuade you to fly fighters.

Well, I've flown a number of single-engined aeroplanes. I think the demands on a bomber pilot, or a multi-engine pilot, are greater than those in a single-engine aircraft.

Did you have any choice about the squadron that you joined? I believe you joined 455 Squadron in March '42.

No. I was fortunate, I got through very quickly and was operating, I think, in September or October of the year in which I joined the air force. I had a remarkable run in getting through. But 455 Squadron was the first Empire Training Scheme squadron to operate in Great Britain, and I was there fairly early in their career and so it was inevitable.

When did they name them the Kangaroos?

I don't know, I've not heard of them being called the Kangaroos.

That was just some publicity blurb that was coming out of UK at the time.

Oh, I see. No, I didn't read it (laughs).

Can you describe your conversion in England - I think it was on to Hampdens, wasn't it?

Yes; that was interesting, it was at [Cottersmoore] in the County of Rutland - which, of course, no longer exists, it's been absorbed - it was a grass aerodrome.

The Hampden carried all sorts of mystique about it. There was a thing called the stabilised yore, which was supposed to be very dangerous for pilots. I think it had its problems, but it was a beautiful old aeroplane to fly, it had been obsolete just before the war and been brought back, but it was extremely manoeuvrable. It carried a bomb load about the same as a Fortress, which the Americans find very hard to understand, and it operated off a fairly short runway - we didn't have a runway, we had gooseneck flares stuck out along the grass, and at night they didn't have the advantages of light-path indicators and all that sort of thing which later became the norm.

Was the Squadron consisting totally of Australians?

No, there weren't enough Australians there in the early stages. We, very early on, had an Australian commanding officer, Wing Commander [Linderman], a great bloke, and gradually the Australians took over the responsibilities. We had an Englishman, Dicky [Banker], who was the first DSO airman awarded during World War II.

Dicky Banker was a great help. I can recall, at a briefing, a young pilot, a new pilot, said to him, 'Sir, at what height do you use your oxygen?' and old Dicky, calming everybody down, said, 'When my pipe went puff' - he calmed everybody down.

Can you describe your flying conditions in England at that time? I mean, you lost just about as many in training in those days as you did in combat.

Yes, well, it was so different to anywhere else we'd been. There's the old story about following the railway line when you are lost, it always goes somewhere. Well, of course, in Britain there are so many railway lines that that wasn't any help at all.

The weather was hard for Australians to understand, we flew in much worse conditions than is generally experienced here. And, of course, identification, from the ground, of towns; there are towns all over the place. It was much more difficult flying conditions than one experienced in Australia.

Did you lose many squadron members in accidents in those early years?

Yes; we lost quite a few at OTU, at Cottesmoore - quite a few. It was a big change to go from an Anson to a Hampden, a very different aeroplane, a much more powerful airplane, despite its age. Yes, there were lots of hazards.

How did that affect morale? I mean, when young pilots and young aircrew are killed, it must have a severe effect on morale of other aircrew.

Yes, that's very real. Later on, when we were converting to carrying torpedoes, when we'd finished in Bomber Command and gone to Coastal, the crews we received were from Canada who had already trained and done their operational flying training in Canada, came for the advanced training with torpedoes - and they'd had a break of several months between their last flight and coming to Turnberry on the west coast of Scotland. We had a very, very high accident rate, it was alarming, and it did adversely affect morale.

What were the reasons for the accident rates? Was it simply too few hours and inexperience, or poor instruction?

I think, to be fair, the greatest problem was pilot problem. I think that people had not had enough training for the tasks that were required of them.

How many hours did they allocate you before you actually went on operations?

It wasn't really a matter of hours; you did your OTU, which involved - I've forgotten how many hours were involved - but you did certain local flying and learning to fly the new aeroplane, the Handley Page Hampden, or the Flying Pencil, or the Flying Suitcase, as it was also called. And

then you did three navigational exercises, at night, and then, if you passed all those satisfactorily, you went to the Squadron. When you went to the Squadron they gave you a couple of flights which were called 'freshers' and they involved flying leaflets over Europe or dropping mines, ostensibly fairly safe operations; but, of course, not always the case. And then it was open slather.

What were your feelings when you finished the OTU and you were about to enter a squadron and go on operations?

I looked at something like awe at the people that were on the Squadron that were doing operations. I was very keen to get cracking on those early operations, I guess it was a matter of testing yourself.

The first operation, incidentally, was a rather intriguing one. I'd been allocated Allan Bowman, an Australian, as my navigator, and Smith and Harrison, two Englishmen, were my wireless operator and rear gunner. When we were sent on our first flight it was to Paris, and we just didn't realise what could happen to you; it was the first trip for all of us. We flew to Paris with leaflets - it was a Moonlit night, we saw the Eiffel Tower, we flew down to a couple of thousand feet, and there was a great kafuffle down the back of the aeroplane with Smith saying, 'Wait a minute, we're not ready yet; wait a minute, we are not ready yet', and we went round and round the place.

And it's a terrible thing to say but I subsequently discovered that rather than undoing the bundles or leaflets, they were tying them up with wire to make sure that they were an effective bomb. We flew back from Paris all singing at the top of our voices, 'The Last Time I Saw Paris'. That was our attitude at that time, we learnt more later.

Now, you were a very young man then, you were pilot officer about twenty-one years old, weren't you?

That's right.

So one could say you, in fact, were full of the joys of spring as much as anything else.

That's right, yes. And it was nice seeing Paris.

What sort of activities did you get in the mess in those early years?

Well, there were really two groups of people; there were those that were very quiet and withdrew in to themselves, but the great bulk of people were prepared to have fun at the drop of a hat. There are all sort of intriguing activities went on. We played a lot of billiards and snooker, and we had a lot of - there was not anywhere near as much drinking as most people have suggested, people were fairly restrained, but we had a lot of fun.

We had one of the pilot officers who could hypnotise chooks, and that gave us a great deal of pleasure. There was one occasion when there was to be a staff ball and the AOC of the Group was to attend. Patrick took chooks and put two in the library casement doors, two behind settees and two somewhere else in the place and left them there during this great reception. And just towards the end he went round - I don't know what he did, but he de-hypnotised them. It caused quite a stir.

How did he hypnotise these chooks?

He held them - he had a canny knack - he could catch chooks much easier than anybody I know in a chook yard. And then he'd get a match and stoke its comb in a particular fashion, and the chook would lay down flat and wouldn't move, just blink its eyes. It was amazing.

Maybe you should have activated it against the Germans.

Yes (laughs).

What about your social life with young English girls? How did they react to Australian aircrew?

I think very favourably; I think we were reasonably popular everywhere we went. We had things that the populace did not have; we were better fed; as aircrew we had an operational meal before we went on any flight usually consisting of bacon and eggs. Well, the local populace got one egg every six weeks. We got chocolates and things like that from home, and parcels, and everybody, because of the hospitality we received, was pretty generous in distributing these things as well. We got cigarettes, which were very hard to get over there. We liked the local people and I think they liked us.

Jack, can you describe one of your early operations when you were bombing targets in Europe?

It was, I think, a fairly demanding sort of activity, physically. We would get up in the morning, or whenever, go down and test fly the aeroplane which we were taking that night, and come back and have a meal and attend briefing.

Briefing was usually in a smoke-filled room - the great majority of aircrew smoked at that time and there seemed to be an increase in the incidence of smoking at briefing. We would be briefed on the target, with maps and so on; we'd be briefed as to what height we should bomb and what path generally we should fly, or perhaps there would be alternative flight paths which we would fly; and then the target would be described to us, the flack which we were likely to experience, and then considerable emphasis was put on the question of searchlights. Following that we would be taken by truck, with our parachutes and our equipment, out to the aeroplane.

And in those early days there were certain requirements that were different. Later on, if heating failed you were required to return to base. In those early days nobody would contemplate returning to base if the heating failed, little realising the effect very, very cold conditions have on one's efficiency.

But I guess the thing, that everybody was pretty cheerful in those early stages, but later, when you were flying over, you started to think about all sorts of things - and the navigator was very busy down the front, below, in the Hampden. You'd check and check, and re-check and re-check, everything that could be checked. And then, when the coast came up, you could feel the bit of a tension in the aeroplane, everybody was quieter.

Was there much chitchat between the crew?

In the initial stages, yes, much of it required, testing - wireless testing, gun testing, and so on.

Was there much light humour to offset the pressure which you were obviously facing?

Yes, there was a lot of light humour.

What sort of banter did you discuss? Was it girls and the previous night's drinking?
What sort of light banter did you ...?

No, there was much more personal digs at one another, in good humour. The discipline that existed on the ground didn't exist in the banter; the discipline that was required in the aeroplane, of course, was absolute.

But first of all, you'd see the searchlights, and I think that I feared the searchlights more than any other aspect of the flight because they were relentless and in the early stages they were, in some cases, sound controlled. And we'd take along a number of empty beer bottles, and when you were in fear of being caught in the searchlights - because there'd be hundreds of them, and they'd light up acres of the sky, and if they got on to you, getting away from them was a very difficult task. And the anti-flack was related to the searchlight, and if there wasn't any flack then you were really worried because there'd be a night fighter about. And it's very difficult to see when you are in searchlights, you can't see anything, it's very hard to see your cockpit, very hard to see your instruments, and sometimes you wouldn't know whether you are flying straight and level or turning sideways; most disconcerting.

Did you have absolute minimum lighting in the cockpit?

Absolute minimum lighting in the cockpit, virtually just a very pale light which could not be seen by more than three or four yards away.

But the fear of the searchlights was real. We'd drop a bottle over, and of course, ostensibly it made a great whooo! as it went down, and the searchlight sometimes would do that and follow the bottle down because the noise of it would be more pitched to the searchlights than the engines of the aeroplane. That was sometimes a relief, not always. But to get in those searchlights was horrifying, and you'd tend to get gradually lower, and lower, and lower, as you were trying to find a space where there wasn't a searchlight; and that became dangerous.

But then eventually you'd break through the searchlight belt - and there were thousands of searchlights - you'd break through the searchlight belt and head on to your target. I think my first operation was to Essen and it was one of the toughest targets in the Ruhr, very heavily defended and a major centre of German industry.

And we'd adopted the policy, mainly because of Dicky Banker, who was the most experienced man on the Squadron, had a theory that if you were lower than the mob, you had to get a direct hit. Shrapnel exploded from anti-aircraft fire upwards, and so we generally flew round about seven thousand feet whereas most people were flying around about ten or twelve, or fourteen in those early days.

You'd then come to the stage of the run-up to the bombing. If you bomb aimer wanted you to turn to the left, he'd say 'left-left', if he wanted you to turn to the right, he'd say 'riiight' so that there was no confusion, they were different noises - and 'steady-steady'. And finally you would

get the target in the sight and he would say, 'Left-left, steady-steady, right a bit, steady' - and if you weren't careful you'd find yourself, when you were really tired, nodding. It took effort after a few nights consecutive flying. And then he would say, 'Okay, bombs away!' and you'd drop your bombs and then he nearly always said, 'Let's get out of here', and you'd head off home. And, of course, that was also a danger period from the night fighters.

Did you always stay long enough to see where your bombs hit?

No, you couldn't in most cases. But when you dropped your bombs, you automatically took a photograph, and the photograph revealed how accurate or, frequently, how inaccurate where the bombing attacks had been.

If I can digress for a moment, I had a very nasty operation on one occasion when I got caught up in the searchlights and ended up very, very low indeed; I could see buildings on the ground. I saw what we thought was the target, and I think I was probably as low as two thousand, two and a half thousand, feet, which was ridiculous - but that's because I was absolutely petrified of the searchlights. We dropped the bombs, I took a photograph, and got back.

There was a competition held by the Group every month about the best photograph, and I was suddenly called to Group and I thought, ah, well, you know, here's the best photograph, I've won something. And when I arrived at Group I discovered that the target that I'd taken the photograph of was [Ham] when we were, in fact, going to Hamburg. It was a very good photograph, but I was asked to explain how I'd got to Ham.

When you released the bombs the aircraft immediately became considerably lighter and more manoeuvrable. Was there some sort of elation or relief when you finally let the bombs go?

Yes, there was great relief, great relief, you could feel it quite distinctly when the bombs went. All you were thinking about then was getting back.

What was the procedure? I mean, you obviously turned the aircraft round - did you increase power? or did you increase height or go to low level?

Well, if we were normally bombing from our seven thousand feet height, my technique was to put the nose down and get speed, even though I was going lower, to get away from the target area. I think it's hard for people to realise just how heavily those targets were defended. Their number of anti-aircraft guns that were available - and many of them were mobile. I think that the German's intelligence was perhaps better than we gave it credit for at that time. Most targets had very, very heavy defences.

And, of course, the artificial targets that the Germans created were amazing. They'd have places out in the forest where they had great lights and flares, and all sorts of things. When a bombing attack started, they'd switch all these things on and you'd home on to this great conflagration thinking that's the target already been hit. If you weren't careful you'd be bombing the wrong target, perhaps several miles away from the target you were after.

It must have been extremely frightening when you were getting the flack and the explosion of the shells rocking the aircraft.

It's nasty when you can smell it.

You can actually smell it?

You can smell the cordite of the exploding bombs, yes.

The Germans used any number of different type of anti-aircraft guns, didn't they?

Indeed.

Which ones did you find the most effective, as far as the Germans went?

I don't know, I couldn't answer that. They were all - they used, of course, very light, rapid-firing ones, at heights up to perhaps three or four thousand feet. Above that ... Later on, of course, it became an entirely different kettle of fish because they had much better controls - sound controls and synchronisation, direct synchronisation, with particular searchlights.

Was your aircraft frequently damaged from these raids?

Most occasions you'd get something. I guess the worst was, I had seventy-seven holes on one occasion, but the aeroplane flew very well.

When your aircraft received these seventy-seven holes, what was that primarily from? It was from ground fire obviously.

Yes.

Or night fighter?

I'd be sure it was a hundred per cent ground fire.

What protection did you have against night fighters?

Well, in a Hampden its armament consisted of two .303 machine-guns on the top turret, and two machine-guns on the bottom turret - the bottom turret was one where the gunner had to lie on his stomach, looking out, and had a very restricted view - and it had one gas-operated .303 sticking out the front.

So it really wasn't that effective against night fighters?

No. Manoeuvrability was the thing. You had to know they were there, and if you knew they were there, a night fighter would have a great deal of trouble hitting you.

How many times were you attacked by a night fighter during operations?

Only twice that I knew of.

I suppose it would have been difficult to perceive exactly what aircraft were in the sky.

