ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: this is an interview with Air Commodore David Hitchins at his home at Geraldton, Western Australia on 2 July 1993.

Air Commodore, you joined the RAAF in February 1942. Why the Air Force?

I don't like walking and I was scared of getting drowned. I've always been fascinated by flight and by aeroplanes since I was a small boy; I guess that had something to do with it.

How did you take to flying?

I'd never flown until I was taken on a familiarisation flight by my instructor, old Jimmy James, when we went to Cunderdin to learn to fly Tiger Moths, and that was the first time I'd ever sat in an aeroplane and I didn't know how I'd react to flying until then. I found out that it was pretty much what I'd hoped it would be and I thoroughly enjoyed flying, I always have done.

Did you find yourself a good student?

I think I probably was a reasonable student. I went solo in the regulation seven hours which in those days the instructors weren't allowed to send you solo in less than seven hours and I managed to do that without any real problem. I was very keen. I was very young then. I was only just nineteen and I was as

keen as anything along with most of the other fellows who were there; we were all keen young fellows then. Yes, I think I was probably a reasonable student. I certainly wanted to learn to fly and I was trying like hell to do well.

What sort of lifestyle did you have as a young student air crew?

Initially we joined the Air Force as aircraftsmen second class which is one or two steps below the 'Untouchables' and we were a pretty well knit group of young fellows at 24 Course that went into Pearce at that time. I suppose all the Empire Air Scheme courses would feel pretty much the same. We were good friends and we still are. A lot of us meet in Perth now and that side of it was great for a young man. We had pretty good instructors. We were volunteers. We weren't there because we'd been driven into the Air Force. We'd all joined the Air Force because we wanted to. Every day brought new interests and new something that we'd wanted to know about or wanted to do. I don't know that parade activities and crushing the gravel down flat with our feet was quite what we wanted to do However, it didn't do us any harm and most of the drill instructors we had there with one or two notable exceptions were jolly good fellows and they were good fellows to know.

At the end of your career you were Officer Commanding RAAF Base Pearce and the attitude towards instructors and

students was very different to when you were a young man, wasn't it?

Oh no, I don't think so. In the later years when I was commanding the base at Pearce and jobs like that the whole Air Force had become much more professional than it was when I joined it. Flying when I learnt to fly - flying had been going on a long time then - was still very much a matter of intuition and how you feel about it and I suppose there's always been something like that in flight and hopefully there always will be. In later years when the whole thing became much more a numbers game, I'm sure that the quality of instruction and the quality of training had in those - what are we talking about? thirty-odd years had improved. I'd say that without question. I don't know that it was any more enjoyable or any more human activity but certainly I was most impressed when I was at Pearce in 1976 and '77, early part of '78, with the quality of the instructors, their knowledge, their professional knowledge, and their ability to impart knowledge to others. I thought they were jolly good.

When I've spoken to other pilots who went through your era, the attitude of instructors towards students was very different. In these current days it's always more reasonable. In those days, as you said, you were two below the 'Untouchables'.

When we started our flying training we were then promoted and we became Leading Aircraftsmen, Then nice people used to invite

us out sometimes. But no, the attitude between ... the relationship between us and our instructors was wonderful. The fellow that taught me to fly was a little bloke called Jimmy James; I think I was his second pupil. He was later on one of the senior 727 blokes in TAA and Jimmy and I were friends right up to the time he died a few years ago, and I mean real friends. We used to chiack one another and even when he was a .... He was a Pilot Officer when I first met him. He became a Flying Officer while we were at Cunderdin. We used to go to dances. I pinched his girlfriend once which I suppose was a silly thing to do because he could have scrubbed me, couldn't he? There are lots of those instructors - not too many left now - but a number of them who are still around Perth - old Jack Ewers rang me yesterday, he lives just near here and we are great friends with all those old fellows. There are a crowd of us that meet in Perth from time to time. I don't think we could have improved on the sort of relationship that existed between the trainees and the instructors in the early part of 1942 when we were learning to fly.

What about the night you had to drive one of your instructors home?

I was sleeping in the hut where we all slept and a torch was flashed in my face and it was the orderly sergeant who told me to get up, asked me who I was, I told him. He said, 'Yes, I've been to come and get you. You're to go up to the officers' mess straight away and report yourself to Squadron Leader Dyer. Squadron Leader Dyer was our flight commander and I think his

wife, Zoe, still lives in Perth and I hope she won't mind me telling you this story because I'm telling it in the kindest possible way. Clem Dyer was a very popular bloke; everybody liked him. So I was to go up to the officers' mess and report myself to Squadron Leader Dyer and I asked why and the fellow said, 'I don't know but I've been told to come and get you; you better get up there'. So I did. Here was Squadron Leader Dyer, it was a bit late. Squadron Leader Dyer before the war had been a racing driver and had also done a bit of racing with aeropleanes. He was a very experienced fellow. I was to drive him home a couple of miles down the road into the little township of Cunderdin where he lived in his Lagonda, and this Lagonda was about a block and a half long, a huge racing machine about which I knew absolutely nothing. He piled himself into the passenger's seat and told me to drive him home. I had some fun getting that Lagonda out through the gate and down the road but I eventually did. He then disappeared inside and I left, parked his Lagonda somewhere beside his house, I think. I then had the prospect of walking a couple of miles back to camp to get back to what was left of the night's sleep. Why I was sent for, I don't know, I never found out. However, when we completed our flying training at Cunderdin and we'd done our thing there we were around for a day or two waiting to go to Geraldton and Clem Dyer said to me one day - he stuttered, old Clem he used to st-st-stutter - he said, 'I'm g-g-going for an air test, you'd better c-c-come with me'. So away we went and he really showed me then what a .... He said, 'I'll sh-sh-show you a few things that are not in the s-s-

syllabus', and he really did show me some things about flying the Tiger Moth.

What sort of things did he show you?

He showed me how to do gliding aerobatics. We climbed right away up high in the Tiger - or high for a Tiger, anyway - and stopped the prop. and we did gliding aerobatics all the way down and finished up with a dead stick landing in the middle of the airfield, and then I had to get out to swing the prop. He was a nice bloke, Clem.

It must have been a very proud moment when you were awarded your wings at Geraldton?

Oh yes, indeed it was. The fellow who gave us our wings was then Group Captain Norman Brearley, later on Sir Norman Brearley of great aviation fame in Western Australia and I'd like to think that I had a little bit to do with naming the present Geraldton airport which was reconstructed and rebuilt some seven/eight years ago I'd like to think I had a little bit to do with having it named the Brearley Terminal. He, of course, was a very famous World War I fellow, a famous instructor, and had seen a lot of operation flying. He was badly wounded during aerial combat in World War I and yes, it was quite a day when he gave us our wings. I can just about show you the spot on Geraldton airport where all that happened.

Did you have a particular aircraft you wanted to fly after graduation?

When I joined the Air Force I knew very little about aeroplanes and even less about the Air Force and there was only one thing that I really had in my mind and that was to fly a Hurricane and join a squadron with Paddy Finucane. The Hurricane was the aeroplane that I had in my mind when I joined the Air Force.

But in fact they sent you to Beauforts.

Yes, after we completed our flying training at Geraldton - and then I did a navigation course at Cressy. I don't know why I did that because I had never shown any particular bent for navigation. I think it was quite an expensive and advanced course that a lot of permanent Air Force blokes would have given their eye teeth for, and instead of that they sent me and a couple of other young very raw sergeant pilots. However, when we'd done that, yes, we went to the Beaufort O.T.U which had just then been moved to East Sale; we were the first course of trainees to go into East Sale.

On the way to Cressy, on the train there was a number of German POWs that had been sunk on the '*Kormoran*'.

Yes, we travelled from Western Australia across the Nullabor; that would have been in late November, I think, 1942. It was very hot going across there and we travelled in cattle trucks and there had been cattle in the trucks before us - that was

most obvious - and occupying the first class carriages on that train were a lot of Germans and I think there were some Italians with them too, I've forgotten. We queried this and said, 'Why are we travelling in cattle trucks?' because we were after all brand new sergeants and very much aware of our own importance and why us in the trucks and the Germans in the first class accommodation?'. It was explained to us that they were survivors of the Germain raider, *Cormorant*, which had been in the battle with the *Sydney* off just north of Carnarvon, as far as we know they were being given the best treatment possible as prisoners of war, which they then were, in the hope that that sort of information might get back to Germany and have some bearing on the kind of treatment that our POWs were receiving from the Germans.

As a young man what was your attitude towards those Germans?

I don't know that I had much of an attitude towards the Germans. I had always been brought up .... My father had been very badly wounded in World War I and I grew up, like most of my generation, I grew up in the shadow of World War I and every family would have had some uncle or a father or brother or somebody who had been wounded or killed. All the people you met or much of the discussion in family circles was about the war, World War I, which of course was fought mainly between Australians and the Germans. And so I grew up along, I think it would be right to say most of my generation didn't have any particular regard for the Germans. There were lots of things

we heard about and the fact that they'd been killing our uncles and so on. My father had some quite extensive wounds on his body which were caused by Germans and so I suppose I didn't really like the Germans although I don't suppose I'd ever met a German; certainly not a German German. There would have been a few around Australia. I know the blacksmith across the road from our little house when we first moved in, he was a German but he was a kindly old man and I used to rather like him. But no, I didn't think we had any particular attitude towards the fellows we met on the train, if that's what you're asking me.

> Because at that stage of your career you really had preferred the option to go to Europe rather than go to the Pacific theatre.

We didn't know anything about the Pacific theatre, not really. Yes, we joined the Air Force before the Japanese - and began our training .... Well, we joined the Air Force anyway, volunteered for training before the Japanese came into the war, and the entire focus of our endeavour was to go and fly against the Germans, yes.

> When you were at the operational training unit at East Sale you were flying these Beauforts which had at that time a terrible reputation.

Yes, the Beaufort aeroplane was not the most popular flying machine around but we were very, very callow and inexperienced. We didn't know anything much about aeroplanes never mind about

Beauforts or anything else. We heard all the stories about Beauforts being dangerous and so on but so were Wirraways and just about everything had ... there was a story about just about everything. I think probably most of the instructors in the Operational Training Unit at that time were ex-Hudson blokes, with a few exceptions,and they were all fellows that had grown to like the Hudson very much and had a lot of time for it. Most of them had seen service in New Guinea and Malaya and perhaps in Darwin and other places where our Hudson squadrons had been and they didn't have too much time for the Beaufort, really. They reckoned that the Hudson was a better aeroplane and in some respects I'm pretty sure it was.

A large number of crews were killed flying that aircraft at East Sale.

Yes, there were quite a lot of people killed around Sale and they weren't all young fellows that were learning to fly and were killed through inexperience. There were some quite experienced people, very capable pilots who were killed in various accidents. There were 700 Beauforts built, if I have the figures correctly - I think that's right - and somewhere I saw some figures put out by some official source: of those 700 aircraft built at Fishermans Bend, over ninety were lost in accidents around Bairnsdale and East Sale.

That must have really put the wind up young air crews.

Well, I think .... I don't know that it really put the wind up us. You were given a job to do and you got on with it and I think most of us, as I said, we were very inexperienced and we were delighted to find out that we could fly what was then quite a modern style of young twin-engined aeroplane that wasn't the easiest aeroplane to fly. We were interested in trying ourselves out, see if we could handle this aircraft which we found out we could. We were very interested in putting our crews together and getting off to a squadron somewhere.

Some of your low flying experiences are worth telling.

After we had done the standard Beaufort OTU training at East Sale, a few crews were sent to do an additional course at the torpedo OTU which was then at Nowra, near Jervis Bay. The Beaufort, of course, was designed primarily as a torpedo bomber and it wasn't a real bad torpedo bomber either, and of course the torpedo business involves flying low. Most young fellows - any young fellow - that was learning to fly in those days used to sneak off and do a bit of low flying and hope to goodness he didn't get caught; that was the cause of a lot of accidents. When we got to torpedo OTU they said, 'Righto, you young fellows, you wanted to learn to fly low, did you? - well, we'll show you what it's all about. This business of flying low at fifty feet, that is not what we mean at all. We mean to fly really low.' And we were trained to get your chap sitting in the turret - we had a crew of four in the Beaufort: a pilot, navigator and two gunners, one of whom occupied the rear turret - and he would keep on talking to you and say, 'Come down' -

this is flying down over the water until he could just see bits of spray flying out the back of the aeroplane and that was when you were at ten feet and that was when the instructors who would be watching from another aircraft or perhaps from a ship, we had a target ship in Jervis Bay, and they'd say, 'Yes, that will do. Now that's what we mean by flying low.', and it was frightening. I didn't like flying as low as that. I don't think anybody did.

There were a couple of incidents, weren't there? - related to that very low flying.

Oh yes, my goodness, a lot of people hit the water and I know one crew, a fellow who was later our flight commander, he surged to a standstill in the water, bounced a couple of times and they all finished up in the dinghy. There were only minor injuries, I think. The aircraft sank and they were in the dinghy. Charlie Walsh, the pilot, had a bald pate and right in the middle of his bald pate there was a boot mark, the heel mark of a boot, and the only person that could have put that there was his navigator on the way out who would have come from the front of the aeroplane, put his foot on Charlie's head and levered himself out of the aeroplane. I don't think he was ever quite forgiven for doing that.

Did you feel as though you had the right preparation when you were posted up to 100 Squadron in New Guinea?

Yes, I think we were .... Yes, we were given every opportunity to learn what we needed to know. Of course, no-one ever knows it all and I do believe that it took most of a tour of operations for any pilot in any of those operational squadrons - I don't mean just pilots either, I mean navigators and gunners and all air crew. After you'd done most of a tour of operations you started to feel that you were confident about what you were doing and that you felt that you could fly with some authority. When you first went there you certainly didn't know anything about the place, really. You had to feel your way along and find out and, of course, unfortunately - I think this was very much the experience in Europe also - it was in that early stage of people who are trying to settle down and apply themselves and apply the things that they'd been taught in their training that was when a lot of people got caught out. And casualties amongst the new crews were generally higher than amongst the more experienced fellows.

