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TRANSCRIPT

OF

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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F5430 (O1421, R/31845) Ritchie, William Gray

Recorded

at: Rockingham, WA

on: 21 September 1992

by: Margaret Rickard

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.

F5430 (O1421, R/31845) Commander William Gray Ritchie AM, as a radar operator; Royal Australian Navy (RAN) HMAS *Platypus* and corvettes HMAS *Broome*, *Bathurst* and *Fremantle*; North Pacific area including Philippines and Hong Kong, and Australian waters; 1944-1946, interviewed by Margaret Rickard

William Gray Ritchie AM describes his experiences on Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvettes, HMAS *Broome*, *Bathurst* and *Fremantle*. He describes his schooling; early employment as a surveyor; being ill with scarlet fever; the side effects of the drug Sulfa;

recruitment into the RAN; basic training at HMAS *Cerberus*; radar training at HMAS Penguin; active service; transporting British ex-prisoners of war [ex-POWs]; mine sweeping; with the 20th Mine Sweeping Squadron off Hong Kong; shore leave in Hong Kong; return to Australia and becoming a permanent member of the RAN.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, Gondwana Scientific, December 2001

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Transcript methodology

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It is strongly recommended that readers listen to the sound recording whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

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).

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This is an interview with William Gray Ritchie, a member of the RAN Corvette's Association WA, and relating to his experiences in *Bathurst* Class Australian minesweepers, commonly known as corvettes of the Royal Australian Navy. Sixty of these ships were built in Australia; twenty for the Royal Navy, which were manned by Australians; thirty six for the Royal Australian Navy; and four for the Royal Indian Navy. The interview was conducted by Margaret Rickard on 21 September 1992 at Rockingham. This tape is part of the Oral History of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association Western Australia.

Interviewee is Bill Ritchie of 25th Avenue, Shoalwater. He was born on March 1 1926 in Kalgoorlie WA, joined the Navy in 1944 as an ordinary seaman and served as a radar operator in the corvettes HMAS *Bathurst* and *Fremantle*. In this interview Bill describes his experienced while serving in corvettes.

Well, Bill, whereabouts were you educated?

I was educated in Kalgoorlie. Initially I started my school at the convent which was attached to the Saint John of God's Hospital which was generally all girls, and shortly afterwards I was able to get into the Butler Street Sisters of Mercy Convent in North Kalgoorlie.

From there I went to the Christian Brothers College and completed my second year high school there and started my junior or intermediate year. But there was some difficulty with the headmaster at the time and a number of us left, and I went to the School of Mines and took five subjects there with the intention of completing my Intermediate, taking the subjects through the School of Mines. And I took one extra subject, metalwork, out at the Boulder Technical College so that I had a sixth, or a spare string to my bow, in case I failed one of the other five.

Whereabouts did you start work?

I started work while I was studying at the School of Mines. An opportunity came up to apply for a position on the Lake Huon Star in the survey office and the job was to act as a junior surveyor to geologists and the surveyors who were working underground. And the concept that I had in mind then was that this would lead to a mining engineer’s diploma or degree and I would carry on within the mining industry. But, as things had it, things turned out differently and I chose another career.

When did you first develop an interest in joining the Navy?

Well, this is interesting. Somewhere around the age of ten, maybe eleven, I must have read a book, or a story, or seen a picture, because from before I went to high school I had this ambition to become a sailor. And I can remember the mother of one of my school mates saying why did I want to be sailor and I said I just wanted to go to sea. Her brother had been killed in a windjammer so she was very anti me going out to sea.

However; at the age of fifteen I applied – the war was on – I applied to join the Navy but was told that I was too young and to reapply at the age of seventeen. Shortly after my seventeenth birthday I applied formally and it was some time in the latter half of, I suppose, 1943 that I was asked to come to Perth and be interviewed and undergo a medical examination, which I did, and I understand that I passed that. But because I was a junior surveyor in a restricted or manpowered industry, and junior surveying was manpowered, I was unable to be accepted into the Navy at that stage.

However, towards the end of 1943 I became very seriously ill and I was in hospital not expected to live because they couldn't get my temperature down. And the doctor that I had, a Dr Burns, asked if, having tried all the other drugs available, asked if he could try what was called a new wonder drug called sulfa [sulphonamide drug]. They put me on this and very quickly my temperature came down and shortly after I developed the symptoms by the red inflammation on my skin which indicated that I'd had a bout of scarlet fever which the physical symptoms hadn't shown. And that was fine, I left hospital, but I was very weak having been in there for some time, and eventually I developed a side-effect off this sulfa which basically affected all my muscular or motor actions, particularly on my left side – and also partly my speech and my walking. Nobody understood what was wrong and I don't think anyone suspected at that stage that it was the side effect of sulfa.

However, my mother had had to go to Perth – I think it was around the Christmas time of '43 – to see to my sister who was living with an aunt in Perth, and my father took me to a restaurant in Kalgoorlie. And one of the problems with this muscular problem was that I used to get spasms. I'd be holding a knife, or a fork, or a spoon, and suddenly it would flick out of my hand involuntary. And in this restaurant this happened where a fork went flying across the room and almost hit someone. My father was most embarrassed and upset and when we got home, he, having been a medic in World War I in the 10th Light Horse, got hold of the tablets and took them out and buried them and refused to allow me to have any medication. And as I dried out from the sulfa I immediately started to recover. It's interesting that I've had no other side-effects to this day although I specifically avoided having sulfa except on one other occasion when I fell down a hatch in a ship.

So you joined the Navy shortly after?

So people I was working for, the Lake Huon Star, asked me if I was coming back to work for them – they'd kept my job open right through this long illness – and I said no, I didn't think I wanted to work underground – but really I still wanted to join the Navy.

I'd turn eighteen at this stage and I'd been drawn to the conscription call-up but, of course, all the doctors knew that I'd had this problem and I went through a perfunctory interview with a doctor and was told that because I was manpowered I wouldn't be called up. So I then said, well, I

didn't want to go back into mines and the Lake Huon Star released me, so I immediately wrote to the Navy and said I was now no longer employed as a junior surveyor and shortly after that I got a job as a junior labourer, which wasn't manpower employed. In other words, it was to lead to a cadetship or traineeship in industrial chemistry which was much more interesting to me.

However, my letter to the Navy struck a bolt and I was sent for again, went through another medical, but when I walked in the doctor said, 'Haven't I seen you before?' and I said, 'Oh, yes, a couple of months or so ago.' So he looked at his records, saw that I was perfectly fit, told me I was wasting his time – checked my throat and asked me if I'd had measles or mumps, chicken pox – didn't ask me about scarlet fever so I didn't tell him – and eventually I was accepted into the Navy. And I went to Perth again towards the end of July, was inducted into the Navy in the recruiting office which was then, I think it was the [Bradbury] Building in Forest Place, and it was upstairs, and a number of us were sworn in. We caught the train east to [HMAS] *Cerberus* – I think that was about 25 July.

Almost immediately?

Immediately, yes.

Were you equipped with uniforms before you left?

No. We were told to bring a change of clothing, that we would be fitted out with all our underwear and all our uniforms and things on arrival at *Cerberus*.

You travelled by troop train?

And we travelled by troop train which went across – basically, there were cattle trucks on the train but we were put in the trans-train carriages and we went off to Adelaide where we, I think, went to the Woodside Army Camp for a meal and were then put on a train to Melbourne.

We arrived in Melbourne on a Sunday. I'll always remember, it was cold, we had no money, there was no provision to feed us, we had to wait until that evening – I think it was around six or so – to catch the weekend troop train back to *Cerberus*. So rather cold, very hungry, we arrived at Crib Point, after dark, and whilst all the Liberty men rushed off back to the base we were formed up and marched in some form of fashion into the base with our little ditty bags – little handbags – that we were carrying.

As we marched past the barracks, or straggled past the barracks, everyone leaned out of their barracks and yelled, 'You'll be sorry', and perhaps at that stage I was starting to feel I was a bit sorry.

I know it.

We were immediately taken to a dining room for a meal – this was probably about nine o'clock

at night, which had been probably cooked at five. I'll always remember it, it was cold – it was pork chops which are supposed to be hot, they were very cold. The mashed potato was dehydrated potato which at the best of times was never any good during the war. And that was a meal plus some form of sweet which was about all, I think, any of us ate because we had about two mouthfuls of the other and couldn't stomach it. And we were then taken off and given our hammocks and shown how to sling a hammock and how to get into them – which was a bit of a problem because we'd never been in it so we fell out of them. But eventually we got in and, of course, we slept pretty soundly, to be woken very early in the morning to the – we were then shown how to lash up these hammocks, which we didn't do very well, and we all got sort of showered and went off for breakfast. And then we were taken off to be kitted up and we returned to the barracks. And the class at that time I was in was a class called 66 and it was all West Australians with one or two exceptions.

How many of you?

I think there was about twenty or so in the class but I can't remember exactly. The interesting things are that one of the people in the class with us was a chap called Greenway – Alan Greenway – who went on to establish, after the war, the Travelodge chain of motels; and then the second person was a Brian [Muddle] who went on to establish Nut and Muddle which was a poker machine business in New South Wales; and a third one was a John Hardwick who became a dentist in Newcastle who I met up with many years later while I was serving in HMAS *Stewart* when I visited that town for an Anzac Day parade.

And what was the first course you took then after your initial training?

Well, during our time at initial training, which was the usual seamanship and gunnery training, we were asked to put down our preference for some form of specialisation. And being gung ho I wanted to be one of the gunnery rates, the AA [Anti-aircraft] or the heavy gunners, but my friend who had befriended me on the train trip going over, a Jack [Lathar], had said, 'Why don't you put in with me for radar?' and I said, 'What was that?' So he explained that his girlfriend's father worked for the PMG [Post Master General], which he had done, and he'd read this magazine which had explained the principles of radar and what it did. And he said this was a new and exciting thing and it kept you off the upper deck where it was out of the weather and therefore he thought that it might be very interesting. So I put that down as my number one choice with ASDIC [Sonar device for detecting underwater objects] as second and gunnery a long way third. And we were sent for an interviewed.

And I'll always remember the interview because you walked in and you were asked to go up to a map and indicate which was the longitude and which was the latitude. You were asked to give the latitude and longitude readings of a place, say, Sydney or some other place. You were asked a few questions about radar which I sort of had a very sketchy knowledge of but I must have managed to convince them that I knew it sent a beam out and it bounced back off things and this was processed through an electronic means. They seemed impressed with that but wanted to know where I got my information from so I said I picked it up talking to people who had apparently read about it in a magazine.

And then the interesting bit was, I was asked to go to a fireplace and call up the chimney a

phrase which they had specifically asked in what was supposed to be a high voice. Well, I didn't know what a high voice was but I must have given a good imitation. And my voice must have been acceptable because some time after that I was told that I'd been selected for radar training. So we completed our training towards the middle of December – about 19 December I think it was. I was posted out of *Cerberus*, came back to the west for some leave, and then went straight back to Sydney to HMAS *Penguin*, arrived at Sydney station.

What was the *Penguin*?

Penguin was a naval hospital and training facility on the north shore of Sydney, it's just behind Middle Head – it's on Middle Head in Sydney. And from there, each morning, we used to be taken to this RAN Station 284 which was on South Head, and that was where the radar station in 1945 was being operated from. And this consisted basically of one building which had classrooms in and a second brick building which had the radar sets in, and another small building towards what's known as The Gap in Sydney where we did plotting and voice procedure exercises.

That course, I think, lasted about eight weeks and on completion of that all my friends were posted to various ships. Jack Lathar, my great friend, was sent to the *Bataan* and I, for my trouble, for some reason or other was allocated to go to Madang in New Guinea as a stand-by radar operator to join any ship which had a shortfall of a radar operator.

So to get there I had to go to Brisbane to catch a plane and I understood I was on a Priority 2 air passage from Brisbane to go to New Guinea. So I took the troop train north to Brisbane and was billeted in HMAS *Moreton* where each morning we were all assembled, given tasks to do such as cleaning gutters, head stalls, whatever. And then we were allowed, after lunch, to go off and do whatever we liked – if you had any money – but I was on about two and six a day and literally had – and I was sending half that home to my mother so I didn't have very much money so I tended to stay on the base.

And then one day, shortly after I'd been there, a regulating petty officer came in and asked if [I was] Ritchie – and I said, yeah, my name was Ritchie – so he said, 'Get your bag, you are on your way.' So I thought I was on my way to the airport but I was taken down to the wharf in Brisbane, and there, just peeking above the wharf, was a mast and he said, 'You are joining the *Gerard*.' So I went down to the ship wondering what the hell was going on, but being an ordinary seaman no-one wanted to listen.

So I joined the *Gerard* for this Priority 2 air passage which was supposed to be the second best one to there and two months later I arrived at Madang having come through a number of ports on the east coast. We crossed around, island jumping, to get to Port Moresby and then we arrived at Madang where I was allocated to the PO radio mechanic as his offsider. My duties basically were to assist him to join – they were training a guard for some VIP visit which was eventually cancelled – and of an evening I was a sentry on stores over at the other side of the river at Madang.

I hadn't been there very long when I was told to get my bag and hammock and hop on board the *Broome* and this became my first association with a corvette. And I took passage in *Broome* from Madang to Morotai where I was to join HMAS *Platypus* which was a repair ship at the time. And I joined and we sailed, and I was one of the bridge lookouts and I took my turn on the wheel, like most people did at that time, and we arrived at Morotai and I then went on to the *Platypus* where I was just a member of the general working party because they had no radar.

Again, I used to do night sentry and eventually – at this time, just to put the time frame in this, was that I arrived in *Platypus* about 21 July 1945 and I was there for about three weeks when I was posted to the *Bathurst* on temporary loan and I was told to take a steaming kit – which, when I asked what a steaming kit was they said a change of underwear, a change of clothes, your overalls, your towel and your hammock, and my burberry, and off I went with my two caps and my burberry, a change of underwear, a towel and very little else. And my bag was packed and put away in the storeroom, and I was told I would be away no more than about two weeks. However, it was about two months, I think it was, before I saw that bag and hammock again and for that period in *Bathurst* I had to exist on this change of underwear, whatever, because there were no stores or [washrooms] available at that time.

I joined *Bathurst* late in the afternoon with a squall and pretty windy conditions and as I clambered on board the coxswain said to me, 'What specialisation are you? What rate are you?' and I said, 'Radar.' He said, 'Not another one of those "not me chief, I'm radar"', and I said, 'No, I'm just a radar operator', and he said, 'Well, you must have good eyes', and I said, 'Oh, yes, fair eyes I suppose.' He said, 'Right, you are the action lookout. You'd better get there because we are sailing right away.' So my little ditty bag was taken from me, and hammock, and I was pointed in the direction of the mast and off I went, fortunately with my Burberry on, and climbed the mast, with squalls coming through, and off we sailed.

The ship was rocking pretty badly, I was pretty seasick, I wasn't a very good lookout, I didn't have much of a clue as [to] what I was supposed to be doing, I got abused quite a lot by the officer of the watch because there were ships everywhere and as fast as I was reporting them I was missing the ones they wanted, and I didn't really understand, I suppose, at that stage what I was supposed to be doing.

We proceeded out of the anchorage and got to sea a little bit, action stations fell out and I was still up there for a while. And eventually a sailor arrived up and relieved me and told me not to forget to report to the bridge, pointed the way to go down – which was slightly different to the way I had come up – and I arrived at the back of the bridge by some means or another and tried to report to the officer of the watch that I'd been relieved. But everyone was pretty busy, they were obviously trying to avoid ships and trying to get into station, and eventually someone turned around – the captain – and said, 'Who the hell are you?' and I said, 'My name is Ritchie.' He said, 'Where did you come from?' I pointed up to the lookout which was about the worst thing I could because he was in a foul temper. So I got a pretty heavy blast for being a smart little fellow and the next thing that happened was the officer of the watch told me to get the hell off the bridge so I never did get to do the report properly.

And I went down and found the coxswain and found my bag, and found my hammock, and said, ‘Where do I sleep? Well, where do I sling my hammock?’ Well, of course, the ship was overloaded, there wasn't enough slings, everyone had all the prime positions on the lockers or the under the tables, and the only place for a very ordinary seaman – and I was probably the junior by several years, I think – the nearest to me was a naval seaman of three years or so in – and I was parked in the main passageway of the seamen's mess on the deck. So I was last to go to bed, I was first up, my hammock was always filthy for which I kept getting jumped all over the top of, I was forever scrubbing my one hammock cover so that I could put it on. My time in Bathurst was basically, I was either a lookout, or scrubbing decks, or scrubbing heads, or doing something, or chipping paintwork.

And the ship, when it sailed from Morotai, was heading for the Philippines to be part of a group which was going to retake Hong Kong. I seem to recall that the admiral of the Pacific Fleet at that time came over from – I think it was the [HMS] *Anson* – and told us – gave us a great cheer

of what was to go on, and we then set sail for, as part of the 20th Minesweeping Squadron, to sweep into Hong Kong. On the way we were doing sweeping exercises and I was put on as the helmsman, and although I'd had a considerable amount of experience when I'd been in *Gerard* coming up from Brisbane to Madang, where the wheel was about five foot high and you steered it with your hands behind your back – you stood in front of it – and it was a magnetic compass so I roughly knew what to do. On this occasion I wasn't paying attention and I put the wheel slightly the wrong way so I managed never to be on the wheel again during minesweeping operations. So I became a lookout and I did one or two watches as a radar operator because in those days they hardly ever seemed to use the radar, I think mainly because it didn't work properly or it wasn't accepted as being a vital aid in a corvette. So I worked in various working parties, occasionally on the sweep deck, but generally as a lookout or just a general rouseabout.

In Hong Kong I was the lookout and I remember reporting that, as we came in, this little winking came from the top of the hill as we swept into Hong Kong and it just looked like someone had shot at us so we were fully waiting, counting one, two, three, four, five; however, it was just a light being flashed on and off. And we had no trouble doing the approach sweep into Hong Kong and then [HMS] *Swiftsure* went through, I can always remember, loaded with Royal Marines which went in and retook the dockyard, again without a fight. So there was no basic opposition when they recaptured because by that stage the war was over.

We fully expected to be attacked by suicide fast motor torpedo boats or fast motor boats which had torpedoes lashed to them – this was apparently a kamikaze type operation – but we didn't see that. We went alongside the dockyard in Hong Kong – or anchored initially, I think – and then we moved across to Kowloon to take control of a base that the Japanese had occupied. We then, as we went across there, one of the things that happened was that I'd learnt how to fire a rifle and other things and wanted to be in this armed party, but because I was only eighteen for some reason I was not allowed to be in the forecastle with everyone else, who were all down behind the [cable] and stuff, as we approached this place. Fortunately there was no opposition and we went in and we occupied this small base, and then later we went back over alongside Hong Kong.

We were allowed a quick walk around the place at a later stage and then eventually we were sent around to Stanley Prison Camp and here I was the bowman in the whaler where we, with a number of other corvettes, were to bring the survivors from the Stanley Prison Camp back round into Hong Kong by sea – some were being taken by road but we were to bring them back by sea. As the bowman used to go up and collect the people from the prison, help them on the boat and take them back. We also went to – after we'd finished that operation – we went off to [Ramoy] or Swatow where we carried out minesweeping operations in those areas before returning to Hong Kong.

One of the interesting things about this going to Stanley Prison Camp was that, of course, everyone who came in the boat, I actually helped them into the boat as the bowman. And many years later when I was serving in HMAS *Melbourne* one of my friends went to the races for the first time in his life and won a lot of money, and invited all the wardroom officers to come and have dinner with him ashore. And somehow or other I missed him and I couldn't find him, and the next day he and I went ashore and he took me into the Captains' Bar of the Mandarin Hotel. And we were having these cocktails which he'd discovered the previous day with all his money when two English couples walked in who were local Hong Kong residents, and he invited them, as an Englishman, to come and join him in his good luck. They were very reluctant, thinking this was another drunken naval officer. Anyway, he insisted and they agreed and while we were sitting down with these people we were asking questions and I asked them how long they had been in Hong Kong. The two ladies said they'd both been born there and their husbands also

gave a similar – or the husband of one gave a similar indication. And I said, 'Well, that's very interesting, if you were born here you must have been prisoners of war here during the Japanese occupation, and you two ladies must have been round at Stanley Prison Camp, and the husband, you must have been over at Kowloon Prison Camp.' And they sat up with a great start and said, 'How would you know that?' And I said, 'Well, I'm going to ask you a question, to the ladies in particular: How did you come back ...'

One of the things I think that I can look back on is – and people sometimes ask you what were the conditions like living on board. Well, on that first night when I came on board from *Platypus* and had been up in the lookout, by the time I got down, found my kit and got my hammock and got into the mess deck, the water rationing being in force, the fresh water only came on for a set amount of time and if you weren't in that rush to get to the bathroom then you could miss out. And, of course, Sod's Law had it that I missed out and that first night I had to have a saltwater shower. I was dirty, tired, hungry and very sick. But the system of water rationing was that it came on at certain times during the day and most people had some form of bucket which as soon as the fresh water came on they rushed to the tap, filled it all up, put a little in the hand basin, soaped themselves up – if they had any washing they did their little bit of underclothes. Then they let that soapy water out and then they poured into the basin the freshwater intended to wash the soap off their body and then rinse their clothes out. So most people had, I suppose, a four- or a five-gallon bucket but, of course, being a very ordinary seaman, only just arrived, the last thing I had was this and it used to take some time to get to the basin and quite often you would be just trying to get the last of the soap off when the water ran out and you were left to wipe the thing off.

So it wasn't an easy life and, as I said, I only had two sets of gear with me so I seemed to be always trying to wash what I had and get it dry. And of course, to get it dry you had to take it down to the boiler room where you would put it into – try and get one of the stokers to help you. And in doing that I, of course, occasionally would run into a PO stoker who would get a bit uptight about a seaman being down in his boiler room.

Again, the meals, it was – the meals were brought from the galley and served at the table by the mess cook, and these meals were nowhere near the meals that the Navy later had on, right – always was hungry and ate only because I was so hungry.

Another interesting thing, thinking back, was an interesting experience I had when we were either at [Ramoy] or Swatow. The ship's motor boat had broken down and liberty had been allowed so there was no way to get people ashore until one of the able seamen volunteered to sail the whaler ashore. Now, this chap had apparently sailed in the dinghies on Sydney Harbour and was a very competent seaman. So he loaded the whaler up with about ten or fifteen people and sailed them right up onto what was basically a slipway where everyone disembarked with their shoes in their hand, and then pushed him off and he and his bowman then sailed back and picked up the next load of liberty men. I seemed to recall they did this through the day and into the night and I think they did that for a couple of days. And over thirty-nine years of naval experience I never saw that done ever again, in either the Australian Navy or the Royal Navy, and as far as I am aware it never happened anywhere else.

The other thing, while we were up off Ramoy or Swatow minesweeping we had swept for quite a considerable period and had detected no mines. And we were just about to give it all away when a mine popped up and we realised that we were on the edge of the minefield. And, of course, the big thing then was to try and sink these mines as they came drifting down with ships following one behind the other, behind the Oropesa floats. And they tried to sink them by rifle fire but, of course, the bullets just hit the casing and either bounced off or went in but certainly it

didn't explode. You really had to hit the horn of the pointer casing them to explode.

I had been a bit of a rifleman before I joined the Navy because I'd been taught by the local rifle club in Kalgoorlie, so I had a go – I was given five rounds – managed to his the mine several times but failed to hit the horn which, when you are bombing up in a minesweeper and the horn is bobbing up and down, it's a pretty small target to hit.

However, there was one occasion where a mine got caught in the sweeper – one of the sweepers whose name escapes me at the moment – and it exploded under the stern. And I seem to recall we were following this ship in the line and we watched this ship. Actually the stern of it lifted right out of the water and I think it retired hurt and returned to Hong Kong either under tow or in company with somebody else.

Eventually we finished minesweeping up off Ramoy and Swatow [now Shantou] and we were recalled to Hong Kong. I have a feeling that part of the reason we were recalled to Hong Kong was that some of the Royal Naval ELINT [ELectromagnetic INTelligence] – that's the electronic warfare people – had detected transmissions between the Australian units in Hong Kong and those up in Ramoy and Swatow and they had picked up that there were information about currency, the currency in Hong Kong and in Swatow. And there must have been some form of racket going on where the communicators were passing this information and coming back and selling the funds that they raised in one place in another, and making some profit. But that was a buzz that I picked up but generally, having come back to Hong Kong, the 20th Minesweeper Squadron was then sent home and I think 21st came a little later on.

We then sailed from – well, while we were in Hong Kong perhaps another couple of things that happened. I can recall getting shore leave and wandering around the colony as it was. Basically, there was very little do to, there was a church organisation that opened up a place where you could get a drink and where they sometimes put on a dance of a Sunday afternoon or in the late afternoon. Well, I couldn't dance and I didn't have very much money – as I said, I wasn't on very much at that stage – and I sort of just went along and looked and talked to a few people and basically went back to the ship.

But what does stick out in my mind was that on a number of occasions it was obvious to me and to other Australian sailors that as we were walking down the street you would see an English lady with her daughter, or two English ladies walking along the street, and they would cross the street. And initially you didn't take any particular notice but it soon became obvious that they were doing that to avoid us. In other words, we'd brought them round from Stanley, we'd given them everything, but it hadn't taken them very long to drop back into what I would call an attitude of the British colonialists out in those places. They didn't want to associate with the basic sailors who had been very good to them.

Was there much damage in the city of Hong Kong?

There didn't seem to be a great deal of things but, of course, having not been to Hong Kong before – I don't think it had been bombed very much within the time before we arrived. It appeared to be very run down and certainly, in the many times I have visited it in future years, I saw it grow from what I would call a dilapidated town, I suppose, to quite a thriving metropolis as it is today.

Eventually, as I said, we sailed south and we came to Morotai and I was transferred back to the *Platypus* where, after nearly two months, I was reunited with my full kit. And, of course, the

stuff that I had was just about useless. Fortunately, I was able to buy some slops – clothing – and put my kit back up to a reasonable standard.

I can't remember quite how long I was in *Platypus* but while we were there a call went out for anyone who wanted to volunteer to go home via the west coast, and being a West Australian I thought that was a good idea. So I volunteered and was accepted to come home in *Fremantle* – I think *Bowen* was the other ship that came down with us. Interestingly enough, I understand that the captain of the ship that did come down with us was the son of a lady who had looked after me after my illness in 1943 when I'd come to Perth for a few weeks rest and recuperation. This lady had looked after me and her son was in the Navy, and her daughter, who was also a communicator in the Navy – he's a chemist and I think he was down the south-west somewhere in his chemist shop afterwards.

But anyway, we came down the coast and another interesting experience was that everyone wanted to get home as we came down the west coast. So I think we went into Geraldton for fuel and after leaving there I think every stoker who went down the engine room wound on the throttle just a little bit more and, of course, it became very obvious in the ship because it started to throb a bit; we were going faster than what we had been. The officer of the watch was looking along the coast – and there were very few lights in those days – some were going back on and he saw this light and he expected to raise this particular light at a particular time – and it was within a few minutes or so, or five minutes, or when he thought he would see it. So he called the captain and said he'd raised this particular light and when the captain – whose name was Bob and had been the harbourmaster here in Fremantle before the war and subsequently after the war – saw this light and he looked at it for a while and then exploded because this light wasn't the one that the officer of the watch had reported but one that was some considerable distance down the coast – and obviously we had picked up a West Australian drift and the captain was pretty hostile, realised what was going on, slowed the ship up, and we arrived off Fremantle very early and instead of being able to come in at eight o'clock in the morning we were held out, off the coast, and just went backwards and forwards at about three or four knots, waiting for the correct time to come into Fremantle Harbour.

So that taught me a lesson, that you never try to crib on the things – although I've been in many ships which did wind on revolutions but once they set the ETA, naval ships will always meet that ETA. And the great thing is that the first line will hit the jetty at the time it's stated it will berth.

So I was a quartermaster and coming into harbour I fully expected that, when they closed up special sea duty, when the coxswain would take the wheel, and I would go on to the telegraph and become a telegraphsman. However, the coxswain was quite happy for me to stay on the wheel, as was the officer on watch and captain, and I was able to bring the ship right in till it was only a hundred yards or less from the position we were going to berth. And I was then relieved by the coxswain who just took it those last few yards and I went and stood in the doorway and watched the ship berth.

Many years later, while serving at HMAS *Sterling*, Mick Jeffries, the naval public relations officer at the time, came along and gave me a picture of HMAS *Fremantle* berthing in Fremantle in 1945 and, of course, there, standing in the doorway are two people [who] could be seen and obviously one of them was me. Now, another coincidence arises from that particular event because at the Tasmanian corvettes reunion I went on the ferry which did the tour of the Derwent and had a barbecue on board, but most of the *Bathurst* people with whom I'd been sitting had decided not to go on that trip. So I was there on my own at the bar, having a drink, and there was two or three, four, other fellows in a group talking and having a drink and asked

me if I'd like to join them. So I did and I noticed that one of them, a chap called Mortimer, had a cap tally on with *'Fremantle'* on. I said, 'Oh, were you on the *Fremantle*?' and he said, 'Yes.' I said, 'When', and he said, oh, he was there for some time during the war. And I said, 'Oh, that's interesting,' I said, 'I joined it in Morotai for the trip home down the west coast.' And another chap standing there said, 'Oh, so did I. In actual fact,' he said, 'I got a picture in my room, back in the motel, of the *Fremantle* coming alongside at Fremantle and I was looking out the window just in front of the wheel.' And I said, 'What were you?' and he said, 'I was the telegraphsman.' And I said, 'Well, that's very interesting because I was the quartermaster and I steered the ship to within position where that picture would have been taken – just before that when the coxswain relieved us.'

So there was another coincidence of many, many years later, catching up with someone that had served in the corvettes with me.

From Fremantle we then set sail for – sorry, while we were in Fremantle I brought one of my girlfriends down, called Elsa, who had lived alongside my aunt in 7th Avenue, Maylands. And we took her over the ship as always young proud sailors were all glad to do. And she wanted her picture taken up in the mast, which I took, and I went on my way and she went on hers. Eventually it turns out that she was sitting with her then current boyfriend and a number of other people in a small milk bar, or somewhere in Perth, and they were showing me other photographs from their wallets and purses, and she produced this picture of her in the mast of this what was obviously a warship. And her boyfriend jumped up and said, 'Where did you get that?' and 'Who took that? Who do you know in the Navy?' So she said, 'Why?' – and, of course, this chap himself had been in the Navy as it turned out. And she said, 'Well, it's a great friend of mine, he lived alongside me when he came on holidays from Kalgoorlie, a chap called Bill Ritchie. And this chap almost exploded and said, 'Bill Ritchie from Kalgoorlie. I joined the Navy with a Bill Ritchie from Kalgoorlie.' And it turned out that this was a chap called Clem Eaton – which we'd called Gandhi because he always seemed to have two left feet; in other words, when he marched his arms and legs were always out of sync with one another – and he married Elsa and I am still in touch with them even to this day – they live in Melbourne. So that was another sort of coincidence that's arisen out of corvettes.

Great stories.

After Fremantle we went to Adelaide and we were there for Christmas Day. And as a quartermaster I took the fourteen watch because some of the other people had visitors and relatives and went off. But I asked if I could do the fourteen so that I could go to church before I went on watch, which I did. And everyone got an issue of a bottle of beer on that day and there was turkey, and ham, and you name it, and it was a beautiful meal, the best I'd ever seen since I basically left home, I suppose. I arrived down to have my lunch, which I'd been told had been set aside, to find there were only scraps of turkey, and scraps of ham, and scraps of everything. There were no soft drinks which I'd asked to be set aside but there was my bottle of beer. Now, many, many years before I'd taken the pledge that I wouldn't drink till I was twenty-one and despite being in the Navy, and being in Sydney and other places, I had never drank at all up to that stage. So, of course, I had a bit of a whinge and one of the able seamen there, with his girlfriend or wife – I can't remember now – 'That's not beer, that's hop beer', and I said, 'Oh, is it?' And I said, 'Well, if it's hop beer I can drink it.' So that was my first taste of beer which was when I was approaching my twentieth birthday, I suppose, at that stage. But strangely enough, I never touched beer again till just before my twenty-first birthday so I did pretty well with the

pledge at that particular stage.

You certainly did.

Now, from Adelaide we then sailed to Melbourne and in Melbourne we went up the [inaudible] and we secured, literally right alongside, just underneath Spencer Street Bridge. And I was there for a period of time and I seem to remember – I should have the date here – the date that I think that we got there was some time in early January – and I stayed there on the *Fremantle*, as part of the disembarkation of stores party, till about 25 January when I was sent down to Onslow.

Apparently I seem to recall, just vaguely at that stage, I had asked someone what you did to stay in the Navy. Now, everyone at that stage was reservist like myself who were on for three years or the duration of three months thereafter. So for someone to ask to stay was unique but no-one wanted to listen to me so I didn't take any further action, and went to Lonsdale where I became the postman thereby parting with the *Fremantle*.

The interesting thing from there was that having been the postman for a short time I was sent back to [Lewin] and I must have arrived in Lewin somewhere around about 12 February – or maybe it was a bit later than that, maybe that was the date that I actually left Lonsdale. And I travelled across in the trans-train and got served beautiful meals – there were no cattle trucks like I'd travelled previously. So having arrived in Lewin on one day I was handed a rail ticket the following day and told to get to HMAS *Watson* in Sydney.

So I was complaining pretty bitterly to the RPO who gave me this and went and saw the master at arms and said [asked] what the hell was going on, I'd come to be demobbed. He said that with my official number – which was about a five-four number – that I wouldn't be probably demobbed for at least a month or two months and that why didn't I take the posting – because when I got to Sydney they'd be just like we were in Lewin where all you did was swept the gutters, painted the kerbing, or cleaned out the hedge, and were given a [inaudible]. He said, 'You won't get a holiday again for a long time because you've got to go out and find a job and get yourself settled down. So why don't you take this on the Government? Have a holiday in Sydney and then, when your DE turn up, they'll send you back to Western Australia.' So I thought that was a good idea so off I went in the train and didn't know where this HMAS *Watson* was, no-one had ever heard of it in the west. I arrived in Sydney, met by the transport people there, and immediately shipped off to this place known as HMAS *Watson* which was basically RAN Station 284 where I'd done my initial training and is on South Head. And by that time they'd put in some accommodation.

When I arrived I tried to make the point that I was a reservist and I was expecting a pay-off, but a chap, who later went on to become the Chief of Naval Staff, called David Stevenson, got stuck into me for being [A] late, and when I tried to say, Look, Sir – but I was told to shut up and get into the classroom and get on with the class.

So we went on to this course which was to be a radar plot second class course. As we were approaching the last weeks of it we were doing revision and I mentioned to the instructor it would be interesting if I passed this course because my mate Jack Lathar had just rang me to say that he'd got his DPE, and being an 'L' I could expect to be not long after him as an 'R'. And that rather put the cat amongst the pigeons. I was sent for again, abused for not telling them I was a reservist, and pointed out that surely my official number would have told them that, and that I hadn't signed on into the permanent services. So they were then in a quandary as to what the hell to do with me – I'd done this course basically, I was only just waiting to do the exams. So I was

given twenty-four hours to go away and think about whether I wanted to transfer to the permanent Navy or whether I wanted to go home. So I walked down to the end of the corridor, turned around twice, came back and said, 'I'll stay', and a couple of days later I signed on to complete ten years and fifty-five days for twelve years of permanent naval service.

That was a fast decision.

Well, I'd already was living – you know, I'd seen Sydney, saw the bright lights, didn't really want to go back to being a mining engineer, and it seemed to me that here was the life that was going to take me round the world – I'd had a taste of places like Hong Kong, I'd seen the Philippines but not went ashore. I knew then that there was a big wide world out there which my good Government might be able to pay my tourist passages as we went around the world.

And so, having transferred, it was an interesting thing. I never again became associated with corvettes except the *Colac* when she was an oil fuel cleaning [lighter]. And I then, of course, having completed this course, went on to serve in quite a large number of ships. In actual fact I served in seven aircraft carriers – or aircraft carriers seven times – plus the *Sydney* when it went to Vietnam with the helicopter flight. I served in *Stewart* and *Murchison, Perth,* and, of course, I was the Deputy Director of Naval Training and also of User Requirements. It was while I was with User Requirements that I was detailed off to look after the West Australian Naval Support Facility, being a silly West Australian – and surprise, surprise, I later became the first Executive Officer, the 2nd Commanding Officer, the 3rd Executive Officer, after I'd done a stint up at Exmouth.

All at *Sterling*?

All at *Sterling*, and I finally finished up completing thirty-nine years and thirty-nine days service in the Royal Australian Navy.

The other interesting point is that I've learnt, being a radar operator, one of the reasons that they wanted me, were happy for me to transfer, was that there were only about fifteen or twenty permanent service radar operators in the Navy at the end of the war. And, of course, all ships were, or had been, fitted with radar at that stage because just about every radar operator trained during World War II for the RAN was, in actual fact, a reservist. So, of course, all these people, they wanted these new people so quite a number like myself came in, and because it was a new branch, of course, we got very rapid promotion. For instance, I was a leading seaman in about two and a half years where it took much longer for many other people to be leading seamen. I think I was a petty officer in four and a half years whereas petty officers were taking twelve and fifteen years. And then I became a Chief in eight and a half years which was almost unheard of unless you were a technician like an ERA or someone like that, you just didn't get that sort of promotion. So I was fairly lucky and, of course, it was because I'd been a Chief for three and a half years when my twelve years was approaching the end – and I'd been badgered over a number of years to become an officer that I finally accepted and undertook a course where I became qualified for a bosun plot and radar. And in 1955 I sailed back in the *Vengeance* to England where I then underwent training for officer and qualified as a bosun, plot and radar in October 1956. And that, of course, led to a very successful career throughout the Navy.

12/01