Oh, yes. On most occasions you couldn't see a thing, and sometimes - I mean, the ones that we

did see was because we saw someone firing at us. But no, you would never - we never ever saw a night fighter close up, only the result of having a night fighter close up - of course, he fired at us.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Ken Llewellyn interviewing Wing Commander Jack Davenport, Tape 2.

Jack, on the way home it must have been a great sense of relief, and at times you must have had difficulty landing because the aircraft was shot up, it may have been damaged more than you anticipated. Can you just describe the reactions by the crew on the way home, and the procedures that followed?

Yes. I think the first thing one noticed was how dry your throat was; you obviously hadn't swallowed for quite a long time. But as soon as you headed for home, there was a great relief, but then a great concentration on making sure that you got over the coast. I think that was a false barrier which you hoped that if you got through that everything would be all right. And, of course, you constantly checked the aeroplane to see what was wrong, and if anything was wrong, then it was always wonderful to hear the continuous beat of both engines.

The sighting of the English coastline was also a great event, and usually this was fairly clear, even on a dark night, because of the waves and the white of the waves. And when you got back to base there was always a great welcome; and when you touched down - and there was some very funny landings at times - the relief was very great indeed because there was always the fear that there was something that you didn't know about that could go wrong.

What was the procedure? I mean, you landed the aircraft and taxied; what was the reception you had?

Well, the first thing was that there was usually a truck to escort you, or lead you, to the particular dispersal point they wanted you to go to. If you had advised in your approach that you had been damaged, well, they'd take you to a different part so that they could start working on the aeroplane right away.

It's important to remember that in those days there was an excess of aeroplanes to people, and so we were flying very, very constantly, perhaps six times a week sort of business, maybe more.

So you didn't necessarily have a favourite aeroplane?

No, in those days; later we did, but in those days, no, we didn't, you flew whichever aeroplane was ready.

But you'd then - there was always the CO nearly always was there, unless he was, of course, flying. And even if he was flying, if he got back early, he'd be there to welcome the others.

The intelligence officers would be waiting for you, there would be a meal - again, another egg if you wanted it; there were a lot of baked beans, of course, for their problems. We would go in and be debriefed by the intelligence officers who were dealing with people who were relieved,

tired, and all they wanted to do really was to get to bed. In the main they were master psychologists as well as intelligence officers because some people's responses were not the best, but they did a wonderful job, extracted all sorts of information from you. That is a job in itself.

You are very good at extracting information from me, and there is an art in this, and there had to be with intelligence officers. Some people wouldn't say what should be said because they were being modest, others weren't saying what they perhaps should say because they didn't know, but the intelligence officers had to put it all together and draw a picture which was usually a better picture than the fact. We were all optimists, I think, we'd all thought that we'd done well, we'd all tried to do our best, but the ultimate results were not always as good as we hoped they were.

And then, as soon as debriefing was finished, again, with much smoking of cigarettes, everybody would get to bed just as quickly as they could because in that time, as I said, there were more aircraft than there were people, and the drill had you getting to bed at perhaps three, four, o'clock in the morning, you'd been on a seven hour, eight hour, flight, and you'd be up again before lunch to do a flight test to fly the next night. It was very demanding. It was such a contrast with what happened to us later on when we were carrying torpedoes because there we were waiting, waiting, waiting, we were on alert, we were standing by; but we were waiting, waiting, waiting, too much rest, too much not doing anything for periods.

So after a sortie nobody sought the bar, even though it was very early in the morning?

No, I don't think the bar was open, although I think you could have got anything you wanted. No, very rarely did anybody go to the bar.

Was there any time, any reaction, against the intelligence officers? because, I mean, there they were, holding you up from going to sleep.

Well, there were niggles, but nothing more than that. In every case that I know of they earned our respect very early on by their care and consideration, and their determination to get to the real facts if they could.

But this continual procedure, as you mentioned, getting to bed very early in the morning, sleeping till probably just before lunch, test flying the aircraft; how long was it before it really started to wear the crews down?

Well, you take a week of that and - you know, I did mention before the bombing run-up, but that was very real, when you were perhaps at the end of five nights in a row, averaging about three or four hours sleep a night, and a considerable amount of tension. It was very difficult in the run-up. In fact - I think it was the seventh consecutive night - I was going out and the medical officer looked at me and he said, 'I don't think you should go tonight' and I said, 'I think you are right' because I'd started to have my head drop on the run-up to drop the bombs, and that's frightening.

How did you react to crews that were lost? I mean, you'd got to a stage where you really couldn't develop strong friendships with people because it would just get to you. How did you cope with that?

Well, it was a great difficulty and it became - I was going to say, became so common - that you kind of built a mechanism to cope with it, I guess. But it put a pall over the place consistently.

You had the opportunity of going to bed and coming back the next day and having to do things, and having to get involved again, and that was, I think, helped. No, it was a terrific strain.

I recall a funny little incident that occurred. England closed down with a very thick fog and we couldn't fly, the visibility was a matter of three or four yards. So we were having a day off so to do something we went down to the local pub. There was only one problem, that was to find it. We were riding along on our pushbikes and there was an old lady walking alongside the road, and we weren't sure we were on the right road, and we stopped and we said, 'Can you tell us the way to the local pub?' and she said, 'Ah, you boys are from the air force' - well, you know, security was a great thing, so we were very careful what we said; so we said, 'Yes'. She said, 'I always know you fly boys, you have a certain look, a sad look. I always say to me hubby, hear today, gone tomorrow.' - and that was our introduction to the way to the pub.

But you got to the pub?

We got to the pub, yes.

Did you really have these uproarious parties at pubs? You mentioned earlier that people didn't drink as much as has been reputed, but there must have been some fairly wild parties to offset the pressures.

Without a doubt, oh, yes, we had some very wild parties.

Can you recall any of the outrageous incidents that happen, that were quite funny in retrospect?

Well, I can recall where at one station we had battled very hard to get a piano, and one had been donated to us by somebody. Obviously nobody else was prepared to have it - it was a terrible piano - and the station commander decided that he would get a piano from group funds or bust. So he took - fairly late in the evening, I must admit - an axe and he charged across the room and threw the axe into the top of the piano, and it kept going ping! ping! ping-ping-ping! for quite some time. He then complained to Group that the piano was out of order and we needed a replacement; we'd provided the previous one, Group had to provide the next one. And we got a new piano - and that was fairly late in the evening.

We had a couple of local draught horses and one place there was a draught horse and a cow. We were riding these around the mess - it had a linoleum floor - and we were having a race on these animals. Somebody got a bucket of water and threw it over the floor, and of course, it then became extraordinarily slippery (laughs). It was rather an exciting race.

This was round the mess?

In the mess, yes.

You had two draught horses in the mess?

No, one draught horse and a cow.

One draught horse and a cow?

Yes. The chap on the cow won (laughs).

So what about the president of the mess committee, how did he react to these activities?

He was on the horse (laughs) - he was defeated - he lost the money.

So there was considerable leniency towards these high jinks.

Yes, well, particularly in this instance as the station commander in this particular station was a very liberal-minded individual who'd seen a lot of operations himself.

So really these activities were essential to maintain a degree of sanity?

That's right; you needed to let your hair down. Some of the people got in to trouble, but very rarely, very rarely.

What about relationships with women? I should imagine that would be the one source where you could let your hair down emotionally and talk to these women, and they would have a sympathy and understanding.

Well, of course, most of the women were involved in the war effort in some way or another - they were either in the WRAAF, or the Wrens, or the navy, or they were working in munitions factories, or farm girls, and so on. You met the most extraordinary people in the most extraordinary occupations. The war brought everybody much closer together, there was a camaraderie. Now one is reluctant, in parts of the world, to walk around the place unescorted as a man, let alone unescorted as a woman, whereas in those days nobody was afraid of anybody else. It was a nice atmosphere in that context, and the English girls were very kind to us.

The relationships were obviously very sharp and intense at times, I should imagine, because really the aircrew didn't know whether they would be there tomorrow.

That's right, and I think this imposed all sort of constraints and all sorts of [liberalisations].

Were the women inclined to lend their favour to men that they recognised may not live very long?

I don't think I can answer that. I guess that had an effect, very rarely. No, I'm not sure I can answer that. Some of the blokes got in to trouble, that's for sure, yes.

Jack Davenport, did you ever get to the stage where you really felt as though you couldn't get back in an aeroplane again?

No, no, I enjoyed flying very much, I flew on every possible opportunity and a lot of the aircrew were of that frame of mind. I only ever had one individual, when I was commanding officer, I only ever had one individual who I recognised was more terrified at the thought of getting in to an aeroplane than getting in to an aeroplane.

How did you react to aircrew members that suffered from what's called LMF, low moral fibre?

Well, again, I only know one, and I quietly eased him out, and he went on his way and he returned to Australia.

Did you feel some sort of disgust at the inability to cope, or did you just recognise that he was just incapable?

Well, I think, in general terms, you certainly would not feel disgust in such a case, but this bloke didn't endear himself to me. It was a rare and isolated case. There was an eagerness - you know, when you are allocating crews to go out on operations, there was always an eagerness to go, there was no instances of holding back that I know of.

So there was a very strong sense of loyalty to people in Australia recognising that you are performing an extremely valuable job?

I think that one of the big factors was that there was a great recognition that there was a Hun over there. Everybody in Britain was in the war, everybody was subject to the problems of the war, everybody was in danger.

I can recall when a long Ju88 pulled up over the cliffs in Moray Firth in the north of Scotland, and blew a building to smithereens and dashed away again. That sort of thing was happening at odd times everywhere, even on the west coast. There was an apprehension within everybody.

What were your feelings against the Germans and also against the Luftwaffe?

Yes, that's not an easy question to answer. I guess that when I was on an operation my objective was to do exactly what I'd been asked to do and, if possible, a little bit more. The Germans did horrific things to many parts of England - London, Coventry - and those places were decimated. One had seen a lot of it. I guess that revenge was something that we felt was - or I felt - was very important, we had to stop it.

There was an activity which plotted our courses to the target in a way that would spread the most alarm and despondency - was the term - and raise air alarms all over as much of the countryside as possible. Of course, that interfered with what the people on the ground were doing. We had a very strong feeling that we had to get rid of the Germans.

What about the Luftwaffe though? They appeared to be very skilled and brave aircrew. Did you treat them, feel differently about the Luftwaffe as opposed to the German people?

I didn't - a lot of people did - I didn't. Subsequently, yes, one feels a real association, an affinity almost, with them, but at the time, no, they were the enemy.

Jack Davenport, in May 1943 you were awarded your first Distinguished Flying Cross for displaying exceptional leadership and courage while attacking heavily defended targets, including Hamburg, Essen and Dortmund. The award was also for your actions while flying a Hampden bomber in north Russia; those patrols over the Barents Sea must have carried considerable risk.

Yes, that was a most extraordinary operation. If I could just mention a little bit about it.

We flew from Sumburgh in the Shetland Islands to [Vianga], which is the airport alongside Murmansk - well, we called it an airport, it was a mud patch with excavated holes all around it, or trenches all around it, in which aeroplanes were kept. And there were tees, and boughs, and camouflage put over the aeroplanes because it was quite close to the front line. The Russian-German, or Finn, front line was not many miles away, in fact, we could hear the guns. We were attacked ever day while we were there, we were bombed ever day; the aerodrome was bombed ever day.

We were to fly carrying a torpedo - we'd converted to Coastal Command at this stage - and in the briefing it was advised to us that it was estimated we would lose twenty-five per cent of the aircraft on the way; we lost eight out of thirty-two.

How did you lose those aircraft?

Well, a number were shot down crossing the Norway-German border - or Swedish border I guess it was. The Swedes shot down, I think, two - they were neutral, but we were flying over their territory; the Germans shot down several; the Russian fighters, who were our allies, shot down at least one and attacked a number of others; and I think the others crashed on the 11,000-foot mountains where there was extreme freezing and snow storms. It was a hazardous journey and it was beyond the normal maximum endurance of our aeroplane. These are some of the things that were told to us at briefing.

It is a desolate part of the world that. We flew up over Norway and then across Sweden and Finland, and then across that great expanse of part of northern Russia. It's just stunted trees and millions and myriads of little lakes, swamps, very highly composed of iron ore. It's a disconcerting thing to look at your compass and see it go round in a complete circle. There are no railway lines or roads, or anything to navigate by. We were obviously south of track and were attacked by two Russian Hurricanes. They obviously didn't know we were coming.

I recall very well the rear gunner saying, 'Let me have a go at them; let me have a go at them' and I said, 'Don't shoot anything, just keep ... we are flying off the colours of the day' - didn't mean a thing to the Russians, they kept barging in. They only fired at us once, but they flew up alongside - we put our wheels down, our flaps down, and they pointed to the ground. We couldn't see anywhere where anybody could land, but there, (fair) enough, was a patch of mud. It was a place called [Monchegausk] - it's not on anybody's map, it was fifteen miles from the front line, it was overrun by the Germans about once every six weeks. We were forced to land by these two Hurricanes there - we were getting very low on fuel as well - and when we landed I can remember I was busting.

The facilities in the Hampden are nil, you've got a very narrow cockpit, and there are no facilities for relieving yourself. And I was absolutely busting and I got out of the aeroplane - and these Russians weren't very friendly; in fact, one stuck a bayonet in to my side here.

You were a squadron leader then, weren't you?

I was a squadron leader - no, I became a squadron leader while I was there.

And I'll never forget Smithy, the rear gunner, standing up on the top there and I'm saying to the Russians, 'English - English - English - Churchill - Stalin - English - English' - nobody had any English at all, and I'm saying this 'English' business, and 'RAF' and 'Churchill'. And Smithy said,

'Ah, you are a liar, tell them you are a bloody Australian.'

But anyway, I managed to ... Oh, what I discovered was that the person with the bayonet sticking in me was a woman, great big ... It wasn't a pleasant experience for quite a while and then finally, about an hour later - and we were very tired and very hungry, and we hadn't had anything to eat for a long time - they took us through swamps to a little old hut and sat down there. They poured us a mug, which we thought was water, but turned out to be vodka, and vodka on an empty stomach, and a pannikin full, is an overrated pastime, and we were drinking 'to victory - to victory'.

They then escorted us - subsequently, some hours later - to Murmansk where we were supposed to be going - Vianga. They kept saying they wanted to fill up our aeroplane with 'kerosena, kerosena, kerosena' and it was only when we looked up in our book we found that kerosena was the fuel they used in their aeroplanes, but it was, in fact, petrol.

So it wasn't a very good introduction to Russia.