What was the bonding like with your crew?

We were four very dissimilar people. During our early stage of our OTU training we were all bundled into one of the messes, I think it was the trainee sergeants' mess, and told to form ourselves into crews on a voluntary basis and that's how my crew was put together. My navigator was the only officer in the crew. I was a flight sergeant, the two gunners were flight sergeants and both senior to me; in fact they were the senior blokes in the crew in terms of service experience, and the navigator was a brand new pilot officer, a bit younger than I

was. We all came from different backgrounds and we had very little in common except that we were all keen to get in there and do what we joined up to do. The two gunners were the only survivors from a very nasty Beaufort accident a couple of months before we met them, all the other: instructor, pilot and navigator in a Beaufort went in and they were all killed. The two gunners, wireless/air gunners, were the only survivors, and they came into my crew. And I've always thought that they must have been something less than enthusiastic about starting off their training again with another brand new young pilot that they didn't know anything about. They knew that there were accidents going on around the place, just the same as everybody else. In fact they knew very well indeed; they'd been involved in one. I've always been - I took my hat off to them then and on reflection I'm a bit inclined to take it off and keep it off because I know a lot of people who wouldn't have faced up for a second turn around in the way they did.

What were your feelings? You flew up on an American C47 to New Guinea, didn't you?

Yes, funny how you remember little things. We took off from Townsville. We'd been waiting in Townsville for a few days and then we went to Milne Bay in a 'Yankee' C47 flown by a big tall young 'Yank', lieutenant - I still remember him - and the name of the aeroplane was *C Biscuit* which was the name then ... of course, C Biscuit was part of the Yankee rations which were

pretty horrible and Sea Bisquit was the name of a then famous American racehorse.

When you landed to this hot fetid environment in New Guinea, what was your immediate reaction?

I can't remember exactly. I don't think I liked it very much. I was thinking to myself, "What did I do to get sent to a rotten dump like this when all those other blokes are on the *Queen Mary* going to England?" - something like that. because nearly all our course did go to England, only a few of us stayed and went to New Guinea.

Can you describe the lifestyle up there of young air crew? I mean, it wasn't that easy; there were all sorts of diseases that you could pick up.

Living conditions were unpleasant. Milne Bay is a rotten place in the wet season. I think it gets something like 400 inches of rain per year and war-time conditions anywhere are awkward of necessity; it's not set up as a rest camp. 100 Squadron when I went there had just suffered some very heavy casualties in attacks at Gasmata and we were the replacement crews so there were plenty of empty tents around. Somebody said, 'Well, sort yourselves out and grab one of those tents down there'. I can remember moving into a tent with the other three blokes and the place stank, as everything around there stank of fetid, rotting vegetation. I can remember putting my kit bag down on the earth floor of the tent and I think it was only a few days

later I went to pick it up and the bottom fell out of it because it had gone rotten. Food was decidedly average and the whole place was muddy and raining and it was an unpleasant environment.

There were no girls around?

I don't remember seeing any. I think there were some around but they were very dusky and not of our culture.

Can you describe a typical raid up in New Guinea - one that you can recall?

The first raid we did was against an airfield near Rabaul. Soon after we went there the Beaufort wing of three squadron, number 6, number 8 and ourselves number 100 Squadron, we did all sorts of bits and pieces for a while and then there was a concerted effort against the Japanese base in Rabaul which was, I think, then the biggest Japanese base in the Pacific. The first operational flight we did was a night bombing attack against a place called Vunakanau which is an airfield some thirty miles, I think, south of Rabaul on New Britain; that was our first raid. We were a new crew, of course, and I think we were given that one as a fairly easy target. It was some distance south. The main Japanese defences were concentrated around Simpson Harbour and Lakuna airfield and Tobera, if I'm pronouncing it correctly, which is just south of the harbour. As I say, the first attack we did was on Vunakanau and it was pretty tame. There was a bit of flack around and few red

lights which we hadn't seen before, a couple of searchlights which again was the first time we'd seen hostile searchlights and somebody gave us a green light from the control tower, somebody flashed a green Aldous lamp at us. I've never known whether the Japanese air traffic control bloke, I suppose he was the duty pilot as we would have called him in those days, whether he made a mistake and thought I was a Japanese aeroplane looking for landing instructions or whether he was trying to con us in some way. I don't know.

Sir, what were you bombing on that raid? - you were dropping two-fifty pounders.

250 pounders and 500s and the object of the whole exercise was to keep the Japanese airfields neutralised in that area. The Japanese Air Force, - I'm talking now about November - we went to Milne Bay on, I think, it was 7 October '43 - so I'm talking about November/December 1943 and the Japanese air force at that stage was on the downgrade. They had lost air supremacy in that area just.

What was your typical bombing profile?

When we were attacking airfields like that we never went to Rabaul in daylight, thank goodness. We were bombing at night and our usual method of dropping bombs then was to climb as high as we reasonably could on the way into the target. You'd pick up an identity point so that you could position yourself before you approached the target, made sure that you knew where

you were. We'd climb as high as we could, of course we didn't have oxygen. The aeroplane having been built as a torpedo aeroplane, they didn't think oxygen was going to be necessary and when they changed our role from torpedoes to bombs, we still didn't have any oxygen. But anyway, following the bad experience of Gasmata and some of those other places where aircraft had been lost - a lot of Beauforts were lost at Gasmata through bombing around 1500 feet which surely was unwise, however, that's what happened. During our later attacks we used to climb as high as we could, fourteen/fifteen thousand feet which used to leave you a bit breathless even though we were fit young fellows and then dive down to somewhere about ten and release your bombs at about 10,000 which was just above the level of the light and medium anti-aircraft fire. Also there was heavy ack-ack in Rabaul which would go a good deal higher than that but there wasn't very much of it. Frightening things there. The thing that frightened me more really than seeing the red lights going around was the searchlights; they were a big deterrent.

Was the Japanese fire very accurate?

No, I don't think it was particularly accurate. I don't know really what prediction methods and what technology they had with their ack-ack but surely to goodness if they'd been very accurate we'd have lost more aircraft than we did. I think most of their ack-ack fire was based upon their ability to pick you up in the searchlights and then fire into the searchlight or they'd tried to cone you between three searchlights if they

could and having done that they would then fire visually into the searchlight cone.

What about Japanese fighters?

I never saw Japanese fighters during daylight. Our gunner reported fighter coming behind us one night when we were over near Rabaul. I've never been really convinced that it was a Japanese. He probably acted quite correctly in saying it was, but it was a very fair chance it was another Beaufort, there would be a lot of Beauforts around there within a few minutes and then, of course, we'd all be off like mad; as soon as you'd drop your bombs you'd get out of there as quick as you could.

Your other great enemy up in that country was literally where you were flying - flying into a granite cloud, as you often called it.

New Guinea is a tropical place. There's a lot of moisture in the air with clouds and rain and so on, and of course it's a mountainous country and it's a bad combination. We were inexperienced. When I went back to New Guinea quite a lot after the war, when I had accumulated a few thousand hours and we had aeroplanes like DC3s which were equipped for blind flying much better than the Beaufort. We had aeroplanes like C130s with all sorts of modern advantages and I used to often look back and think we must have taken a lot of chances getting around in this country when we were inexperienced and we had an aeroplane that was bereft of real navigational aids. We had

good navigators. We had all sorts of standard advantages but navigation aids we didn't have and if you got stuck into some bad weather at night-time, it wa a very worrying business.

Can you recall an incident where it was literally luck that you and your crew survived?

Oh no, I don't think I can. I can remember getting back one night into Goodenough Island when we were based there. For various reasons: weather and also the fact that we thought there were night fighters after us, we went a long way out. Somewhere from Rabaul we went out west towards Lae and then headed back into Goodenough, and I think we had some trouble with weather getting home and anyhow, by the time we got on the ground and got ourselves into the operations room we were just in time to see the fellows wiping our names - erasing our names - with the blackboard rubber from the strike board. And so we said, 'Hey, just a minute, we're back'. When we got back to our tent some time later than that, all our shirts had gone. A good serviceable shirt and a pair of decent clothes was a prized possession and we got back and the blokes had raided our tent and knocked off all our clothes. We had to go around and try and get them back.

In fact some of the crews got quite twitchy up there and there was an incident where a pilot went out of his tent or the area where you were sitting and returned with an axe and tried to attack his navigator.

Yes, people were under stress. We weren't all getting around with our bottom lips down. There were some pretty good cheerful times there. One of the things I remember a lot about Goodenough Island was a beautiful waterfall that came down the side of the mountain and tipped down about fifteen feet into a lovely big rock pool. We used to swim there it was a beautiful place. We used to play poker which of course is forbidden. We had lots of recreation amongst ourselves and it was not altogether dismal and gloom but yes, there were fellows who were under stress. Some of the fellows who were there, of course, were not all inexperienced like us. There were some of the previous generations, which means they were about three years older than we were, and there were some fellows, including the flight commander and the CO, who were on their second tour of operations and they were pretty experienced blokes; a couple of them had been shot down in other places and they'd seen a lot of the war before we knew them. Some of those fellows were under considerable stress. They'd had a bad time in other places. Some of the fellows who reacted, I think, to stress were the very inexperienced blokes who'd never been away from home much and it wasn't so much the stress of the possibility of being shot, it was the stress of being isolated and having to make decisions for themselves - isolated from their family, I mean - in unfamiliar surroundings. I think that was the sort of thing that affected a lot of blokes. I remember one guy, a very nice fellow who'd gone through all his trainings, the same as anyone else, and he just went forward to the flight commander - he disappeared - and he said, 'I'm very sorry but I can't cope with this'. It must have been a very

difficult thing for him to do but he did it. He said that he didn't feel that he was doing the right thing by his crew, he didn't feel confident and that the best thing that he could do was to admit it, and he did. I often thought that he probably did the right thing.

He might have showed a lot of courage.

No doubt he did. I'm quite sure he did. I can tell you that there were plenty of times when I went out .... I can remember going down one morning when we'd just gone to 100 Squadron and it was my job to do the local - there was a standard daily patrol that went out from Milne Bay. You had to fly down this narrow-gutted bay and get yourself out into the Bismarck Sea and it was primarily an anti-submarine patrol. I can remember going down there and it was raining and the mud everywhere and the aeroplane I was getting into looked ugly and I thought to myself, "My goodness, this is a hell of a way to earn a living, I wonder if I really should take off into this rotten weather and how the devil am I going to back when I've been out for about six hours". I can remember having to give myself a good hard kick in the bum to get on with it, and I'm sure I wasn't the only person that felt like that; I think a lot of people did.

Yes,one fellow did get up from the table. We'd been sitting having our meal at a bench outside the thatched hut which passed for a mess at that stage. It was a hot place and the meals weren't particularly appetising. There was kunai grass

and not a very attractive place. This fellow got up quietly from the table and the next thing I saw him coming from opposite where I was sitting. He'd been around to the wood heap which was near the cook house and he'd picked up the axe from the wood heap and he was about to brain his navigator. A couple of fellows grabbed him and he disappeared, poor fellow. I think he was very disturbed and we didn't see him anymore.

What did the RAAF do with him immediately? They must have actually had to restrain him and send him out as soon as possible.

I don't know. I do know that he was taken away to the sick quarters and our doctor was a man called W.A.R. Smith - a very fine fellow - he was known 'Battle' Smith, funnily enough with initials like W-A-R. They got this bloke and headed him off down to the sick tent, to the medical section there and I honestly don't know what happened to him after that.

Air Commodore, what about some of the characters in the squadron?

One very outstanding recollection I have was our squadron padre. His name was Debenham. He was an ex World War I soldier who had taken to the cloth after the war and he was, by any standards, a character. I could talk about 'old Deb' for hours but one thing I do remember about him was. He'd been across- there was this deep gully separating our camp area, tented camp on a hillside,- across through this gully to the nearby

squadron; I think it was 6 Squadron. Deb had been over there one night, got lost on his way back and was down in the bottom of this gully and couldn't get out and he was yelling out, 'Ho, ho, ho' which was his war cry. Any time old Deb wanted to attract attention he used to come up with the ho, ho, ho business. He was carrying on in the middle of the night down in this gully. I can remember a whole lot of people telling him to shut up, he was waking the whole camp up. I don't think he got back until the following morning. Another thing I can tell you about old Deb on a rather more serious note. We had a very bad situation at one stage where the particular anti-personnel bombs we were using used to hang up on the underside of the wings. You'd think that the bombs had gone and they would fall off on landing and several aircraft were lost because the bombs had hit the runway and exploded. And there were several aircraft blown up on landing because people didn't know that the bombs were there. After that, while the electricians and the technicians and the armourers and all the people whose business it was to deal with such things, they were trying to sought this lot out. When you walked out from your briefing before going out somewhere, Deb would give you two large pieces of rope with a bulldog clip on each end and a piece of rope about six feet long with big piece of red bunting tied on it. He said, 'Never mind about all these other fellows, you clip those on the tail fins of those external bombs, the red bunting will trail out behind them and you'll be able to see whether the bombs are there. If the thing is still there when you come back before you land, don't land, jump out and that will save us a lot of trouble. It was a very

practical and simple thing to do but it's something I've always remembered.

Was the padre a very important element of the view of the detachment?

Yes, it was always a good thing to have an understanding padre around and I don't mean a hand holder and that sort of thing. Deb would was a wonderful bloke. One of the things he did .... In our ration packs which you could open when you were on some of the longer trips, there was a very nice little cellophane package full of raisins. Deb used to say, 'Don't throw away those raisins if you don't want them, always let me have them I can take them down to the hospital and use them there'. It wasn't much later that if you went to have a talk to Padre Debenham or have a game of cards with him or if he wanted to sit in on the poker school which he often did, Deb would produce a very reasonable glass of raisin wine which he had made. Just about that time, the CO, Dick Thompson, who was a very good bloke, he was confronted by two service policemen who had come from somewhere else around the island and they'd heard about the wine. Of course, New Guinea was a dry area and these fellows had raided the padre's tent and found a considerable quantity of this wine which he had made and he used to dispense around the place with - I'm not suggesting he was an old drunk, he certainly wasn't – But if somebody needed a glass of wine, well, that would be all right, Deb would fix that up. Anyway, he was then, of course, asked to explain why he had booze in his tent and he explained that it was sacramental wine which

he'd made for proper purposes. He got away with it for a while but I think the day of reckoning eventually came. Another little story on a similar vein that I can tell you is that I went down to Port Moresby to pick up a new aircraft for the squadron. There was a big repair depot in Port Moresby and I brought back an aircraft that had been serviced there. While I was in Port Moresby some fellow who'd come up from the south sold me, I think it was, three bottles of gin which is a thing that I don't like. Even now I don't like gin. But there were lots of fellows around the place who liked a drink and I think I paid six quid which was an extortionate amount of money each for these bottles of gin which I took back thinking that I was being a very good chap and someone else would like it. When I got back there I found out that someone else had taken an aeroplane down to Townsville and filled the bomb bay up with bottles of gin which they'd bought out of bond down there for a few shillings a bottle and so nobody was particularly interested in my gin at five or six quid or whatever it was. So I thought I'd better get square somehow so I borrowed a vehicle from somebody and headed off round the island - this was on Goodenough - and I found a place where a whole lot of American negroes were mending trucks. I went in and said, 'Any of you blokes interested in buying gin at six quid a bottle?' and they said, 'Yes, we are'. I think a bottle of whisky in those days brought about twenty quid if I remember correctly. However, I went back to the vehicle and dragged out my three bottles of booze and took them over to the these big fellows. There were a dozen or so of them there and they were all built like the Harlem Globetrotters - they were all six foot six

high. I handed over these three bottles of booze and these fellows crowded all around me and they said, 'Just hang on a minute. There was another Australian fellow down here the other day and he sold us some gin and when he'd gone we found that it was water and we're going to check this lot before you go.' That I can assure was one of the biggest operational frights I ever got because had it been water, and I didn't know whether it was water or not, really. Obviously it wasn't water or I wouldn't be here talking about it now. But that I can assure you gave me a very nasty fright.

How did you get away with this drinking when it was supposedly a dry island?

There wasn't much drinking went on. The advent of a bit of grog here and there was very seldom and beer and stuff like that we never saw. Fellows made - there was a horrible cook in 100 Squadron. He used to steal half the dried fruit, things like dried apricots and tinned peaches. Somebody in the armed services must have bought a warehouse full of tinned peaches and this horrible cook whose name doesn't matter, he used to ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

There was a horrible cook in 100 Squadron. He used to steal half the dried fruit. Things like dried apricots and tinned

peaches. Somebody in the armed services must have bought a warehouse full of tinned peaches and this horrible cook whose name doesn't matter, he used to steal this stuff and make jungle juice out of it and sell it to the Americans. The Americans would pay .... I think he had a still out in the tall jungle kunai grass and he used to distil off this booze which he used to make and sell it to the Yanks for a quid a bottle, I think he used to get for it. It was quite a good business, on our rations.

It must have been a pretty potent brew.

Oh, dreadful. Yes, I can remember on my twenty-first birthday, the only time I ever .... Jungle Juice we used to call it. I can remember the only time I ever touched it - because we were all very young, we weren't drinkers - but on my twenty-first birthday we had a game of poker in the tent.

How did you celebrate your twenty-first?

With a game of poker and somebody found a bottle of 'Jungo' and we had that for a twenty-first birthday and that's the only time, I think, that I ever touched Jungo; it was horrible.

Round about that time you probably made one of your few flying mistakesin your life; you had a taxiing accident in a Beaufort.

Oh goodness, I'd rather you didn't ask me about that, but yes, that is true. I was taxiing a Beaufort along - I'd come some distance along a taxiway, I turned into a parking bay in the middle of which was a large tree, I was going a bit too fast and I hit the tree with the wing of the Beaufort and I wrecked it. Not an incident that I'm particularly proud of but I guess everybody makes a mistake once in awhile and that was a very expensive mistake that I made.

What were the repercussions?

I got a red entry in my flying log book. Later on there was a further investigation into that matter and it was shown that there was partial brake failure so some of the blame was taken away from me but it was primarily my fault. I should have tested the brakes and checked them before I moved into a confined parking area which I was going into in this parking bay. With revetments piled up around it and a tree in the centre, I should have brought the aircraft to a stop outside the bay and checked the brakes and I didn't, I just turned straight into it and it was too late and I found out the brakes weren't working properly.

Air Commodore, you returned to Australia in June '44 on an aircraft that needed extensive repairs and returned to Perth on leave. It must have been a great experience catching up with your family again.

Yes, I grew up in a little town called Cranbrook in the great southern area of Western Australia and my family were farmers there and that's where I went for leave after we came back from 100 Squadron. Yes, it was nice to get home.

How much leave did they give you?

I think it was about three weeks.

And you went from there back to East Sale to instruct on Beauforts.

Yes, I was posted back to East Sale and before we started instructing we were given a little course at Sale on how to instruct. Something you might like to hear about there. For the purposes of training instructors and for running the test flying on the base at East Sale - there were a lot of aeroplanes there - there was a little squadron called the Test and Instructional Training Squadron, called TITS, and by a remarkable coincidence the CO was a fellow called Sid Brasier.

Was it about that time they actually found out the problem with the Beaufort that was causing all these crashes?

No, I don't think that fault was identified until some time later. A lot of accidents were caused by the whole range of things that affect aviation: pilot inexperience; pilot error; weather; engine failure, although the engines we had in our Beauforts were pretty good, the R1830 Pratt-Whitney engine was

a damn good engine and really and honestly we didn't have a lot of trouble with them. Some of the Beaufort accidents were later on found to be due to failure of the elevator trimming tab. Now, that defect was not identified until, I think, it might have been early '45 when a fellow called Wing Commander Charles Learmonth was flying.

How did it affect the pilot when that problem came about?

The effect of the trim tab failure was to cause the aircraft to pitch nose down fairly strongly and it was beyond the strength of a pilot to hold the nose up because the elevators had gone fully down and it was just not possible, and of course the trimming tab itself which would normally be used to correct such a situation was inoperative and it was not possible for a pilot to control the aeroplane. Charlie Learmonth described this situation to two other pilots who fortitously were flying in close formation with him, just near Rottnest Island. They were from 14 Squadron at Pearce. From what he told them and from what they were able to see before he flew into the water at a steep angle and he and all his crew were killed it was then that the real problem was identified.

He showed great presence to do that.

Yes, indeed, he was a very experienced man, of course, Charlie Learmonth. Learmonth Airfield on North-West Cape is named after him.

Did you enjoy instructing on Beauforts?

No, but again we were still young and keen and if you were given a job like that to do you were prepared to get on with it, I do acknowledge that some of the experience I gained as an instructor, as I think anyone who tries ever to teach anyone anything, you learn rather more than they do and it was very valuable experience to be a Beaufort instructor.

The end of the war was coming about that time, what were your thoughts about your future?

I had rather hoped that I might .... I wanted to go and fly B25s and that didn't come off. I think there were a lot of people .... Towards the end of the war the place was embarrassed with pilots. There were too many pilots around and nobody knew what to do with them. There were fellows coming back from England. Anyhow, I just kept on instructing right until just after VJ Day and when the war ended I guess like a lot of other people, we all looked around at one another and said what are we going to do now? I had always rather imagined that I would go back to the land which is where I grew up. My father and a lot of his contemporaries all told me that land prices were inflated beyond all reason and that if I could stay in a job somewhere and earn a shilling, as we then did, it would be the thing to do - to wait until things returned to normal before attempting to buy land and become established in some way on the land. So I stayed in the Air Force which I

rather enjoyed. I was given the chance to go then to a transport squadron at Essendon, Number 37 Squadron.

You went back up to New Guinea for a short period of time.

A little bit of time in 37 Squadron flying around Australia from Essendon and then I went back .... I still had ideas of going back to New Guinea coffee planting. I didn't know anything about coffee planting but I thought it might be an interesting thing to do. So I was posted to Number 33 Squadron which was then based at Lae. 33, of course, had been a transport squadron based in New Guinea for a long time during the war and they were then at Lae and I flew with them and saw a little bit of the inland parts of New Guinea; places like Goroka and into the Wahai valley which we'd never seen before and was a revelation to me. We'd only seen the rotten coastal bits of New Guinea during our war-time there and when I went back and I saw all these wonderful places up in the highlands of New Guinea. It's just like going to another world and I was fascinated with this. However, 33 Squadron was disbanded not long after that and they were looking for some fellow to go and fly C47 aircraft with an air/sea rescue outfit then based at Port Moresby so I managed to get myself a posting there: a) because I thought it would be an interesting job for a while; and because it gave me the chance to further investigate the prospects of going coffee planting.

Now at that stage of your career you are also tempted to change your allegiance and you were looking at an offer from the Chinese Nationalists.

I don't know that I was going to change my allegiance but one night over a few beers with some blokes in Rabaul. Rabaul, of course, at this stage was back in our hands and there was a little tented mess there on the side of Lukunai airfield which had been our target in earlier times. A few of us were having a beer there one night and we were discussing a proposition put out by the Chinese Nationalists who were looking for pilots - Australians, Americans, anybody who would go and fly B25s for them in their war with the communists who were then opposing Chiang Kai-Shek. The more we talked about it the more interesting it became and we were told about the very attractive wages that were going and the excellent conditions that were involved. Things were a bit quiet around Port Moresby for a few days so I borrowed my own aeroplane - this will give you an idea of how slack things were in those days, you could get away with damn near anything. You'd never do it today. I borrowed my own aeroplane and flew it down to Melbourne, stopping on the way to get food and fuel and anything else we needed. Went into Melbourne and sought and was given an interview with the Chinese Consul. I told him who I was and what I was interested in and he gave me a very good hearing; he was a very pleasant man. He explained all the conditions and said, 'Yes, we'd be delighted to have you fellows come and fly for us and I've been asked to see if we can recruit people like you but one thing you must understand

is that if you go to do this you must set aside your Australian nationality and become a Chinese national'. At that point I grabbed my hat and thanked him very much and grabbed my aeroplane and went back to Port Moresby. It was an interesting exercise and that's as far as it went.

You came back to Australia eventually and then you had an opportunity to fly up to Japan.

Yes, after some months more or less on my own in New Guinea in that job which I enjoyed very much because it was the first time that I'd ever been able to get away on my own and do my own thing and there was a lot to do and there were plenty of interesting things to do in New Guinea then. However, yes, when we went .... I was posted back to 37 Squadron again which by then had moved to a place called Schofields outside Sydney and we were then, along with number 36 and number 38 Squadrons formed a wing called 86 Wing. Our purpose in life then was to run a courier service between Schofields, outside Sydney, and Tokyo which involved an eighty-four flying hours round trip from Schofields to Tokyo-and back again, three times a week. I did that four or five times.

But then you were posted up to Japan and you became the personal pilot to General Sir Horace Robertson.

Yes, after some time flying up and down between Australia and Japan they were looking for somebody to go to Iwakuni which was the main air base of the British Commonwealth Air Force near

Hiroshima. It was supposed to be a six month posting which I found interesting and with the assistance of my then squadron commander, old Kenneth Selby-Brown, a man for whom I had great affection, with his assistance I managed to get posted to Japan for six months. I found myself ... when I got there nobody knew what we were supposed to be doing and it was predominantly a fighter.. - the air side of things in Japan was predominantly fighter squadrons of the RAAF, the RAF, the Indians, the Royal Indian Air Force, and the New Zealanders also had a squadron there; but the whole thing was a fighter outfit. It was fighter oriented and nobody really knew what I was supposed to be doing because I wasn't trained in the fighter business. However, there was a small RAF flight there, number 1315 Flight. We used to call it 'quarter past one flight' and I finally grafted myself on to that small organisation run by a charming Irishman called 'Spud' Murphy, and I just flew with them for about six months on a sort of unnofficial basis.

But you did fly this general around quite often.

Later on. That posting was extended by six months and twelve months and so on and eventually I became personal pilot to the Commander-in-Chief of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force who was 'Red Robbie', Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Robertson and I flew his aeroplane for quite a long time. Of course, in 1950 the Korean War began and a lot of things developed from there. But I've always remembered with great affection my time with the RAF because while I was there the RAF Transport Command was a big organisation and this little flight was a far

flung detachment of that but the RAF Transport Command included an examination unit that went around amongst all the units, examining the pilots and the standard of flying, the standard of navigation and the general operating standard. It was started by a fellow called D.C.T. Bennett, an Australian, who had been famous in the Pathfinders in earlier times. While I was with the RAF there I sought an opportunity to fit myself into their training and examination system which I did and I gained a Transport Command Category and my Master Degree in Instrument Rating which was later on very useful to me in later years.

When you were...

Another job popped up and I was able to claim some justification for claiming that I should go there.

You recalled one incident when you flew 'Red Robbie' in severe icy conditions which you considered really quite dangerous.

Yes. There was one particular incident .... We did a lot of flying between Australia and Korea - I beg your pardon - between Japan and Korea and for the first months of that operation my small flight had then become - the RAF had gone home - and my small organisation with two Dakotas and a couple of Austers had become part of Communications Flight in 77 Fighter Squadron. And when the Korean war began that was built up with two crews from Australia, six, I think it was, crews,

five crews came from 38 Squadron in Malaya and we finished up with a squadron on our hands. There was no one appointed to command it and by default since I was there and had been for some time, I was a flight commander in 77 Squadron, I took over this collection of people who had arrived from all over the place and for whom no proper organisation had been set up. And certainly nobody knew who was to command the thing, so by default I did and that situation prevailed for quite some time. During that time old Red Robbie, of course, he became very much involved in things that were going on in Korea. He was the commander and when we had the British and the Gloucesters Battalion were there and there was one or two Australian battalions and 'old Robbie' was very much involved with what went on in Korea and, of course, he was a most experienced soldier in his own right. The particular incident that you refer to, I think, was one, late one afternoon we were waiting for 'Robbie' at a little airfield called Yong dung po which is in a river valley in the north of South Korea. Robbie appeared at the aeroplane and said that he wanted to go to Tokyo now and I explained to him that southern Japan, including Tokyo, was very rapidly coming under the influence of a typhoon and that all the airfields were closing rapidly, more or less while we were talking about it. By the time we got to Tokyo some four hours from where we were there'd be no chance of getting in reasonably to Haneda airport at Tokyo and there would be no alternate airfield that was reasonably available to us and so I suggested to him that it really wasn't on to talk about flying to Tokyo. Well, I reckoned without General Robertson because he got into the aeroplane which was his own private aeroplane,

sat himself down, did up his seatbelt and said, 'Hitchins, it is most essential that I get to Tokyo tonight. I don't want to hear anything about the difficulties, just get me there.' and he sat down. So away we went. I thought quite seriously of telling him to go to blazes. He said, 'I will accept any risk. I will accept any risk involved, just get me to Tokyo.' I thought, 'If it's as important as all that and the old fellow is himself involved and is prepared to stick his neck out, I really think the best thing we can do is to get on with it.', so we did. We landed at Haneda airport. We had total use of all the navigation aids, all the air traffic services, everything, every bit of radio in the Japan area was ours because we were the only aircraft airborne in that area. Fortunately I was in pretty good flying practice in those days, I was flying a lot, and I was familiar with Haneda, I'd been there many times. I knew, that the American ground controlled approach - it's a talk down procedure - at Haneda. I'd used it before and I knew that it was very reliable and of high quality. So they gave us a ground controlled approach into Haneda which was piled up with snow and there was about a thirty knot breeze howling with snow blowing horizontally and we landed with what I am sure now was about a thirty foot cloud base. I was very pleased to feel the wheels go down on the runway and see that we were between two rows of lights which I could see only dimly - this was about ten o'clock at night and I could just see the runway lights very dimly on each side and I was very glad to feel the wheels go down on the runway. We got ourselves off the runway and went across, parked the aeroplane and there it stayed for three days. That was a very

severe typhoon, a blizzard in fact; it took the form of a blizzard. All the traffic in Tokyo stopped, the water mains burst, the power lines came down and when we got back to our aircraft, Old A 65 114, three days later we had to get picks and things to remove the ice from around the wheels before we could move it. But yes, that was a very difficult landing.

When you were serving with 77 Squadron you also took the advantage of being converted to a Mustang.

One of my great cobbers of those times was a fellow called Bay Adams, he was then a flight lieutenant, the same as I was. He became an AVM later on. He was a very experienced fighter bloke and I taught him a bit about flying multi-engined aeroplanes and he taught me to fly the P51 Mustang. I did a few operations in the P51 with Bay. Used to cast the odd bomb and rocket into Korea on my day off.

That was a strictly illegal flight, I guess.

No, it wasn't illegal at all. They were duly authorised flights. I can't claim to have been a properly trained fighter pilot but I found the Mustang a very good aeroplane to fly. I liked it very much; it was a beautiful aeroplane to fly.

How did you find becoming a single-engined fighter pilot, really?

I wasn't a fighter pilot at all. I used to go across there and chuck a bomb and a rocket. It wasn't fighter pilot stuff in the real purest sense of the word but I'd always been interested in, as I told you before, I wanted to fly Hurricanes initially and the Mustang was the only aeroplane of that kind that I ever really flew. I loved flying the Mustang, I thought it was a great aeroplane to fly - really enjoyed it. Like a big Cadillac to sit in, it was a very comfortable aeroplane.

Nobody threw anything back at you when you were over the border?

Yes, don't worry, there was ground fire going on while we ... we used to attack ground targets - vehicles and things like that. I only did three operations. Oh yes, there was ground fire there, don't worry, but I don't remember seeing any flack or stuff that was scary, so if there was ground fire there, which there was, I didn't see it so it didn't bother me.

There were mistakes made during that time. You recalled about a hospital train being shot up by 77 Squadron.

Yes, the first operation - I think it was the first operation 77 Squadron did under the command then of Wing Commander Lou Spence who was killed in Korea. They attacked a South Korean hospital train. The strike was under control of an American airborne controller who directed them onto that particular target, later, sad to relate, found to be a South Korean

hospital train. The 77 Squadron were exonerated from any blame associated with the error involved.

But apart from that, the pilots of the squadron must have felt dreadful about it.

Yes, who wants to do a thing like that? These things happen apparently. There was also a very unhappy incident, a horrible ... where some American airborne, I think it was a full squadron, attacked the Gloucester Regiment which were out on a hillside in a fairly exposed place. The Yanks mistook them for Koreans. I do believe that the Gloucesters were, through some error, displaying the wrong identification panels and the Yanks claimed that they hadn't identified themselves correctly so they took them to be hostile troops and they inflicted some very horrible casualties on them with bombs, rockets and strafing.

The 77 Squadron had a fair share of losses at that time.

Yes, there were continual losses of one, two, Mustangs going off. I think 77 Squadron, quite frankly, they were a pretty competent outfit and many of the pilots were experienced blokes, I don't think they did anything stupid and by comparison with some of the American squadrons, and in particular the Springboks also flying Mustangs - the South African Air Force fellows - their losses were much higher than 77 Squadron.

Now at that time you also recalled an incident where you flew to China on a special mission.

Yes, that was before the Korean war. We were sent across to Nanking, my crew and I, with a C47 this is, nothing to do with Mustangs, to go into Nanking and to evacuate the women and children from the Australian Embassy and the Canadian Embassy and bring them back to Japan. Yes, a pretty straight forward business, about a four and a half hour journey, I think, across from where we were to Nanking. We couldn't get any decent sort of briefing as to where we were to meet people or just exactly who we were to deal with or how we contacted the embassy, and the whole thing was very sketchy. I remember we took drums of fuel with us so that we could somehow refuel ourselves to get home. It wasn't even clear to me which airfield we were supposed to land at when we got there; no-one could tell me. However, we landed at an airfield called Ming Kwo Kung - I hope that's reasonable Chinese – which is inside the stone wall which lies around the old part of Nanking City - a very ancient city - and there's an airfield there rather like an Australian country provincial airfield that you'd find anywhere around this country. We landed there. There were no other aircraft, no sign of movement and no activity and a sort of terminal, what we would call an airport terminal building just near one end of the runway. We'd been ordered by a senior officer that we must go over there armed which meant we had a Bren gun and a few .38 pistols. I don't know what we were really supposed to do with them. I don't really think we stood much chance of taking on the Chinese with a few light weapons. However, I

lined the aircraft up on the end of the runway with everything ready for take-off, left the engines running, told my co-pilot who was sitting in the seat that I would go across to the terminal building and see what I could 'sus' out. I said, 'If I come tearing out of that door, waving my arms and legs, put a few shots in behind me and as soon as I flick the back door light, just open both those throttles, don't wait for me to get up in front, push those throttles up as far as they'll go and go for it.' I went into the terminal building and there were a few people standing around there. I didn't, of course, know what I was going to do, so I went over - there were some telephones against the wall and some large telephone directories there. Chinese telephone directories are about a foot thick. So I opened one of these and was rifling through this thing while I was trying to think what I might do next and a big young Chinese fellow in a flight jacket came over to me and, of course, I was in RAAF uniform he came over to me and said, 'G'Day Aussie, what's your trouble?'. I said, 'I'm trying to get a telephone number out of this phone book and I can't read Chinese'. Anyhow, he sorted it out for me and made a phone call to the Australian Embassy and we took it from there. The next morning early we left there with the women and kids. We were overladen and we flew them back to Iwakuni.

In fact you were given a thousand pounds but ...

Yes, I was given a 1,000 bucks in greenbacks; that was money indeed in those days and I was told that if I needed to grease any palms or if I needed money to help sort the matter out that

there wouldn't be any accounting involved and I've always regretted that I had to give the money back.

During your posting to Korea your social life stabilised when you met your future wife, Joan.

Yes, well, very much part of our business in the transport outfit which was called 30 Transport Unit initially because nobody knew what to call it. It later on became number 36 Squadron which was a war-time squadron and it was resurrected and the number given to us. Very much part of our job was the evacuation of wounded and others from Korea and so there was a large detachment of flight nurses, air evacuation trained nurses at Iwakuni and we got to know these girls very well. They flew with us often and put up with a lot of difficult situations, too, I might add. Yes, that's when I met a girl called Joan Mills and we were later married in Iwakuni during the Korean war and despite the vicissitudes and the very changing fortunes of the years since then, we're still living together here right in Geraldton where we now are.

She must have been very suspicious about marrying a RAAF pilot, particularly one with a character like yourself.

I beg your pardon, I'm not aware that... my character gave any cause for suspicion but no, she wasn't suspicious. If she was, she was very foolish because she'd been around air bases and

RAAF pilots and blokes like that for long enough to know probably more than she was supposed to know, I don't know.

> Because even though you've retired so long ago from the Air Force, you're still a very well known personality.

Oh well, if that is so perhaps it has a bit to do with because, you see, after World War II I was very lucky in remaining most of the time in active flying jobs or in squadrons or around air bases and that meant that you got around a good deal amongst the Air Force and you met a lot of people. And, of course, I've tried since I've retired to keep contact with a lot of my old Air Force war-time friends, and in fact a lot of my old pre-war friends. I've just started a flight of the Air Training Corps here in Geraldton, so I have maintained my contact with the Air Force and the things related to it and so I suppose a lot of people would know me from things like that.

> Air Commodore, in 1951 you got sent back from Korea and you served at Mallala to assist with the project on the Woomera Rocket Range.

I was just posted to number 34 Squadron at Mallala. It was nothing particular, it wasn't a personal thing, it was a normal squadron posting. I'd been in the Japan/Korea area for then four years and they reckoned they'd had enough of me there so I was sent to 34 Squadron which was based at Mallala and its

purpose in life was to provide air transport for the Woomera range - long range weapons establishment.

The aircraft you flew at that time was the Bristol Freighter which had in itself a dubious reputation.

Well, the Bristol Freighter wouldn't be the loveliest thing you ever saw. It was a big high winged twin-engined flying boxcar with two sleeve valve engines. It was a big twin, 40,000 lbs gross weight and we did some jobs with those things that couldn't have been by any other means at that time. We carried all sorts of awkward things around the range that you couldn't have fitted into any other aircraft at that stage of the game. The engines in those Bristol aircraft were unreliable. They were beautiful engines when they were running well but they used to fail, generally without warning and so from that point of view it wasn't a particularly good aeroplane.

At one stage you upset the Brits by grounding the aircraft.

Well, when I went to do my conversion onto those aircraft with one of the pilots who had been in the squadron for some time and he was going to show me all about it which he did. He pointed out to me that there were some cracks in the wings. They were cord - wise cracks on the upper and lower wing surfaces in the skin. He told me that these had been around for a while and that everyone was quite satisfied that they were not of any great importance. Time went by and after some

months I later became the training officer for the squadron. I was the check pilot on those aircraft some months later and these damn cracks were still there and I think we had four aircraft. All of them had these cracks in the same places and I, despite the things I was told, I couldn't quite accept the fact that it was okay. So I walked around and one day I tried to talk various people into making a determined investigation about this and I didn't, so I got cross about it and I grabbed the servicing schedules for these four aircraft and I entered them all up as being unserviceable on account of these cracks. Every aircraft has its own servicing schedule and if a pilot or anybody else - an engineer - enters something as being defective or suspect it then requires somebody else with proper qualifications to counter sign it as having been either rectified or inspected and found serviceable. It would have been well within the capability of a number of people there to counter sign what I had already done and say, "well, this particular pilot is mistaken" and they could then counter sign and say that the aircraft is serviceable. Well, there wasn't exactly a rush of people trying to grab pens to counter sign what I had put down and in effect I grounded the squadron. I didn't do it with that intention but I did express concern about the serviceability of the aeroplane. I might tell you that we were carrying forty and fifty passengers at a time between Adelaide and the rocket range and around the various places we went to. And so it wasn't just concern about the air crew and myself in particular. I had a genuine concern about the safety of the aircraft; a lot of people were involved. So there we were at a very important stage of some development.

It was not long before the atom bomb was let off out at Maralinga and there was a lot of development work going on and 34 Squadron was important in that context. And so here we were with our four aircraft grounded. I can assure you that there some very angry Brits and other people running around saying what a great bloke Dave Hitchins was. However, nobody seemed to be very keen to certify that the aircraft was serviceable, so Bristol Company sent an inspector from Bristol, post haste, out to Australia and they made certain inspections. They stripped part of the skin off and had a look inside at the spars which, of course, was what we were concerned about. Having done all that - it took several days - they said that the aircraft were serviceable and that the cracks were of no importance, So away we went and we carried on with our work for some months. It wasn't very long after that that I was posted from that squadron to another job in New South Wales. I had occasion to ring South Australia and I was speaking to some of the engineers on another matter and while I was talking to them one of them said, 'Did you hear that a Bristol freighter has just crashed a few miles from Parafield airfield which is outside Adelaide?'. I said to him, 'Which wing came off?'. He said, 'The left one'. And that was when Flight Lieutenant John Entwistle, a very experienced and more experienced, decorated war-time pilot and civil pilot, he and a fellow called Murphy and a young fellow called Shillinglaw were all killed in that aeroplane; fortunately there were no passengers on board. But a wing came off.

Your decision was fully justified.

I have no regrets about making that decision. In fact the reason I did it was because I kept on saying to myself, "If anything ever happens, if some dreadful thing does happen, and a wing comes off one of these aeroplanes, I'll never be able to look myself in the face again for being so irresolute as not to do something positive about it", and that's why I grounded the bloody aeroplanes and I make no apology for doing it.

Is that the only time in your service career that you grounded an operational aircraft?

It's the first time I virtually grounded a squadron. Oh no, any pilot will from time to time have reason to question the serviceability of an aeroplane. He's not doing his job if he doesn't. Maybe if you fly an aeroplane and when you've completed the flight you know that this or that requires attention, it is your job to enter that up and to say so, so that the proper corrective action can be taken. It's part of your job.

Do you believe that experience - at that stage you were a very skilful pilot and obviously a cautious pilot as well – that made Air Force Office consider you for promotion to squadron leader and then become the personal pilot to the Governor-General at that time, that's Field Marshal Sir William Slim?

I can't tell you what Air Force Office thought about my action in virtually grounding 34 Squadron. I think that at one stage they would have been very glad to have me banished to Siberia because they were severely embarrassed by the 'poms' who were telling them what a great bloke I was having grounded their squadron for them. Whether that had anything to do with my posting to fly the Governor-General or not I don't know but I've always regarded myself as being a cautious pilot and I make no apology. Any pilot that isn't cautious is, in my opinion, foolish and irresponsible.

Did you look forward to that posting with some relish of flying the Governor-General around or would you have preferred to go to an operational squadron?

There were lots of things I would rather have done. There were all sorts of interesting jobs going on at that time and I didn't particularly want to go and fly within the pristine realms of the VIP flight which it then was, a flight of 38 Squadron based at Richmond. However, I felt well obviously somebody had some faith in my ability to fly and do things reasonably well otherwise I wouldn't have been given that job, so to that extent I was very pleased about it - yes, I was.

Of course, the aircraft you flew at that time was one of your old operational aircraft that had been converted.

No, not on operations. The aircraft that was then allotted to the Governor-General's use was the old A65 114 which had been

specially fitted for General Robertson's use in Japan and Korea; it was the same aeroplane. It had been refitted but it had been a specially fitted and specially used aeroplane for some years, and I was quite surprised when I went there and found this old friend standing there looking at me and I said, 'I've seen you before'.

What attributes did you need to be a VIP pilot?

I wouldn't try to answer that but I think you had to possibly know how to put on a clean shirt and have a shave now and again and polish your shoes and look respectable. Also you had to satisfy the proper authorities that you knew what you were doing with an aeroplane.

Did you develop a special rapport with Sir William Slim?

I'd like to think I did. I think anybody would like to think they had some sort of rapport with Field Marshal Slim. He was a wonderful man and I certainly look back with great affection on the personal contact I had with him. I think everybody that worked with old Bill Slim had great personal regard for him. He was a wonderful man; wonderful intellect, wonderful experience, had a great ability for getting his ideas across. I always thought that I knew what he wanted me to do and I didn't have to stand around asking questions too much, I knew what I ought to be doing and I was expected to get on with it. He was a wonderful man, no question about that.

He had a particular rapport, didn't he? - with people in the outback.

Yes, he did. He had a wonderful rapport with everybody. He was known in the British army as the soldiers' general and I think that that describes him very well. He had a wonderful way of getting on with all sorts of people. I can remember taking him out - we took him all over Australia at various times. Norfolk Island was one of our journeys but I recall particularly going out to Alexandria Station in the west of Queensland. We were there about a week, I think. We landed there late one afternoon. The station manager was a man called Murray who people from that part of the world I'm sure would know who I was talking about. He was a very well known and highly respected cattle man and he was the manager of Alexandria Station. While we were getting things out of the aeroplane, the Governor-General noticed on the far side of the airfield that there was a mob of cattle moving along - it would be half a mile or so away, I supppose - with some drovers, and he asked Murray, the station manager, if he could go over and speak to the drovers. He jumped into Land Rover - some sort of vehicle - and I said, 'Can I come, too?' and I jumped in the back. We went over to where these men were riding along with a large mob of cattle which they'd been droving for some weeks I understand, and Murray called out to the head drover and said, “Come over here, there's a fellow that would like to meet you. He's the Governor-General.”

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

'Come over here, there's a fellow that would like to meet you. He's the Governor-General.' And this tall man sitting on a horse who'd been out on his own or isolated from human contact for some weeks with a mob of cattle looked down from his horse and said, 'Jesus, Murray, you never bloody give up, do you? You're a real card, Murray.'

He also had a particular rapport with horses.

Yes, he had, of course .... The Governor-General had been a cavalry officer and had a lot to do with horses during his time with the Indian Army. He was an officer of the Indian Army, really, as distinct from the British army. Yes, he knew a lot about horses and had experience with them and while we were at Alexandria Station the station horses were in a large enclosure and I saw the station manager's face go white and he looked across to where all these horses were milling around and there he saw the head man in Australia standing amongst all these dust and flying hooves and horses getting around. He was standing there talking to a big black stallion and holding him by the ear and the station manager's face went white. He said, 'Oh, that's a very dangerous animal. If that thing gets hold of him it will kill him.' So he went over and got the Governor-General away from this horse. He wasn't in the slightest bit put out he was quite happy to be handling horses

out in the middle of the yard, the same as anybody else would. He knew what he was doing.

What other memories have you got about Sir William?

Well, if you wanted to think of a military leader who could get his thoughts across to other people, who always had command of the situation and had this great clarity of thought who could sort out straight away the essence of anything and express it clearly, then he would be my idea of .... I've never met anyone with his ability to do that. He was also a man who had great warmth. He was a bad man for people who failed in their job and didn't pay attention to what they were doing. He suffered fools not at all and I made jolly sure that I didn't get in his way in that respect but he was a man with great warmth. He was a man of great learning. I think he was a school teacher in his youth. He was also a man with a great sense of humour. I wouldn't describe him as a funny man but he wasn't short on humour. His sense of humour was always available. On one occasion he was taken to Tennant Creek for something local, I don't know what it was, and the only cool place in Tennant Creek was, of course, the pub and as he was being taken in through the swing doors of the Tennant Creek hotel out came some wild eyed bush character through the swinging doors, was confronted by this man with a lot of medals and wearing his vice-regal regalia and his reaction straight away was to say, 'Jesus Christ', and the answer was, 'No, Bill Slim, Governor-General'.

What could a VIP expect on your aeroplane? It was obviously very comfortably fitted out. Can you describe the sort of service that VIPs received?

Essentially we were there to provide essential services for people who were involved in running the country. People like the Governor-General and the Prime Minister and other Ministers of State and people who had a need to go somewhere in a hurry and get there on time, if that was the nature of their business, and who under the happy arrangements of those more gracious times, were accorded some sort of status and were given more than just basic travel facilities. In those days we had DC3 aircraft. They were replaced by Convair 220s and then 440s not long after I moved on to do other things. We had stewards to provide meals and the aeroplanes were more comfortably fitted with seating and so on, and the crews used to wear white uniforms and it was a better standard of travel than would otherwise have been available in a military aeroplane.

Did they get selection of wines and spirits?

No, we didn't provide liquor on the aeroplanes. I can remember one night taking Sir Robert Menzies back from Kooyong, from Melbourne, he'd just attended Australia - Hoad and Rosewall had just beaten the Yanks for the Davis Cup - and we took him back, I think it was a Christmas Eve, took him back to Canberra. As he was getting out of the aeroplane he said, 'If you look in the right-hand pocket of my seat, you'll find a bottle of King

George V in there. I can assure that it's quite fit for human consumption and I'd like you to give the crew a drink for Christmas.' That's just something I remember on the way past.

What about Sir Robert Menzies? What was he like as a passenger?

Again, a man - I flew him around several times in several kinds of aeroplane and a few situations. I flew him around Woomera once in a rotten little aeroplane called a Percival Prince. Yes, he was a man I always liked. I always admired him. I thought he was a great Australian and I admired his scholarship and I always enjoyed listening to him; whether you agreed with everything he said was another matter but he spoke very well and he was a commanding figure and I always liked him very much. A good way to start the day with Sir Robert Menzies - he was a rather rotund fellow - and a good way to start the day with him was to make sure that his seatbelt was let right out to its furthest extent so that when he did it up, when he buckled it up, he had to pull it in about six or eight inches and that seemed to please him quite well. So we learned to do that.

Did he have any particular food or drink preferences that he wanted?

I can't remember any quirks like that, no. No, he was a fairly lusty sort of chap who enjoyed most things, I think.

Did any of your VIPs come up on the flight deck to have a chat?

Sometimes, yes. Some enjoyed .... I remember a fellow called R.A.B. Butler, who was a member of the British government and I've forgotten his precise position, but he loved to come up and fly the aeroplane. He was very interested in aviation. He didn't fly, he didn't have a qualification but we used to let him sit in the co-pilot's seat and drive the aeroplane. He seemed to like doing that. He was a charming man. Some people like other passengers anywhere, I suppose are interested; they like to poke their nose into what's going on and others are not interested.

If we get on a more sensitive issue, I know in a standard Dakota the facilities down the back, if we say the toilet facilities, are very to say the least primitive, what special facilities were set up in your old aircraft?

We had chemical toilets and space was the problem in the DC3. It just didn't have enough space for all the things you'd like to do. You only had a little tiny galley and little tiny toilet down the back.

Did they have mirrors and other things of that form?

Yes, they were quite nicely fitted, yes, and they were nicely painted. The Queen's aircraft, of course, was a very, very lavishly fitted aircraft.

Did you ever fly the Queen?

No, I flew the aeroplane several times, the same aeroplane. I owned it, I commanded the flight which included that aeroplane but no, I didn't fly the Queen or the Prince.

You developed a special affection for that particular aeroplane. Was it A67 114, was it?

A65 114, that was Robbie's aeroplane in Korea and then was the Governor-General's aeroplane. During a recent visit to Adelaide I went to the Aviation Museum which is being set up down near Port Adelaide and there was my old 114, some clown has busted it and broken a wing but it's being repaired and restored. It gave me quite a feeling to see that old thing there because I flew a lot of hours in that particular aeroplane.

You were also involved during the Petrov defection and the planning.

Well, there wasn't much planning in it. I was only involved to the extent that one of the aeroplanes from the flight that I then ran was called up some time during the night and set off to Darwin for a trip that nobody could quite describe to me. I didn't fly the aeroplane, someone else did but I was told to

send this aeroplane to Darwin and I got the most evasive replies about what it was supposed to do and where it was going and how long it would be away. I couldn't get any satisfaction from anyone. I was told just to send it to Darwin. It was the following day, I think, that that aeroplane came from Darwin back to Richmond with Mrs Petrov who had been persuaded while she was on the ground in Darwin, she had been persuaded to .... That's right, both Petrovs, Mr and Mrs Petrov, they had been persuaded to leave the BOAC aircraft that was taking them out of the country and to seek asylum in Australia. And it was our aircraft that brought them back. What happened was that the base commander at Richmond had been told that the aeroplane was coming south, there was no secret of the fact at that stage that the Petrovs were on board it and he was told, I think it was 'Curley' Davis who was the base commander then, he was told to open the place to the Press so that the Press would be able to have access to the Petrovs. What he wasn't told and it was not long before the aircraft reached Richmond, the aircraft was told to go and land at Schofields airfield which is not far away. This they did. Schofields was then almost deserted, there was no-one there and as they landed a large black car appeared alongside the aircraft, the Petrovs were bundled aboard and away they went, I don't know where and the aircraft was then returned to Richmond and the Press met a virtually empty aeroplane.

They must have been disappointed.

I suppose they were, understandably. But it got everybody off the hook. It was a useful device I suppose.

When you were on the VIP flight did you ever have to shut down an engine?

Yes, I did, only once. Going from Sydney to Point Cook and there was a graduation parade and I was taking Sir William Slim down there to be the Reviewing Officer and old 114 decided it was going to play up and we had to close down an engine and make an unscheduled landing at Fairbairn where the rest of the flight then was and I was able to grab one of our other aircraft and complete the flight in that. We got to Point Cook quite a bit late.

It must have been with mixed feelings that you left that VIP job and went to Staff College?

Oh no, I enjoyed it, I've always enjoyed those flying jobs and I was a flight commander in a good squadron, 38 Squadron. I was very happy, the CO - Jack Cornish and I got on very well. Fairbairn was a happy base. So I had no reason to want to leave there but I was hoping to get on and do something other than fly DC3s around. I'd been at it for a long time and so no, I wanted to go to the Staff College. While I was very happy in 38 Squadron I wanted to go and do something else. And Staff College, after all I'd taken on a permanent commission and if

you're going to proceed in a normal way as a permanent Air Force officer, well, you'd better go and do the staff course.

Your sense of humour certainly hadn't left you when you went to Staff College.

I hope not.

Because there's a story with one of your very good friends, Bay Adams, who eventually retired as an Air Vice-Marshal and the sheep, Bridget.

Adams was a fellow student of mine at the Staff College in 1955 and one of the characters of Point Cook in those days was a girl called Lou Marshall who was the nursing sister there; a very popular person, Lou Marshall, everybody knew her. She had a pet sheep which was tethered up outside the sick quarters on a long rope. The sheep was called Bridget, if you want to know. Anyhow, one night Adams - I don't know where Adams was, he was away somewhere for the weekend or something like that. We thought it would be a good idea if he came back on Monday morning so we got this sheep and tied its feet - of course, I grew up on a sheep farm - we tied this sheep fore and aft and put it in Adams's bed. When he got in on Monday morning there was his bloody bed with a sheep in it.

So what did he say to his friends?

He wasn't very pleased about that, at all.

You must have wondered if all your stars had come at once when this offer of this number 24 Commonwealth Squadron came up. You had all the right qualifications which you picked up in Japan and at the time you were in the right position to say, 'Hey, listen, I'm the best man for the job'.

Yes, I had always wanted to go to the Commonwealth Squadron, I saw that as a ....

His one of the few postings that you'd coveted that you'd mentioned.

Yes, it was a posting I coveted. I'd have gone there as the cook or, the gardener, I think. And through a most unusual set of circumstances .... The command of that squadron rotated between the RAF, ourselves, the New Zealanders and the Canadians and at one stage the South Africans, and a series of flukes resulted in the position falling vacant and it was the turn of the RAAF to provide someone to go and run the squadron and I just happened to be standing around with the right qualifications in the right place for once.

Your wife, Joan, was not particularly happy about that.

No, well, we'd just bought our first house or sort of bought our first house in Frankston and she was very happy there and

the kids were happy in school and she did not want to be transplanted anywhere. She didn't want to go to England. However, it was a very happy posting. I think we all benefitted greatly as a family, apart from other things. The kids were very happy at school in England; they learnt things they wouldn't have learnt otherwise and it opened up a whole new series of interests and options for us.

What was the voyage like across on the *Oronsay*?

The *Oronsay* was a new ship, very well appointed, everything on it was very expensive and my outstanding recollection of the *Oronsay* is the vast number of 'pommie' stewards who stood around waiting for tips.

So it was really quite a pleasant change from being in Australia, being waited on.

Yes, a long ocean journey like that, took us through places we'd never seen before. Yes, it was an interesting experience.

When you got to the UK you were met by your old mate 'Spud' Murphy.

Old Spud who'd been our RAF boss - he was my boss in Japan when I first went there. Yes, old Spud was then a wing commander in the RAF and had some terrible job in the Air Ministry and he met us when we arrived there. It was nice to see him again.

What was the ethos of 24 Squadron? - it seems to be a slightly unusual arrangement.

The ethos was pretty much what you chose to make it. I was very keen on that job and, well, you're in someone else's parish, you're in someone else's Air Force and you're representing your own country when you're in a situation like that. So you've really got to watch what you're doing and make sure that you do things correctly.

Did you have crews and ground crew from all parts of the Commonwealth?

No, the crews were from all parts of the Commonwealth and the RAF crews included a number of fellows who were Canadians and some Australians and a few New Zealanders who were in the RAF in addition to RNZAF, RCAF and RAAF. The South Africans had been there before that but when I went there they had ceased participating - they had withdrawn from the British Commonwealth and so they didn't have any South African crews there then. We also had in 24 Squadron, it was a very interesting squadron. I think it was the biggest squadron in the RAF. I'm not sure of that but we had at one stage eighteen Hastings and we operated all over the world. We included a VIP flight which flew people, all the high dignitaries of the British hierarchy around the place -not the Queen, not the Royal Family; they had their own flight. But it was a very interesting squadron. We had a lot of Czechs and Poles, war-time fellows. Some of them were highly decorated, mostly

flight lieutenants who had no career prospects in the RAF but were very, very capable aviators and I formed some nice friendships amongst some of those blokes. It took awhile to get to know them. They weren't very quick to acknowledge this young squadron leader bloke that had just come from Australia and I had to work on it a bit.

Now, the Hastings aircraft did have its problems.

Well, the Hastings was an aeroplane that was built out of left over bits of Handley-Page Halifax to a largely Army specification after the war, just after the war. It was an 80,000 lbs all up weight aeroplane, two Bristol Freighters, and it had the same engines as we'd had in the old Bristols in the Woomera days. The reliability of those engines had not improved at all and we had some troubles with them. A good Hastings was a nice aeroplane to fly but the earlier marks were very awkward things, and it was tail wheel aeroplane, a bit bigger than a DC6 and it could be a difficult aeroplane to handle near the ground because it should really have always had a nose wheel and it didn't.

Because you used to put restrictions on your crews flying across the mountains in Syria.

At one stage during one winter. During the northern winter you get a lot of bad weather over the eastern end of the Mediterranean, you get nasty thunderstorms, very vicious in the winter-time and heavy cloud and icing over the mountains of

Syria. When we were proceeding out of the Mediterranean and going generally east, that's the way we had to go for diplomatic reasons. And I didn't like the prospect of us having an aircraft picking up a big load of ice which you did over that area and possibly losing one engine or two which was not unheard of, and you were then going to be in a very bad position. You were going to be unable to maintain enough altitude to safely clear the mountains and so I bucked at having to authorise flights through that region. I did so particularly because there was a perfectly good alternative way to do the job by going around just a bit, taking another route through Aden and we would have achieved exactly the same thing and not incurred anything like the risk that I thought existed. So I refused to authorise any more flights over that area, or through that region, at least in the winter and until we'd sorted out the engine problems that were then current. I had some fights with the hierarchy of the RAF in the process. However, if you're going to command a squadron, you've got to command it and not just sit there and suck your thumb and it was my business to make sure that things were done properly. I invited a senior RAF gentleman to come and authorise the flights himself because I wasn't going to do it and there weren't any takers for that either. And just after that a Tudor aircraft, another aeroplane a bit like a Hastings, a four-engined post-war transport, was under charter to the Air Ministry and was going through that region over Syria on its way to Woomera with what I understand was a load of very sensitive documents, I don't know what they were. However, this aircraft finished up sticking out of a hill in Syria. I

don't know why, whether it was icing or engine failure or a combination, I don't know. However, that's where it finished up and it was - I don't know how this came about - whether the Russians knew what was in that aeroplane or whether they were merely curious, I don't know, but there was a very nice race up a steep Syrian mountain between the Russians and the RAF mountain rescue team which they had in the island of Cyprus which is not very far from there. The RAF won the race and they got there and I heard from this source and that that they managed to rescue most of the sensitive documents that were strewn around the place in this crashed aeroplane and at least they prevented the Russians from getting them. I don't know what the documents were.

So again your decision was vindicated.

Well, yes, I think it was. Yes, I do. There was no need to be taking risks like that. It was just pointless, achieved nothing and for goodness sake, that's what you have squadron commanders for: to keep their eye on that sort of thing. There is a difference between squadron commanders that are flying in the squadron and staff officers who sit in their office a hundred mile away.

Can you describe one of your own more interesting trips with 24 Squadron?

It was a very interesting squadron. It was the best geography lesson that anyone was ever likely to get. We operated all

over the world. I got my first taste of the Middle Eastern countries, a lot of Africa, a fair bit of Europe, Scandanavia, through America. We went around the world a couple of times, on our way mostly to Woomera, going through Singapore, across Australia, Fiji, out to Christmas Island, that is the Christmas Island south of Hawaii and then across America and back across the Atlantic and back into England that way. I suppose to me the most interesting trip I did was to Russia. We did a trip over there for the British Air Ministry and went through Copenhagen and picked up a Russian navigator and a Russian signaller who were put aboard to make sure that we behaved ourselves and didn't get lost on the way across and we landed at Moscow. I can't remember the name of the airfield now. Spent several days there. It was all completely new to us and certainly completely new to me. I found it most interesting. Moscow was a depressing place but that in itself was interesting; just to see it, it was all so new to me. When we were leaving Moscow to go back to the UK we were very interested to take a look at,-in those days there were three concentric rings of surface to air missiles around Moscow city and we were interested to have a look at these. There were recognised lanes through them which civil aircraft used and by arrangement with our own navigator when we took off from Moscow, I flew the wrong course which I hoped we would get away with long enough to see something that we would not otherwise see. I reckon I was on that wrong course for about half a minute and this big, black, brutling-browed Russian navigator was on my back like a flash and he very smartly told me which course I should be flying and, of course, I did as I was told.

I don't suppose he wanted to finish up quarrying salt somewhere in Siberia.

How did you find that posting? Did you find it a very satisfying posting?

Yes, I did. It was a most interesting posting. It wasn't easy. There were a lot of difficulties because of the mixed nationalities involved and you're operating ...

This is an interview with Air Commodore David Hitchins, tape 2.

Air Commodore, how did you find that posting with 24 Squadron?

The Commonwealth Squadron was a wonderful posting; full of interest. I won't say I enjoyed everything, some of it was very difficult. You were dealing with someone else's Air Force in someone else's aeroplanes and someone else's... There were mixed nationalities involved. It's quite foolish to suppose that all the member nations of the British Commonwealth think and behave alike; I can assure you they don't. And those sort of things take a bit of handling but that's what you're paid for and I thought it was a wonderful experience which I thoroughly enjoyed. Something else that I thoroughly enjoyed, too, was the high degree of professionalism that I found in RAF Transport Command. It's a very,very big complex command. It operates all over the world and it is extremely well supervised

and extremely well run, and the RAAF has learnt a great deal from it.

So you had a great respect for the way the RAF operated.

Yes, I did. I didn't agree with everything they did but their approach to the whole business of operating a thing like that was very professional and I learnt a lot from them.

You came back to Australia on the *Stratheden* for a posting to Staff College as an instructor.

Yes, that's right - the *Stratheden*. Unlike the *Oronsay* which was a very plush and new ship that took us to the United Kingdom two and a half years before that, the *Stratheden*, I think, was on its last voyage and it was very much rundown. The crew were mostly Goanese who were very nice people to deal with and I made a particular friend of the chief engineer, a huge Englishman with the most dreadful thirst I've ever struck, I think, and one of the funniest men I've ever met. The engines used to stop on the old Stratheden and we'd soak along on the tide for a while until he got them going again. The meals were wonderful and the kids were spoilt rotten by the Goanese stewards. My wife and I had a great time and it was one of the happiest experiences I've ever had.

Of course, in those days they used to bring back officers and their wives and families first class.

Oh dear, yes. Why in the hell we ever got away with that, I'll never know. It was a most uneconomical way of doing things but nobody complained; I certainly didn't.

So did you feel as though you came back to earth with a bump when you took over as an instructor as Staff College?

Oh, not really. We went back to Frankston. to our own home. We were glad to get back there. I was quite happy to go back to .... I've always respected the RAAF Staff College as an institution. Two institutions that taught me things that I would not otherwise have done: one was the Elementary Flying Training School; and the other was the Staff College and I didn't really mind going there as an instructor. I spent four years there which is a bit too long but it was an interesting job and not without its challenge. An instructor in a place like that, I was then a wing commander, and you're dealing with students who have been around in the Air Force or some other service for quite a while; they're all experienced people that have been selected to go to the Staff College and you're not dealing with a bunch of dills by a long, long way. In order to stay in front of the students, you've got to watch what you're doing and do your homework.

By the time you took over as CO of 36 Squadron in 1964 you were a very experienced officer.

I was pretty lucky, I'd been around a bit, yes.

Compared with the current CO, say, of 36 Squadron, you'd had far more experience, hadn't you?

I really can't tell you. I don't know who the CO there is.... I don't know. I would imagine though that the average squadron CO these days is probably a graduate of the Academy and so he's been better educated in that respect than I ever was.

But your flying experience. I mean, you'd served up in New Guinea for a period of time. You'd served as a VIP pilot. You'd served over as Commanding Officer of 24 Squadron, flying around the world.

Yes, I guess that I'd been around a little bit more than .... I'd also had the experience of being a senior NCO which is something that - opinions vary about this and a lot of officers I know would disagree with me .... but I consider that when I was running squadrons and later on air bases, that my experience as a senior NCO, as a flight sergeant/warrant officer was very, very handy experience to fall back on and it stood me in good stead a number of times. So to that extent I suppose I was a bit more experienced than some of today's wing commanders.

As we've already mentioned, that you were very familiar with transport operations, what did you think of the Hercules?

A great aeroplane. The Hercules we had in 36 - 36 then was the first and only Hercules squadron and we had then the Hercules C130A which was a bit antiquated by today's standards. The aeroplane has been,- successive models have improved on the basic design but it was a very fine aeroplane; a very good aeroplane to fly, versatile, it could go high, it could go pretty fast, it could carry a lot, you could go anywhere and you didn't require metropolitan style airfields, you could get the old C130 down on most airfields and it had a very good asymetric performance - three engines no trouble at all. It performed very well, better than in fact some of its successors - some of the later models were not as good as the 130A in that respect. Yes, a great aeroplane. And we had the first real good flight simulator in the Air Force in 36 Squadron and that was the basis of our training. We also had two good flight commanders and some fellows around the place who were fairly salty but they were experienced; good flight engineers, and a good job and very interesting. We had the most interesting jobs in the Air Force, I'm quite sure about that.

Did you have a little trouble trying to tie yourself behind a desk at times?

Well, if you're going to run a squadron, 36 Squadron was the biggest squadron in the Air Force, I think, and it certainly was for about a year. It was a member of a squadron of number 86 Wing which was disbanded soon after I went there and number 36 Squadron inherited all the maintenance that had previously been controlled separately and so we certainly were then the

biggest squadron in the Air Force. 10 Squadron might have been about the same size, I suppose it was. And so if you're going to run a thing like that you've got to accept the penalty of doing a bit of paperwork but I had two good flight commanders, I could delegate a lot of things to them and I'd learnt how to dodge by then. If I wanted to go flying, I generally did.

Some of your flying was operational up in Vietnam.

It was not operational in the sense that we were involved in Vietnamese operations, we weren't, we didn't do any operations there. We did operate in and out of lots of places in Vietnam, principally Vung Tau where the RAAF were located but we used to go to Phan Rang and into Saigon, Cam Ranh Bay and there would have been others, I just forget now.

You carried out a number of Medivac operations.

Yes, we did quite a lot of medical evacuation operations out of Vietnam but mostly the medical evacuation operations were mounted from Butterworth. The practice was that casualties in Vietnam would go to Butterworth which was the main RAAF base in South-East Asia and they would be held there. There was a big hospital with all facilities, a big staff, and injured or wounded people would be held there and stabilised until they were well enough to face the long journey home. In those days, of course, we were further hampered by the fact of confrontation with the Indonesians. The Indonesians had shut the gate between Darwin and Singapore and so to proceed from

South-East Asia to Australia we had to go from Butterworth around the northern tip of Sumatra down to Cocos, Cocos into Pearce and then back to the east coast from there, so it was a long journey home for a lot of those very horribly wounded fellows. I can remember guys with both legs off - land mines - and some fellows who were remarkably cheerful in the face of all the troubles that beset them. Of course, the old C130A was a noisy old aeroplane and that didn't help matters. Later on when 37 Squadron got its C130E models which were a lot quieter I think they did things a little bit better than we were able to, mainly because the aeroplanes were quieter.

Did you have any desire to go into the operational theatre in Vietnam?

Yes,I did. Along with a whole lot of other people that I can remember, I volunteered to be posted to Vietnam and I would have been very glad to do that. On a couple of occasions I went around with the choppers looking at what they were doing and just for the hell of it I flew one operation with 2 Squadron Canberras. I did that rather to be a bit cheeky. I thought that if I did that I would be able to say technically that I had flown operationally in three wars but really it was just a bit of a joke.

At that stage did you start thinking about your career. You were a fairly senior wing commander. Did you think about where your career was going in the Air Force?

I thought my career was going pretty well. I was in command of one of the best squadrons I've ever seen and they had the best aeroplanes that we'd ever had and I had a good crowd of fellows and plenty to do. I think I was fairly well regarded by people like the Air Officer Commanding and the Base Commander at Richmond. I won't say they always agreed with me, they frequently didn't but I felt that I had a good working relationship with my superiors and I really do believe that I had a good working relationship with most of the fellows that worked for me, not all, that's for sure. A lot of them still ring me up. That was what? – we're talking about middle 1960's.

'64-66.

That's nearly thirty years ago. I still see fellows that worked for me in 36 Squadron; the phone rings or I get a letter or somebody comes up the driveway and he's on his way around Australia and heard that Joan and I live here. They all knew Joan, of course; they used to live in our backyard, a lot of them when we were on the base at Richmond. A lot of the young fellows who we made friends of then are still friends today. I've got one particular mate who was the bad boy of 36 Squadron, a young fellow called Pike. I see him frequently and when I go to the east coast he takes me flying in his own aeroplane. And at other times he flies a 747 for Qantas. So I don't know what you really mean by my career but I was certainly very happy with my lot in all respects in those days.

Do you consider your time as CO one of the most satisfying times in your career?

Yes, there's nothing more satisfying for a service flying bloke than to be CO of an active flying squadron. If he knows his job, has some familiarity with it, and is lucky enough to be allowed by the system and by the hierarchy to get on with it, which I was, I can't think of any situation that I would rather go back to.

Air Commodore, your next series of postings might have been seemed an appropriate build up to what ended up as one of the most important postings of your career.

Well, after four years with number 36 Hercules Squadron I went to the Command Headquarters at Glenbrook and I had a year there as the Senior Administrative Staff Officer which was a big complicated job and involved a lot of paperwork and a lot of shuffling around. Then I spent two years in the same headquarters as the Staff Officer in charge of - I was then a group captain - in charge of the planning staff in the headquarters and that was a most interesting job. It took me all over Australia and I was involved in the construction of most of the Air Force's squadron training exercises and had a bit to do with the training of Army units that were going to Vietnam. I enjoyed that job, it was very interesting and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I used to sometimes sneak off back to Richmond and go and do the odd trip as a Hercules captain then, too, but that was rather a bit off the record. I was lucky to

have a good boss. Then I went to Amberley as the Commanding Officer of the base squadron there which is a tedious business. Running a base squadron is a thankless task and at the end of every day all you can say is that you've got away with it again and that you hope to goodness tomorrow will be better. When I was posted from Amberley to be the Officer Commanding Darwin at the end of 1972 I felt as though a great weight had lifted off my shoulder and I have never been happier at the prospect of anything than going to Darwin which is a place I like.

One of your most important postings in your Air Force career came when you were Officer Commanding Darwin and I know that you made a number of flights into Timor during that time.

Yes, during 1975 the Indonesians moved into Timor. The Portugese moved out and the Indonesians moved in and during that time we went over to see Timor - went several times into Dili. On one occasion there were supposed to be some Australians that were stranded there and there was some suggestion we should bring them all back.

On what authority did you fly across to Timor?

I was directed to fly over there by our Command Headquarters. I was the Officer Commanding Darwin which came under the command of Operational Command Headquarters at Glenbrook and I was ordered to go over there.

So in that particular case did you evacuate those Australians?

We brought some Australians back on one occasion from Dili and some from Baukau; a whole lot of things went on. On a couple of occasions I went across there with Hercules that were going in on tasks that had been directed by the proper authority. We went into the island of Atauro several times, that's just north of Dili, I think ten miles, just across the straits. It was the Portugese administrative headquarters. 'Atauro' means 'pig island'; it's only a little place. We went there several times.

Did you have an empathy with the situation the Timorese were in?

Well, I don't know the Timorese very well and I'd never been in Timor before. I was never there during the war as so many Australians were. But when we were getting around on the island of Atauro I had some time there one day and I was walking around and fell into conversation with some local people who just happened to be near the airstrip and I found them to be most engaging, friendly, nice people. The people near the airstrip - there are little villages and people are very poor peasant farmers with little plots of land and very modest houses, mostly very neatly maintained and the pathways would be swept and there'd be no rubbish about and the place was tidy and agreeable but the people were obviously very, very poor: they had minimal food, no running water, no proper

sanitation. All the years that the Portuguese, I think there were 400 years of Portugese administration and I could see very little that they had done except build about half a mile of cobbled roadway and set up a distillery that produced a very evil brandy. I felt that the Portuguese people were deprived in many ways - Portuguese, I beg your pardon, the Timorese people were in many ways deprived and deserved better assistance from Australia than we seem to have given them.

Now, at least on one of those trips to Timor you came under some criticism from the Australian authorities.

I was directed by phone from the Command Headquarters to send two aeroplanes over to Dili to evacuate civilians. This I did straight away with one of our own aeroplanes and a Caribou that happened to be there.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

... which I did straight away with one of our own aeroplanes and a Caribou that happened to be there and after the task was completed the next day I started receiving all kinds of directions about how the thing was to be done. I got on the phone and said, 'All very interesting but I did that job yesterday'. That really did start a chain of interesting events. Apparently I had carried out the task without proper formal authority. I certainly believed that I had been

directed to do the job, so I just went and did it. Somebody who was on the other end of the phone used the wrong words or since he was an officer that I have a lot of time for and he's a friend of mine, I'm not going to blame him, perhaps I misunderstood what he said. One way or the other the job was done without formal government authority and that did set up a bit of trouble. However, we survived it. We really didn't contravene anything, it was the fact that we did what we'd been told to do, but the thing hadn't been blessed by the government.

Were you picking up Australians or Timorese?

Timorese.

Were these people termed as radicals in the Indonesians' eyes?

I really don't know what the basis of their ... why they were being brought back. Some of them were administrators, people with obvious affiliations with the Australian government and, though I no doubt question that there was good reason for bringing all of them back as we did. On another occasion we were directed .... Not long after that incident we were directed to send a Caribou to Baukau which is further down east of Dili to evacuate some people from a nunnery and we were specifically ordered that we were to bring back these people from this nunnery. And nobody else and I was monitoring through the signals arrangement, I was monitoring the proceedings. And

at half hourly intervals while the aircraft was on the ground I spoke to them and on this particular contact they said that there was small arms fire developing around the airfield. They were under no direct threat at that stage but there was a bit of sporadic small arms fire audible in the general area. So I told them, I said, 'Get those people aboard that aeroplane as quickly as you can and get out of there and call me when you're airborne.' which they did to say that the aeroplane now had something - I think it was sixty-eight people aboard it - and I think the official load was forty something. They had sixty-odd people aboard and they'd be in Darwin in a certain time. I naturally asked them how come they've got sixty-odd: 'Oh, we were loaded at gunpoint. We were hijacked.' So what were we to do about that. We couldn't very well send them back. I spoke to the Command Headquarters and suggested to them that the best thing to do was to shut up about the hijacking, let the aeroplane come into Darwin, the Press would always be there to meet the aircraft, we arranged for them to do that, and we just keep quiet and let them interview people and treat it deadpan. I thought that was the best way to go and my boss after thinking the matter over and talking to someone else, he said, 'Yes, that's fine, we'll do it that way.' About half an hour before the aeroplane landed and we're now getting on towards nine o'clock at night, I am told by Admiral Smith who was then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee - the way things went in those times - that the aeroplane was to be .... The whole operation was to be treated clandestinely and that the Press were to be excluded from the proceedings. So I harked back to what I remembered of the Petrov thing, how

the similar sort of thing was handled there. So I said, 'Very well, seeing that the aeroplane ...'. Meanwhile I'm on the other telephone telling the aeroplane to turn his lights out and to stay clear of the airfield until I'd sorted out a couple of details, which he did. I said, 'The best thing we can do now, I'll arrange for the Press to stay exactly where they are. We'll keep on talking about the aeroplane and I'll have someone there to meet the aeroplane. And we'll land him in the dark without any lights, on the far end of Darwin airfield, which is a very long airfield - longest in Australia - and we'll sneak him in on the end there, have a couple of buses waiting and winkle the people off and the empty aeroplane can taxi up to the Press. That was referred, while I was speaking to the Minister whose name is Morrison, and he agreed to that arrangement. So that's what we did. In came the Caribou, landed without lights - they're good boys some of those Caribou drivers - and with the assistance of the police we had some buses waiting off to the side of the runway and the first person to step outside of the Caribou was a large Timorese sergeant who looked like Fidel Castro, he had jungle greens and a big beard. He stepped out of the aeroplane holding aloft an automatic weapon, something like an AK rifle, I think. He was the fellow that had hijacked the aeroplane and he had a smile all over his face. He looked around and holding this weapon above his head with both hands he walked over to the first policeman that he could find and gave him this weapon as much as to say, 'You can have this, I don't want it anymore'. He'd achieved his purpose. All he'd tried to do was to get his wife and kids and as many of his mates' wives and kids on that

aeroplane and get them out of Timor to some safe place. And that's what the hijacking was all about and that's what happened. The people were duly taken under custody by the police and cared for and the empty aeroplane taxied up and interviewed the Press. That cost me a few beers to square the Press off after that.

They must have been furious.

They were. I had to apologise.

What about the repercussions from government?

I never heard any repercussions to that incident. I was never questioned about it; it was just accepted. It wasn't a government inspired action it was just an individual who was concerned for the safety of women and kids and he saw this as an opportunity to get them out of the country and into some safe place and so he did it.

So all those Timorese are now integrated in the Australian community?

I feel sure they are, I don't know that but yes, I suppose they are. And for a time we - this of course was after Cyclone Tracey and the base at Darwin was extensively damaged - for quite some time our officers' mess was converted into a refugee place for Timorese families who lived in the old officers' mess in Darwin; it's still there. And what nice people they were to

have on the base. We asked them to cooperate with us in simple matters like rubbish and keeping the place clean and tidy. We used to feed them in the airmen's mess and I think they were very well fed there, and what nice people they were to deal with, how very cooperative they were. I got to like them - what I saw of the Timorese people made me like them very much.

So when your aircraft went across to pick them up in Timor you had no specific names of people that you should actually put on those aeroplanes?

No, I don't remember being given names. I don't remember that.

... other incidents connected with Timor?

Well yes, on one occasion - the Australian government agreed to give some degree of assistance to the Portugese as administration were leaving Timor and in that context I was told to go across to the island of Atauro and bring out the Portugese officials whose offices were there. While I was on the ground at Atauro I was met near the strip by a man called Gerald Stone, a Canadian, a well known journalist in Australia. He wrote then for the *Bulletin* and I think he had a TV program in some State. And also a gentleman who identified himself as Mr Gerald Packer. They'd gone over to Atauro in a ship from Darwin - they'd travelled privately - and Mr Packer told me that he would be coming back to Darwin with me and I had to explain that it mightnot be possible in view of the limitations on the aeroplane and we'd been sent there to assist the

Portugese. Mr Stone expressed some misgivings, dissatisfaction if you like, with the lack of action being taken by us, whoever 'us' were. He considered that we were not doing enough to help the Timorese people in the difficulties they were facing up to. I felt constrained to get a little bit cross with him, and explain a few things and said that if he felt that more should be done to help the Timorese, he better go and tell the .... He shouldn't be blaming the RAAF. He should be telling the government about it. Anyhow, that operation was completed and we took the Portuguese people and Mr Stone and Mr Packer back to Darwin. And lo and behold in the next edition of the *Bulletin* is an account of this angry Air Force bloke in Timor who had expressed opinions about this, that and something else and had a fair bit to say which was seen by some people to be critical of government policy in the matter. And you can bet the phone started ringing then and my boss who was himself under some pressure, I suppose - political pressure, I mean - he was then asking me some fairly pointed questions about what sort of things I'd been saying to the Press and people like Mr Stone and Mr Packer. There was a bit of flack around my ears for a while over that little lot. These are the sorts of things that happen to service officers when they are in a sensitive area and you've just got to face up to these difficulties. You don't have a press officer, you don't have protection of this kind and that and you've got to deal with these things in the best way you can and you're bound to get into trouble whatever you say to the press.

Air Commodore, one of the most difficult situations you've ever come up in your service career was Cyclone Tracey which happened on Christmas Eve 1974. At the time you were on leave at Smiths Point but either you or your staff officers had the foresight to take a Dakota from Darwin to Tindal, and the following day that aircraft picked you up at Smiths Point to take you straight back to Darwin.

Yes, I was on leave at Smiths Point. I always tell people that it was an act of judgment and foresight on my part to be away from Darwin on Christmas Eve of Cyclone Tracey but in fact I was on leave that had been arranged months beforehand.

When you returned to Darwin and landed on that strip, what were you confronted with?

Devastation. Devastation is the only word that describes it. I flew over the town and over the base and around the harbour before we landed and it was just - I couldn't really believe what I was looking at. I flew over my own house. I might add my wife and family were over at Smiths Point; we'd been there for a couple of weeks and I left them behind. The fellows that brought the aeroplane over said, 'Don't take your wife and family back to Darwin. Much better to leave them here where they are because when you go back to Darwin you'll see that there's nothing there for them.' and that proved to be so. I had a good look at the diningroom table in our house through the roof which had a great big hole in it. The whole town was just in a terrible mess: foliage, trees, vehicles, roofs off,

ships upside down, vehicles upside down. The base was a complete ruin.

In essence you really had to take control. You were the senior service officer.

I had to take control of the base. I had no formal responsibility outside the base except that under arrangements that were developing within Darwin then I had sort of agreed and - I won't say I'd been appointed because I hadn't - it was generally accepted that I would be responsible for providing air assistance to the local administration as far as I could in the event of any emergency, which happens in Darwin every year with floods or road closure or some such thing - it happens every wet season in Darwin. And there was a sort of loose arrangement under which the Air Force would come in on a big emergency. I don't think anyone had ever imagined something of this magnitude of Tracey.

Did you receive any government directions?

No, I didn't receive any government directions. I was told by my boss that I was to afford all possible assistance to General Stretton who was sent to Darwin. He was the head of the Natural Disasters Organisation in Canberra and he came to Darwin the night after I got back - the night after Christmas night, that is - and he went to Darwin to take charge of the emergency - arrangements to deal with the emergency.

So did you then come under General Stretton's directions?

No, Sir, I did not come under General Stretton. I asked my boss ...

Was that the Air Officer Commanding Operational Command?

The Air Officer Commanding Operational Command, "Where do I stand in this matter? Am I under your command or the command of General Stretton"? And I was very grateful to receive a message not long after that saying that the command arrangements in Darwin were in no way altered, i.e. I remained under command of the Air Officer Commanding Operational Command. At the same time I was told by him to afford all possible assistance to General Stretton and his work in straightening up the local scene.

So did you have very early discussions with General Stretton?

Yes, in fact I met him at the airport. He arrived in a Hercules that night. I think it was ten o'clock, something like that. I met him on arrival and arranged for one of our boys to find a vehicle which wasn't in very good shape but that took General Stretton into the Police Headquarters in Darwin which was then being set up as the operation centre for the relief operation.

What part did the RAAF play in Operation Tracey?

First of all, we set to work to try and make it possible to get around the base. You couldn't get around the roads because of foliage and trees and goodness knows what was obstructing everything you tried to do so we had to get to work and clean some of that up. We got the runway - all the debris cleared off the runway: bits of trees and such rubbish, so that the runway was useable. The control tower was not useable but we used vehicles for control of vehicles. Darwin, of course, was a joint user airfield and an international airfield but as soon as the control arrangements became substandard for civil purposes, international flights and so on overflew Darwin and so we were concerned only mainly with military traffic. The first thing we did was to try and make the base work, not only for our own purposes but because it would be necessary ultimately for civil aircraft to come in and use it to support the local population. In the immediate ... straight after Tracey there were all sorts of little things that went on that were not specifically organised; individuals would do things. I know of an electrician who had his normal duties around the base, and electricians were very busy. He had just of his own initiative set up a number of generating plants in the nearby civil community and each evening, having finished his work, he would then set off in a vehicle that he'd acquired somehow with fuel, oil and so on. He'd go around these generating sets that he'd set up - I think there was one at the hospital and there were certainly several others where a group of people had set up a house and decided that they'd live there, because all the

houses were wrecked. He would go around, service the generators and set up everything and make sure that they were still operating; and that sort of thing went on all over the place. There was some general discussion about the ultimate evacuation of Darwin, the civilian population. In the days immediately preceding that decision, as far as we possibly could, we used the Hercules and other aircraft that were coming and going to get our own people, as far as we could, out of the place. That is to say, the Navy, the Army and the Air Force families. We pretty nearly completed that. All sorts of things happened on the base. The padre and his wife and a number of other ladies set up a laundry. Fellows didn't have any place they could wash their clothes; there were no facilities. In many places there was no running water. So these ladies set up a communal laundry and fellows would dump in a bag of clothing and that night they could come and pick them up and drop something else off. Then the decision was taken to evacuate Darwin by air and I was party to the general discussion about that When the decision was taken I immediately started talking right there, within a few minutes, with the local airline representatives and I proceeded as I thought I would be expected to do to set up arrangements to put this into effect. I was told by a fellow called McHenry who was the Head of the Department of Northern Territory Emergency Services that I had no authority to proceed with these arrangements, and I was within an ace of getting it fixed with the local airline blokes, all of whom I knew. I then in view of that sought audience with General Stretton, I told him what had happened and I said, 'I think you should put me in charge of this

operation'. He said, 'I'd prefer if you let the civilians do it'. So I said, 'In that case I have no authority here. You are going to let the civilians do it. Jolly good luck to you. I'm going back to the RAAF base where I do have some authority.' The man who was put in charge of coordinating the civilian evacuation of Darwin was a very nice bloke whom I haven't seen for years who was the head of the local Education Department. I think he was a very knowledgeable educator and I know that he was a hell of a nice bloke but I doubt very much that he knew very much about operating an air evacuation system. However, that's the way it was set up and that's the way it went and I can assure you that it was chaos for quite some days until I persuaded General Stretton to let me take charge of it. During that time I had no control over civil aircraft, I had no control over who got on them or went where. The thing was totally uncoordinated. I was, however, able to coordinate and control what was done in relation to military aircraft. I didn't have to seek anybody's approval about what happened there. But as far as the civil aircraft was concerned I had no authority and, much as I tried I achieved nothing.

> Why do you think General Stretton made that move? He should have been fully aware that in emergencies it is usual for the military to take control because they have the most experience.

I don't know, you'll have to ask General Stretton about that but I think, and I maybe quite wrong, but I think that he was concerned that the whole thing would be seen as a civil

operation. He told me, and I heared him say several times that he was there acting, not as an Army officer, but as the head of the civil emergency services and he was concerned - I think this is the answer to your question - he was concerned that it be dealt with civilly and that the military people should not be unduly involved.

What about the people being evacuated on Hercules aircraft?

That was no problem as far as we were concerned. We knew a lot about how to handle that. We would say, 'Righto, there's a Hercules going to Brisbane ...'.

So you organised the evacuations of people on Hercules aircraft when they...?

I didn't do it personally, my staff did.

Your staff did ....

I had some movements people there who would have done the detailed work, I didn't.

But the civil ...

But we controlled it. I controlled it in Darwin, yes.

But the civil aircraft were all handled by the civil authority.

I don't know who handled them. All I can say is that I tried to take charge of it to coordinate the entire thing and I was told I had no authority and that it would be better to let the civilians do it.

But some days later they said, 'Right ...'

I think it was eleven days later, after most of the civilian population had been air evacuated and it was chaos. There were people just going willy-nilly all over the place. Couldn't blame the civil operators like Ansett and TAA, they would arrive in Darwin and say 'What do you want us to do?'. I'd say, 'It's no good asking me, you'll have to see the civilians about it'.

That must have been a point of high frustration for you?

It was indeed, yes.

What other areas did you find very frustrating during Cyclone Tracey?

There were all sorts of attempts to interfere with what went on on the RAAF base. I was told that I had to send people from the RAAF base in order to put up tents and assist with repairing accommodation in the civil community, and I said,

'No, I'm not going to do it. There are able bodied men, propping up lamp posts all over Darwin. My job here is to rehabilitate the RAAF base and make things here work and that's what I'm going to do.' I found it rather difficult to have to argue about it but I did.

What did you consider your achievements during Cyclone Tracey?

Getting the RAAF base back on its feet and one thing that pleased me very much at the time and in retrospect I'm still pretty pleased about was the reaction of the RAAF people there, not only the uniformed, little WAAAFs that worked the telephone exchange and the women and the kids, a lot of the families, the dependants, they behaved wonderfully - they were all very good. Generally speaking I think the RAAF performed very well. The Navy came in some time after the air evacuation was nicely proceeding - it was proceeding anyway - in came the fleet in charge of an admiral and they spent some time working around Darwin, directly assisting the civil community and I think a lot of people thought that the RAAF should have been doing likewise. Well, I didn't have time to run around pointing out that we had a base there which we had to take care of and make operational, whereas the Navy had come there specifically to move refrigerators and clean up around houses.

Was there any danger at that time there could have been a secondary cyclone?

There was some danger of a secondary cyclone in the period of say, within forty-eight hours of the original cyclone. One of the other things I did. We had a very good hygiene bloke, flight sergeant, who was later commissioned and I asked him to go and nip around the town - because Darwin Air Bases is virtually in the centre of the city and I said, 'Go and have a look around the general area and tell me what you think about the hygiene situation.' because I didn't know if there were sewers overflowing or really what was going on. I asked him to go out and find out. He came back and said that - of course, at Christmas time just about every house had a refrigerator full of Christmas goodies, the usual things that people have at Christmas, over goes the refrigerator, off goes the power and the place is now full of rotting food. He told me about this and said within three or four days here we're going to have the greatest plague of flies and pestilence that's ever been seen. The sanitary arrangements were not of the very best, despite all our efforts to control things and observe proper hygiene. So I rounded up three old Ag pilots, two from Kununurra and one came up from somewhere else, and I said, 'Righto, you blokes, we've got plenty of DDT and other chemicals here, will you spray the town?'. They said, 'What do you mean?'. I said, 'Go around and spray the town because if we don't we're going to have, I'm told, and I think I accept what I'm told, that we're going to have a very nasty hygiene situation. It won't only affect the RAAF base, it will affect everybody here if we don't do something about it pretty smartly, so I want the town sprayed.' So I said, 'You blokes, I don't know who will ever pay you, I've no idea, I have no authority to let a contract

but I want the place sprayed. Can you do it?'. They said "Yes". So we gave them free accommodation in whatever we could find. They used to drink in the sergeants' mess and they used to spend their days ... and there's a photograph on the wall. See that, that's one of them. And they sprayed Darwin. Later on when peace and sanity prevailed, I got a letter and a phone call of thanks from Dr Charles Gurd who was the head of the Department of Health in Darwin, a fellow that I knew well, and he thanked me for what we'd done. I think perhaps we did the right thing there.

In your very full and exacting career, was that one of your most difficult tasks?

I suppose it was a bit difficult. One of the difficulties was the lack of communications around the base because we didn't have a telephone. Now, you think of the number of times that anybody who's got a job to do will pick up that telephone and say something or tell somebody to do something or receive information perhaps. Take your telephone off, my word, it makes things difficult. So I had a little set of runners, I had about three or four of them, and I'd get one of these guys in - one of them was a girl, she was the wife of one of our sergeants who was a great help to everybody - I'd write out a message on a bit of paper, fold it down and say, 'Here, take that to so and so and go and find him wherever you can, get him to write the answer on the other side of that bit of paper and bring it back here'. We did that for days. The other thing that I found difficult was the fact that we just didn't get

enough sleep. If I got three hours consecutive sleep in twenty-four in that first couple of weeks I'd have been lucky. But it was great, I didn't mind doing that. All the people were cheerful. The people were hopping in and doing things and getting on with it one way and another. There was a fair bit of irregular behaviour. People weren't standing around too much seeking authority to do this or do that; they just mostly went and did it. I found that wonderful. The people were full of initiative, prepared to work, do what they were told, put up with the difficulties. It was great.

Did you shake hands with General Stretton when he left?

Oh, well, some days I can't remember the exact time scale now, but I was asked by General Stretton to arrange for his clandestine departure from Darwin. 'Would I please arrange for him to be clandestinely flown south because he was concerned that if the local population knew that he was leaving, there would be some sort of collapse of civilian morale in the place. So I said, 'Yes, if you want me to get you clandestinely out of Darwin, I have no wish to stand in your way, Sir'. So I did arrange for a Hercules captain, briefed him that he was to take off without clearance, having in his lap a prepared flight plan to go to Canberra and he was to take himself up into the air above Darwin, lodge his flight plan by radio with the control authorities and take General Stretton to Darwin [sic] which he did.

To Canberra.

I beg your pardon, took him to Canberra, yes. Another thing that happened which I guess doesn't matter very much but I was told on New Year's Eve .... When I first got back to Darwin all the fellows were - no, it was Christmas time - and they were a bit inclined to stop work. They said, 'We've had a bad time for a couple of nights, now we're going to have a day off'. I said, 'No, fear, you're not' and I kept their noses to the grindstone for several days but I did say, 'On New Year's Eve, come hell or high water, we're going to have a party'. That was all set up and that, I might add, would include a large number of Darwinites who were honorary members of our messes, officers', sergeants' and airmen's messes. We had a great relationship with the Darwin community, something I was always very pleased about. I got a message to say that the service messes were to be closed on New Year's Eve. Unfortunately, the bloke who was supposed to tell me that didn't find me until next day, so I never really got the message and so we didn't close the messes and we did have the party which I'd promised the blokes they would have, so that all worked out quite well.

Air Commodore Hitchins, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW