

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER: S01657

TITLE: AIR MARSHAL SIR VALSTON
HANCOCK, RAAF CAREER

INTERVIEWEE: AIR MARSHAL SIR VALSTON HANCOCK

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SUMMARY:

DATE RECORDED: 30 JUNE 1993

RECORDING LOCATION: DALKEITH, VICTORIA

TRANSCRIBER: DIANNA NELSON

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: FOUR TAPES

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK
BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

1

This is an interview with Air Marshal Sir Valston Hancock at his home at Dalkeith, on 30 June 1993.

Air Marshal, when did you first become interested in flying?

It's rather a long story but when I started out on a career I had hoped to go on the land which my parents came but there was no future for a civil engineer in the west then, until my uncle mentioned that the RMC Duntroon offered opportunities for one person in each class to go to Sydney University, take a degree in civil engineering and then come back into the army and specialise in military engineering. I went to Duntroon with this purpose in mind, having no idea that it was an avenue into the air force, at all, or any interest in it at that stage, and found that on graduation no vacancy was available for anyone. There were two or three of us anxious to do it but there was no vacancy. So in a fit of pique I switched to the air force. Now you may wonder why I switched to the air force. I had no particular reason to except that I won an essay, the Oswald Watt[?] Prize, for a paper on the value of flying for military aviation. I knew so little about it, if I'd undertaken what I advocated in that essay of mine I would have crashed and wouldn't be alive today to tell the story. I switched then to the air force. There were three others in my class who wanted it and the air force then under the leadership of Air Commodore Williams[?] came to interview us and the others were very annoyed because they thought I may have jammed them out of a position. They were only taking one or two a year at the most but on this occasion there were four of us offering and I was seen, to a lot of them, they thought they were going to be 'tail end Charlie' but it just so happened that Dickie Williams accepted the lot of us even though I told him that I didn't really want to join the air force, it was a second choice, but nevertheless he took me in so I went in to the air force on secondment from the army on a three year basis, so at the end of that time, if the air force wanted me and I wanted to continue, I would be accepted, otherwise I would return to the army.

What was your opinion of Sir Richard Williams who eventually became the 'father' of the air force?

I had a very high opinion of him. No one knew the struggle that he had to maintain the independence of the air force, and he went through a hell of a lot of trauma because people couldn't understand why we were inadequate to meet the challenges at the time, but he was fighting tooth and nail to

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

2

maintain the independence of the air force. The other two services, of course, wanted to carve it up and have their own air arm as they had done in World War I.

What sort of reputation did the air force have amongst Duntroon cadets in those days?

I don't think anyone thought much about it. We certainly weren't taught much about application of air power at Duntroon at the time. It was quite a new phenomena. Quite a number of people were anxious to go into the air force. In fact we got two chiefs in the air force in the early days; one was McCauley[?] - two chiefs from Duntroon in the early days; one was McCauley; the other one was Scherger[?], and I don't know to this day why they are particularly keen about it. Certainly we had no great image of the air force at that time.

Judging by your record, you had a formidable reputation as a sportsman at Duntroon, didn't you?

I always liked sport very much and we were encouraged to do it there and I think I probably overdid it but I had no regrets about that because it opened a lot of doors for me and gave me a very satisfying life. I suppose I had some natural aptitude so it wasn't too hard to take it in my stride.

So once you started flying, did you have any pangs to go back to the army?

None whatever because failing my attempt at becoming a military engineer, I was offered specialisation in the artillery. Now, that was the lowest and the last choice I would have selected. I didn't want to go back to the artillery in the air force, indeed, any other specialisation except cavalry, perhaps, and that was closed off because vacancies were filled. And I enjoyed flying so very much, beyond my expectations - it had never occurred to me. In fact I hoped desperately that I would get a permanent commission in the air force.

So you took as a real natural towards flying.

Strangely enough, yes. I said I didn't know I had any aptitude and I didn't have any particular interest in it. My introduction to it at Duntroon was a bit harsh because Scherger was my pilot who gave us an introduction to the air there and he nearly turned me inside out and could have put me off for

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

3

life. Fortunately I had a strong constitution and survived that part and went from there on to enjoy it immensely.

You nearly didn't make it, because you mention in your book during your flight with Flying Officer Jerry Durand[?] in a Warrigal[?] you must have wondered whether you were going to remain in one piece.

That was an extraordinary situation. Got out onto the tarmac and here was a Warrigal there with the back seat empty and Jerry Durand in the front seat. Now, the two of us were at 1 Squadron at the time and if we saw a vacant seat anywhere we hopped into it as fast as we could, if the pilot would take us. And here was this seat going begging. So I asked Jerry could I get in the back and he said, 'Hop in'. He then had told, I understood later on, that he ensured people that he could get a Warrigal out of a spin although it was supposed to be impossible to do so. Do you want to hear the details? He first of all took off and went up to a height of about 3,000 feet and did a half a spin and came out of that and then went and climbed up to 6,000 feet and then he did one spin and a second spin and then I heard the engine come on and I thought this bloke is not getting enough buzz out of an ordinary spin, he wants to accelerate it. Anyhow, we came out with about 300 feet of the ground and we landed and immediately Jerry Durand got out of the seat and vanished in the direction of the officers' bar, I think. I climbed out of the aircraft grinning hugely because I enjoyed it immensely. I didn't find out till much later that he'd put on his engine to get more thrust over the tailplane and elevators to get out of a spin. If he hadn't have done that I wouldn't have been around today. I got a reputation for being very calm which was totally undeserved and Jerry Durand won his bet that he could get it out of spin just.

You must have developed a bit of a reputation amongst your fellow students then.

I disillusioned them very quickly. I didn't want to go under false colours. I'd have been scared to death if I'd known what was really happening. It was just as well I had a skilful pilot like Jerry Durand who kept his nerve.

It must have been a very proud moment though when you were awarded your wings.

It really was; that was a real high for me. First solo, of course, one looks upon with a certain amount of wonderment. I remember once I got airborne and I felt as though I had

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

4

unbounded power, I commanded everything I surveyed and that was a big buzz, that alone. And, of course, the wings following that up was a very proud moment for me.

Who presented you with your wings?

I think Dickie Williams but I can't remember now. I've got a blank there.

I guess your parents would have been there.

No, my parents were not at that particular stage. I don't think it had the same glamour it has today. The presentation of wings today, of course, is quite an event and, of course, no one less than the Chief of the Air Staff normally to do so. [Inaudible] but I was just glad to be there and hoped that my position in the air force would be confirmed after I'd got this great pleasure out of flying which I never to.

Did you have a particular path you wanted to follow, into transports or fighters?

No, I was very keen, though, to specialise in air photography. I felt this was really a constructive application of air power, and whilst I had no particular interest in ordinary photography, I became very deeply involved in our specialisation practice which was done under a chap who was really a genius, a Jerry Packer[?]. I remember listening to him talk about it and he really was right on top of the job and he used to ask us at the end of the thing, 'Any questions?', as much as to say, 'I can't really believe you're so stupid you haven't taken in all I've got.' but he was as good as that. Myself and Tony Carr[?] followed the specialisation route and we had quite a long career doing the work around Australia and that.

Air Marshal, you had a particularly interesting trip photoing Sydney Harbour Bridge, didn't you?

Yes, I don't know how naive a chap can be. Bertie Sims[?] was the Flight Commander and the senior officer in charge of photography. When I arrived there, of course, I was put through the various tests and as a grand finale to that I was told to take Sergeant Wilson[?] in a back of a Whoppitee[?] and fly through the two spans of the Sydney Harbour Bridge which hadn't joined at that stage but were approaching each other. I

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

5

was informed, in fact I was shown a photograph, of a successful flight and no one ever told me that the situation had changed. And so on the assumption that I could do it, as someone else had done it, I continued my approach and as I got closer and closer it seemed to be impossible to do. Anyhow, I chickened out at the last minute and pulled the stick back and went over the gap. Just as well I did because since the last photograph was taken and my attempt at it, the Sydney Harbour Bridge had closed considerably. I was damn glad to have chickened out at that stage.

Was there a complaint to the air force from that particular flight?

No, I can't remember. If there were, I didn't catch them. I was just glad to be home and out of it.

Did you manage to get a photograph, though?

No, I didn't because I had to go over the top. Wilson may have taken something but I think he was probably more relieved than I was because he must have been aware of what was happening.

You also became particularly adept at aerobatics and I know you mention in your book on one air show that you nearly came to your demise.

I'm not too sure about that. I'm not sure of the incident to which you refer. If you're referring to an air race When I first arrived at Richmond it was the policy of the Air Board to encourage the units at Richmond to attend the air shows which were rarely staged around the country. Air power was in its infancy in those days and the number of civil aircraft were very limited and it was the air force which provided the bulk of the activities. In order to bring the people to the air show we were allowed to go around and beat up the town, so to speak, to attract publicity, but we had to do so with a certain amount of discretion so we didn't spoil our image. To give the troops a bit of a thrill there, I decided to spin a Whoppitee. I got it up to a reasonable height, allowed it to go through a spin and I was damn lucky to get it out before it hit the ground. After that I decided to be a little more temperate in what I did, but it was good fun all the same but we were careful about what we did. If anyone was in peril it must have been ourselves rather than the people in the town.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

6

Air Marshal, can you describe the life of a young pilot in those days?

Yes, it is rather striking to think back about what really happened. I came out and went to Richmond which was Army Cooperation Squadron, the purpose of that, of course, was to practise cooperation with army and specialise in photography in support of the army and we did a good deal of that but generally I had a feeling that we were just a great big flying club. I looked upon it like that and I found a considerable enjoyment to it. We were at Richmond there at the time, very popular with town. We had a very good social life.

Can you describe your social life, Sir?

It consisted mainly of dances which continued on till well in the morning. When I say 'dances' they were really balls which continued on till well in the morning and we finished up at daybreak in the commanding officer's quarters having bacon and eggs. After that we went back and tried to do a day's work which was a little difficult under the circumstances. I well remember a treasure hunt, too, which was really exciting because the track was laid by Wally Walters[?] who was one of my closest friends and one year senior to me from Duntroon. He was at Richmond and he agreed to lay the clues for this and we all had our own female partners and we had our own cars and we roamed over the countryside from Richmond, Windsor and Blacktown. He laid the clues in such a way that they weren't too difficult to follow and we finished up with the treasure on the banks of the Hawkesbury River around about midnight with a midnight swim plus a feed of crayfish for good measure. If that's not high living, I don't know it. They were typical of the sort of things we did. Of course, during the weekends - every second weekend - we had the Citizen Air Force to train and so we compensated for that by having three days off every fortnight as a compensation for working through one weekend every fortnight and that gave us an opportunity to move around out from the station. I remember several trips I did up the Colo River which is a tributary of the Hawkesbury. I went up there with a chap called Parker who was one of the farmers around the area and we had tin canoes which we put on the back of one of his utilities and went out to the junction of the Colo River and Hawkesbury River. Thereafter with our fishing rods and rifle, we used to haul our canoes up the Colo River over the rapids and so on into the various long lagoons where we got into our canoes and paddled and let our rod and lures trail from the back of the canoe and there we had amazing catches of perch. Every now and again we'd shoot the odd duck, believe or not, with rifles and that takes some doing. After we left civilisation we went stark naked because no one could get down the banks of the Hawkesbury River because of the thick

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

7

undergrowth. After about four or five days like this, if we had as long as that to spend, back to civilisation again. Now, if that's not high living, I can't recognise it.

Were you considered by your girlfriends at that time rather wild young men?

I don't think so. We played the game pretty hard but the mores and morals of the country in those days were totally different from what they are now. I cannot believe we were as innocent as we were. We found, generally speaking, the company of girls excellent without going to bed. No doubt a certain amount of it did take place. I know one of my colleagues was a very good 'pants' man but I think we'll call it a day at that.

The effects of alcohol weren't fully realised in those days and it was rumoured that sometimes you used to fly probably a little under the weather.

You're quite right. As a matter of when we were doing our apprenticeship before we started our course at Point Cook I was with a Tony Carr out to 1 Squadron and two pilots there, Jerry Durand, who I spoke about previously, and Leo Ryan[?], also a Duntroon graduate, used to take a Moth out each morning - one each - with a vacancy there which we filled as a matter of right and took us hedge hopping over the countryside. It was a marvellous experience, as you might know, when you're close to the ground and on quite a number of occasions we'd pass through trees which you certainly couldn't go through in a level situation, had to go through on a steep turn, and we thought that great fun. Incidentally, we practically completed our flying course while we were there but that wasn't official. I've got to say though that if that had continued for much longer, one of us would have been killed because Leo Ryan on one of his morning exercises hit a haystack and that was the end of Leo, so there was a certain amount of risk in what we were doing but it wasn't really apparent to us.

What was the reaction to it when your friend was killed?

That happened after we'd left the place but we weren't very surprised because Leo was really asking for it. He used to drink pretty heavily on binges and sober of course and was a very good pilot for the rest of the time but he used to have, as I say, these binges and I think he was asking for trouble in the long run.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

8

So on that occasion he might have been slightly under the weather.

Oh, I don't doubt that for a minute. I remember I was virtually a teetotaler all my life and somehow or other I've been responsible partly for starting quite a number of parties in the mess which started off with lemonade and finished up with spirits. I remember one occasion when Leo Ryan took to a pea rifle, that's a .22, and started shooting at the shoes and boots which had been put outside our room for polishing by our batman and that's hardly the reaction of a sober gentleman. I remember starting that one one night on a glass of dry ginger. There were other episodes like that, too, which gave us the feeling that it was right and proper for young blokes to take to alcohol, and particularly we had an air marshal, I suppose Wing Commander in those days, Wing Commander Cahill[?], who encouraged chaps to go out on a spree like that. I've got to say that that was a very unhelpful attitude because he spoiled the careers, in my opinion, of two or three very fine young chaps who otherwise would have gone to the top or close to the top anyhow.

You also mention in your book, *Challenged*, about flying in aircraft with open cockpits which you longed for the days when they were going to have closed cockpits.

I did, yes. On the course with us was a chap called Alan Diprose[?]; he was a sergeant pilot. He had served his term after graduating and then had taken a job with Broken Hill Proprietary, I think - I'm not sure of that. We met Alan Diprose who was emerging from the cockpit of a Dragon Rapide[?]. Now, myself and Wing Commander Hepburn[?] whom I was taking over from as Director of Works and Buildings were on our way back in a Sirrus Moth[?] from Perth where we had been selecting what is now the Pierce[?] Airport or Pierce Base for the air force and we'd had a long flog across the desert. After landing at this aerodrome where Diprose I had succeeded in pulling the ripcord of my parachute and so I was enveloped in a cloud of silk and I had a terrible struggle getting my parachute back into its package after that. My embarrassment was made more acute by seeing Len Diprose emerge from this Dragon Rapide in civil clothes with this nice, smart crease in his pants and a part in his hair and I longed for the day when we would be able to do likewise. I've got to say that ever since we've never seemed to have improved on that because we get ourselves entangled in parachutes, escape [inaudible] and so on, and we're still being trussed up like a chicken. And so the only way out of it, of course, is to do what Diprose did and go civil. However, that's in passing to show that life in

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

9

the air force is not as comfortable as it is for people on the outside.

Sir, noxia[?] and hypoxia[?] were terms which were relatively unknown in those days. How did you get briefed about those particular symptoms?

Never even heard of them when we were on our course. In fact I'm not too sure that I may not have initiated a study of the act of hypoxia on pilots because, as I mentioned earlier, I was doing photographic work and after I'd come back from Brisbane I was doing photography in the Newnes area where the shoal deposits were; the State government wanted a mosaic of that area and I was given the job of doing it. They used to take a Whoppitee up to 18,000 feet without benefit of oxygen - took me a long time to climb up there - and after I'd completed my runs to carry out the overlaps for the mosaic, I used to come down to earth as quickly as possible.

What were the systems when you were at 18,000 feet?

I recollect nothing. I certainly was in no danger of losing my consciousness. I do remember though on one occasion dropping a pencil on the floor of the cockpit and bending down and picking it up and after that very simple exercise I was gasping for breath. Anyhow, we used to come down, as I said, after we'd finish our photographic runs. I went back into the my office where I was the adjutant of 3 Squadron, adjutant to Collie[?], and the CAS (Chief of Air Staff) was up there ...

That's Air Marshal Williams.

Williams, yes. And as I came in he said, 'Are you all right, Hancock?'. I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'What have you been doing?'. I said, 'I've been up at 18,000 feet carrying out a photographic run'. He said, 'You look pretty funny to me', and that was all he said then but that made me wonder whether that inspired him to start studies and research into hypoxia; only a suspicion on my part, I couldn't confirm it.

What did the air force do about that, eventually?

We established our own laboratory down at Point Cook and put people through the decompression chambers there. In fact, just around the corner from me now is a former Wing Commander Craig[?] who was a doctor - Flight Lieutenant Craig, a doctor

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

10

in the air force - and he was the chap in charge of that. Regularly we had to go through these practices in the decompression chamber which is very interesting because the technique was to put two people together or more for that matter, one on benches on each side, inside the decompression chamber and evacuate the air. People sitting on one bench would have masks on - oxygen masks - the other ones opposite would have a notebook and pencil and as the air was evacuated from the cylinder they would record their reactions and sensations. I can remember very vividly watching the people on the other side and listening to their comments and they were like a bunch of chaps who were on a 'grog fest' and as they got higher and higher, in other words as the oxygen was evacuated, they got sillier and sillier and their conversation may have been brilliant as they saw it but it was sheer rubbish as we watched them talking from where we sat on the other side without oxygen masks on. When that was over we had to take our oxygen masks off and they donned theirs and they'd watch us acting like cheap drunks. It was rather funny at the time but it served its purpose because it sorted out those who were capable of flying in high climbing aircraft and those who would have to really settle for reconnaissance type aircraft at around about sea level. It caused some people, of course, to lose ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Air Marshal, in your mid-twenties, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Commodore Williams, at that time offered you a job as his personal assistant and also Staff Officer Works in 1931. That was rather an odd appointment for a young pilot.

It was indeed. What led to that was a reduction in the funds available for the air force, and the other services for that matter. The Director of Works and Building was a Squadron Leader Hepburn[?] and he was going to be posted elsewhere and Dickie Williams wanted to make sure of a continuity of activity in the works side and I think he remember that I'd indicated my intention to qualify as a military engineer way back and this inspired him, I think, to offer me the job of being his Staff Officer Works and taking over from Hepburn, and also filling two other jobs. One was ADC, as I recall then, now Personal Assistant to him, and the third one was the Deputy Director of Operations and Intelligence. I pointed out to him that I wasn't a qualified engineer and I would like to go to the Melbourne University and get my degree there on part-time work. I made that approach; I was told that I would be accepted

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

11

subject to proof of graduating from Duntroon and I'd be allowed in another two years - three years it was - to complete the two years required to get a degree in civil engineering. But I thought that one over and I felt that even if I could get all that time away from work, I'd certainly never be able to continue my flying career and I decided not to go for that. Instead I made enquiries of the Working Man's College, I think it was, now called the ...

Melbourne Institute of Technology, is it?

That's right, the Institute of Technology. I had a discussion with them and they listened to what I had to say about my previous education and suggested that I could do an adequate course but wouldn't get a diploma by following selected specialties in the diploma course. So I discussed this with Chief of the Air Staff. He said he'd give me time off to do that and that's what I settled for. I worked part-time at the Working Man's College. The rest of the time I filled in on the three jobs that I mentioned, plus continuing my flying activities.

What were you flying in those days?

I started off in a Sirmus Moth. It was the policy of the Air Board to ensure that every general duties officer was capable of instructing and so every six months, I think it was, maybe twelve months, we were required to undergo a test as a flying instructor. I remember going down to Point Cook where Squadron Leader Johnny Summers[?] was the chief test instructor and examiner [inaudible] and doing my check with him in a Sirmus Moth. He seemed to like what I was doing because he offered me the extraordinary privilege of being able to fly a Bulldog[?] which he guarded very preciously and so that particular period I was qualified to fly Bulldogs, Whoppitees, Sirmus Moths.

The Bulldog was quite a spirited aeroplane to fly, wasn't it?

Yes, that's why I say to be offered a Bulldog by Johnny Summers was the highest accolade you could expect. I remember him saying after this particular test, 'You're wasting your time up there, I'll have you out of that in no time.' but I knew damn well he wasn't going to beat Dickie Williams and I never left headquarters; I continued on with those three jobs.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

12

But you are still flying an open cockpit aircraft.

Oh yes. I was flying an open cockpit aircraft for a long time after that.

Did you find that staff work for Dickie Williams helped you when you eventually became Chief of the Air Staff?

In retrospect, yes, very much so but I didn't get all the information I expected to get from Rigley. Rigley has turned out to be a really inspired and a gifted airman. I knew that he was keeping a diary, this was the common thing, but I thought like all the others that he was a hot administrator. In point of fact he was very forward thinking in terms of air power and yet at no stage even though I was his deputy did he give me any inkling of his theories in relation to air power; that would have been of tremendous value to me and I've always been a little bit resentful that he didn't pass anything on. But I could understand that in retrospect because these youngsters from Duntroon are highly suspect when they're brought into the air force to lock horns, so to speak, with the people who'd been through the ordeal by fire, who survived World War I. I suppose he felt that that would be wasted on me. Anyhow, he didn't reveal his views to anyone else either for that matter and it's only recently that he's been recognised, mainly thanks to ...

Alan Stevens[?].

Yes, Alan Stevens that has dredged this up and presented it in a very meaningful form.

Air Marshal, was there any training in air power in those days?

No, it was tactical work that we did. The thought of independent action as we know it today, I don't suppose ever occurred, anyhow we heard very little of it. You may regard this a reflection upon the leadership at the time but this is where I come to the support of Dickie Williams. That was in his particular field that he didn't follow it up adequately, primarily because our aircraft were obsolescent but more particularly because he spent most of his time trying to preserve the independence of the air force.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

13

Were the army trying to take over the air force in the '30s?

Yes, both the army and the navy, no question about that. They made no secret of their intention to get their own air arms.

How did they go about that?

Primarily through political means. They seemed to have the ear of the government. I think the Liberal Party were in for most of the time. It just happened that the navy in particular, I think, used their social approach and achieved wonders that they probably wouldn't have got by a logical approach. Anyhow, that was Dickie's persisity[?]; again and again he had to try and repel boarders, so to speak.

So what the army and the navy wanted to do was to totally integrate the air force into one of their services.

Each wanted their air arm, the fact that it was part of the organisation of each of those services and that would have been the end of it.

So capital equipment in those days as far as Dickie Williams went would have gone totally by the board.

We got nothing. What we had till fairly late was surplus equipment from the RAF of which we had plenty.

But it was obsolete.

Yes, hence I suppose the most current model was the DH9A which I did my first solo, yes, my first solo on a DH9A, followed very rapidly by the Whoppitee which took over from that and that was the first one which the air force procured from its own vote, and the Bulldog.

Air Commodore Williams obviously thought you had a career in the service because in 1936 he was obviously influential in sending you across to the Royal Air Force Staff College at Andover in Hampshire.

Yes, by that stage I'd become - I'd got a permanent commission and I'd also, of course, sat for my qualifying examiantion for

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

14

the staff college and that gave me access to promotion to squadron leader when the time came, so it was in my own interest to do so. I was lucky to be sent with Bert Sims[?].

When you were at the Royal Air Force College at Andover the rumblings of war must have been prevalent.

Yes, that was a very interesting stage. I'll always give the RAF credit for knowing well and truly that Hitler was on the road to war and the air force was determined that they'd be able to meet him in the air. I remember being lectured to by very prominent people, such as Barnes Wallace, and I can't remember all the others now but

What did Barnes Wallace lecture you about?

He lectured us about the nature of the bombing aircraft of the future. The most extraordinary thing I remember from that lecture was he pointed out that aircraft would never be built beyond a certain size or a certain power because they couldn't build an engine and a propeller which could extract the power from the theoretically bigger engine. He also introduced us to geodetic structure which I remember.

On the Wellington.

On the Wellington, quite probably.

What were the advantages of that geodetic structure?

Well, it had redundant members in its frame so that if any one was severed it still retained its structural strength up to a point but there'd become a limit of course; if the damage was excessive it could become a victim of anti-aircraft fire.

But it didn't become standard aircraft construction, did it?

No, it didn't get past the Wellington, as a matter of fact. It's always surprised me but at that stage, of course, we had other aircraft around the corner, although I can't be very clear about the sequence which followed the geodetic construction.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

15

Were you ever influential in sending information back to Australia when you were at Staff College, although you were a very junior officer, about the dangers of war in Europe?

No, at no stage. I suppose really the sources of information would have to be our liaison officer in London. I can't remember the organisation. Later on it became a very full-fledged office when the Empire Training Scheme was launched.

You went back to Australia in the late '30s. What was the RAAF's preparation for war?

Not much, I've got to say. I will say this that Dickie Williams deserves a lot of credit for detaching me, to my rage, from 90 Squadron which was flying the Blenheims[?] and that was the most powerful thing on wings in those days, and I'd just launched on this particular career, he sent a message saying that I was going to be DWB designate and I was to start, at least, continue my attachment to 90 Squadron and to start an inspection of all the modern aerodromes and the buildings in England in anticipation of having to prepare Australia for war. So clearly Australia knew what was in prospect then. And so I did this and I went around the different countrysides and I was very successful in getting hold of what [inaudible] were to some extent for the Empire Air Training Scheme, and that was the Velman[?] Hangar which was the dream of many Works and Buildings supervisors because it was built like a Meccano set and could be of unlimited length and very wide width and contain any aircraft of the future for purposes of housing them one way or another. So when I came back to Australia the air force was on the verge of an expansion program - I think it was to eighteen squadrons.

From how many?

I've forgotten what it is now, perhaps about six, but I've forgotten. It never was implemented because they decided at that stage Australia's best contribution to the war would be training its percentage of people for air crew combat in the Middle-East and in England, and this was a program which required the coordination from training organisations, as you probably know, in Canada and South Africa and Rhodesia - I've forgotten how many others. The essence of the success of this organisation or the training scheme, was to produce your pilots, your navigators, your wireless operator/air gunners on time to go through the various specialisation skills. We started off with only elementary flying training skills but we decided to train that and let them, at one stage, further up

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

16

the service flying training schools and doing our own bombing and navigation training out in Australia. That meant that a large number of establishments had to be brought into operation very rapidly, and the old techniques of passing them through various committees simply weren't going to work. I can remember wondering how in the hell I was ever going to lift our program from a few hundred thousands a year up to seven million pounds. Fortunately I hit upon the idea of the Velman Hangars, modified for the use of Australian steel sections, plus pre-constructed frames for huts that were eighty feet by twenty feet, and they can be put together in various combinations like 'T's, L-shaped buildings, U-shaped - a whole variety, and they proved very, very flexible and a quick means of getting things done because I remember the use of this technique - we had a place in Sydney, it was a civil flying establishment, I've forgotten its name now, from the time we got the approval to the time it was first used was five weeks. In the old fashioned scale it could have been five years. And this we applied to all the constructions associated with the Empire Air Training Scheme. I've got to say at this stage, that only succeeded because Hepburn, who at this stage - you may remember he was the chap from whom I took over Director of Works and Buildings - had moved to become the Director of Works for the three services. He and a chap called Hoy[?] of Canberra who was the Deputy Director-General of Works, got their heads together and he prevented the dreadful conglomeration of trying to get authority through for the construction of these buildings. How they did it, I don't know but I don't think they got due recognition of their contribution. Anyhow, it happened that way and it was going very well indeed and then the Board of Business Administration and that made me even more worried still because what looked like a smooth operation, looked like being jammed up by a board of business people - highly competent but totally unused to the needs of an air force. Their specialisation, of course, being the civil field. Fortunately I had a very good rapport with Senator Pierce and I poured out my heart to him and he proved very understanding. He recognised the limitations of his Board of Business Administration and accelerated the passage to put things through. In other words they accepted my word for most of the stuff that went through and made minor alterations until they themselves got a greater degree of understanding of the needs of the service. That was another reason why the whole system [inaudible]. The facts are, I think, that our Empire Air Training Scheme was one of the biggest successes of the air force's done it in peace-time or semi-war conditions. A lot of the tribute of that is due to chaps like Pierce and Hepburn and Hoy, clearing the way, because if the ordinary organisation had continued we were stuffed.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

17

You personally must have been very frustrated, being given a ground job as opposed to going to an operational unit.

Yes, I really was. Being dragged away from the Blenheims was really a knockout blow to me. I thought at last I'd shaken myself clear of a staff job, but don't forget that staff job gave me a tremendous amount of flying that I would never have had if I'd continued in a squadron job, and it took me all over Australia and over New Guinea and gave me experiences that no other air force chap would have had in cross country navigation and things of that nature, so it had its compensations.

Sir, were you surprised when you were appointed to command the Bombing and Gunnery School at Evans Head?

Yes, I was. I can thank a RAF air commodore who's Air Member for Personnel. At this stage, of course, we had a large expansion and we did require officers who had a good grounding in air force practices and so on, and they were spread pretty thin on the ground. This RAF air commodore couldn't see any sense in maintaining a fully trained and practising pilot on a staff job and he had me out of that in no time and I was the last to complain. I had the extraordinary experience, I suppose, first of all, of finding that sight which I did when we first ...

How did you go about finding it?

I knew we had to have big open spaces and not these little places that we hitherto had for dropping practise bombs and so on - had big open spaces which allowed us to carry out air firing against 'sleeve'[] targets and bombing of high explosive bombs against ground targets, so that meant flat ground with a capacity to erect mounds or have natural features which enabled us to plot the fall of rounds. Once again I spoke to Wally Walters who was out on active flying jobs and had flown around a fair bit and asked him did he know of a place that had these qualifications. He said, 'You might try the north coast of New South Wales'. So it was I took off in the Nanson[] one day with a chap called Ivor Lightfoot[] who was an armament officer and I needed an armament officer, of course, to guide me of specialist features that were needed for bombing and gunnery school. We went up to a place called Evans Head which had an emergency landing ground there, and we flew around it and we reckoned this was the ants pants because it had the bigger open spaces, it had some natural mounds there and we could see it wouldn't tangle up with the civil people who were always complaining that they were endangered by air force practices and so on. And so I decided on that. I was in

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

18

the happy position at this stage of not being bound by any committees but because of my wide experience in going through the needs of the air force, based on Dickie's selection of me in the early days, I was able to decide what projects should go ahead. I had, of course, to plan them out then with my staff and have them valued and so on and put through the ordinary channels which I've just been describing to you. Evans Head was a very major undertaking because a tremendous amount of works - roads and airfields and dropping zones and bridges and things of that nature - and with the help of Lightfoot who advised on specialist needs and so on, we were able to work and present the plans for this bombing and gunnery school in a very short time and in fourteen months, I think, after its clearance - approval - the thing was a going concern.

Which airfield were you using for Evans Head?