They sent for a pilot to escort us who had to be a hero of the Russian Republic, so that was a nice gesture, and they escorted us from there up to Vianga where we landed, having been reported lost.

Why the importance of carrying out these patrols though?

The largest convoy that ever went to Russia was, I think, 179 ships carrying goods which were being demanded by Stalin of Churchill, and they were escorted up a certain distance, and in Altafjord at the north of Norway, was the [Terpitz], the [Lutsau], the [Shear], the [Sharnhorst] and eleven destroyers. And had they attacked that convoy there would not have been a ship left afloat.

We had finally twenty-four Hampdens with torpedoes, a Mk-XVIII torpedo, World War I, and we were going to attack this armada if it went to sea to stop them attacking this convoy. There wouldn't have been one of us survive, but it worked. Twice they took off - or once they got up steam and we took off, and they returned to base, or they didn't go from Altafjord. Next time they were sailing out of the fjord and we took off, and they obviously picked us up, some way or other, and they returned to harbour and so the convoy came through unscathed by that massive armada. They had lost quite a few ships by submarines.

So it was actually effective?

It was a hundred per cent effective and we got a wonderful signal from Churchill. We were disgusted, Churchill wasn't. Then we mucked about for months while somebody made up their mind as to how we were to get back to Britain because we couldn't fly our aeroplanes back, prevailing winds were against us and we couldn't reach. So we gave our Hampdens to the Russians.

How did you get on with the Russians during that period? because you were there for quite a long time.

They were very kind and generous to us, very thoughtful. They moved out of their barracks, or they gave us their barracks to live in - and the reason, we discovered later, was that they'd all

moved out and were living in caves up in the hills because it was being bombed every day. But they were very generous about it.

There was one tap in this great area, out in the open, where you could get water; the water was brown. The food was reasonably good because we'd taken most of it, had gone by sea, the British Navy had taken it up there. It wasn't the most pleasant of activities.

You were the senior officer there, were you?

No, I wasn't. The Squadron was commanded by Grant Linderman, and the English squadron - there were two squadrons - the English squadron was commanded by - was it [Dynsdale]? a New Zealander - no, that's not right - [McLauchlan], an Irishman - that's right, McLauchlan, he commanded the 144 Squadron. We came back.

Linderman and I were interviewed by the BBC in London, and it was a direct broadcast, which was unusual in those days - everything was very carefully censored. In the course of the interview the interviewer suggested that 'would you like to go back and have another crack at them?' and old Linderman in his dour way said, 'If the opportunity arises, we will happily stand aside for somebody else'.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

This is interview with Wing Commander Jack Davenport by Ken Llewellyn, Tape 3.

Jack, you had one very entertaining party which was reciprocated by you in Russia, and I would like you to put that down on the record.

Yes, well, the Russians were trying very hard indeed to be hospitable and kind to us, and in the main they succeeded, even though we were only allowed to bath once a week. We had a party, they plied us with their vodka, we thought it was made of wood pulp and we thought it was pretty crook wood they were using. But some of our people got carried away a bit. In fact, one or two of them were literally carried away, and we were very upset that they'd made such an impact.

Just who was at the party? Can you describe the Russians? Were there women there? Were there Russians in uniform?

No, there were no women at all, except the women that were serving and doing the cooking, and so on, in the [soloviet]. The local commissar, four big stripes up his arm - a big tall fellow - the local general, who was in charge, who was then, I think, seventy years of age and still flying a Spitfire that had been given to him.

He was seventy years of age and still flying a Spitfire?

That's right. All of the local people, the local pilots, who flew their aeroplanes from these circular pits all around the airport; they'd fire a gun and everybody would take off at once, and lord help the middle bloke. They had biplanes, they'd operate up to about four or five thousand feet; then they had a superior one to the biplane above that; then they had their top aeroplanes up

high. But they were attacked every day virtually.

Were they very successful in defending the airfields against the Germans?

Yes, they were, they were amazingly successful. The aerodrome was bombed quite a lot, but they - vapour trails formed very readily and you could see the whole sky with all this activity going down, you would see the puffs of the smoke when they fired their guns, and every now and again you would see a parachute open and somebody wafting down.

Of course, at one stage one of the Russian fighters was shot down and went straight through the middle of our barrack block, and about twenty feet, or thirty feet, deep in to the ground underneath the two-storey building.

So the Germans actually had a reasonable amount of respect for these Russian fighter pilots?

Oh, yes; oh, yes. They were a very determined group of people.

Anyway, back to the party.

I'll just ask one question: could any of them speak English?

Oh, yes. Well, there was a Russian interpreter - in fact there were two Russian interpreters - and we had an interpreter which we'd taken over with us. But it's amazing how people can get on with understanding one another when they have common interests and they have nothing else to fall back on. Some of the descriptions were amazing.

The party ended up very late in the evening. One of our people was lying in a trench, in snow, and couldn't move. He seemed to have all his faculties except the faculty to move physically. He'd have frozen had he been left there. One of the other people was blind, couldn't see and couldn't see for several days, all as a result of this magnificent vodka.

So we planned our attack and we had a party too, and we allocated people to different people and they had to look after them and made sure they fixed them as they'd fixed us.

And we had a little fellow - he shall remain nameless - but he was about five-foot-one, and the commissar was about six-foot-three or four, and we allocated him to Spud, to this fellow. I called in in the room he was in to see how he was going, and the commissar hadn't turned a hair, but Spud had been pouring the vodka into him as though it was water. And I called back a second time and Spud said, 'Look, no effect, look at him! No effect, the great big so-and-so' - of course, the man didn't understand a word of English and Spud said all these nasty things about him with a smile on his face. And I was just going out of the door when there was a great thump, and I looked around and here was the commissar horizontal on the floor. All had been redeemed.

How many of your crew actually went temporarily blind from drinking this vodka?

There were two.

And it took some days before they recovered?

It was several days before they recovered their sight, they were very worried people.

Well you, as one of the senior officers, must have been extremely concerned.

Yes, yes. But I wasn't the senior officer by any means. We had two wing commanders there, one on the other squadron, one on our squadron, and they were concerned.

But also that the Russians made an award to the senior officer in the area, was an air commodore.

Yes, he was an RAF air commodore, and after we got back to Britain we learned that he had been awarded the Order of the Virgin, Second Class, which was one of the Russian awards. We were intrigued.

Was he allowed to wear this by the British Government?

Well, he did and it looked just like our Polo Medal, it was just a white decoration, a white ribbon.

So he wasn't quite sure whether to wear it with pride or not.

Well, I think he wore it with a lot of pride hoping nobody would ask him what it was, and perhaps he left the 'Second Class' out.

How long did you spend in Russia?

Well, I think it was nearly four months, and we came out on the Argonaut, a Royal Navy light cruiser on its maiden voyage. We averaged, I think, over thirty knots between Murmansk and Scapa Flow. Of course, it had to go back to - it had to get back, under sealed orders, to participate in the North African landings.

So it wasn't anticipated being attacked then?

It was, yes.

It was attacked?

No, it was anticipated it would be attacked and that was the whole point. At thirty knots it's a very difficult target for anybody once we were out of range of Ju88s operating from northern Norway.

So what happened when you got back to UK after?

Well, shortly after that we converted the Squadron to Beaufighters carrying rockets - we were in [Luckars] in Scotland - and the Squadron welcomed these with open arms. We found the rocket to be a remarkable weapon; it would go in to the side of a ship, through the cargo, and out the other side. It was just a solid twenty-five-pound head. We did a lot of the experimental flying with the twenty-five-pound head and the sixty-pound head, which was an explosive head, but we found that the solid head was very much more effective.

It was about this time you were made commanding officer of 455 Squadron at the relatively tender age of twenty-three.

Mm.

You were also awarded a DSO not long afterwards. How did you feel as such a young man with these very heavy responsibilities and the accolades from the British Government for the job that you had done?

I don't know how I felt, I was delighted I think. At the time all of my friends seemed pleased about it. I felt that it was a reward for the Squadron as much as for me. I'm not sure quite how I felt - I felt pleased.

You are being rather modest about it. I mean, you'd carried out an outstanding job up to that stage and you are still a very young man.

Yes, well, I didn't think about being a young man, and I didn't think about any of the Squadron which I commanded thinking about me as a young man. They were all extremely cooperative - of course, they were a remarkably fine bunch of people.

You must have got great respect from your Squadron, you always are known as a strong disciplinarian and a very meticulous planner.

Well, I was about to digress and say that I think one of the things we've suffered from, more than anything else during the wars, both here and in Britain, is the need, or the greater need, for real leadership, and, more than anything, from proper planning. And I always felt that to go on an operation without every detail being carefully worked out was inviting trouble, and it was only when discipline broke down that one got really serious trouble. And there are a couple of incidents of that, not in my Squadron, but in people that were working with us - that I don't want to talk about, but which proved the point that discipline is absolutely fundamental to fighting a war, carrying out an operation.

Probably more than half the Squadron members were older than you. How did these members feel about your promotion?

Well, I don't know; I must admit, it's never crossed my mind. One of my squadron, of course, was called 'Gramps' and that was my navigator. He became my navigator on Beaufighters because they were allowed to select who they wanted to fly with and nobody wanted to fly with me; and so he got me.

Why didn't they want to fly with you?

Well, I gather that afterwards he'd rigged the draw because he'd decided he was going to fly with me. That was one of the best things that happened to me. He was a remarkable - he was called 'Gramps' because he, at that stage, was nearly thirty and he was the old man on the Squadron among the aircrew. He was a meticulous navigator, extremely skilled, cool as a cucumber, the rougher things got, the better his log turned out to be. I'm very fond of him. He's now eighty-odd and he's still going very well.

You still correspond with him?

Oh, yes, and I see him every time I go to London - he's an Englishman.

That must have been a great thrill when you do catch up with him again.

Yes, it is; yes, it is indeed; yes, we have many happy times.

How did the Squadron find converting from the Hampdens to the Beaufighters? What were the great differences in the aeroplanes?

Well, you had these two great engines in a Beaufighter, and you went from a normal cruising speed of about 115-120 knots to about 200, and that's a big jump. But you had an aeroplane that had four cannons out the front and eight rockets; it had a firepower equivalent to a six-inch cruiser; you had a weapon which could cause terrific damage. Previously, carrying bombs was one thing, but you didn't get to seeing what you were doing, your damage with that. Then, carrying a torpedo, you did, but most times it was a very difficult task to succeed in dropping torpedoes.

So there was very much a shift in tasks for the Squadron once they converted to the Beaufighter?

Well, we were attacking shipping, we were supposed to deal with shipping down the Norwegian coast right down to the French coast - and a lot of ships were moving up and down, and we made a terrific impact on them. Initially there was an odd escort vessel, eventually you'd get one merchant ship with seven, nine, ten, eleven escorts with one vessel, and the impact on the war effort of the Germans by that was considerable.

What skills did you have to develop from flying sort of high-level, relatively high-level bombing, in the Hampden to obviously extremely low-level work in the Beaufighter?

Well, low flying is a definite skill, to do it properly. We were able to fly at very low levels indeed - and you have a great incentive, as you would know in this context, because the higher you are the earlier you got picked up on radar. Since, in operating, say, against Norway, the shipping would come out in the southern tip of Norway for a couple of hundred miles, and there were three aerodromes on the top of the cliffs, just where the ships were below, and the more warning they had, the more trouble we'd get when we got there. There was rarely an operation that we carried out in that part of Norway that we weren't attacked by enemy fighters.

What was your home base when you converted to Beaufighters?

Leuchars initially, then we moved down to Norfolk where we were operating more on the Dutch and French coasts, but also still from there up to Norway.

Can you describe the operation for which you were primarily awarded the DSO when you severely damaged two merchant ships and an escort?

Well, in general terms I'll try. I was leading a force of - I've forgotten how many, but it would have been thirty, may have been more - Beaufighters, combination of the two squadrons, we joined together as a wing, a New Zealand squadron 489, and 455 the Australian squadron,

obviously called the Anzac Wing.

Did you lead the Wing?

Yes - on this occasion I did, yes.

This convoy, which was heavily defended, I think consisted of five merchant vessels - there might be a painting of it in the War Memorial, in fact; there's a magnificent painting of a Beaufighter attack, which is my aeroplane in the centre of it, and it's taken from one of the photographs that was taken on this operation.

So you probably had more than twenty aircraft in that particular wing.

Yes, oh, yes. Well, we sometimes had as many as a hundred, joining two wings together - we had two squadrons, the other wing had three squadrons.

And we went out, sighted this convoy.

Where was the convoy located?

Off the Dutch coast, off the Friesian Islands.

The problems were many. To fire the rockets one had to be within between eleven and six hundred yards from the target, and in a dive, and you had to be flying at a speed which I've forgotten, but was about 200-220 knots; and you fired eight rockets, and they went in pairs, one after the other when you fired them.

You had to be in a dive, and the technique we used was to fire the cannons and they'd hit the water short of the target, and you'd keep flying on your target until the cannons started to hit the ship on the water line, then you'd press the rocket button. And that meant that two had hit the water line and the other six would hit underneath the water, go through and out the other side. They were an amazing weapon.

So it was the early Exocet really.

That's right. But the thing about them was that they were so accurate, they went absolutely - they travelled at 1,100-odd miles an hour from the time they left your aeroplane to there. The trouble was that the escort vessels were out to just beyond where you'd have to fire your cannons, all around the thing. And the other trouble was that the ships and the escort vessels carried rockets, and they'd fire a rocket up in to the air which would have a wire attached to it, and an explosive head on a little parachute. So it was disconcerting to come in and see some of these rockets going up.

And you'd attack, and then you'd have to pull out really fast in case you hit the mast or something like that, which happened on several occasions. And then one circled back and came in the other way, and at the same time, the torpedo aircraft, which were the other section of the Wing, would come in behind, and low down, and drop their torpedoes. But we made a horrible mess of that convoy. I've forgotten what we lost - I've forgotten how many aircraft we lost - I think we lost one there and one ditched on the way back.

You must have had an amazing amount of fire though, from the escort vessels you had to fly through.

Yes. They were terrible vessels, always underestimated. They'd have a gun platform right on the bow, they'd have a gun platform right on the stern.

Were these modified trawlers?

Modified trawlers in the main, yes.

And then they'd have a gun platform either side of the bridge. And they mainly carried 20-millimetre stuff, but some of them carried 40 millimetres and they could put up a hell of a fire screen.

But again, the thing that scared us most was those rockets, but I don't think they did as much damage. The theory was that they would hit your wing, drag on the wing, and then the explosion would go off when it hit the wing and blow the wing off. Now, we didn't know how much damage they did because unless you happened to be taking a photograph at that time and had that in the photograph, you wouldn't know, when someone pranged, whether it had been hit. And, of course, all the time you are firing you are taking photographs automatically.

So your wing must have taken literally hundreds of hits, although you only lost one aircraft, you mentioned.

I would think so; I would think so.

A very dangerous operation.

Well, yes it was, but it was more enjoyable than most inasmuch as you could see exactly what you were doing. As I think I said before, when you can out of the operation you'd swallow for the first time and find your throat was very dry, very dry indeed.

You were recognised in reports as being totally fearless in your attacks and pressing home.

That's absolute balderdash (laughs). One was frequently very scared, but you had a job to do and that's what you concentrated on.

So one you concentrated on the target, you just got locked in and you just carried out the job, regardless?

And that was virtually the attitude of virtually everybody.

How did you feel when you got back from that raid? it was extremely successful.

Well, I was always concerned that everybody got back, and I'd always go back a bit faster than everybody else to try and get there first so that I could be there when the others got in.

Yes, you feel a bit wrung out, without a doubt, but you felt a bit exhilarated because of the success of the operation.

The exhilaration in some ways must have carried you through.

Without a doubt.

That you did get that buzz after a success.

Yes, yes. I think the adrenalin was still flowing at that stage.

Now, about that stage you met your future wife in England, didn't you?

In Scotland - be careful!

In Scotland. Did you find, when you met your future wife, that it reacted on your job? As commanding officer you may have become a bit more cautious, a bit more reflective, about what you did.

I don't think so; I don't think so; I didn't think anything about it. My wife was very supportive, and she'd say, casually, 'Take care' or something like that, but there was no great emotional upheavals.

She didn't impinge any pressure on you?

None at all - she was quite remarkable. These Scots are a remarkable race.

But it must have required considerable courage on her part ...

Yes.

... because she must have told you after the war that she was terrified.

Yes, yes, exactly; yes, exactly. And, of course, the Squadron were extremely good. If I was out operating there'd always be somebody to go home and talk to Sheila. We kind of kept open house for all the Squadron and they'd all go home and there'd be two or three of them frequently there when I was operating.

Can you describe your wedding? I don't know whether it was in Scotland or the UK.

Yes, well, it was in Scotland. My wife got a degree - a masters degree - at St Andrews University about three weeks before we were married. She was very young, she'd just turned twenty-one a week before we married - I was then twenty-three. We had a wonderful wedding in Scotland - we've got it on film, carried out by the RAAF - they sent an official photographer up.

The Squadron had planned, I subsequently learned, a major blitz of the church during the wedding. Fortunately for everybody concerned the cloud was about 300 feet, it was snowing and very bleak - it was the beginning of January - and so they were unable to carry out their intended raid.

It was a Service wedding?

No, it was a very civilian wedding. My two brothers were there.

They were both service pilots?

Both were service pilots. One was pilot officer, the other was a flight lieutenant at that stage. They'd come up - one had come up from Sydney, the other had come down from the north of Scotland where they were operating - had come up from London, I meant to say. It was a very good, happy day.

What about the celebrations afterwards? There was obviously limited access to suitable spirits and beer.

You underestimate Sheila's father. We had copious quantities of champagne - I don't know where he got them - he was a meticulous person and he could have only done it in a proper fashion, but he did it. Whether he had been saving it up for ever, I don't know.

What made you have a civilian wedding as opposed to a Service wedding? you were commanding officer of a squadron.

It was the right of the bride's parents to have the wedding, and I wouldn't dare interfere with that.

It was really a bit of a shame though that the Squadron couldn't actually beat up the church.

Well, perhaps it was, I felt a little disappointed, I must admit, even though I'd been kept completely in the dark because had I not I'd have put my foot down. It would be a terrible thing if something went wrong.

It probably attracted a lot of attention locally, I should imagine; the media would have been most interested.

Yes, well, her father was a very distinguished Scotsman and there was a lot of local comment, and, of course, there was a great number of people there.

Where did you move? Did you move in to service accommodation?

Yes, I moved in to married quarters with Sheila and about 120 mice. There was a mice plague on at the time in that part of the world.

That was your first task, to get rid of the mice?

That's right, yes, it wasn't easy (laughs). They move - they provided a much more difficult target than a ship.

You've had quite a remarkable marriage, haven't you?

Yes, indeed; yes indeed. In fact, next January is our fiftieth anniversary.

When you met did you feel as though there was some instant rapport between you?

Rapport. Yes, without a doubt. I guess I was concerned that - I was president of the mess, and it was a dance that we'd organised. We'd sent to Aberdeen and to Edinburgh, all over the place, to all the hospitals, with busses to collect girls. Sheila was at university at that stage, and she eventually came, and I met her then, but I was with another lass on that occasion. One of my blokes unfortunately spilt a pint of beer down the front of Sheila's frock, so I had to subsequently apologise and make amends. That's how it all started.

So you made amends in the most proper fashion?

Ultimately, yes.

So I guess that was one advantage of being the PMC, you could meet the ladies you wanted to.

Yes; and I was able to forestall the further operation that developed in the Squadron to take this young girl out by increasing the incidence of night flying.

How long did you spend in England together before you returned to Australia from there?

Well, I stayed there till I finished my tour - I was weened from the Squadron rather forcibly by the C&C Coastal Command, Lord Douglas, and sent to 18 Group in charge of operational planning. I then controlled, or was responsible, for the planning of fourteen squadrons, including 455 Squadron. I waged the war against the coasts of Norway and Denmark and Holland.

How did you feel about being forced in to a staff job?

I resented it, I refused to accept it, and I was told by the C&C that he wasn't asking me would I do this, he was telling me that this was what I was going to do. And I said, 'Well, Sir, I refuse' and he said, 'Don't be bloody silly'. But I tried very hard to stay with the Squadron because we had a wonderful outfit, doing a remarkable job, I thought. In fact, the Squadron sank more ships than any other squadron in Britain.

In fact, you carried out about three tours by that stage, hadn't you?

Virtually, yes.

And you were really being told to have a rest?

No, I was being told that there was a problem in Scotland and this is where I had to go, but that was another story which I really can't repeat.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

Interview with Wing Commander Jack Davenport by Ken Llewellyn, Tape 4.

Jack Davenport, you rescued a fellow pilot in 1944 at considerable personal risk ...

Don't worry.

(Break in interview)

Jack Davenport, could you tell us the circumstances surrounding a rescue of a fellow Beaufighter pilot in 1944?

I haven't spoken about this since 1944. But yes, I will.

Bill Stanley was coming back from a reconnaissance operation. He'd been attacked and severely damaged - his aeroplane was severely damaged - and he came in to land and had problems with his undercart, did a belly landing, and unfortunately the aeroplane caught fire.

I was standing in the tower - control tower - at the time because I knew of his return and the fact that he'd been damaged, and when I saw the plane catch fire I jumped down from the tower and quickly drove out to the site, hopped out of my car, and dashed around to try and get him out of the aeroplane.

The rear gunner had managed to get out straight away, but Bill Stanley's flying boots were trapped under the rudder pedals and he couldn't seem to get them out. I leaned over the back of the plane - or the cockpit - and grabbed hold of him and pulled, and he wouldn't come. With a great heave, with strength that I probably didn't have, I pulled him out of his boots, which was fortunate, and dragged him away. Unfortunately, Bill had been fairly severely burnt.

He eventually recovered, had a number of operations, and eventually came back to Australia.

In fact, there was a number of firemen around at that time better equipped to take up that situation, wasn't there?

Well, there was one, and he was contemplating approaching the aeroplane from the front where there was exploding ammunition. But it wasn't a time to be waiting.

Jack, you were awarded the George Medal for that particular action. In retrospect, do you think it was rather foolish, as a commanding officer of a squadron, a very valuable pilot, to take that particular action?

I think you are overrating the pilot, but I must admit that the thought didn't cross my mind.

Now, you were awarded two medals by the King, weren't you, at Buckingham Palace? That was your DSO and the George Medal, is that correct?

Yes.

Could you describe the presentation at Buckingham Palace?

It was quite an event. The Palace, of course, is absolutely grand, the decorations and the curtains, and the curtaining and the carpeting, everything is absolutely grand, including the artwork.

The King stood on a small podium, and one by one the recipients moved forward, presented to the King, and he then took your medal from a cushion placed in front of him, and pinned it on, and said some nice things.

Do you remember what he said to you?

He said, in relation to the George Medal, he said, 'I am particularly pleased to be awarding my medal' and I'm sure he was. He was very friendly and very friendly to everybody.

Was your wife present at the Palace?

Yes, she was. My wife was there, together with another friend.

Can you remember what your wife recalled of the event? I suppose she was also very proud.

Well, yes, she was, she was very proud, and, of course, she bought a new hat and that was important.

Did you go immediately back to flying after that presentation at the Palace?

Yes, I did in fact, back to the Squadron.

Now, at that stage you'd nearly completed your three tours, hadn't you?

It was getting on that way.

What were your feelings at that time? I mean, you must have been feeling mentally and physically rather tired.

No, I don't think I was. You know, we were young then and nothing seemed to be a trouble. We'd sometimes come back from an operation and then play rugby in the afternoon. We were very fit, we kept very fit, and it paid to keep fit. No, life was enjoyable in the main, interrupted by some incidents, of course, but life was enjoyable.

You were rather annoyed though when you got posted to a ground job at 18 Group, weren't you?

Yes, I was. The Squadron was doing famously, we were a very tight-knit group, we all respected and had confidence in one another and that is so very important; I felt that my place was there. To have to go off on what was a planning and administrative job was something that I found very hard to take and resisted as much as I possibly could.

What were your particular tasks on that ground job?

I was sent to 18 Group in Scotland in charge of the planning for fourteen squadrons. They were involved in carrying the war to the Germans in Norway and Denmark, Holland and the north part of the French coast, as far as shipping was concerned. It involved planning operations, particularly as we frequently knew just what the Germans were doing, and had to plan in such a

way that the Germans didn't know that we knew what they were doing.

Was this your job till the end of the war?

Nearly. For the last two months of the war I was posted to Kodak House in London where I was acting as senior air staff officer. The air officer commanding was in hospital at the time.

~~Was that Air Vice-Marshal Wiggly, was it?~~

That was Air Vice-Marshal Wiggly, yes. He was in hospital at the time, so I had a very pleasant time there.

Subsequent to that, at the end of the war in Europe, I was to be posted to Australia, but before I did so I was asked to go to Norway and other parts of Europe to examine the effects of aerial attack on German sea communications.

What did you find during those particular ...?

Well, Norway was very impressive and interesting to me for more reasons than one. My brother had been shot down in Norway on an operation which I had planned, and he'd been a prisoner on [Fornabew] aerodrome which is at Oslo, and I was very concerned to meet the people that had rescued him when he crashed on a frozen lake.

But the other impression I had - and I was responsible for liberating quite a portion of southern Norway, where nobody else had yet been - was to find confirmation of the extraordinary work that the Norwegian underground had carried out during the war; they did a wonderful job.

What were your feelings when war concluded?

Well, my war concluded, I guess, in Europe. I was coming back to operate in the northern parts from Australia, but war here concluded before I left the UK. And so I stayed at Kodak House until such time as I came back in the beginning of 1946.

In fact, the Royal Air Force offered you a substantive wing commander's commission, didn't they?

They did indeed.

What made you refuse that?

I wanted to come back to Australia first and foremost. Secondly, I didn't think that a career in the permanent air force in peacetime was for me.

Did you have any idea what you wanted to do when you left the service?

No, I didn't, except that I felt that it had to involve working with people.

On reflection, what's your views about man's inhumanity to man? We don't seem to have learnt anything by the Second World War, the First World War, or indeed any conflict.

No; in fact, if we look at the world today it seems to me that there are more conflicts going on, and developing, at the present time than there has ever been. I deplore the inadequacy of Australia's defences, the decimation to a substantial degree of our air force. I think that strength is a wonderful thing in defence, and a frightening thing in attack.

Man's inhumanity to man seems to me, in this day and age, to get worse and worse. There was an era, I suppose, long ago, when it was the norm, but we became, I thought, more civilised than that, but seem to be thrusting that aside more and more today.

So do you believe the people of Australia, and indeed, or leaders, are being slightly naive about the fact that we are not at risk?

Yes, particularly the young - and one can understand this - they will not understand, they cannot understand, why all major problems cannot be resolved by reasonable men sitting down together and a little bit of give and take. The trouble is that there are people who are unreasonable, people who are fanatical, people who are liars, who will achieve their power-hungry objectives no matter what is involved.

Why do you believe it takes war and conflict to bring this camaraderie of people together, to unify people, in fact? It just doesn't seem to happen in peacetime.

No. It's a common cause, that's the fundamental, I think. But in addition to that, leaders of today don't seem to deal much with the humanities of people, or the human implications of people. They provide services and take taxes, and so on; a country needs real leadership, leadership that will bring the people together, leadership which, I think, in Australia we've lacked for a long time.

It seems to take these situations that draw the best out of people, and I think you've admitted that yourself, that you were pushed in to that situation and it drew the best out of you.

Yes. So often it's the position makes the man. I think that's real, it was real then, I think it's real today, in business as well as in life in general.

You and your two brothers had really quite a remarkable career, didn't you? You all were in the European theatre as pilots, you all survived, your parents must have been exceptionally proud of you all.

Yes, I think they were. I was very proud of my brothers. My younger brother did an operation on - a tour - on Sunderlands in 461 Squadron; my elder brother did his first tour in 461 Squadron on anti-submarine work - in 461 - and his second tour on Mosquitos in 235 Squadron in Scotland from where he was shot down. They were two great blokes.

In fact, it's probably unique for three brothers in the RAAF served in the European theatre.

I don't know of any other - I know of numerous brothers, but I don't know of any other group of three. We had good and separate wars.

Jack Davenport, you had a very distinguished service career; would you have changed

anything?

Oh, I'd have liked to have known then what I think I know today. I think I'd have been able to do a lot of things better.

What would you have changed then?

I think I'd have devoted more time to the people around me. One was very busy and sometimes didn't spend enough time in that context. I think I could have planned better, I could have avoided some of the problems that, in fact, occurred, I'm sure I could. But that's hindsight.

Since the war you've had a very successful and rewarding business career. Do you believe your service life gave you the good substance and good platform to stand on for your future life?

Without a doubt. The responsibility that one had thrust upon one, the requirements and stresses of the time, the fact that you could work for many, many hours, covering several days, without sleep if necessary, it stretched one and made one appreciate the potentials that perhaps existed.

Jack Davenport, thank you.

Thank you.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW

09/00