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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01785

F/4751 Olsen, Leslie Herbert

Recorded
at: Two Rocks, WA
on: 1 September 1993
by: John Roberts

Description
Part of a collection of nineteen oral history interviews conducted by the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association of Western Australia. Interviewers included John Roberts, Margaret Rickard, Lorna Dodd, William Gray Ritchie and Jack Shepheard.

F4751 Leslie Herbert Olsen, as an able seaman; Royal Australian Navy corvette HMAS *Geraldton*; Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and North Pacific Ocean; 1942-1946; interviewed by John Roberts.

Les Olsen speaks of his childhood experiences; joining the Sydney Morning Herald [SMH] as cadet artist; his brief stint in the army and transfer to the RAN; initial training at HMAS *Cerberus*; sailing to Colombo on MV *Majura*; joining corvette HMAS *Geraldton* in September 1942; life on board a corvette; *Geraldton'*s role both before and after Olsen joined it; his duties including watch keeping; his sketching and photography; *Geraldton'*s collision with an US tanker in the Persian Gulf; convoy duties in the Indian Ocean; refit in Australia in January 1945; service in the North Pacific; the end of the war in the Pacific; a landing party after the war; his discharge and rejoining the SMH; working for the Corvette Association; establishing a corvette monument on Memorial Hill in West Australia, and Iris Nesdale's book *The Corvettes.*

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, December 2001

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Transcript methodology

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Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. 'World War Two' (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to 'Second World War' (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [ ] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. A double dash (- -) indicates an unfinished sentence.

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Sound Collection

AWM ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NO.: S01785

INTERVIEWEE: Les Olsen

INTERVIEWER:

DATE RECORDED:

RECORDING LOCATION:

SUBJECT:

SUMMARY:

TRANSCRIBER: C.L. Soames
TRANSCRIPTION DATE: December 2001

Identification: This is an interview with Les Olsen and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association of Western Australia. Les is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association WA and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

Les was born in Sydney on 2 August 1920; he joined the Navy in November 1942 at Fremantle; prior to that he had had service with the Army. He joined as an ordinary seaman and his official number was F4751.

Sixty of these small ships, officially Bathurst Class Australian Minesweepers, commonly known as Corvettes, were built during World War II in Australian shipyards as part of the Commonwealth Government's wartime shipbuilding program. Twenty were built on Admiralty orders for the Royal Navy and were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These

ships were named after Australian towns – *Ballarat, Bathurst, Bendigo, Broome, Burnie, Cairns, Cessnock, Gawler, Geraldton, Goulburn, Ipswich, Kalgoorlie, Launceston, Lismore, Maryborough, Pirie, Tamworth, Toowoomba, Whyalla and Wollongong*. Also, of the sixty built, four were for the Royal Indian Navy and named HMIS *Bengal, Bombay, Madras and Punjab*, and they all left for their home base independently in 1942. The remaining thirty-six were built for the Royal Australian Navy and also named after Australian towns. They were *Ararat, Armidale, Benalla, Bowen, Bunbury, Bundaberg, Castlemaine, Colac, Cootamundra, Cowra, Deloraine, Dubbo, Echuca, Fremantle, Geelong, Gladstone, Glenelg, Gympie, Horsham, Inverell, Junee, Kapunda, Katoomba, Kiama, Latrobe, Lithgow, Mildura, Parkes, Rockhampton, Shepparton, Stawell, Strahan, Townsville, Wagga, Warrnambool and Wallaroo*. Of course, some of these towns are now cities.

HMAS *Geraldton*, J178, was built for the Royal Navy and was commissioned on 16 August 1941. It paid off in Colombo in June 1946 and was handed over to the Turkish Navy where it was named *Antalya*. This was later deleted from Jane's Fighting Ships list in 1975.

This interview was conducted by John Roberts on 1 September 1993 at Twin Rocks near Yanchep WA.

Two Rocks.

Two Rocks near Yanchep [WA].

Les, could you give me your full name, thank you?

Leslie Herbert Olsen.

When and where were you born?

In Sydney on 2 August 1920.

Now, could you give me some indication of your early life, where you were educated and your early occupation before joining the services?

Yes. I attended Petersham Intermediate High School doing all the secondary high school subjects, but joined the staff of the Sydney Morning Herald as a copy boy and then enrolled in the East Sydney Technical College for an arts course. That's it.

When was your first involvement with the Royal Australian Navy?

Actually, in – I had been in the Army and when Singapore fell, the whole 2nd Division from the east coast was sent across to the west Australian coast under Major General Gordon Bennett, and we were to form the North West Defences. I took trip – my trip was on the HMAS *Manoora* as a transport at that stage. That really made me aware of the great life that could be had in the Navy.

Any particular reason of earlier life why you wanted to join the Navy?

Oh, yes, being in Sydney and having been in a boat family, and I'd been reared on sea stories since the age of two or three, and finally I sailed boats on the Sydney Harbour and was in constant touch with all the Navy things. So from fifteen onwards I was trying to become a naval sailor.

> As you'd previously been in the Army was it difficult to join the Navy or change your services, change from one service to the other?

Yes, it was, and if I'd been in Sydney I still would not have been able to manipulate the change, but over in Perth it was a lot easier. And even though I was in national service then, I still managed to do it. A friend of mine who was in the AIF at the time was knocked back but I was taken in.

> Where did you go for your training, Les?

Over to *Cerberus*, where most people went. I crossed the Nullarbor in the train, it was a long, hot, dreary ride but was in company with sailors returning to the east and they gave me another touch on naval life and explained a lot of things – the fun and the serious side of it. We used to pull up en route for meals, and a lot of shenanigans going on around there, but it was all good fun and I learnt to respect the older sailors.

> All right. Now, when you went into *Cerberus* could you give me an indication of the time of the year and some of your early days in the Navy? – issue of kit and how you adjusted to Navy routine.

Well, it was early November when we finally reached...

> What year was that?

Early November in '42 – '42 when I reached *Cerberus*. I did my early naval training – it came very easy to me after fourteen months in the Army and being in the Navy and the place where I wanted to be I had no hassle with discipline. To me it was great, I was amongst ships and the smell of ships and it was great.

> Any reactions from your family, the fact that you'd left the Army and joined the Navy?

Oh, yes, the family were concerned as they had been ever since I was trying to manipulate their signatures. My dad was conscious of the fact that they were being slammed into a submarine and he didn't like the sound of that, and mum didn't like me going to sea anyway even though my grandfathers had been there and I'd been fishing with my dad from a boat all my life. I knew the sea from a small boat point of view but really going out to sea was another adventure.

> You must have been rather an unusual character, turning up in an Army uniform to a Naval establishment. Maybe you could tell us some of your adjustment to the fact of what you received in your kit and some of the daily routine for the first few weeks of your course.

Yeah, well, as you mentioned, being in an Army uniform in a Navy establishment for about eight hours didn't come easy to some of the other sailors and they gave me a rough time for a while; but there were four or five others there so we shared this stuff. The issue of the kit was exciting to me, I was getting a uniform I wanted to be in. Fitting was rather a joke at times, although much more precise than the Army had been. If you didn't like a size, if it was too big, you were able to send it back whereas the Army, that was it. It consisted of two uniforms, one for dressing out and the other for working in, sets of overalls, two caps, shirts, and the pride of my life, a big submariners fully-wool, smelly, greasy, jumper – which they took back along with the pith helmet, which they took back after a while. These were all very exciting but the part was, everything had to be named and stamped, that was your property and nobody was to touch it bar you. The funny part about it and amusing part of it to me was the extremes we went to, to get rid of the new-looking uniforms – the collars were too blue so we'd scrub them with salty water to make them bleached, we'd put hair over the top of the shirts to make it look like you had a hairy chest. These were little things we picked up from the older sailors that had been there fully a month before us.

Take the fluff off your trousers with a razor.

That's dead right, yes.

Now, in your training, as you moved in with your training as a seaman, have you got any recollections of that from of training? I know you finished up with a rate after but you can tell us about that as well.

Oh, yes, the early part was marching – left, right, left, right, form fours and all the rest of it – which came easy after the Army training. But the exciting part became when we went down to the jetties and got into boats and we rode the big cutters and the whalers, and we went out on the *Cerberus* itself which was a tug which had been converted for the Navy's use and we set sail across the bay to Cowes. We were taught to steer and allow for drift and all the rest of it. Because I'd done a lot of sailing that didn't worry me either so I was considered to be a bit of a natural for the ...

What rank did you finish up with?

Oh, at the end of three months they asked us did we want to do any special courses. Actually, I was very interested in ASDIC to start with but somebody told me that if I did ASDIC I'd be down the bottom of the ship on the destroyer and I didn't like the sound of that. So I felt that if I was going to fight the Nips I'd like to be up on deck and throwing things back as fast as they came so I did an AA3 course.

After you left Flinders could you give us an indication of what happened after that and then when did you first go to sea on the *Geraldton*?

After Flinders there was – it was quite amusing, they gave us seven days leave and instructions we were not to leave the city. But four Sydney-ites looked at each other and we decided to jump a train and went home to Sydney for four days and got back just in time to go on the draft – which is a bit stupid when you look back with all the penalties that could have gone with that. However, we were drafted to the

Mediterranean per the MV *Majura* which was an old P&O and BI thing which did about twelve knots. We went to Colombo and were off-loaded there for a while, for about two or three weeks, and then the 40,000 that has gone on draft with us were slowly whittled away till finally there was about eight or ten of us left. After three months there we enquired what was going to happen to us and they pushed us onto an old French tub and sent us up to Bombay where we sat another six weeks – we were completely forgotten again.
I was sitting on the Gateway of India on the sea wall underneath there one afternoon and five corvettes came steaming up the bay. Someone said, 'Hey, that's a corvette' and, 'Gee, that's the *Geraldton*.' So I raced back, got my gear and two hours later I was on board.

> So you joined the *Geraldton*. Can you recall the approximate date when you joined the *Geraldton*?

Let me see – June – it would have been about late September.

> Forty...

'42.

> So you are on the *Geraldton*, you are, no doubt, ready to go to sea; can you give us some of – how did you find adjusting to at last being on a ship after your depot life?

Oh, it was good; I felt I was doing something at last instead of scrubbing out POs' messes. I felt this is what I trained for and this is what I was going to do. The first night out was rather traumatic, trying to catch up with the convoy that sailed before us – we were alone – and right on dusk my first job was port lookout and the starboard lookout on the starboard wing of the bridge yelled out that there were two torpedoes approaching. When I really thought out what this meant the hair on the back of my neck just crawled and I just felt weak all over and thought, God, not the first night, surely I'm going to last longer than the first night. But by this time the two fluorescent – or streaks in the water – had been identified as two very playful porpoises who came right up to the ship, ducked under and then played under the nose of the ship. It caused a lot of concern at first but the lookout was congratulated for his sharpness.

> Now, although you are on a corvette – I don't think you'd seen a corvette before – what was your reaction when you first went on board, to the mess deck, living accommodation, and working facilities?

Oh, well, it was tiny to start with, it wasn't very far off the water, and how the hell 102 fellows were going to live on this ship; it just amazed me. And I felt very much a new sailor who didn't know much amongst very seasoned sailors who had just come back from the Med. But one fellow came to my rescue and took me under his wing – and I think these days you would call him a sea daddy, that meant somebody who looked after the juniors – and he advised me where to go and what to do, and even made me a tiddy hoggie and a cup of char just to get myself settled.

Now, you used two terms, you said a tiddy oggie and a cup of char. Would you explain what you mean by those?

A tiddy oggie was sort of a piece of pastry with some onion and some meat rolled up in it, very much like the modern day pasty which fellows were able to make themselves – and if the cook was in a good mood he'd cook them for you. Anybody said 'tiddy oggie' knew exactly what it meant. Now, what was the other one?

Char?

Char was a cup of tea – mug of tea – in a pussers' mug, a thick, white crockery type thing built to withstand all knocks.

Now, you use 'pussers', what do you mean by 'pussers'?

'Pussers' was the sailor's term for the Navy – Navy general – and pussers was right through the RN, the RAN and the RIN. It was just a way of signifying that you were part of the Navy – nickname.

It's supposed to mean 'please you, strictly service articles only'[1], is one thing I heard.

It's the first time I heard that.

Now, you are on a ship which has already been in an operation all its own. Could you tell us what area you were serving in, what was the role of the ship and where did you go from there?

Well, the ship had been in the Mediterranean and that's where I left Australia to go to – but got lost on the way, as I said – and they'd served out of Alex [Alexandria] right through the Med and out into the Atlantic – which is quite a bit of an achievement for an Australian built corvette. Then they finished up their stint in the Mediterranean with participating in the landing on Sicily. The stories were running pretty fresh in their minds by the time I'd reached them and I used to sit and listen, say, well, this is what it was all about. But then they advised me that things would get a lot slower because we were heading for the Persian Gulf, it would get a lot harder to live, and a lot hotter to live – and I soon found that out when I tried to walk across the wooden decks in bare feet, it was so hot you had to jump and you had to get something on your feet, even on the wooden decks. But after a while you got used to it, like everything else, and every now and again you'd get into a little bay and have a swim, even thought it was full of tiger snakes, or sea snakes that looked like tiger snakes.

What was the ship's role in this zone, what work was it engaged on?

Mainly escorting and escorting ships from the States and other parts of the world – we'd take them up there with rolling stock on to help the Russians, and we were taking tankers out laden with oil. There was a patrol situation there where corvettes would patrol the mouth of the Persian Gulf on a three-month station, and that became

[1] Pusser is probably a corruption of purser.

a little bit boring. Submarine things were pretty common and you often relieved the situation by dropping a depth charge amongst a whole lot of fish which showed up on the ASDIC and we had fish for three months, it was good. And if you've ever had 200 pounds of TNT let off underneath you, you know why their eyes were popping out of their head.

> What were your own duties on the ship? I realise you'd gone as an ordinary seaman with a gunnery rate, but obviously you finished up doing other duties as well.

Yes, sailors' life on a RAN ship was a very busy one. At that time we were in two watches which meant four hours on and four hours off, and that, I found, was the hardest thing to take. I wanted to go to sleep when I should be awake and tried to rest when I should be working, and so on. But about three weeks of that and you accepted the routine and you lived through it without any trouble. You were watch keeping, you were being part of ship, you were doing your share of scrubbing and other duties throughout the ship, and certainly lookouts throughout the day and watch keeping on the bridge at night. When they learnt I was interested in steering the ship they made me part of the quartermaster group inside the first two or three weeks.

> You mentioned that you had another duty on board at a later stage in your career on the *Geraldton*.

Yes. After a few years on the bridge I thought I would like to start studying for my 'hook' which is Leading Seaman, whose rate is signified by a [calyx]. To do that I thought I should get off the bridge and do the ordinary work around the ship involving those duties I would have to know about, like brazing the whaler and setting the whaler down at sea, and controlling the whaler, and even getting in amongst the minesweeping gear and trying to understand that. It was very, very hot down there and I found that a bit boring, so I went back on to the bridge where I seemed to be a lot happier.

> But you mentioned also you were a [tankard] one time.

Yes, well, that was all part of tanking, is a seaman who is attached – who was attached – to the supply assistant and you did his going, his fetching. In other words, you went and got the carcasses out for the men's meals the next day and you lugged them up on the upper deck to thaw them out. And in the morning you would cut them up into portions and gave them round to the different messes. You never, ever did it right because whoever – whatever you did was wrong because you either gave one mess too much or too little and you got abuse. But you soon learned, after a few months at sea, to abuse them back and they respected you all the more.

> You mentioned you delivered the meat and the food to the messes. What was the reason of [for] that?

Well, we had a canteen type messing in which two seamen would be set aside each morning to prepare the midday meal for the cooks to cook to they received their meals, they peeled it – they received the meat off me and then they would peel their

spuds and their onions and put them all in one big tray and deliver them to the cook who would then have them ready for the [clocks gran].

Can you recall any exciting meals you had at sea?

When you are young all meals are exciting and you just – The midday meal was it, other meals were not so good, particularly on the later stations on, say, the Pacific side of my stint, when you became under the influence of American supplies at times. And there was one meal, which I've forgotten the name of, but it was a very heavily spiced skinless sausage which nobody liked at all, you only ate it when you could camouflage it with other things. I think we might have had some of that stuff on board for the best part of three years – it was in cans and nobody would touch it.

I think that might have been Smorgan's famous tinned sausages.

Yes, they were very much like that.

Now, how did – with all these duties at sea you wouldn't have had much time for relaxation and amusement, but obviously this is not so. Could you tell us how you filled in your times and maybe some of the amusements at sea, whilst you were on the ship ashore?

Well, you are quite right, you didn't have much time when you are in two watches, four hours on, four hours off, right through the day and night, so any spare time in two watches was spent crashing and trying to catch up. But when you went to three watches that was a bit different, you had four hours on and eight hours off, even though so part of the eight hours off watch was taken working shift, which you did every morning from, say, 08:00 to 12:00 hours. But some of the part was taken with dhobying and that means scrubbing your clothes and keeping them ready and bending clothes, and so on. Entertainment was then supplied by ourselves, people who had carted guitars around or ukuleles – one fellow had – or squeeze-boxes – sing songs, particularly in harbour at the end of a hot day, you'd sit up on the forecastle and if you were lucky you got up there and got yourself a bollard, and if you were early enough you got the comfortable one. Otherwise you sat and flaked out on the timber decks.

Well, how did you fill in your time? I mean, I know people played cards and other things but probably you may have had some special way of filling in your odd moments, particularly up on the forecastle.

Well, yes, I did because being a cadet artist and quite keen on it I kept a sketchbook and right throughout the war I had mess-deck sketches, forecastle sketches, villages that I visited on my shore leave – and also with a camera and I was able to take a lot of shots from the crow's-nest or from the bottom of the mast looking up, anything that showed life on board. And I was lucky enough to catch some survivors that we picked up who'd been afloat for about ten days in a small dinghy. Shots like that have been valuable and very interesting since the war's been over.

Now, you mentioned the attempted torpedo attack which turned out to be porpoises. Could you tell us some more of your life on the *Geraldton* or the *Geraldton's* activities in the area you were serving?

I suppose one of the strongest memories you have after all these years was my second trip out of Bombay – still a very young sailor – in which we were escorting, once again, ships up into the Persian Gulf but with an incident that stays in my memories. One very bright moonlit night a Yankee tanker cut through the convoy we were escorting and came right through the port side, right through the centre, of the convoy of about twenty ships and came in collision with us right out on the starboard wing. How this can happen is quite understandable because we were without lights, as it always was in wartime, and she hit us just in front of the bridge – which was a good spot to hit us because if had gone any further aft she would have rolled us right over and we would have sunk, but as it was it hit us a bit further for'ard and spun us around. The port side crashed into the starboard side of the tanker and we just bounced off again. But I can remember sitting up and everyone was saying, 'Shit, it's a torpedo' and then there was chaos with lockers falling everywhere, tables collapsing, people under everything, and the CB bursting out of their caboose. And a friend of mine kept saying to me, 'Keep going, Les, keep going.' There was no way he was going to catch me.

You mentioned CBs, what did you mean?

Communications Branches had their own little nest for'ard up near the paint locker. From where they were it must have sounded like sitting in the middle of a forty-four gallon drum and somebody belting it from the outside. So the noise, they wouldn't know what was going on, they just shot up into the mess – and I really mean the mess on our own mess decks – and, of course, our reaction was to get to our action station as all our training had taught us, but when we got up on the deck, here's this big tanker right alongside and there's one of the ASDIC ratings standing up there waving his arms saying, 'You've left me, you rotten bastards, you've left me.' He didn't know he was the first one up on deck and we were still trying to get there...
... 24:00 hours, right on the change for the middle watch. I guess there was a little bit of confusion there at times and nobody seemed to know the situation down below. So people slept where they could and the next morning, when we were trying to clean up the mess decks and plug the big hole which we had, we found a seaman, still slightly unconscious, underneath the lockers and a pile of cables and such. He had a little short stint and a few aspirins in the sick bay but apart from that nobody was seriously hurt except for cut arms and heads – and my head, where I'd sat up, crashed into the deck head and fell out of my hammock.
We limped into Khor Kuwai in the Persian Gulf the next morning and proceeded to patch up with timber and concrete from the Khor Kuwai RN station. And we fixed that up and went back to Karachi for a three-months' refit or a patch-up done by the local Indian dockyard people.

Now, when you were at Karachi obviously, as you were there for three months, you would have had the opportunity to have some leave and have a look around India. Could you give us some information on that?

Yes. One little incident was very interesting to me. The day after we limped into the dock in Karachi a truck pulled up and there was 102 or 104 chickens, very much alive, and they had been sent to us by the local people for Christmas Day, for our

Christmas dinner. And so we had to set about slaughtering them, and cleaning, and plucking, but it was a wonderful gesture and it affected me very much.
After a while they declared that leave was available and you could select either going up to the Khyber Pass or going across through the Sind Desert to Al Ahmadi where American Methodist missionaries had requested that some of the Australian sailors be sent. So I was in the party that went over through the Sind Desert to Al Ahmadi and they treated us great. They hadn't seen sailors there for a start and, you know, we were a local oddity and everything was laid on for us.
After ten days or so we came back to the ship in Karachi and just resumed ship life until the bows were put back on. Then we were told to go to Bombay where we were to join a huge convoy escorting one third of a huge floating dock, big enough to take a cruiser. And this was very important that it got through to Trincomalee; it must have been part of the big build-up for the invasion or attack on the Japanese throughout Malaysia.
So when we assembled it was just amazing the number of ships that varied from wagons, which was the battleships – the huge battleships that were far out of sight with just the top of their masts showing – about six or eight cruisers, half a dozen destroyers, five or six corvettes, and many MLs [motor launches] who did the inter-convoy duties, and particularly the two tugs that were towing the section at three knots per hour and this went on for the best part of three weeks.
And I've never seen so many depth charges dropped on many poor old unsuspecting whales. Anything that came within cooee of that dock got thumped and I can remember we must have got rid of at least half a dozen whales. We were on second degree of readiness the whole time so it was rather a lengthy stint and was glad to be over, particularly towards the end when an aircraft came over at night, it didn't flash its ID and almost copped the full range of the anti-aircraft defence. But everything was fine and that was the end of that convoy.
After the Trincomalee convoy we changed stations and worked the Bay of Bengal which involved working between Madras, Vishakhapatnam, up to Calcutta, taking South African coloured troops into Chittagong. On one of these convoys we called in at Vishakhapatnam and was given a few hours leave – nowhere else to go except down the beach. So some lifesaving friends of mine decided we'd all go out, swim out, shoot a few waves and come back. The only trouble was, when we got out there we found we were in a very strong side current that was going down the coast quite fast. Anyhow, Jack O'Brien, who was the supply assistant, and I, decided we couldn't swim too far in this and decided to go back the way we'd come out. And so we'd swim forward, lose some yards, and then pick it up again, and so on. It took us half an hour to get back to the beach and we were exhausted and I really thought we were not going to make it. And years later Jack confided in me that he really thought he was had it as well.
However, we were back to sea and doing the Calcutta run, the Chittagong run, and it was very close to Jap territory at times. So we were on our toes most of the time there for all that year. Sometimes we'd go up the Hugli [River] to Calcutta which is an eight-hour trip up there, get ashore in Calcutta and that was quite a good leave there. At the end of that year we really – the Hugli was really a very, very, long dragged out trip because we had to stick to channels and avoid sandbanks, and it took eight hours to get up there. And when you are secured to the buoys you notice all these bodies coming down the river which was perhaps coming down from Ala Habit and other towns straight down this Hugli. They used to bury them and burn them and throw

them on the river and they'd float down and out to sea. So this was something we'd never seen before.
Finally we set sail then back to Colombo where the rumours were strong that we were going home at long last, but it took another three months of minesweeping practice between Ceylon and India before the big day came. We set sail, escorting units of the Far Eastern Fleet who were to go to Australia and up into the Pacific and become part of the Pacific Fleet which was to become the major factor in fighting the Japs and releasing Singapore and Hong Kong from their hold. We called into Australia first at Fremantle and did a refit, and then caught them up later – three months later.

What date was this approximately, Les?

That was '45 – we got home in January '45. That's where – I mentioned – we ran into the Australian destroyer who'd rolled over in the Bight and as we left to come around to Adelaide they flashed over and said they'd rolled over and 'Good Luck' then because you are a lot smaller than us and you are going into the same thing. Instead of us going direct to Melbourne we ran out of fuel off Adelaide and had to go into there, and from then on we went into Melbourne.

What was your reaction after, well, the best part of three years overseas in Indian ports predominantly, and the Gulf, of coming back to Australia, to the land of your birth and what were your feeling there of coming back? At least you were coming home.

Well, I think that was the key factor, coming home, because, you know, you'd been a long time away and conversation was always about home. Although we did get a lot more leave over there than the fellows in the Pacific got, home was home and here it was at last. When we finally reached Fremantle it was a beautiful sunny day and you could hear the radio in English and we knew we were home, and that was great.

Now, after you went from Fremantle to Adelaide, what was your next stage on the *Geraldton*?

Up north.

I assume you would have had some leave in between at your home port, Sydney.

Oh, yes, after all that time we were given nine days' leave which was later extended into fourteen days. That soon went, of course. When we had to – we were finally going up north again, we called into Brisbane on the way, picked up a new skipper, and he took us through to the rest of the war. We went up to Madang initially – no, not Madang, Manus – and we were there absorbed, once again, into the British Pacific Fleet and resumed escorting throughout the islands. The main ones in particular was from Enewetak in the Marshalls where the atomic bomb was let off after the war, escorting tankers up into the – just off the coast of Japan – and the tanker was there to refuel a British Fleet which was there in strength and they were bombarding the coast of Japan.
Whilst we were there on one of the trips – probably the third or the fourth – there was a difference in the Far East situation and the British Pacific situation, particularly in

the victualling and we were able to, at times, get Australian victuals and often American victuals which gave us a lot of fresh fruit and tinned fruit, and things like that [which] the Yanks were very big on. But we still got hold of their very spicy tinned sausages which nobody would eat, but you had to take a percentage off. Yank signals and Yank routine was different and the signalmen used to often get a bit confused about things but when we got back with the British Fleet – when we got back to the British Fleet normal routine as per the 'pussers' took over again and we were quite comfortable.

> Where were you when you heard that the war was over and how were you informed? Maybe you could tell us what reaction you had before that.

Well, it was rather confusing because we'd heard it was over about four times before we were actually given official notification. It was during the fourth or the fifth run up to the – off the coast of Japan that the atomic bomb went off and even though we didn't hear it, we were within 200 miles of it and since then we knew that we'd probably be in the fallout area because of a wind change that they hadn't anticipated. But we did start to get rumours through, particularly leaking through Sigs, and things that were confidential with the skipper. And finally we were told that the atomic bomb had gone off – or a big bomb which possibly was an atomic bomb – had gone off and had completely devastated that part of the earth, and the rumour said that no longer would anything be able to live, it was a terrible thing and it shouldn't have been done, but it was going to save forty or fifty thousand allied lives and it was justified on this basis. It was all new, very frightening, but it did signify the end of the war. This was later ratified by the skipper who called us down on the quarterdeck and officially announcing that the war was over and what we were going to do still be probably working, sweeping mines and so for another six months before we could be released.
Our next move down was back to Enewetok where the signal said to proceed to the Philippine San Pedro Bay where the huge American Fleet and some British units were. We celebrated the order, spliced the main brace there, and that was quite well received, and during that evening we were told to fire our pyrotechnics and celebrate in a big visual manner. Being a corvette it took us ten minutes to get rid of ours but the big cruisers and the carriers went on for about four hours. The next day we set off for Hong Kong where we were to take up and be part of the liberation of that city, and we arrived there to find [in] that harbour a lot of big British wagons – battleships – and we were coming in charge and we were allocated a berth within 100 yards of it so we could see everything that was going on there.

> What were your impressions of Hong Kong as compared to modern day Hong Kong?

Well, luckily I've seen them both – and the early ones – the big difference was still a very congested, very busy harbour with lots of local boats on it, the main difference being that all around the foreshores there were signs of ships that had been sunk in raids prior to it being captured. Kowloon was all under camouflage painting. The restriction on leave was a hard thing to take after so long. We were anchored between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island for six weeks before we could move because these Japanese were still playing havoc in the streets and we were holed up in a brewery. And the British Army, it was kicking them out and stirring them up most of the whole

time. But at the end of six weeks we were allowed a bit of shore leave and we would fraternise with the locals and that – a few drinks and things like that. We were helping them celebrate the end of the war.
All ships had to supply a party for the victory parade which we lined the streets of Hong Kong. It was a very, very hot day but we were told not to show any emotion because politics. But the PO said, 'I want from you the snappiest attention and slapping your butts that you've ever seen in your whole life when these little so-and-sos go by.' That was the only emotion we were allowed to show and we did this with quite a lot of gusto.

> You've mentioned that you had to go ashore with a raiding party, shall we say, because the Army were tied up seeking Japanese out.

Oh, yes, we received notice that the Japanese had …not deserted but had broken away from the British Army and joined with the ever present Chinese pirates and they were robbing the rice junks going up river to Canton. And also their station was down the coast about a three-hours' run on a small island, and five or six corvettes were sent down there to surround the island and converge on this spot where they lived, and we were to clean them up. So all the gunnery rates from the *Geraldton* were set ashore with one officer, and a very junior officer, and a Chinese interpreter guide. It took us about an hour to climb from the beach up through the jungle on a very narrow track and after about an hour we came within quarter of a mile of the place.
And I can remember it well because I was told to be rear guard and I was to stay right where I was. This left me a quarter of a mile from anywhere in the thick jungle and I thought, my God, this could be it, there's Japs around, there's Chinese pirates around; as soon as the landing party gets up there they are going to go everywhere and they are going to find me here. So I thought, this is a great way to end the war – I'd survived, I was going to die after the war. So I hid in the jungle and after a while when we heard the clump, clump of grenades going off and I heard footsteps coming back, and I didn't know what it was going to be. But after a while I heard the Aussie voices and was able to go out and resume my normal functions. They told me that when they got there the fighting was already on and some of the Japs had taken hand grenades and put them under their arm pits and blown themselves to pieces and there wasn't anybody to bring back.

> Obviously you must have been fairly close now to the ship returning to Australia. Could you give us some stories about that?

Yes. I would say – we had one little trip out of Hong Kong again after our return; it was down to Stanley Bay where we took out the survivors from the civilian POWs. And we took them from Stanley Bay up into Hong Kong and put them on the *Empress of Australia*. It was very emotional and we gave them all our chocolate and all our cigarettes, and they were very grateful as they went up to the gangway for the *Empress of Australia* with a very emotional goodbye.
But within a week of that we were given orders that our ships were not suitable for minesweeping out of Hong Kong and they needed the American timber boats because the *Strahan*, I believe, –it was so long, I think it was the *Strahan* – she was blown up trying to sweep so they decided to send us home – which we didn't object to, we rather liked the idea.

Our skipper who – incidentally, we were flotilla leader for the 22nd – we went blind ahead past Cunningham's ship and playing Waltzing Matilda. This was quite emotional too, seeing it was the end of the war. And we went down through the Philippines and finished up in Brisbane some weeks later.

> And you returned to Brisbane; now, could you tell [me] your impressions after that? Because I should imagine, after your service, you would have been fairly close to sufficient points for a discharge.

Yes, yes. As we went up Moreton Bay and up the river to the big bridge near the city there, school kids on either side of the river were cheering us. We had one night's leave and then the next day I was advised that I had enough points to be discharged. So about four or five of us Sydney ratings were told to muster with a two hour notice, get on the truck and go into the railway station. This didn't give us much room at all and I suddenly realised as I was leaving the ship I hadn't said goodbye to old friends and I had to stop and think. This had been my life, my ship had been my home for three and a half years, and this was a pretty crumby way of saying goodbye. So we stopped and thought a while and then got on and went. And it took us down to Sydney, where we got a bit of leave – and I think we got fourteen days' leave – and then drafted from Balmoral to Rushcutter's where I was discharged.

> Now, the fact of coming home, what was the reaction to your family? Because you hadn't seen much of them over the past three and a half years.

Oh, well, I think you can imagine that, coming home to family. There were a few tears and a few laughs, and meeting old friends again, catching up with people. Immediately after the war, or after my discharge, in the first weeks was taken up renewing old friendships, meeting people – friends I'd played football with who had become POWs in Singapore and so on – and naturally a few parties and a few beers were absorbed. It took that long to really settle down and make yourself realise that it was a different life. Things you had done for three and a half years automatically, and you were trained to the hilt, you had to forget. Even the fact of sleeping in a bed was a new – something you had to get used to again. Going back to work was a rather traumatic thing in which you were, to control your thinking, you couldn't get up and wander and couldn't do anything, and you had to discipline yourself into a new way of life.
I can remember going back to the Herald on the second or the third night I was – the Herald being a morning paper you did most of your work at night. The eleven o'clock shift went off and I was in the art studio alone – and around about eleven thirty the phone rang and without hesitation I got up and I yelled out, 'Bridge' – and a heavy silence, and from the chief subs room came a little giggle and a laugh and he said, 'I know exactly how you feel, we must talk about it one day.' So it was rather embarrassing but at least some people did understand but a lot of people didn't understand the problems you had.

> Did you take advantage of the CITS training?

Yes. When the war interrupted my career I'd only had two years at the Herald which meant I had another four years of training to do. And so I had to go back to art school and I had to work, so it was a four day, four nights a week, and possibly work on a

Sunday night as well. So at one period I was working seven days a week to have the privilege of catching up on my course.
The assistance given to me was quite good and the advice was given to me about investing money, and the assistance for picking up your course was good too. I was also able to do a second job which helped purchase of land and helped paying off a house. The War Service Homes came through with an initial loan of about £3,000 which doesn't sound much now but then it bought quite a good house in those days.

> Les, you mentioned that the Herald had been very good to you by making up part of your wages whilst you were away. You might like to make a mention of that.

Well, they didn't make up any of the wages during my time in the Navy, but on my return they said all the time I'd spent at sea was credited to me and I was now a full time journeyman.

> All right, was given as far as your service – I misunderstood that. Now, we are up to the stage now, could you tell us some of your future career with the Herald and your later life?

Yes. The life on newspapers had changed somewhat and there were many new innovations came through newspapers, and the introduction of colour printing was a new thought. And the attitude to what they printed and what they didn't print had changed somewhat.
Yes. The attitude in the Herald had changed, they'd lost a lot of their conservative approach and it opened up a whole lot of new avenues for me particularly. There was introduction of special supplements and Sunday papers were introduced for the first time, and Saturday races were included for the Sunday papers, and the comics – comics entered the Sydney Morning Herald. Even though that it was a Sunday paper that was something that was never, ever, ever going to happen but it did.
After about four or five years with this I was getting a bit restless because I'd felt I'd come to a dead end and was looking for other avenues, so I branched out into advertising and illustration. Finally, after twenty years' service with the Herald, I took my long service pay and took up the job as an art director on an advertising agency. And this involved wider scope still by going in advertising and later on into television and radio, and all other avenues of communication.
The wider field took me into not only advertising and illustrations, but into exhibitions which were designed and construct[ed] and took you right into other avenues that were quite lucrative and a lot more interesting. It took you out of office work and so on and this took me right through to the time I retired - which I did four times.

> You are a lucky fellow. Now, in your retirement, Les, what are some of the activities you've been engaged in?

Well, I think the most interesting has been the association with the corvettes who finished – who created an association. I thought my Navy days had gone forever but was able, through association with these fellows, relive a lot of it. And I found it was still there, still interesting, and I still wanted to be part of it. When we started the – every second year we had a national reunion, took us right across Australia and this

also involved memorials being created, literature being created, and I was part of this. Our first effort was to put a glass door in the chapel on Garden Island to commemorate the service of the sixty corvettes – or the fifty-six Australian corvettes – and it's still there today and it's still serving a good purpose.

> Les, could you mention why you were asked to cooperate in this and some of the details associated with the development of that doorway?

Well, yes, the Ipswich Association that old Cliff had been approached by the PR man from Garden Island – he was now PR man for the Navy – and, incidentally, he was an ex-Army fellow – advised us that there were many windows and memorials for all classes of ships other than the corvettes, it was about time we did something about it. So we decided just that and they rounded up a party of about twenty people who were to not only organise memorials but to organise the first Australian corvette reunion. Now, I was approached by people who knew that I was in that business and could I help out with the memorial, first up, for the Garden Island doorway, and this we did two years before any other reunion took place. So the first one was at Garden Island, we unveiled that, and along with lots of other literature kept me very busy for two years prior to the reunion.
Since then I – the next one was at Adelaide and I wasn't involved in that but then I changed residences and came over to West Aussie and I was involved in the memorial that sits on Monument Hill now. That was the best part of a year, developing that.

> Les, could you give us some detail on the monument corvette memorial on Memorial Hill, Fremantle?

Yes. We discussed it at length and we had various designs which didn't seem to please everybody. Looking back now, some of them were pretty basic. But finally, when the council had knocked back a few things, because they were too high and too dominating, and they told us it had to be in the form – if we wanted a space up on the Hill it had to be in the form of a seat where people could use it. So I sat down and worked out the idea that one of the nicest things I remember in my corvette days was coming into harbour after a convoy and sitting in on the forecastle, sitting on the bollards and nattering away with people – some of them were having a smoke and some were having a nice cup of char and talking about what we were going to do, and what we were going to do in the days after the war. So my mind went back to this so I thought, well, why not do the twin job of creating a memorial and a seat at the same time? So we created the memorial involving the bollards and the description of why this was done is on there today and it's being used by, not only old corvette people, but old people who sit there and look out to sea, over the waters we used to work on.

> Do you think this gives visitors a good indication of what the corvettes were, who they were, on the information you've supplied on the plaques?

Um, yes, if they really want to read it the information is there, but visually it's more inclined towards the old corvette people. After they've read it they agree and sit and natter. I've had people say, I read it and I sat and had a natter.

> A natter meaning?

A natter means a talk, a natter means talk or spinning a [ditties], telling a story?

Telling ...

All these old things you used to do.

Now, regarding the care and maintenance of that memorial, what work do the Corvette Association do?

Well, the Corvette Association became aware that this type thing could become a target for vandalism so they formed a vigilante group, more or less, people who were going to look after it and people who did look after it and have done in the ten years it's been up. And they've been very lucky, there's only been two occasions, I think, in which there have been attempts made to deface it.

How often is it used?

To my knowledge about one a year for official functions, but many, many, many other times it's been used for old sailors who come west and for people who live here, and for tourist busses who bring people up there to have a look around Monument Hill. They do read it and they do – our list is issued with a leaflet describing what it's all about.

Now, in 1994 we are having our annual reunion in Perth, Western Australia. What is the intention then regarding that memorial, Les?

Oh, it will be used as a service on the Sunday. I should think the chaplain, or the Navy chaplain, will be there giving an address, along with the NOIC and other invited Naval identities will be there addressing and remembering, and just remembering those who didn't come back.

Have you been involved in other art activities or other activities associated with reunions?

Ah, yes. I've still kept in touch with Sydney and they still send me their news letter – I'm still one of them actually. For each of their reunions I've done their literature and their brochures – they hand out brochures, and menus, and song sheets. I guess I'll be doing the same for WA branch here next year.

Now, you have been one of the contributors to Iris Nesdale's books. Could you give us some information on what her writings are about and your part in those?

Yes. Iris's entrance into the corvette world was quite funny. She came over to Sydney telling us she was going to write a book about corvettes, and our first reaction was, you know, how the hell can you, a woman, expect to write about corvettes and corvette sailors? So she just pulled out a tape recorder and said, 'Because you fellows are going to tell me.' We sort of took her in our hearts there and we gave her all the information she wanted. Right now, to this day, she's an honorary PO, and this, to her, was a wonderful thing. And she's written many books, but in particular the one I was

involved in was The Corvettes which was the history of all our fifty-six corvettes; I did the cover for that for her. And there has been another one that's just hit the streets which was based on the small ships which were from the corvettes down and that has just hit the streets at this moment, and I'm rather happy to be involved in that.

> Les, have you got any special memories about corvettes that you would like to recount?

Well, yes, there is. The very, very first time I saw a corvette I was horrified. I'd just completed my trip from Sydney to Fremantle on the *Manoora* and the seas we met there were pretty horrific coming through the Bight and we were escorted in by some very small ships – which I didn't know who they were and wasn't particularly interested either. But when the main battalion had left at Fremantle to go to Gin Gin I was left as a party assisting the colonel and when I had my little breaks I went for'ard, stood up on the stem-head and looked down with a friend of mine. And I saw a little tub down there and I said, 'Holy cow, do they really go to sea in those things?' and he just nodded and said, 'Yeah.' And many years later – it would be about thirty, forty, years later – a fellow come up and said, 'Do you remember standing up on the stem-head of the *Manoora* looking down?' and I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Do you remember that ship you saw?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'That happened to be the *Geraldton*.' And I thought, oh, my God, what a coincidence. It lived up to its expectations: it was small, it was rough but it was tough.

> And Les, one thing I think you may have forgotten is the fact that our banner, which is drawn attention to other corvettes' association – and I believe other groups have been very keen to have one similar to ours. Could you probably explain the significance of that?

Oh, yes. I was asked to, you know, would I like to do a banner for them and I thought, why not? We'd only had one about three feet by three feet which we proudly marched under on Anzac Day. But I thought we needed something that would identify us a lot quicker and a lot stronger. So we did one eight feet by four feet using the corvette strong and a picture of a corvette – because a lot of people didn't know what a corvette was. As a matter of fact, we wrote to a newspaper once asking for publicity and he said, 'Sure, I'll send out my motoring editor.' That sort of floored us so we thought we needed a strong ID.

> Now, in concluding this interview with you, Les, maybe you'd like to give us some ideas what makes you feel special because you've served on corvettes.

Well, I think [A] it was Navy and Navy I wanted to be, and there were exclusive type of sailor, entirely different to destroyers, cruisers and so on – we were a lot freer, a lot happier, just as dedicated but I think we were a lot looser in our approach until the time came to be tight. The close living and the rugged living, I think, made us a particular type of person and these friendships have gone on for a long, long time. And it just amazed me that talking to some of my friends and mates many years later I find that some of them couldn't even swim and this just amazed me how you can join the Navy and not be able to swim. But these are the type of things, and the friendships I've retained, that keep coming back.

Thank you, Les.

12/01