Evans Head had what they called an emergency landing ground - it was an open paddock about 800 yards by 800 yard. It had only a grass surface and a very poor grass surface at that because when we were up surveying it with Lightfoot we had an extraordinary experience of trying to take off from it. We found that we couldn't, it was so sodden, and there's another story about that - about how we got off it - I won't bore you with that. Anyhow, we had to go ahead with that and it wasn't till some time later that we put down bitumen strips which were the forerunner of the aerodromes of today. And then having launched that project which was a major one in terms of facilities, engineering and otherwise, I was then posted to become Wing Commander Flying there. This suited me down to the ground. I was even more amazed to find that that was changed from Wing Commander Flying to Commanding No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School.

That was in '43.

Before then, I think - I'm not too sure of the date.

You started operating Fairy Battles from that strip and you had problems in the early stages because of dust ingestion, didn't you?

We did, we had the ingestion of the sand. As I said before it was a sandy aerodrome and you just sucked it into the intakes and it cut the life out of the cylinders; reduced them to about twelve hours per engine. We couldn't stand up to this trauma or this wastage so we had to put down sealed runways. Before we reached that stage we did work out - or our engineers worked

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

19

out - a smart method of taking out or sieving out - what's the expression?

Filtering.

Filtering the sand before it got into the engine. That kept us going till we got down permanent runways.

You flew the Fairy Battle and initially I think you thought it was probably quite a reasonable aircraft.

It was, as a matter of fact. It had been shot down, of course, on the Western Front but it was the fastest aircraft in Australia but I know when it came to us that it never occurred to anyone apparently to use it as a frontline aircraft where we were but it was a very good aircraft for training because you could put two gunners in the back seat and put your navigator who could occupy the back seat and then carry out his bombing runs from that point. It had a a good turn of speed; it cruised at 200 miles an hour. It had a very good range although that wasn't necessary for the job it was doing, and it could cruise at about 10,000 feet all day and it could climb relatively quickly, and so it was an excellent aircraft for our purpose there.

It was never used on the sharp[?] in the Pacific theatre.

It never even occurred to anyone. I remember flying it from an elongated field at Geelong when it first came out. I wasn't going to be a [inaudible] CO. I went down to fly it on the day my son was born. I just wonder whether she was going to be a widow that night or whether I was going to live to see my son but it worked out pretty well because there were no means of giving any dual control in that, you just had to be told what to do and get in and do it, which is what we all thought we could do when we graduated from Point Cook.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

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AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

20

be told what to do and get in and do it, which is what we all thought we could do when we graduated from Point Cook. I remember being outraged to think that we required some dual in a Brigademon[?] when they first came into use. Anyhow, I diverge, so let's get back on track.

In 1942 you were appointed Assistant Director of Plans under Colonel Evbank[?] and Air Vice Marshal and Bostock[?].

Eubank[?], it was.

Eubank.

E-U-B-A-N-K, it's a misnomer there, Deputy Director of Plans, yes.

How did you find that appointment?

A total value because the whole idea was, of course, to integrate the RAAF with the USAF in the south-west Pacific, and that was the area we called the South-West Pacific, and we had a General Brett[?], a Lieutenant General Brett from USAF, who was appointed to command this joint force but MacArthur[?] never made any delegation, never looked like doing it. He kept things under his own particular wraps. We started off in Melbourne where MacArthur was from the Philippines and then after a time the whole of MacArthur's staff and the USAF and RAAF staff went to Brisbane. I thought paths will change now, really MacArthur is set to go and we'll get some work to do; it never happened.

You regarded that as one of your most frustrating appointments in your very full career.

It was, without any doubt whatever. Eubank also, whether he managed to arrange for his posting or not I don't know or whether the USAF really wanted him home to plough back the experience he'd gained in the Philippines but he left the job and I was left to hold it on my own but there was no work to do and again and again I used to go to Bostock and ask him if he couldn't solve the problem for me but he told me to have patience, that things might change and it never did, even when they got a new commander and formed the Fifth Air Force.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

21

General Kenny[?] came across, didn't he?

General Kenny came across. He was a real livewire but even he couldn't unbutton MacArthur.

What was your opinion of MacArthur?

Oh dear, that's very hard to judge because I don't really have a personal insight into it, I have to rely upon what I heard mainly, but I regarded him as quite unscrupulous in the techniques he adopted to get his own way. There were a number of occasions when he had no hesitation in falsifying the reports coming from the South-West Pacific activities. But I say in war these things are accepted as acceptable as far as I can see provided they yield results. In other words, truth is one of the first casualties.

Did he get his own way by going the political route?

Yes. One of the things that made life very difficult for us is that he refused to be saddled with any administrative load. He wanted to control the Australian forces and on the operational side not to be burdened with administration and this indirectly or directly led to the confrontation between Jones[?] and Bostock. Do you want to know about that?

The Jones/Bostock era is one of the probably sad moments in the air force's history during World War II.

It was disaster for us; it really was.

Can you try and interpret why this happened?

Jones and Bostock started off as very close friends. When I say 'close friends' as friends that survived World War I, and when the air force was split between Jones and Bostock ...

They both had the same rank.

That's right. ... the surprising thing was Bostock was senior to Jones and in my opinion far more competent. He had limitations in other areas but in terms of mental ability and foresight I think he was way ahead. Jones, of course, was saddled with no operational control - that was left to Kenny

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

22

commanding through Bostock - and Jones, as I said, had the responsibility for supporting the teeth of air force, the fighting forces, engaged under the control of Kenny. Bostock always felt that he couldn't exercise effective control of the air force and use of the air force unless he had a voice in the input of the training of the forces and support of the forces that he was commanding. Jones believed that the government of Australia had charged him with the responsibility for the welfare and the control of the forces, the RAAF; in other words, they were not to be lodged in foreign hands. So we had this terrible division. Bostock felt that he was denied any administrative control or effective training control, Jones on the other hand stuck to his guns and believed that his responsibility was to the Australian government and there's no way that he should be deprived of it. You could see both of them had a very good argument in that respect and neither would give in and so Jones did try to solve it by getting a declaration of his point of view or support of his point of view from the government but he never succeeded in getting it, nor did Bostock ever get any effective control of the administration and training. He had an input into the training side of the business. And so neither would give in and the politicians wouldn't make a clear cut decision because MacArthur insisted upon being free to exercise control without any responsibility for support. I was in both camps as a matter of fact. As I said, I started off as a planner for Bostock and when that failed I succeeded in extricating myself from my useless job and came back to the air force as Director of Plans on the supporting side and my concern was mainly with things that happened in Australia and the course that our strategy would take in getting people capable operating in the front lines.

It was obviously always MacArthur's intention to emasculate the hierarchy in the air force so he could have total control.

I don't know what activated him there. Strange to say, he did accept an officer at the time, a Group Captain Hewitt, as intelligence officer on his staff; on his staff or either accredited to it in some way, anyhow. That is about the only input we had at that sort of level.

Do you think the government should have resolved the issue by appointing Air Vice Marshal Jones to Air Marshal to resolve the issue?

I don't think that would have done any good unless they agreed on which way they were going to go. The government created the

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

23

situation to start with and I don't know how they would have got out of that.

Did these two former friends, Jones and Bostock, did they ever meet during the latter part of the war?

I don't really know, I don't think so. I think they'd gone to a stage of standing apart from each other. They would have telephone conversations, of that I'm sure. They had several confrontations which must have demanded that they met on common ground somewhere but I'm not aware of those occasions.

So operationally the RAAF suffered during that period of time to a marked degree.

Yes, I believe so; they were wondering where their leadership really lay, and yet on the other hand our fighter forces had a very high reputation. Kenny used to use them in the forefront of quite a lot of operations because they could be relied upon to stick to their job. There were some disgraceful exceptions to that, as you probably know.

Can you describe them?

We had the situation where Cobby[?] was in command of 9 Operational Group and he had Sims as his senior staff officer and I've forgotten the other chap for the time being - that's not relevant though - and then commanding the forces another 9 Group operating from Numfer[?] and the pilots went on strike in effect. They rebelled. They strictly speaking should have been shot for something like that in time of war. How they got away with it I don't know. Led mainly by Caldwell[?] and a chap called Wing Commander Arthur[?]. They felt that the targets allotted to them by Cobby and Sims were not worth the metal and they were endangering their lives for no good pay off and so they declined to perform and that was the subject of, not a Royal Commission, something pretty tantamount to that and the consequence of all that was that Cobby was relieved of his command and went back to his job in civil aviation, Sims was also, I think, resigned and the other one - senior administrative officer - elected to take a reduction in rank to Wing Commander.

Is there any justification for the action that the pilots took, do you think?

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

24

I think so. I think Cobby and Sims spent too much time in their huts and not enough time talking to the pilots. Cobby has always been a lazy bloke. I was his adjutant for quite - a couple of years, anyhow - and he'd be only too glad to let someone else do the work but he was a very good leader. He had the capacity for talking people into doing things for him. He was World War I Australian Ace, as a matter of fact. Yes, I believe there is justification for that but you can't do it in war. Theoretically there was every justification but, as I said, the manual of air force law provides that you are going to be shot if you rebel in times of war.

What was the reaction by Air Vice Marshal Jones?

I can't remember any input he had in relation to that. He had to eventually become involved in it because the recommendations Barry[?], I had quite a good rapport with Barry, put in his report and it had to be passed through by Stock[?] who would naturally I suspect, in fact did support the recommendations and the Air Board would eventually decide what sort of Barry found out what had happened, what the the justification may have been, but the Air Board would have to take out the administrative punitive action so Jones certainly had to come to the party and confirm what was subsequently decided.

Group Captain Caldwell, like Cobby, had an incredible reputation. As you are fully aware Group Captain Caldwell became the RAAF's top scoring ace during World War II and a very controversial one. What was your opinion of Caldwell?

I only had one contact with him. I believe he was a first class 'con' man. My staff believed it and they warned him. Caldwell sought an interview with me when I was Director of Postings. They warned me. They said, 'Look, he'll con you into doing anything he wants to do'. He came to see me and he had a ...

You were a group captain at that time.

I was a group captain, Director of Postings. He came to me and tried to present a case for getting transport from here up to Townsville - I've forgotten where it was - and transport was pretty hard to come by in those days and I think I might have given into him because he was so convincing. But my staff warned me that he was on the make, so I knocked him back and that was the only occasion I had contact with him but if you

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

25

really want to know about Caldwell, talk to Bruce Courtney[?]. What he's got to say will shock you and I'm not too sure how to tell you; but he had some really down to earth experiences with Caldwell, so he's speaking from personal knowledge and direct knowledge.

Because he's aware he was then court martialled for illegally transporting grog across to the islands and then selling them at a vast profit to the Americans.

The question is, too, whether his fighting ability was well founded or not. There isn't any doubt about his capacity for conniving, for getting his own way. I'm just surprised he hasn't turned out to be one of our high flyers today.

When I met Caldwell I found that he was an extremely powerful personality and people like Bobby Gibbs, as one that picked up a DSO in the Western Desert, he described Caldwell as a very average pilot but an exceptional shot.

That's the sort of impression I had but I think you better talk to Bruce Courtney. I'd pass on second-hand information and that's not good enough. Bruce might not be prepared to talk because after all Courtney [sic] is in the land living still - not Courtney.

Air Marshal, you must have been seething with frustration by the time you left MacArthur's headquarters.

Indeed, I was when I came back to Air Force Headquarters which I thought I'd served my apprenticeship well and truly to find that I was doing what amounted to internal planning again but after a time I found it satisfying in as much as it was a productive job and it gave me plenty of opportunities for flying which, of course, has always been my hope and intention of perservering with but I still wanted very much to get into operations because it seemed to me to be utterly wrong to have a permanent officer with a career in the air force, considerably more career still left to me, but not had the experience of battle conflict. And so I used to camp on the door of the Director of Postings which was 'Snow' Lashell[?] at the time, but I never could get a hearing from him and in desperation I went to Jones and argued that I've served my apprenticeship and a lot of time at Air Force Headquarters, wasn't it time I was given an opportunity to go into operations? He said, 'Hancock, I can't spare you yet. See me again in three months time.' Forty-eight hours later I was posted to western area over here in Perth. To this day I don't

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

26

know why he did that. Anyhow, I set off without my family because they couldn't accompany me in war-time [inaudible]. Air Commodore 'Brown' Knowle[?] was in charge and I bared my soul to him and told him that I was bitterly disappointed and I viewed my next appointment with less than enthusiasm, which is a bad way for any permanent officer to start his new posting, but I felt at least I had to be honest with him about that. Brown was very sympathetic, indeed, and it wasn't long before I settled down to do what I found to be in my opinion a very rewarding job and useful job. This was about the time when the Japanese were still on the drive southwards and intelligence had been obtained showing that a task force of pretty considerable proportions was heading down through Indonesia, the East Indies, and it wasn't known which direction they'd take; whether they'd go down to the east coast or down to the west coast or whether they'd split. Anyhow, there was feverish activity all around to be ready to deal with the situation if it should happen that way. And as the senior administrative staff officer at Western Area it was my job to make sure that the bases and all our operations were fully supported. That gave me the opportunity to get around the country and do the very best we could with the limited resources we had. We had a very big parish to cope with at this stage. It was the whole of Western Australia and this was a very big parish, indeed, and we exercised our function by having a widely distributed number of bases; in particular, Currana Downs[?] and Nunkembar[?] were built for the operation of the American heli-bombers, and in addition to that we had what amounted to emergency landing grounds at Broome and Derby, and a large number of stations had landing grounds also. We had units disposed on a permanent basis at points where we had our Radar stations and where we had operational bases in regular use. The purpose, of course, of Radar stations is pretty clear, it's to protect the aircraft which may be deployed from the inland bases and the operational bases were there to provide petrol, oil and lubricants and so on for itinerant forces. Now, they were isolated from civilisation. They were living in a wretched climate where temperatures can be anything up to 125° in the shade and they had no real amenities there. Radar operators in the tents, of course, just operated in a loin cloth because it was that hot. I felt it my job as the staff officer for administration to do the rounds, first to make sure that they had what was necessary to discharge their function but more importantly in my opinion it was to show the flag and let them see that they weren't forgotten. I used to make a point of loading up an Anson[?] with staff officers, such as Education Officer, the Organisation Officer, occasionally a medical officer, Engineer Officer and the like, who could go and do something to solve their problems if they had any, or at the least to let them see that they were not neglected. I found this very rewarding because the chaps were grateful for the attention we paid them and we could solve some problems on the spot. It also gave me an excellent opportunity for flying

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

27

and also brought into some extraordinary incidents. Perhaps the most outstanding one was one in which I set off on one occasion on the visit to the traps with an Anson and my route was to go to the northern area via Mulga Downs which was the property of my cousin, Lang Hancock, and I used to make a point of dropping in on him this way because he was directly on my route and I had a lot in common with him. And the [inaudible] was that we set off and reached our first refuelling point which was Meekatharra. At Meekatharra I was to be refuelled by a chap who had the responsibility for providing fuel for the air force. It also turned out that he was the local funeral director. Instead of having him on the tarmac to meet me on arrival, he was busy on his secondary role, so we got a late start. I had, however, calculated the distance to go and based on our previous winds I reckoned I could get to Mulga Downs before last light and so I took off confident that I could do the trip on time and in fact I kept a check of our ground speed on the way up and everything confirmed that I would reach Mulga Downs before last light. In fact I got to what I thought was Mulga Downs on ETA and Mulga Downs, of course, is buried to a large extent in mulga scrub and when I arrived my cousin sees me coming and he runs up and down on a clay pan to create the dust to give me a windsock to operate on. When I got to Mulga Downs on ETA I couldn't see it so I did a circle to try and find it and I couldn't detect it at all in the rather dim light, so I decided to fly on to Pouth[?], an out camp which is another twenty-fives miles further on, to confirm I get a checkpoint, and I found I had in fact arrived dead on time at Mulga Downs and I found out subsequently that my cousin did not do a run up and down the clay pan because he saw me circling and assumed that I'd picked the clay pan out and I was coming in to land and so no visible evidence of my arrival there. So I did a quick calculation and had sufficient fuel to go on to Port Hedland and by this time I couldn't see Mulga Downs either because the light was buried in a number of fires which had been lit in the area and so I had no permanent means of deciding I had arrived there. So I set course for Port Hedland and I was pretty sure that I'd got there on ETA but I looked around and I couldn't see anything because it was as dark as the inside of a cow. Then I realised that as I had not planned to go to Port Hedland, they'd have no notice of my intending flight there, and as the north-west coast was under attack by the Japanese at this stage the moment they heard an unscheduled flight, all lights would go out on a very effective blackout. So I got to Port Hedland and couldn't find it at all but I know now that I'd arrived there on time. So my fuel was getting low and I had to make up an alternative plan pretty quickly. I was aware that the Ninety Mile Beach lay further to the north-east and so I set course for the Ninety Mile Beach, knowing that I could normally land provided it wasn't high water. So off we went and I told the crew what was happening and I had Geoff Newman[?] who was the Education Officer keeping a look out with myself for the appearance of the Ninety Mile Beach, and Ces

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

28

Ryan[?], the engineer, was watching the fuel gauge and switching from one tank to the other. We had four tanks on 'Aggie' and as one tank got low he switched to another but he kept on going till we seemed to be almost out of fuel. Just about this stage I saw a light and I'd hardly got near it than it went out. But Geoff said, 'Look, there's a strip of beach down there, I think'. I looked down below my right wing and sure enough it looked like a beach. It wasn't the Ninety Mile Beach ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

... and I looked down below my right wing and sure enough it looked like a beach. It wasn't the Ninety Mile Beach but it certainly looked like a beach and this had to be it. So I did a quick circuit with my headlights on and over the area because I was afraid there might be fallen logs, debris washed up and I didn't want to clout one of those in landing. So I went in and after my circuit did a landing and it really was what you'd call a ...

A greaser.

Yes. A greaser, that's right - literally and metaphorically - I've never done a better one in my life. It was a greaser because it was sand covered by mud, that's why it didn't have a bright white appearance. I tried to apply the brakes and nothing happened naturally, of course, because it just went along on the mud as they locked. Anyhow, I was able to make use of the outboard engine to run her up above high water mark. We all got out and kissed 'Mother Earth' then we pitched down for the night. This was about eight o'clock at night I suppose. During the course of the night I heard a great roaring, so I roused Newman and we went to the top of the sand hill which bordered the beach and we could here the noise still, we couldn't see anything though. It was very dark, or course. So back to bed we went and the next morning I got up early and with Newman I went to a windmill which was - I could see then - was in a valley which separated us from the main road. There was one row of sand hills near which we were camping, then there was a valley and another row of sand hills and beyond that there was a road and the station house which I'd seen that night. And so we all set off in our uniforms happily, and we just got onto the road and marching towards the house and the great roaring met us, the same as we'd heard before, it was the VDC, the Volunteer Defence Corps, had got word from the homestead that Japanese had landed in this are

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

29

because who else would it be because it was an unscheduled movement. At the head of a troop was a very red-faced and outraged leader who turned out to be my cousin, Angus Welsh[?], he was the head of the VDC, who was coming up looking for blood. If he'd got us that night, I'm quite certain he'd have shot first and asked afterwards. In the meantime what had happened when the light went out, Joan Welsh, my cousin, tucked a child under each arm and went helter skelter back to the nearest station and she'd got in touch with Angus and Angus had come up and you know the rest of the story. Anyhow, I managed to smooth over his wrath and I went back to the aircraft and we drained the fuel out of the two outer tanks and put it into the two inner tanks. I happened to have fourteen gallons of fuel left which is not much when it is distributed over four tanks, so I sent the party, my air crew, off with Angus Welsh to the nearest station there whose name I don't recall yet, where they had refuelling facilities and I flew the Anson off the beach wondering whether I was going to get there but I did - in time to refuel and get on our way again. So that was quite the luckiest and most nerve-racking experience I think I've ever been subjected to bar one which you'll probably hear about later. Anyhow, we continued on our way and we'd gone north to Nunkembar and to Broome and Derby and were on our way back and calling in at Woollal[?] Station. Woollal Station was managed by a chap, Decole Percy[?], and we had a Radar unit there which was protecting the base at Nunkembar and Torana Downs[?] and this is a place called Redcliffe, about fifteen miles south of Woollal Station. Now, Woollal Station did have an open landing ground which was about a half a mile square. It was quite adequate in the dry but was hopeless in the wet period and in the wet period nothing works in the north-west, all roads and all wheel transport dries up for that time and so having put down there and having gone out to Redcliffe to talk to the Radar unit, I thought how in the hell are these blokes going to be evacuated in the event of an emergency such as a medical one in the wet because they'll never be able to get out by road. I thought, let's try out the beach. I knew it could be landed on but I wanted to be absolutely certain myself. So I got out of with a couple of other members of the crew and we marched up and down for two miles and we couldn't even leave an imprint on the beach, that's when the tide was out. The tide goes out to a tremendous distance up there, something like about a mile but it comes in very rapidly. We walked up to this beach to just check our convictions that it was safe and then I went back to the aerodrome at Woollal, got the crew on board and we took off. I proposed to land on it to establish beyond any doubt at all that I could use it in an emergency. Well, I landed on the beach and I knew there was no point in taking off straight away, you've got to allow some time for your medical evacuee to be landed on board and so I waited there for five minutes with the engine ticking over and then decided to take off. I opened the throttle to normal take-off position, no response. Looked at the wheels, the wheels were quite normal, they were not

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

30

bogged in any way, at all. Then I went into the override positions, still nothing happened. Then I told the blokes to get out and rock the wings which they did and at that stage we started to see thing going down a bit, not much but visibly so. So I told them to break up the fruit cases which we had on board and stuff them and some spinifex under the wheels and I opened up again to emergency power and nothing happened. Meantime the tide had turned and was coming in. We were in trouble and so I decided to run back to Woollal Station and get hold of Hal Lashey[?] and get him to bring his utility down with some rope and hawsers and planks. And I don't suppose I was gone more than about forty minutes. It was quite a run, run through heavy sand, but I was moving pretty fast in those days. I got him back and to my incredible belief there was the Ansom with the water up to just below the mainplanes and the whole of my crew stripped naked salvaging stuff from the aircraft. We fortunately had the engineer officer with us, he was able to direct them what things to cut out and so on. Well, I hadn't any time to weep about the matter because I wanted to get the thing above the high water mark which we did and we got it above that and the engines were taken out. We took them to Woollal Station, we rinsed them down with fresh water and so on and I got a message through to Brownell[?] at Western Area what had happened and not long after that an Ansom flown by a chap called Bill Barker[?], Wing Commander Bill Barker, came up and took us home. 'Brownie' was very understanding when I explained to him exactly what had happened and why, so there was no disciplinary action taken. I'd like to tell you that that Ansom flew again, thanks to having the engineer officer with us, because it was got out and the engines had been, of course, protected and it was in the area but I don't know when but it did fly so it wasn't as desperate as I thought it was going to be. Now, that was the conclusion of one of my unexpected adventures up in the north-west.

I think that's a fascinating story but at this stage you might like to go on to the other one that you mentioned - the other story that you had - that was of great interest. It's probably a war-time one, was it?

Air Marshal, after your sojourn in the west you then got posted back to headquarters and became Director of Postings.

Yes, this one was a real shock to me because you may remember how thwarted I'd felt on going to the west but in the event I found the whole experience very rewarding and to come back to an administrative job again, which wouldn't offer the same sort of outlets that Western Area had was very disappointing. On the other hand I knew damn well that I'd get myself into operations one way or other once I became Director of Postings.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

31

Anyhow, I sat down into that particular job and I would have liked to have got out of it straight away but I felt I couldn't reasonably propose I should leave it with less than six months in the job and the war still had, as far as we could see, a long way to go, and so I spent a lot of time trying to come to terms with the particular job and I felt what was important for the Director of Postings was to make sure that he fitted square pegs into square holes and round pegs into round holes because this is the way you get results. Every one of us has strengths and weaknesses and best you know what they are, and more particularly the environment in which they're going to work. And so I made a point, as soon as I got established as Director of Postings, to set off on a look around the traps, not in Australia only, more particularly to the north of us into New Guinea. I can't remember the details of the first one I undertook but generally speaking it took me up the east coast of Australia to take a look at what was happening out of ... gazed in the landing by the Japs down at the extreme south, Hoisin Corner[?]. We had a fighter squadron down there and a general reconnaissance squadron as well and they'd been putting up a brilliant performance in assisting the army and Major-General Close[?] repelling the Japs; their first real repulse of the war as far as I can gather. I went down to see how they were operating. I managed to scrounge an Anson, or take one, to go up there. I was quite shaken to see the conditions to see the conditions under which they were operating. They were operating out these pierced steel planks and they were laid down over very unsound foundations and the noise of an aircraft landing across those was quite terrifying. They sounded as though every bolt in the aircraft had come loosened and was rattling. Anyhow, it was a thing that they'd become quite accustomed to there. When I reached there I managed to get a trip with Major-General Close on a Hudson which was going over to the north coast of New Guinea, to a strip called Wanegilla[?]. When I got there - I wasn't flying the Hudson - when I got there I saw a platoon of troops setting off to march into the jungle up towards Dobojura[?] on the north coast of New Guinea, and I said to Close, 'Where are those chaps going?'. He said, 'Oh, they're going on a fortnight's patrol and we've got a reconnaissance patrol to see what is happening on the north coast. It made me very thankful, indeed, to be serving in the air force because the troops who engaged on a mission like that could be within ten inches of a Japanese in the ver heavy undergrowth that existed up there. And here they were going out to spend fourteen days with their life in their hands and I was going home to a nice warm bed at night. It seemed a bit unfair but on the other hand when we had bad experiences in combat we were terrified for some time and slept comfortably at night. From there on I went back to Morawkee[?], I think it was, in the south-west of Dutch New Guinea, on the south coast of Dutch New Guinea, and completed the tour through Darwin and from Darwin I decided to go back to Melbourne via Groote Eylandt where we had an emergency landing

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

32

ground and an operational base party. I'd had quite a bit to do with personnel administration when I got to Darwin and all the outlying ancilliary aerodromes and so I got a late departure from Darwin, furthermore the thunderstorms were all around me and I was going to land at Groote Eylandt. The aerodrome was right in the middle of the island and I'd had to make diversions to avoid the thunderstorms, so I was late in getting there. When I got there it was verging on dark and the whole place was overcome by heavy [inaudible] clouds and there was no way in the wide world I could get in and I didn't have enough fuel to go back to Darwin, so I did a circuit of the island and then found a beach on the southern shore. It was a straight forward beach, it was a circular one, much like a velodrome for motor racing, cycle racing and so on, with quite a heavy slant on the surface but, of course, there was no problem landing on that because centrifugal force affected the landing techniques. Anyhow, we landed quite comfortably and I made damn certain I taxied up well above high water mark, bearing in mind my experience at Woollal. And the next thing we did, of course, was to get a message through to the base at Darwin where we were because they knew what our flight plan was and they wanted to be kept informed. The crew went into the aircraft and bedded down to sleep and for my part, I slept under the wings because I wasn't going to have a repetition of Woollal all over again. Anyhow, the thing worked out very well indeed and we were on our way the next day. Later on, of course, I repeated these trips but that's perhaps another story.

When you were at Postings Air Marshal, you mentioned you had to give a reasonable period of return service before you could get an operational posting but that came up with 71 Wing when you were made heir apparent to those three squadrons up in New Guinea.

Yes, The AMP called me up, he knew I wanted to get into operations, here was my opportunity. 'The OC of 71 Wing was due to be relieved and I want to send you up there to take his place.' This one shocked me because no way did I want to take command of a Wing as a chairborne commander and I hadn't flown Bofus, least of all done any tactical training with them and that isn't my way of doing business. So I persuaded him that I should go through the gammet of all the preparation that any air crew would for Bofus squadron duties. And so I was sent off to West Sale, I think it was, where I did a navigation/reconnaissance course but it was a very abbreviated one because I'd already done a very comprehensive one in England at Thorny[?] Island. And so I spent only about two weeks doing this and so I got an endorsement and that was virtually how to handle navy cooperation and carry out normal

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

33

route flying and the like of which I'd done a lot anyhow, so there was no point in going through

When you were posted down to Sale had they resolved the problems on the Beaufort[?]?

I think they had. I think they had. I can't go back in time unless I consult my log books.

It was time when certainly a number of Beauforts had been lost through a tail trim problem.

I remember very well indeed as a matter of fact. Subsequently No, unless you want to be sure about that.

It's not critical actually, Sir, we can probably continue. What was the final engineering solution to that particular problem?

What had happened and this is only ascertained because the pilot of the Beaufort, Learmonth[?], had kept his sense of balance and more than that had really acted as a hero. He'd found when he was flying with two others in formation at low level near Rottneest that his aircraft had got into an uncontrollable dive and neither he nor assisted by his navigator could bring it out of it and they'd gone into the drink and lost their lives with the crew. But the crew flying in formation on him had seen what had happened and they'd seen that the trim tabs on the elevator had somehow or other got into a position where they forced the nose of the aircraft down; they were at full length of their travel, and Learmonth had kept a running commentary going with base explaining what his motions were or sensations were and the aircraft on either side could complement that. They carried out some investigations later on which showed that the barrel locking nut on them through which a piece of wire is threaded to prevent the rotation of the barrel locking nut, which is used for extending or shortening the length of the rod which actuates the trim tabs had come unstuck and the barrel rotated free, forcing the trim tabs into a position where the nose was forced down, and there wasn't any doubt about this once we'd had this visual evidence of it, so it wasn't too difficult to find a fix for this one. Thereafter we had no problems with a Beaufort for those reasons. Later on I'll tell you about some incidents which were not necessarily connected with a Beaufort but which are still quite dramatic.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

34

How did you find the Beaufort to fly?

I loved it. Not an easy an aircraft to fly and you really had to work on it and be a good pilot before you could handle it.

Does it have the nickname of 'Whispering Death' ... was that as much created by its reputation as by the fact that it seemed to be on people before they knew about it?

No, this is very interesting. It is the Bo-fighter that was the 'Whispering Death', not the Beaufort. The Bo-fighter, because you couldn't hear the damn thing coming. It really was an awesome sort of aircraft to be up against. But the Beaufort got its bad reputation because of the failure that I've just described, but once they fixed that I'm not aware that any other ones of that nature ever occurred.

What were the main differences between the Bo-fighter and the Beaufort?

To start with the Beaufort had a crew of four, including the pilot plus a navigator, two wireless operator/air gunners. The Beaufort [sic] had a pilot plus one navigator. The Beaufort was a ground attack aircraft as a specialist aircraft as opposed to It had no bombing capacity in the normal sense of the word. The Beaufort [sic] on the other hand had a triple role really. It was engaged in maritime reconnaissance. It was engaged in army co-op. - direct support to the army on the ground and that was by strafing and bombing in support of the armed forces. And also had an independent role of acting as a strike force. All of these things were determined by Northern Command Headquarters. The armament on the Beaufort was more impressive in some way than that on a Bo-fighter because we had dorsal turret, we had a waist gun. We had fixed forward firing guns and the navigator could also take a turn of the freely mounted gun on the side. It was designed that way to give it a chance of surviving in the air. I don't know too much more about the Bo-fighter; I flew it after the war but not during the war. It was the prime means of succeeding in the Bismarck Sea battle. That was, I think, almost entirely an air battle and most of the credit, I would think, would go to the Bo-fighter which would be in a strafing round, the use of cannon and the like.

When you went to New Guinea as the Officer Commanding LF[?], you initially flew with 100 Squadron.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

35

That's right. I did that because I wanted to learn the technique. Whilst we'd been trained at West Sale and later on at East Sale which was where we combined our capacity to execute our three roles, I still was only a beginner and you had to go through an ordeal by fire in my opinion before you can ask others to do it, so I operated as an apprentice, so to speak, or a simple airman with 100 Squadron and served out my time there and I suppose the powers-that-be through Wally Walters decided that the time came for me to take over the role for which I'd been sent up there initially, which was to command the wing.

What was your reaction about going to New Guinea? You were quite a senior airman at that stage yet you were being mixed with a lot of very much younger air crew who were combat hardened.

It didn't worry me in the least because I knew damn well that I couldn't command respect if I couldn't do at least what I expected them to do, so I had no inhibitions or worries about that. I lived in the same tent with my crew and shared tents with other members of the thing and, for all practical purposes, I could have been a sergeant pilot. I wasn't the least worried. I was determined though to give me the best chance of survival and that was to learn all there was to be learnt about it before I took command because I did intend once I'd taken command, not to withdraw from operations. I in fact did fly regularly with every squadron.

How did you find the experience of combat?

It wasn't the tough assignment that the earlier blokes had to go through in the early stages of the war when they were bombing Rabaul and things like that, where they had to stand up to Zeros and anti-aircraft fire and so on. Although we were trained for protection against fighters, the Allies had blasted the Zeros out of the air and our concern was with anti-aircraft fire from the ground but by far the biggest menace there was the weather because you were operating from one base where we were, at Teji[?], and we had to contend with the low cloud and stuff. When we were dealing with support of the army, that is, low level bombing and strafing and more particularly on the maritime reconnaissance sorties. we'd go out for five hours guarding Hollandia Harbour. When I say 'guarding it' MacArthur had something like 400 ships tied up there and they were a target for Jap submarines and it was our job to provide a fence across the entrance to Hollandia Harbour. When I mean a 'fence' to conduct maritime reconnaissance patrols armed with anti-submarine bombs, going backwards and forwards at the height of 1500 feet. Most of the time on instruments, at

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

36

night, a dark pitched night most of the time and then having to come back to a base which was clear when you left it but had a very high chance of becoming obscured by these rapid developing thunderstorms and as you were towards the end of your fuel limits at that time, you might find that you had nowhere to go when you got back. There were no alternative aerodromes. In fact, just before I arrived they had lost a total of six air crews who never got back to base for that particular reason. If they bailed out, they never survived and so there was in the process of getting relief from this thing, discussion, not at our level, but ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

... discussion not at our level but other levels with MacArthur to suspend or cancel these anti-submarine patrols because we reckoned we never detected a submerged submarine. The only chance of detecting it was with our ASV7 which would detect snorkels on the surface and we didn't think we were going to see many of those. So it was eventually agreed that they would be cancelled and we were relieved of that responsibility but we still had these problems of terrain and weather because the Torochili[?] Range was the spine of New Guinea and there were times when we had to climb over that spine and into the Sepik[?] Valley and carry out independent operations. If you were caught out by weather then or you had a loss of one engine, you wouldn't get home because [inaudible] wouldn't perform very well unless you'd lost all your load and I suppose you could have jettisoned it - you might just about stagger over the Torochili Range and get home again. We also were carrying out, the day before I arrived - in fact the day I arrived there - a strafing attack in support of the army on the Torochili Range and two aircraft collided on collision courses because of the low cloud and stuff. What we had to bear in mind, of course, was that you can't adopt the ordinary peacetime tests for what are acceptable risks. If you're going to give maximum support to your ground forces, then you have to take calculated risks above and beyond the normal call of the duty and this is one of the occasions when it didn't work. But this is what we were faced with all the time, anyhow. At other times we were forced to fly below the safe limit, our normal limiting height; to be free of the shrapnel from your own bombs was 1200 feet but again and again we used to go in

Identification: this is an interview by Ken Llewelyn with Air Marshal Sir Valson Hancock, tape 2.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

37

Ken, you might be interested in knowing something of the problem we had with the army just before I arrived up there. It arose from the desire of the army to dictate the exact technical terms on which we'd undertake our ground support operations. What we wanted to do was to get the target nominated by the army and we'd go about destroying it in our own particular way. The army wanted to dictate the direction of attack, the height of attack and so on, for reasons which I can understand because it had impact on the safety of their troops but we decided that we were going to stick to our guns and insist upon doing it our way. But what happened just before I arrived there was, it was agreed that the army would provide a number of patrol leaders to come up and fly with us on our operations to see what our problems were and we would provide a number of air crew to go with the army on patrols, not necessarily the leading patrols because they wouldn't be qualified, but on patrols where they get a sense of operations and so from then onwards I frequently carried an army leader and we had our quota of air crew to send down to the army. This seemed to produce a vivid change because we no longer had any critical reviews coming from the army and things settled down very nicely. We used this technique all through for the rest of our operations and in particular for the Dove[?] Bay operations; but that's a story we'll come to later on.

Perhaps the most dramatic experience of my life in the air force occurred when we were engaged in carrying out attacks on ground targets, sometimes in assistance to the army, sometimes as independent operations. We'd been operating at a very intense rate. We used to fly at the rate of something like three sorties every two days. At that rate you're going to use up a hell of a lot of bombs and this is what happened. Our normal bomb load consisted of 215 general purpose bombs. We were starting to run out of these so we had decided to use the surplus anti-submarine bombs which were left over after we ceased operations against Hollandia Harbour, and so we used to fly with a mixed load of GP bombs and anti-submarine bombs. Our normal technique was to take off independently, form up as a squadron or one or two squadrons or whatever the strike demanded and fly to the target area before getting there to change out to line astern at about 800 yards interval. On this particular occasion there was a target whose name I don't recall but it's in official historical records and our normal approach was at a height of 1200 feet at our regular speed of 144 knots and we got quite careless at this stage because - I say careless because we didn't have any fighter aircraft to combat and all we were up against was possible anti-aircraft fire. On this occasion we strung out into line astern of about 800 yards interval and I was flying in number three position, Hugh Conaghan[?] was leading the squadron - I was still an apprentice, don't forget - and number one got away his bombs quite satisfactorily, number two, just at the point of bomb

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

38

release blew up into a great cloud of smoke and flames and so on. It seemed to me that there was hardly anything of a pocket handkerchief size left of the aircraft. I broke off my attack and I called to Hugh Conaghan what had happened and I completed my attack from another direction thinking that perhaps 'Dead Eye Dick' who was notorious in that area as anti-aircraft gunner had got our measure, and I came in on a different run at a different height, different speed. Then we went back to base. Hugh had cancelled all bombing after that and we had a post mortem to try and find out what happened. We couldn't reach any conclusion other than that it was Dead Eye Dick who had been moved from the butt area to where we were carrying out our operations. So the next day we mounted a similar operation with the same bomb load again and I was flying again in number three position and number one, Hugh Conaghan, got his bombs away, number two aircraft blew up in the same great ball of fire and little bits and I had to take violent weaving action to avoid the debris that came down. At this stage I broke off engagement and called to Hugh Conaghan who called to the rest of the squadrons to go out to sea and jettison their bomb manually, which we all did. Back to base with pretty crestfallen attitudes and we had a post mortem again. As I'd been the prime witness on both these occasions I was required to give the leading evidence on the thing and I pointed out as far as I could gather, in fact I was quite certain, that this explosion occurred at the time of bomb release. It's an electrical system with a sequence of events which I'll describe later. I thought one of three things could have happened. There may have been a collection of fuel somewhere in the aircraft from overflow of refuelling and the electrical bomb release system may have created an unguarded spark which would lead to the explosion of this confined fuel. If it wasn't that it could be the GP bombs, why I wouldn't know, or the anti-submarine bombs. However, it was decided that Hugh Conaghan and I would fly down to headquarters after advising the Chief of the Air Staff we were coming down. In the meantime all operations were suspended. Hugh and I took off in a Beaufort and the CAS, Air Marshal Jones, had got Air Marshal Wackett[?] who was the air member for technical services at the office, and I told them what had happened. I suggested that we might solve it by trying to set up explosions which attempted to reproduce the flashes I had seen. We went down to a limited range at Wirrabee[?] where they filled a forty-four gallon drum half full of fuel and suspended a fuse and a detonator inside it. Then they got an old Beaufort and suspended under one wing a 250 pound bomb, another old Beaufort and put an anti-submarine bomb underneath it and I stood at safety distance while they went through the process of exploding it by remote control. I saw the fuel drum go up with a vivid flame but it didn't have much relation to the flashes I had seen, so the 250 pound bomb was ignited next and that quite a number of the characteristics of the flash I had seen. Then they exploded the anti-submarine bomb and I said, 'That's it'. It was the

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

39

absolute replica of what I had seen on both occasions. So back to New Guinea Hugh and I went and we set up a 120 flights with anti-submarine bombs suspended under the one wing and the bombing chain and the series of igniters and so on were laid in the anti-submarine bomb and instead of having a detonator in the fuse relay where it would be pierced by the pin when it struck the ground What really happens, the bomb is arrested and the striker pin goes on and pierces the detonator and that exposes the train and the whole thing goes off. We took the striker pin out and pasted a piece of fabric over that hole and then we set off and we carried out our 120 sorties and then we looked at the results. We found that with five of occasions the fabric had been pierced by the striker pin, so we confirmed positively that the culprit was the 125 pound bomb. But the question is why did it do it? Then we back and inspected a number of the stores and we found that the striker pin is prevented from going forward until the bomb is what you call armed. To arm the bomb you've got to arrange for a sequence of events which spins off the propeller at the back of it when the restraining pin has been pulled away - not the striker pin but the pin which prevents the propeller from rotating - because what that does is to remove the restraint from the striker pin so that then when it falls it's free to go forward and pierce the detonator. So there we were, there were five potential explosions that would have occurred and what had happened was the thing that restrains the propeller from unwinding had been distorted in transit; it had been handled perhaps very heavily in a package case which was too frail for the job, and so the moment you armed the bomb and had the propeller unwrapped, instead of spinning clear it actually screwed the striker pin in onto the detonator and you're blowing yourself up. That was a great relief for us because we got that remedied straight away and we also advised the Commonwealth of what we discovered, and I'd like to think that we may have been the means of saving other lives because this sort of situation appears to have occurred elsewhere and no one had really solved it. But I can recollect in my tent and awful long time afterwards waking to nightmares of this great ball of flame as everything blew up into little bits and people with whom we'd been living and joking with just blown to smithereens later on.

How did you find that affected you?

Once we'd found out what had happened it didn't worry me except I was left with these nightmares but I knew that wasn't going to happen that way again.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

40

Did you find those nightmares affected your ability to get up and fly an aeroplane again?

Not in the least as a matter of fact. As you've probably gathered I'm a great survivor or believe in giving myself the best chance of surviving and I'd taken all these measures and reckoned that anything that happens after that was just my bad luck. Certainly nothing was going to happen through my neglect. I did get a shock about two months later when I was being elevated to command the wing and I was in my own special hut on the shore. I was watching a squadron taking off from Teji airfield and doing the usual thing of going off independently and the leader going well out to sea in a bit circuit till the other tail-enders caught up, and just about opposite my 'basher'[, my hut, I wasn't looking at this stage, but the next thing I saw out of the corner of my eye was these great balls of flame once more. I thought, my God, not again. What had happened was that the leader, 'Popper' Christie[, a very, very popular chap who was the ripe old age of probably about twenty-eight or something, had been leading the formation, his number two had overtaken him and collided with him. Why I'll never know because we'd have so much training in these procedures that we were real professionals by now. Anyhow, we put that down to a pilot error and it didn't worry us because we could see that that was the only possible explanation.

So both crews were killed.

Both crews, yes. You can't get out of a Beaufort very readily. Anyhow, there was so much flame and stuff around I'd have thought he wouldn't have had a chance anyhow. It may have been almost instant death on collision.

That was a very onerous responsibility given to you when you actually took over 71 Wing.

More than I expected. In that sense I never expected those, I expected other problems. I had a few with what we call 'waiverers'. I think those were precipitated more by the environment in which we were operating because, I explained, you could get yourself into some impossible situations through weather at times, not through enemy action.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

41

How did you deal with people who were waiverers or as it used to be called, I think, in the Royal Air Force, people who suffered from low moral fibre?

There's a well known process you go through. In fact I lost one of my air gunners - won't mention names at this stage. I didn't have any trouble getting others happily. I thought perhaps I might be at fault. And that provided for medical examination - suspension from flying, medical examination and plenty of [inaudible] the nature of their default. You could even be imprisoned if I remember rightly or put into a detention but usually discharged from the air force with ignominy. It wasn't a nice way to go.

How do you feel about those individuals in retrospect? - their inability to get up and fly in a combat mission.

Well, I'm not too tolerant and I ought to be. Don't forget, I'm a professional and I elected to come into this situation. Now they did, too, but they didn't have the sort of backing and convictions I had. I think what really happened we were not good at facing the pre-war air force with the fact they may have to put their lives on the line. In fact we were poor at it because we wouldn't have had the dreadful drama of Darwin when it was bombed, when people started running, never to stop till they hit some of the cities. I put that down to lack of adequate training. To think that one day instead of becoming a nice, comfortable aeroclub we might have to put our lives on the line. I made a point ever since then of seeing as far as I could that this idea of an aeroclub was killed right from the beginning and people when they joined up were well aware that part of their service and contract is to die if they have to but preferably make someone else die.

Just as an aside on that particular issue, do you believe these days, particularly in the recruiting messages that we give, we don't emphasise enough that we really do expect the ultimate sacrifice if required?

I don't know, Ken, but I have asked again and again from people I have had contact with and they're quite frequent, they have both sides well taken care of. It may not be in the recruiting side but it's certainly in the course of their indoctrination - only have their word for it but I see no reason to disbelieve that because they're far more professional today than we ever were and I think that conviction or belief must be part and parcel of the training technique.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

42

Air Marshal, during your time as Commander of 71 Wing there was one particular incident where you got into severed strife for the issue of bourbon to your air crew.

Believe it or not, Ken, as we were operating under American operational control, we were entitled to some perks which American air crew were entitled to, and one of those was a nip, I don't know how big it was, of whisky after every completed operational sortie and we had found out that we were entitled - it may have been a technicality but there wasn't any doubt about our qualifications. Whilst I was still an apprentice airman at 100 Squadron I was sent down to collect our ration. Now, as I mentioned a little while ago, we were operating at a pretty fast rate of about three sorties every two days and so our qualifications for bourbon were pretty high and extensive but we never drank it ourselves. We always made a point of storing it up and having a bash for all our co-operators and other Beaufort squadrons. The question was it had to be requisitioned, it had to be collected from a base called Finchhaven[?] and the question was who was to be sent down to collect it. Well, bourbon or any spirits of that matter are pretty high value up there and I don't know what took place in the minds of the OC 71 Wing but I think they certainly picked upon me, anyhow, so off I went in what we call a degutted Beaufort. All the armament was taken out and every bit of space was given to room for passengers or other gear. I was sent off down to Finchhaven where I arrived and presented my requisitions. It was a big bundle of papers because we'd qualified for a hell of a lot in a time of about three months, and this took place about every three months. And so down I went and landed there and went up to the USAF storekeeper and passed over my requisitions and I was shocked to find they got out these hand trucks and were wheeling case after case down to the Beaufort. I thought something must have taken place here; they've got a wrong figure somewhere, but no. I didn't ask many questions about that. I took off with a very full load of whisky and delivered it safely in one of the most careful landings I ever made and we had one of our usual, I won't say riotous, but very, very happy occasions when we had people in from the neighbouring bases. I often wondered after that why they chose me. I think there may have been two explanations: one that I was a well known teetotaller; and the second one was that I had the rank of a colonel even though I was acting as a simple airman as a group captain. The 'Yanks' were known to be very conscious of rank and they felt that if a full-blown colonel turned up, with requisitions, no one would question his qualifications for the whisky ration. Anyhow, the sequel to that occurred long afterwards when I was back at Headquarters as Director of Plans and Policy when 'Macka' Noltey[?], the ML for Supply and Equipment, called me into his office one day and said, 'Hancock, I have a very large number of documents signed by you as having accepted delivery of so much whisky. How on

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

43

earth did you come by this because a very large sum of money is involved and we've been billed with it, now?' and I told him but he didn't believe me. So he said, 'Go away and write it down. I want to have this in writing.' which I did and eventually he had to believe me because of my authority and so Australia paid out or gave the USAF a credit for a very large sum of money. I think it may have done some good because a lot of these debts were settled by that form of scholarship, Fulbright Scholarship, which became available to Australians after the war at universities in the United States. And so indirectly we must have done some good on both counts, to ourselves and also to Australian students in the long run. That's one of the more interesting experiences I've had up there.

Air Marshal, at the end of the war you were a group captain with 116 operational sorties, you were awarded an Order of the British Empire in 1940 and a Distinguished Flying Cross in 1945. Did you at that time think of leaving the service?

No, Ken, I didn't but I did much earlier when I was at Evans Head and commanding the bombing and gunnery school. I discussed with my adjutant who was a very qualified seaman the idea after the war of joining a venture which I won't describe now but it involved a fishing venture in which I do the flying, getting the catch to market and he would do the operational side of catching it, and use our wives to help out and it seemed very attractive to me and I was almost persuaded to follow this course because I'd seen how grossly unprepared we were for the war and it looked to me as though democracies were never going to be prepared, and I didn't want to be caught out in another war, particularly if I was in a senior appointment where we were ill prepared to do what we were supposed to do: defend Australia. Fortunately, after the war we were in doldrums but over the horizon we could see the opportunity to get new aircraft which started off with Sabres and eventually finished up with the Canberras and so on, so that changed my attitude; I thought it was worthwhile soldiering on.

Actually, in retrospect you must be horrified at the destruction of the majority of our operational aircraft from World War II when we haven't even got a sample of, say, a Beaufort.

I remember particularly. I think I flew my aircraft, 677, down to the scrap yard out in the middle of New South Wales somewhere or other. Hundreds of aircraft in full flying condition were there and they were reduced to parts and sold as scrap eventually, if indeed they got as far as that. Yes, it

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

44

was. It's surprising though, one or two aircraft have appeared which we never expected to find. For instance, a Beaufort, we thought there's only one that I'm aware of which is being reconstructed under private enterprise and the ...

END TAPE 3, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B

For instance, a Beaufort, we thought there's only one that I'm aware of which is being reconstructed under private enterprise and the entrepreneur approached me and said, 'Would my association consider buying it?'. I couldn't do much about it except pass it on. But since then one or two others have surfaced, so how I don't know, but that's the way the story goes.

But the decimation of the air force after the war must have been fairly hard to take.

Yes, I had a very unhappy experience when I was with Kenny's staff during the war and having no means of contributing to it. After the war I was back at Director of Plans and Policy, I was a member of the joint planning committee, that is of army, navy and air force, and it was our business to set the stage for the reconstruction of the three surfaces after the war and we actually produced a paper of some length which identified the USSR as positively the potential. We thought this at least would start them off on determining the size and composition of the air force but it did nothing of the sort. We were told to destroy the paper straight away because ...

Who told you to destroy the paper?

Defence Headquarters. I remember that particularly because I couldn't find the damn paper to start with and I was in a 'blue funk' [?] over it did find my copy eventually. So we were still in the doldrums until we got underway with the new orders, and I think they were stimulated No, they couldn't have been stimulated by Korea because that came right out of the blue.

Do you think Defence Headquarters had an ostrich mentality at that stage about Russia?

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK
Which mentality?

45

Ostrich mentality.

Yes, they didn't want to know about it. They didn't know how to solve it; I think that was their problem. I haven't any doubt about that. Left us in no doubt that that was very sensitive material and no one was going to point the finger at Russia at that stage, so we got nowhere. In the meantime I had to operate as the Deputy Director of Personnel in charge of the demobilisation of the air force. That follows after the end of the war but perhaps you'd like to hear about one episode which may well have been the last operation of the war. I knew something was happening behind the scenes but we didn't know what it was but we had some big surprise which, of course, to be turned out to be the nuclear weapon. But the nature of it, not even the most elementary nature of it, ever got through to us we were so devoid of information. I got a message from command headquarters warning me that the end of the war may be declared at any moment. I felt that I couldn't cease operations because till I got it officially we had no authority to do that and we should do what we'd been doing all along, so I let this attack on this particular village go ahead and I went in as 'Tail end Charlie'; it was a squadron strength attack. We carried out our usual bombing runs and then having got the Japs out of fox holes, we hoped, we went down and there were Japs running hither and thither. They'd come out of the fox holes and we had to go around and strafe them with out dorsal and front guns blazing. We'd completed that and in fact I was the last to do it and I'd completed my run and I got a message through 'Cease fire', just like that and so we didn't have to do anything at that stage. We'd exhausted all our ammunition and weapons and we set course for home in a pretty cheerful mood, I might say.

So you knew it was the end of the war.

Oh yes, that was official but up till that stage I didn't know. A lot of people say - some people say, anyhow, that we knew before we set out on the operation. I can assure you officially I did not know but had reason to believe it might occur.

So it could have been the last operational sortie of World War II.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

46

Yes, I dare say I'd get a lot of argument about that. And, of course, from there on I was posted back to headquarters after a very generous ration of leave, happily with the family.

How did you adjust to peace-time after the war? There's been much discussion about people that come back from Korea or the Gulf War, the enormous problem they have of making that adjustment back to peace-time and the residual violence which they often hold within themselves? How do you feel about that?

I can understand them. My position was rather different from a great majority. Most of those had been enlisted for war-time operation only - been dragged away from universities and very lucrative employment perhaps and good prospects and they couldn't get out of the show fast enough. Those who wanted to go probably, if they were held and we had to hold some, had a period of resentment I would imagine. I certainly was very frustrated because we'd gone into the process of seeking[?] a post-war air force on the basis of our strength before we were mobilised and that left us with a very small air force and very few permanent commissions to give, and certainly very much reduced ranks. I was feeling frustrated, too, because we had quite a number of people that were anxious to take up a life with us and we could award permanent commissions to a limited number and there were others who we had to let go and proclaim that we'd bring them back when we knew what the size and composition of the force was going to be. Now, a lot of those blokes seemed to settle down pretty well because we couldn't lure them back afterwards. I don't know how they reacted but it seems to me they must have got on pretty well otherwise they would have declined the life to which they'd become accustomed.

But there was no counselling, was there?

No.

There was no seeking out the services of a medical officer or psychologist.

Oh yes, I can assure you, yes. When we started out in this operation the air member for personnel was Air Vice-Marshal Hewitt and I was one of the members and we had John Clarke[?] who was a psychologist, that's all, just the three of us, I think. John Clarke was very, very helpful. It was the first time I'd come in contact with a psychologist because he showed us how to put square pegs in square holes and so on but pointed out first of all what the qualities and qualifications of a

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

47

permanent officer would have to be. Then we had to circulate and advertise the fact that we wanted them and then we had to interview them. A funny situation occurred here. The Minister for Air insisted that we have a psychiatrist on the board - we already had a psychologist but he wanted a psychiatrist there. Our first port of call was to be over here in the west. We assembled over here and the psychiatrist was to join us here but then we had a last minute message saying, regrettably that he couldn't attend because he'd been admitted to a mental home. I thought that was marvellous because I didn't have too much confidence in having psychiatrists - I had plenty in a psychologist after meeting John Clarke - and so we never had a psychiatrist on the board.

What about the people who'd left the service and were having enormous personal problems from the residual effects of war?

I wouldn't know about those except for those who elected to come back to us. I was a bit disappointed to find that we didn't get back the numbers I rather hoped to get back or the people we had tentatively selected which suggested to me they were not having any problems in settling down; but they would be a very small percentage of the community. I don't know how the rest would react because I was in a closed circuit again for all practical purposes.

What about your fellow airmen now? - now you're about eighty...

Eighty-six.

That's a good age. What about your fellow airmen that are still close to you? Do they ever talk about the residual effects of war?

Never. I don't think I've ever had anyone raise the situation. I meet a lot of them because I'm the patron of two associations: one is the Western Norwest Air Crew Reunion; and also the Beaufort Squadrons Association. I met many of the war-time people there. The permanent force people have gone for the most part, Paddy Hepburn[?] is about the only contemporary of mine and very few others. The [inaudible] I think have all retired, so I don't get a chance to make comparisons there. But the fact that these two associations are very lively and get a very good patronage from the survivors which suggests to me that they have nothing but good feelings about our lives, and must have done reasonably well

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

48

after they've settled down because, of course, they'd be a very small proportion of the community. That's my only insight on to the people who've left.

Just talking about people again. In 1948 you were appointed as Commandant of the RAAF Staff College, and so you came very much back to a people's empire.

Yes, quite right. I came back to the youngsters, anyhow. There's quite an interesting angle on that because we were not overwhelmed from what must have been a very attractive scholarship because we took them in under very generous terms but we didn't get anything like the quota. We thought we would have trouble picking the whole variety of geniuses who were offering but it didn't happen that way; we couldn't even get our quota. We had to wait till some people qualified at that year's university examinations.

You think there was a backlash against war, conflict.

Looking at it in that light, yes. I know some people couldn't get out fast enough. Had an amusing incident when We had a scheme, of course, which was something all three services were [inaudible] acquired points for longevity of service, your marital status, whether you attended a university and had to interrupt courses, attractive possibilities of employment and so on, and we discharged them in accordance with that weighting. I got a message or rather a communication from one parent who wanted me to accelerate the discharge of his son who was resuming his university course. I enquired into it and I didn't do a damn thing about it except to note that he was on the point of being discharged. He was discharged and believe it or not I got a case of whisky in the mail which was a gross embarrassment to me because I had to find out who sent the damn thing and get it back to him at my own expense. That's an incident, it hardly pertains to the question you posed.

When you were made Commandant had you any indication that you might be put forward as Chief of Air Staff?

None whatever in my opinion. I felt I might in time qualify to be considered; in fact I reckoned I'd have to be. I'd har a fair amount of experience in different appointments and I'd at least got some operational experience behind me, so I might be amongst the runners but I never thought much about it quite frankly. I was very happy to do what I was given to do and I

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

49

enjoyed doing that and that was reward enough, and this is not a 'line shoot', it's exactly how I reacted.

One of your ambitions was to attend the Imperial Defence College which in fact you did in 1951.

It wasn't an ambition; it was an expectation. I wasn't fighting mad to do it or anything like that - determined to go there. In fact when I went to Point Cook I believed that I was going to be sidelined thereafter because I expected to be kept in that appointment for at least four years and after four years I'd be of such an age that I wouldn't have too much time left to plough back into the air force what the Imperial Defence College had given me. So when I was posted there I thought, bad luck, but I wasn't bitterly disappointed; I'd just expect that and look forward very much to doing a job I'd been given. When I was actually posted I was disappointed because I liked doing what I did and, anyhow, I'd decided I was going to go on the land which had always been my first love and at that stage I would have the means to do it.

What did you get from IDC?

I know the biggest benefit was the contacts I made. You were on friendly terms with everyone there. You had a chance to call a spade a spade. You had a range of speakers which were probably unequalled in the world because we were lectured to by people from the Prime Minister downwards: ambassadors and so on. Being the heart of London all these people were available to us. One of the conditions, of course, in going there was the selection was from people who had been through the ordeal of operational experience and when you spoke you had to listen to them because at least they'd survived and had been promoted rightly or wrongly anyhow, and we had the benefit of a wide range of viewpoints, particularly the Americans coming in. They were the only exceptions made, normally it was from Commonwealth members only. We lost the South Africans for reasons that are pretty well known and we had navy, army, air force and a sprinkling of people from the public service - people in Foreign Affairs, Defence and so on - so we could get the benefit of the bureaucrats' point of view. We had the benefit also of people on the staff who had been through the mill and was of those was Bill Oliver[?] who turned out to be a tremendous [inaudible] later on because we resided at the same residence and he and I used to walk through Hyde Park and Kensington Park to the college every morning together. He used to arrange for me to go on to the Continent to do work which or get experiences which I wouldn't have got if I'd stayed doing

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

50

the mundane things that we did in our intervals between the courses or the periods of the college.

It must have been a wonderful time for consolidation and reflection.

For the first time in my life I could take time off to look at the world in proper perspective. When you're in the service you had so much to do you never really had the time to digest the intelligence information that was coming to you or stand back doing that. The fact that we had to solve problems that were real. They'd present a scenario to us which was current and we formed up into planning groups - balanced with the right number of member in the services and leaders appointed who acted as prime minister or foreign secretary, what have you. We were expected to give rational solutions to the current problem posed. The staff also would provide a solution; but what I admired about them most was that they made it quite clear to us that this was not the official solution, it was one solution which they believed would be effective, and they're simply using it later on in their analysis of our solutions to try and reach conclusions about our values and that was very good. In addition to that we were also sent around different parts of the Middle East and other areas, Europe was one, Middle East was another, and I've forgotten what the third option was - I think with the United States forces. An interval of about three weeks, I think, was allowed for this when I chose to sample the Middle East because that seemed to be the area in which Australia may be doomed to operate in future. At this stage the Far East had not risen in prominence or importance. What I liked about that, we were sent off there and we were treated as VIPs and allowed to listen to the views of the government and the leaders of the country. When that was over we were unleashed on a cocktail party [inaudible] the civil leaders of the country, and that was one good method of comparing the view of the man in the street, the practical operator, and the official one. That I felt was a very strong point of the Imperial Defence College.

It was really a great precursor to your appointment as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, wasn't it?

More so than I expected, much more so, because I thought, well, I'll kiss these blokes, so to speak; when we leave here I'll never see them again but I was utterly wrong. I met many of them again and again at different appointments in the world. For instance, Bill Oliver came out to Australia as United Kingdom High Commissioner and I had many official and unofficial talks with him in his capacity then when he was in Australia. I met him later on again when he became the

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

51

Commissioner General for the UK exhibit at Expo '67 and we helped each other enormously there. Now, that has got little to do with Defence but it has a lot to do with cooperation between two countries to the benefit of both, and others whom I've met from time to time on perhaps less important occasions but useful for opening doors and so on, that more so perhaps than the training I got because I wasn't prepared to act as a forceful leader on these occasions. When I say that, I prefer to extract the views of my colleagues on the committee and perhaps I might have been more forceful than I was. On the other hand I've always believed in listening to what people want to tell me but not necessarily being bound by that because if you don't listen to the various advice you can make some awful boo-boos. In the long run you are the bloke who's got to accept or reject that advice but you're not bound to take it; [inaudible] useful way to go.

Did you find difficulty adapting to the position of Deputy Chief where in fact you worked for two Chiefs of the Air Staff during your period?

None whatever, I enjoyed that. I got on quite well with George Jones, apart from my tiff over appointment in operations, if you call that a tiff.

Did you find Air Marshal Jones very different than when he was operating during the war?

I can't say that I noticed much difference at all. No, I can't say

How would you compare him with Sir Donald Hardman[?]?

Donald Hardman was way ahead of him. Donald Hardman was a very smooth operator. He also was a thinker. I got the impression first that he was a socialite or something like that but no, he came up with surprising comments when I least expected them from him.

Why do you think the government decided to bring in a Royal Air Force officer?

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

52

They felt that no Australians had had that experience to command the air force in the appointment of CAS and Scherger, in particular, was bitter about it.

What was your opinion?

We certainly hadn't had the range of experience that our RAF officer would have. We'd been denied the opportunity, and this is why Scherger was bitter, of ever having a senior appointment where things were really happening; that was the European theatre to start. We made a very big contribution in air crew and the most senior bloke we ever had perhaps was a wing commander. I think Martin who came through Paddy Heffen[?] had a non-operational appointment in a non-operational base but that's about as far as we went and we made a much bigger contribution; that which entitled us to take command of something, anyhow.

You think Scherger should have been appointed at that time.

I think he should have been given a go, yes.

Because what was the difference between Scherger at that point of his career and later when he got appointed?

I'm just trying to go back in time now. Scherger had had experience commanding 9 Operational Group; that was the leading edge, our teeth, that we contributed to the war, and that was a real one because, as I said, Kenny believed in employing our fighter squadrons and that's what they consist mainly of there. He was unlucky in as much as his tenure was interrupted by an accident when he was thrown out of a Jeep, but he went back after that to complete his period of service there. He may have lost something as the war dawned closer to its conclusion but he's got a lively mind, he's a good leader, first class pilot - he had all the attributes. Donald Hardman on the other hand had a good deal of political savvy because he'd been reared in an environment where you had to take account of that. The other thing that Scherger was well qualified throughout his experience in Malaya - Malaysia as it now is - he had some of the best training you could ever expect of an officer because there in that appointment you had a whole variety of the elements of armed warfare: bombers or strikers, fighters, reconnaissance.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

53

Air Marshal Scherger must have been extremely disappointed about Sir Donald Hardman taking the slot and at one stage he may have thought of resigning.

I don't know if he thought of resigning, Ken, I wasn't party to his beliefs at that stage but he had every in my opinion to be disappointed because he'd had very good experience. He'd had operational experience as the AOC of 9 Group where he commanded the leading edge of the air force - the fighter element which were highly regarded by our allies. Later on he had the experience of commanding in Malaysia, Malay Command as it was called then and later called 224 Group and that was superb experience because he would be party and privvy and to the councils of the political forces in life up there, together with all the law enforcement that you got from the police force plus the army, navy and air force. It would be perfect training for the appointment of CAS.

At that time the British were performing their atomic tests - one was at Montebello[?]. What was your attitude towards the Brits deciding to perform these tests in Australia?

I certainly wasn't against it. I have never believed we should be a nuclear power because it's beyond our capacity to be effective in my opinion but I believe we should ...

END TAPE 3, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 4 SIDE A

... beyond our capacity to be effective in my opinion but I believe we should remain abreast of developments so that if we should ever have to go nuclear, we wouldn't have a big gap to bridge before we entered that field. In fact I used to follow very closely what was happening at Woomera and later on, of course, I flew up to Broome, I think it was, where one Lincoln squadron was based for sampling purposes from the aftermath of the explosions at Montebello Islands. But to this day I still don't believe that we should be in the nuclear field because if you look around and see what has taken place you have had an absolute striking revolution where conventional arms are becoming more effective, in my opinion, than nuclear weapons because they're much more flexible and don't provoke the storm and diatribe that entry into the nuclear world will do. We've got an incredible capacity now to strike accurately and

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

54

rapidly. I'm just getting ahead of myself here. I just hope that our leaders will understand what has happened.

Just going back then, you still had a very full career ahead of you after you were appointed Deputy Chief: in 1955 you were sent to London as Head of the Australian Joint Services Staff and then before being appointed CAS you were given command of RAF Malaya and in fact when you came back to Australia you were given Home Command which was later called Operational Command and now is termed Air Headquarters.

That's right. Yes, I was very, very lucky. I just couldn't believe my eyes here I had two plum appointments and I get to the third one, I couldn't quite comprehend. That's why I say I've been terribly lucky in my life.

Can you give us some highlights from those three appointments that you had before you were Chief?

The one in London, I was not resentful but reluctant to go because I'd had a pretty long bout of serving staff appointments and this was yet another one but I'd been on very good terms with the Secretary to Defence, Sir Frederick Sheddon[?]. I was representing him in discussions arising during the formation of SEATO. He seemed to be well satisfied with what I was doing and he briefed me before I went to London and said that 'information seems to have dried up from London and I want you to do what you can to restore its flow'. Well, I didn't know exactly what he was referring to because he was the recipient of what information did come out there, so he must know what he is talking about but I was left in no doubt whatever as to what was required of me, and that was to get a flow going so that we could see the inside story of what was happening and what the thinking was in the defence circle in London, not the RAF - defence circle. My official contact was Mountbatten, believe it or not, but he wasn't the bloke I had my dealings with. I had a very good offsider, a Colonel McKay[?], who later became Major-General McKay, and he wormed his way around the defence circular planning staff and he got me an appointment with the Chairman of the Joint Planning Staff and I had a talk with him one day. I persuaded him to give me, every fortnight, about half an hour or so - brief me unofficially on what was happening; the news behind the news, etc. I sealed that by remarking, 'Perhaps you can give me Hancock's half hour'. 'Hancock's Half Hour', I think, sold the problem because he was humour of the time, the comedian of the time, Tony Hancock, he's well known and I think by cloaking my approach under that name it tickled the humour of the Joint Planner. Anyhow, I had regular meetings with him, although I

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

55

had occasional contacts with Mountbatten. I used to observe Mountbatten when he was going to official parties. It was very, very clear to me that he would go to these parties with one thing in mind only, or predominantly anyhow, to get information or a solution to something that he wanted to or he needed to make personal contacts unofficially. I used to see him make a dive into the crowds and just single out his victim or his target every time and the moment he'd achieved what he wanted, off he'd go home. That's only a sidelight. I never got that close to him as that, I wasn't big enough for that purpose but my contacts with the Chairman of the Joint Staff was first class and I got stuff going back, apparently satisfying Sheddon. We did quite a lot of official entertaining there and it proved to be very satisfying inasmuch as I, too, would target my ...

Call them 'victims'.

That's exactly right.

It was really the halcyon days, wasn't it?

Yes, everything was very good.

There was a fair amount, there were generous expenses, the pound was in good shape.

You've got it in one, as a matter of fact. I don't say everything was hunky-dory but it was far better than we'd been accustomed to. Normally the social circuit is the killer. Australians just don't know any sensible limits to the thing; they'll keep you there till one o'clock and two o'clock in the morning and drink your whisky and so on which I don't object to but I object to the late hours, particularly when I was Ox[?] Command.

Were you still a teetotaler at that time?

Yes. That's not true. I'll have an occasional sherry perhaps about once a month; one of these outrageous binges I get on to. It didn't handicap me in any way at all. They accepted me eventually in that role. Anyhow, promptly at about ten-thirty you'd hear the rustle of the ladies' skirts and you knew that that was the time for departure and they all departed like a well regimented squadron and so it made the social life much easier and I could carry out other activities which I was lucky

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

56

to do because I also got access to some jet flying when I was there.

You flew a Vampire over there, didn't you?

I started off with a Vampire and that was a chosen vehicle for the Chief of the Air Staff who also had been an instructor at the Staff College say back, and I can't remember his name offhand, but I got access to a Vampire which I enjoyed because I'd go out there every week and get flying - real testing flying - in pretty tough conditions under instrument control, and then Desmond Boyle[?] took over. Desmond Boyle was a charmer but he didn't like a Vampire, he liked a Meteor, so he got a couple of tame Meteor's stabled out at North Weld[?] where I used to go and it my amazement he allowed me to continue on them. I got a conversion to Meteors over there and continued a lot of what I'd been doing before, so I remained a pretty flying practice even though I was in a desk job all the time. Stood me in good stead later on. May even have contributed to my appointment to Malaya Command or 224 Group. I liked that. I found it rewarding. I couldn't see what productivity I created by it. All I know is I got information out which apparently was what Sheddon was looking for.

Did you believe you were probably being groomed because, certainly those three appointments were exactly the right areas before becoming Chief of the Air Staff?

No, I didn't believe I was being groomed. It didn't occur to me, as a matter of fact, because they were tossing up I think When I'd finished my 224 Group appointment, Malaysia, they were tossing up whether I was going to be AMP or Support Command or Home Command, that is, Operational Command. It didn't occur to me. They may well have been doing that for all I know. I don't know what goes in the hierarchy in the way they do these things.

So Air Marshal Scherger never took you to one side and said, well, there's a possibility this is going to come up?

No, not at all. You can hardly believe this but there was no consuming passion in my life to become Chief of the Air Staff, certainly quite glad to get it because it was a seal of approval, anyhow, as far as these things can be and every job I had turned out to be very attractive inspite of my approaching

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

57

depression at the time. They turned out to be much better than I thought they would be.

When you were appointed Chief of the Air Staff what did you see as your immediate priorities?

I haven't any doubt about that, at all. I had to get a strike aircraft - above everything else. I almost didn't care what happened to the other members of the service. That's not quite true but I was determined that one thing would happen, that I'd get a replacement for the Canberra because while it was a delightful aircraft to fly and I loved every minute in it, it was not an effective deterrent. What sticks out a mile is here we are, in Australia, and we have to wait till someone gets over our soil and all we can do is put up our fighter umbrella. That's all you can do. You've got no real deterrent power unless you can reach out and strike a potential aggressor from his base organisation.

How did you go selecting the potential aircraft, and in fact which aircraft did you look at?

At the time I got into office there was nothing, no aircraft which selected itself. There were quite a number on the drawing boards and doing what I intended to do, I made very certain I was kept up to date on all developments in those areas. In fact we were going to be laden with the Star Fighter, the F104, at one stage. McCauley[?] had picked it, again, with no real modern flying experience, and Scherger had the courage to say 'Not on your nelly. This is not the aircraft for us.'

The F104 was sort of comparable, I guess, with the Lightning - short range, very high performance.

Yes, and very high wing loading and a killer unless you handled it very well. I had a trip in the Lightning and I could see why the thing was unpopular with pilots, anyhow.

What was the reason it was unpopular?

She had the gliding angle of a brick, to start with. She took a very long run off to get off the ground. Her controls were pretty limited. They always called her the 'widow maker', I

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

58

think - something like that - because it had no visible means of support. It seemed that the ...

Certainly the F104 they used to call the widow maker.

That's the one I'm talking about.

Sorry, I thought you were talking about the Lightning.

I don't know that the Lightning was a potential, was it? The only Lightning I know of was the RF[?]. Did the RF have a Lightning? Now, I'm with you as a matter of fact, yes; I had a lapse of memory there.

It's okay, we were talking about Certainly during that time the Mirage replaced the Sabre and then we were looking at potentials for, as you said, the replacement for the Canberra.

It never occurred to me that the Lightning was even the same field because of its range. One thing it stood out a mile. Whatever aircraft we got as a strike aircraft, by that I mean what we used to refer to as a bomber, had to be capable of covering the sea gap because the problem I visualised was not a hostile Indonesia so much as a hostile Indonesia as a cat's paw for the USSR, and it could threaten us and we had no means of countering any threat except by saying, 'We'll hack you from the skies with out fighter aircraft' - you surrender the initiative entirely, you see. We simply had to have something which would get across the ocean and threaten potential bases.

Just on those two replacements for the fighter and the strike aircraft, was there an enormous amount of resistance in Defence and from the other two services about replacing the Sabre and the Canberra?

I couldn't speak with any authority on that. The other services certainly Certainly there was resistance against replacement of the Canberra because they felt that would gobble up too much of the Defence vote but I think probably as far as the navy and the army were concerned, they'd appreciate a strike aircraft for tactical support; but I can't speak with any authority, I had no real method of sensing what happened or if I did, I've forgotten what the reactions were.

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

59

But certainly on the bomber which you took a great deal of interest in, how did you go around making sure the right aircraft was selected?

I worked like a Trojan on that. I worked at every level I could. What I wanted to establish in everyone's minds was that the Canberra had to be replaced because it didn't have the range to pose a deterrent force and that was tested by its capacity to bridge the sea gap. If it could do that, it could do any other job that might occur.

You're talking about the sea gap up to the north of Australia.

Yes, and the worst part, of course, is from here to middle part of Indonesia, but that's another story. So it had to meet those conditions. I set Geoff Hartnell[?] to work on preparing a document which was an appreciation of the situation we might be facing and I pointed out to him, he had to pose two situations: something in the event of being faced in South-East Asia on the mainland, Indo-China, with posing a deterrent or contributing to a deterrent from a potential Chinese or USSR, more particularly Chinese, inroads down to South-East Asia. Another situation - we're in a fortress Australia concept. And he produced a very good paper in that respect. So good that I persuaded the Minister for Defence to invite Townley[?] and Shurge[?] to come across and listen to Geoff Hartnell present this paper because I wanted them to understand what I was getting at and this was the best way I could think of getting it over, and they came. I didn't test them afterwards to see what they felt about it. On top of that I also undertook a tour of all operational bases in the service and other important ones and got the COs of those bases to call all the officer elements together, and I went round explaining my concept of the strategy for Australia, doing what they do now through the ...

Air Power Study Centre.

Yes, that's right. I hadn't the gumption to try and put it on paper. I went around and personally I did this because flying with navigators and safety pilots for [inaudible] training and so on, I could detect a current of belief that the function of the air force was to act in support of the other services, and this was the antithesis of what I visualised for our strike aircraft. I recognised that the other services needed their support but in my book the first thing that came before any of the others was to get this deterrent power where none of the other elements could do that; we'd have to wait for

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

60

the people to cross the channel, so to speak, before we could fire a shot in anger or deter them. And so I went around to the bases and exposed myself to questions posing this sort of a theory. I don't think I was unfair by indicating other services were unimportant but I didn't give them the support that I gave for the replacement of the Canberra.

Did you feel any incursion by the army and the navy when you were CAS, as happened as you mentioned in the 1930s?

Not directly in that shape. They were always trying for their own. I think our struggle was, we were all struggling for the same bolt of cloth and I was prepared at one stage if necessary to quit my attempts to hang on to the tactical side of the service. This was before we got helicopters in any strength, but that was a sort of last resort because the navy was determined to have the carriers, the army was determined to have control over their ground support, and they were always aiming towards this and pointing out that they'd have no certainty of support when the time arose.

So you were not surprised when the army eventually got the helicopter.

Not in the least, no. I knew they always wanted to have control of their own light aircraft. I think it was satisfied, I don't know whether it was my time or before, when we supplied the light aircraft. I must say that worked pretty well in New Guinea but it was on the basis that 'thus far, no further'; it would stop at the light aircraft and not venture into the fields of medium or heavy aircraft. I had a damn good feeling that if it did what would happen, they were insisting on their demands being met and the air force would deny what I felt was its most vital element, that is, a deterrent force - the Canberra replacement. It seemed so natural to me, I couldn't understand that there would be any argument about it because we'd always been taught that the best form of defence is offence and you get in and you fight the battle on your grounds rather than waiting for the chap to dictate the terms.

So in fact now the army has got the medium lift helicopters in the Black Hawk now, they're now also going to take the Chinooks. Do you believe that's in the best interests of the Defence force?

No, I do not, at that level at any rate there may be some argument as to who should dictate the terms and control administratively and operationally the light aircraft. You

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

61

might even treat those as the ordinary vehicles that everyone uses but past that level, certainly not, because I think you switch then to meet the conditions that apply at the time, in other words by a centralised command, and that's another chapter we're opening up: who's going to control, but that will be dictated I suggest by the strategical situation of the time.

If we just switch back again to the strike aircraft, you obviously realised that you needed aircraft with great potential. At that stage you were not aware of any, even at the design stage.

Yes, dead right. That's why my hand wasn't very strong. Although I felt I'd prepared the ground in justifying a strike aircraft that was a real deterrent, I couldn't say to the Minister, 'This is just what we want', but I'd kept on talking till I'd become a bloody nuisance; in fact I was matted by Townley on two occasions, maybe three, because I'd spoken a bit strongly about the need for a ...

Was this publicly or in committee?

No, publicly. I used to go and talk to RSL meetings and anyone else who wanted to listen. I didn't make it as blunt as you might suppose but I pointed out that the outstanding need of the air force was for a replacement for the Canberra. I think - I never confirmed it by exploring it - but I think that Townley himself had stated in Parliament, at least my staff told me that Townley had stated in Parliament that the overriding priority for the air force was the Canberra replacement. I thought with that sort of backing I couldn't go wrong in being a little more blunt than I might otherwise have been but I got so blunt, I think, that Townley put me on the mat.

Do you believe that the Chiefs of the service should have a voice to the community as opposed to learning just one voice in Defence, say, the Chief of the Defence Force make those sort of comments?

You'll be surprised to find I do not believe the chiefs ought to speak to the community. The United States' chiefs are permitted within a certain field to talk direct to the community but I believe that the forces are the servant of the Crown and what the forces have to do is make crystal clear what their advice is to meet certain situations - leave them in no doubt whatever about it and do everything you can to persuade them. If you fail to do it, that's bad luck, that's the way a

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

62

democracy works. Never had any doubt about that. Otherwise you'll break up ... at least I would expect to break up in chaos but it just so happens that the United States seems to have taken the second route and seems to be intact as far as I can gauge.

How far did you get with the potential purchase of a strike aircraft after your four year term as Chief of the Air Staff?

Do you want the story? Well, I became such an irritant that eventually There's another thing before that. Townley tried to fob me off by saying that he would try and secure funds. I should tell you that Townley said once we'd purchased the fighters, the 100 Mirage, we had no more money for anything else, and that to me, of course, was a desperate situation, so desperate that I opposed the purchase of fifty fighters. I was against it. You may think one was crazy for doing that but this was gobbling up all the funds and destroying forever, as far as I could see, a chance of getting a replacement for the Canberra.

So apart from the 115 plus Mirages that we got, you were in favour of cutting that by fifty to ensure that we got the strike aircraft.

[Inaudible] of not getting it, yes; put it that way. Only because I wanted to preserve funds for the replacement of the Canberra if and when a super aircraft became available, and I kept on about this and I opposed so many blocks that I even objected to forming Tyndall[?] because that would take more money out and we could do without Tyndall but it was a lower priority in my book. And so it was very clear to Townley that I was going to be difficult about this. He tried to persuade me first of all to accept replacement for one squadron. I said, 'No, that's not viable. If we have to maintain an aircraft forward, there's not a hope in hell unless we've got another one back on the mainland to support it.' So very ruefully I settled for two squadrons. I felt at the time I'd sold the air force down the river doing so. I believe since I didn't, but that's another matter. Anyhow, to placate me he said, 'Well, I'll let you go and do a trip around the potential suppliers of your replacement'. I suppose I could have done the same job from the office but I hoped against hope that something would turn up to give us a reasonable chance of getting what we wanted. So I set off with - we've been talking about him - as the principal of the party and I had representatives from the maintenance side and supply side and another chap whose name is important but I've forgotten and I'll leave it for the time being. We'd settled on or I had

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

63

settled on, anyhow, that we were going to look at the TSRII[?] in England which had a lot of promise; the Mirage IV[?] in France. In the USA we'd look at the Vigilante which had been reworked. It was very much upgraded; it was basically a naval aircraft.

Was the Phantom in that list, too?

No, I put in though because I was looking at the prospect of using it with refuelling capacity. I didn't want to rub it out if it could become effective. The requirement was that these aircraft would have the range to get to Indonesia, we specified what the range would be; that it would have a high level and low level capacity for delivering modern weapons.

END TAPE 4, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE B

... it would have a high level and low level capacity for delivering modern weapons. At that stage I had very high hopes for the Bullpup[?] which I had discovered when I went to the Philippines that the air force there was training in its use. It had already become an operational weapon. It was a guided bomb in effect; I won't say more than that at this stage. You may want to push me on it later. I visualised the Bullpup being a primary weapon or some descendable[?], but the primary weapon of our strike aircraft, and so it had to have those capacities and it had to have a terrain following capacity in particular because that's the only way we could see for a strike aircraft to survive in a very hostile environment.

Why the capacity to get to Indonesia? Is that because of the confrontation and the problems we were having with Indonesia at that time?

Yes, I felt quite certain that Indonesia was not going to be a threat to us, as such. I had visited there on one occasion and been very well received. They extend the hand in a very marked manner of friendship. Anyhow, I couldn't see it becoming, under its own steam, a real threat to Australia but as a satellite of the USSR, I could see all sorts of trouble brewing and that was the only threat I ever foresaw from Indonesia and that's why I specified the capacity to cover a certain distance and so on. And so I set out and went to London first and got a great reception there because I had potentially a few million dollars in the bag. It wasn't up to me to do it but I would

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

64

have quite a significant voice in making recommendations so they gave me the red carpet treatment. I looked over the TSRII and I was most impressed with it. It had got one ...

Had it flown at that time?

No, it was on the point of flying, though. We spent a lot of time poring over the aircraft. It had a limited reconnaissance capacity. In fact we didn't know what it was going to perform as a reconnaissance aircraft. It had a limited terrain following capacity but certainly what seemed to me the most advanced of any at the time but didn't meet the specification in every sense. The biggest factor against it in my opinion was the cost. The cost was going to be They gave us a tentative cost but they weren't prepared to stick by it and I could see that thing being anything up to two or three times the cost we had in mind.

What was the tentative cost, can you remember?

Look, I couldn't tell you at this stage. I couldn't tell you, I just don't remember. I don't think I even put it in that book because my memory wasn't good enough and I didn't want to go down on something that wouldn't stand up to a volatile critique. Anyway, I knew it was beyond anything that we were talking about - or would be - and so we went on from there, as I say, impressed but by no means convinced that was the way we should go. Then we went to France where we saw the Mirage IV which I had a flight as a passenger, and that didn't begin to meet our requirements. It had no low profile, no terrain following capacity. It didn't have the range so it was purely a formal visit to show we'd been trying, anyhow. From there I went on to America and there they rolled out the red carpet for me. They gave me and my team a reception at which the Chief of the Air Staff was present and America's Roving Ambassador whose name escapes me for the time being.

It wasn't Kissinger, was it?

No, not at that stage. This chap was very well known but he was a Roving Ambassador. He was at the dinner party and hosting, from what I remember. We were being taken very seriously. I think the first place we went to was people who built the Vigilante - one of the leading aircraft firms of America. Andy[?] and I had a flight in one but Charles Reed[?] had a flight in another in the capacity of pilot under supervision. I was impressed with what I saw because it had been updated very considerably. It had barely the range we

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

65

required. It had a TFR capacity but a pretty crude one. It had a very good reconnaissance package. Its price was certainly well within the perception we'd formed about what we could afford. It was the best we'd seen in one respect except for the TSRII. We went from there to General Dynamics to check out on the TFX, as it was called then, and at this stage it was only in a wooden mock-up form, and you may wonder what the point was in viewing it there, but it had such an attractive performance and met our requirement in every detail that I didn't have any hesitation in proclaiming publicly later on that it was the ideal aircraft for the RAAF but, of course, it was untested, hadn't even into production. Anyhow, having been through that I thought I'd have a look at the Phantom because the Phantom might be a starter provided it had an effective inflight refuelling capacity, and happily the F4C[?], that was the United States Air Force version, was not fitted with a TFR and its range was very short of what was required. I was given the opportunity to literally fly as captain under supervision the KCV[?], that's a refuelling aircraft, a tanker, and both was applied and I went to operate the boom for refuelling so that I had a pretty good feel for the problems that might occur - anyhow, the environment in which we'd have to operate. And so we put it in on our list and outlined its limitations and so on. Having done that we'd completely very perfunctorily what we set out to do and I came back to Australia and I pondered for a long, long time. None of what we saw, and I knew this before started, was going to fulfil our specification and I wasn't prepared to take a gamble on the TFX or the F3F[?].

One-eleven.

And so I wrote a report which outlined the limitations of all these aircraft and recommending that we should go for the Vigilante. I was less than honest when I did this and I've come out and said this in my oral record. The F111 had a plan for producing 3,000 of these aircraft and we all know - anyone worth his salt will know - that any aircraft when it first ventures out into its operational role always has teething troubles, very serious troubles, and ours were amplified by the fact that we were buying a new concept, a swing wing aircraft - a variable sweep aircraft - so that was added to the problems we already had and we didn't know what the price would be. The price I was given was very much short of what I expected the price would be and in fact I had no hesitation in declaring that it was unpriceable, that it could be any price, and I certainly knew that the price quoted to us was not going to be obtainable. Furthermore, I got a personal message from the top echelon in Defence to ignore the price that was given to us. And then I went back and made my report. It was a lousy report, I thought. I didn't deal with the situation adequately. What it did point out that nothing really offered

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

66

us a solution to our problem except the F111 and that may be years away. I certainly couldn't accept the production time that they gave us nor could I accept the price, therefore, I propose that we should settle for two squadrons of Vigilante, and so it looked to me as though it was going to be an aborted effort but by this time a good deal of heat had been generated for the replacement of the Canberra. I suppose I may have contributed to that by what I had to say. I put in my report and because of this public discussion. In fact it was more than that; the press were hammering the government and they had to go into damage control situation so they sent Townley to America. Townley went straight to TFX, General Dynamics. They quoted him the price that they'd quoted me and Townley came back and recommended to the Cabinet that we should buy the TFS sight unseen, so to speak, at this very attractive figure which I knew to be inaccurate. However, that's the way politics go. To my surprise the heat was so great that they decided to take the TFX on those terms and so the government got out of a tight political situation by saying, 'We have solved the problem of the replacement of the Canberra'. Now, I was full of fear because I knew what we were sailing into. It was no surprise to me that everything I'd forecast about the TFX came home to roost; in fact in a bigger way than I'd ever expected because the problem with the groan[?] in the wing swing. Anyhow, they tried in the meantime to write us off with the offer of the B47[?] I think; it was a six engine aircraft. I pointed out that there was no way we were going to get this aircraft before 1970, not 1967, and so they countered that one by the United States Air Force offering to lend us a B47. I had been sent into coventry at this stage and I was completely bypassed - one of the sourest times of my life. At no stage did I have any input into the decision about the TFX but I did insist on flying the B47. In fact I took it off from Amberley and flew it all the way to Darwin on instruments where it performed very well, indeed, and then the captain whose seat I'd taken over, took it over for the tactical strike on the airport there. I dismissed the B47 very quickly. I said it's no more than a long range Canberra - no damn good to us. It's not going to perpetuate the techniques of modern strike aircraft and so on. Anyhow, as you know, the decision was made to buy the F111C eventually and we had to soldier on with all the problems that were generated and we damn nearly lost it half a dozen times. It was a mistake or rather it was a selection that was the right one made for all the wrong reasons because it was a political reason, none other than to quell the uproar that had been generated over the successor to the Canberra and I've had to live with that ever since. I'm delighted to find out how it has worked now and, more particularly, I can't believe that they just decided and I mean decided to buy another fifteen F111 'H's or 'G's, I think. So that has capped my satisfaction but more particularly the consequence of the war in the Gulf has brought air power to a zenith and beyond any question. It's shown that conventional weapons can be far more effective

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

67

and flexible for our purpose than any nuclear weapons could ever be, and could do with the small number of aircraft, such as two squadrons which I thought was a sell out because of their increased accuracy and performance; so I've been on a high ever since. As an aside to the rejection of the TSRII, I should have to tell you that it was bitterly opposed by Mountbatten because I believe the cost of the aircraft in its final form, he felt I understand and I've got no firm authority for this, that the cost would be so high as to distort the amount of funds that were available for the other two services and if I didn't kill it, which I'm commonly supposed to have killed, he most certainly would have I think.

Your thoughts about Vietnam.

I believe very firmly in the concept of arresting the tide of Communism as it flowed down through South-East - not South-East Asia - out through Indochina, whether it was under inspiration of the USSR or China. I believe very firmly it had to be arrested there and more particularly as far as Australia was concerned before it got within reach of our boundaries. Therefore I had no hesitation in supporting it. But what I did object to, and I objected to in the Chiefs of Staff Committee, was the deployment of Australian forces on grounds not of our choosing. The drive of Ho Chi Minh and also the Viet-Cong was such that they were totally familiar with the terrain and environment there and to think that we should put in forces against them on their chosen ground was totally unacceptable to me. But on the basis that we put in a force which would be a defensive force and undertake only so much offensive capacity as was necessary to protect themselves, I agreed that we should certainly provide air support in the form of the Caribou to act in much the same way as the RAF did in Malaya in my time where they were a tower of strength in giving support to the villagers and other forces which could more effectively counter the surge of the Viet-Cong in their outward. But I also felt very strongly that we'd been sold down the river by the media. They'd got into American homes and had got the voice of the people to present the United States in the role of the aggressor and the facts of history are that it was the North Vietnamese who crossed the seventeenth parallel which had been agreed at Geneva as the boundary between the North and the South and no matter what you may say you couldn't get away from the facts of history and I had no hesitation for that reason in providing support as within our means where it could properly be given, and so I went along with the recommendation that we should send an element into South Vietnam to support the ground forces and villagers. One very interesting experience which I would like to record and that was a long interview of some two and a half hours with President Diem on one occasion during my visit to South Vietnam. He, with the aid of an

AIR MARSHAL HANCOCK

68

interpreter, took me whole of the development of the struggle in Vietnam and displayed so much capacity to remember the detail of it that it left me wondering whether he may have interfered too much with operations because of his detailed knowledge of it, but probably not. What I did then derive from that interview was a conviction that Diem was indeed a real patriot, otherwise how could he possibly have persuaded 200,000 Vietnamese armed forces to continue the struggle against North Vietnam and I've been wondering ever since why it was that the USAF or rather the USA were supposed to have connived at his assassination because every subsequent president has been unable to command, as far as I can see, the same loyalty as Diem did. [Inaudible] well after all the events, I'm quite convinced that the battle for South Vietnam was lost in the television screens of the American people and to a lesser extent Australian. I've always believed that had we kept going we may well have redressed the situation and forced North Vietnam back across the border. In particular I have it on good authority from one Australian army officer who was a direct participant in this activity that the United States did not live up to their promise to replace aircraft lost or rather war material lost or destroyed on a one to one basis, and that may well have tipped the balance against South Vietnam.

Air Marshal, you've had many other experiences during your four years as Chief of the Air Staff, and after thirty-six years in the RAAF you were given the ultimate accolade of a knighthood. Do you have any regrets about your term in the RAAF?

Pretty good question and a searching one, Ken. In fact I did have regrets earlier on as I think I recorded about continuing on after the war because of our failure to be ready for defence when we needed it most but as things developed I was delighted and very satisfied indeed that I continued my life in the air force because it has given me a wonderful life and I'd be happy to follow it out again, repeat it, mistakes and all for the satisfactions I have derived.

Air Marshal, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW