



Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01787

F5078 Roberts, Niall John

Recorded

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by: Jack Shephard

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 Shephard.

F5078 Niall John Roberts as an able seaman radar operator, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvettes HMAS *Echuca*, *Horsham* and *Warrnambool*, western and northern Australian waters, Timor and Arafura Seas and North Pacific ocean, 1943–1946, interviewed by Jack Shephard

Roberts speaks of his schooling in Boulder City and Kalgoorlie; early employment as a monitor for the West Australian Education Department; his experience in the Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC); recruitment into the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and training, experiences while serving in RAN corvettes HMAS *Horsham*, *Echuca* and *Warrnambool*; doing hydrographic surveys and minesweeping; transporting occupation forces to Timor; return to Australia, and discharge and post war employment.

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

[This is] an interview with John Roberts, and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA. John Roberts is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA, and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes. John was born in Boulder City on 9 January 1925 and he joined the Navy on 3 June 1943 as an OD and served in the following corvettes: HMAS *Horsham*, J235; HMAS *Echuca*, J252.

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 order for the Royal Navy but were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These ships were named after the 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.

The interview was conducted by Jack Sheppard, Secretary of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA, on 2 September 1993.

What is your full name?

John Niall Roberts.

When and where were you born, John?

I was born 9 January 1925 at home in Boulder City, Western Australia.

And where were you educated?

Well, as my birthday was at the beginning of the year I was one of those kids that went to school a year earlier than most, and my first two years were spent at a convent which is just across the road from our place where I stayed until I was about eight years of age, and then went to Christian Brothers in Kalgoorlie where I stayed until I completed my Leaving in 1941.

And what was your occupation before joining the Navy?

Well, as I stated, I stayed in school until 1941 when I had just turned seventeen and received my Leaving Certificate, and for that year was employed as a monitor by the Education Department. In those days you had to spend one year in a school as a junior teacher, learning how to teach,

and if you liked them, or they liked you, then you were then allowed to enter teachers' college.

Well, you would not have been so young; you would not have had any previous service experience.

Well, I did actually because Bill Rourke, who was the principal of the Boulder Central School, was the captain of the local Home Guards and as I was his monitor I then spent most of my time being the orderly private, I assume – because we were fitted out in a green uniform and I did a lot of the hackwork, like making the targets for the rifle range, and then pouring him beer at the end of the evening after our parade. So I'd say that I had one year's practise of VDC [Volunteer Defence Corps].

And that goes to show that you didn't have to be a senior citizen to join that group then. What was your first involvement with the Royal Australian Navy, John?

Well, coming from Kalgoorlie I had no commitment with the Royal Australian Navy except that the boy next-door, who went to another school but I did knock around with him, was talking of going in the Navy. At that time I had been involved in the Boy Scouts and some of the older chaps who were Rovers had already gone to the Middle East, and some were lost in Malaysia, and the notes were coming through that these people had been taken as prisoners, or had been killed, and it made me determined that I certainly wasn't going to go in the Army. Air Force didn't appeal to me and the Navy seemed to be a novelty because they all seemed smart, and clean, and tidy, and this appealed to me.

Okay, you've told me why you joined the Navy; was it difficult to get into the Navy at that time?

Well, as I was training to be a teacher I did work in the Christmas holidays, I'd worked in the mines previously, I then came to – waiting to be called up – came to Fremantle and worked in a skin store. But I was to go into college. By this time I had turned eighteen and it hadn't occurred to me that I had to register for call-up for the Army – as I'd enlisted in the Navy and been received I thought that was sufficient. So I spent the first term of that year at Teachers' College until two Army provosts turned up and wanted to arrest me because I hadn't registered for national service; but the Navy saved me and I joined the Navy and went in on 3 June 1943.

And that would have been to [HMAS] *Leeuwin*?

No, we were enlisted in Perth – I think it was the Navy Recruiting Office in Forest Place – told to go home, get some gear together, and then we went to – I think it was Fremantle Station, it might have been Perth Station, I'm not too sure – we were put on a troop train and then we finally arrived in Melbourne.

And how long did that journey take?

Oh, to my knowledge it took about four or five days because we seemed to have to stop and pull in while other trains went by, we seemed to have to stop for meals because it was quite a large troop train and with the change of trains it would have taken, I'd say, four or five days at least.

Are there any special recollections of that trip?

Except that it was – although we slept in bunks we were very close to each other which, I think, was preparation for living on a corvette. I think there would have been about twelve roughly tiered bunks in each carriage.

And what emotions were running through your mind at this stage after having left home?

Well, I suppose the fact you were going into an adventure, I think this is the thing that appealed to me, that this was something different from living in the goldfields, something different from starting Teachers' College, learning to teach; and the feeling we were going to another place and to join the Navy.

You never felt as though you wanted to get off the train as you went through Kalgoorlie?

No, not at all.

Being close to home. What was the reactions of your parents and family?

Well, unfortunately my mother died when I was fairly young so I was brought up by my father, although I had younger sisters and brothers. But I think, by this time, Dad was glad to get rid of me because I was seventeen, coming on eighteen, and everybody else was joining up and I felt – and I think he felt – that it was one's duty to do something like this.

And what was it like upon arrival at Flinders?

Cold, freezing, wet, dismal, and I think we all on the train trip finished up with colds and the fact that wherever you walked – or you didn't walk, you had to do everything at the double and it was quite a shock, I think, from the easygoing life that I'd had previous to that.

Well, I, having been in Flinders, I well remember that. You went to bed with everything on and over you, and the blankets, and including your spare hammock. What about learning to wear your uniform and the issue of that uniform?

Well, I'll always remember queuing up and getting this big kit bag, and hammock, and being told how to tie up the regulation seven rings, and being impressed with the fact that the fellows who had been there about a month before looked a bit smarter than us because with our hats square on, and our woolly uniforms, I'm sure that they picked us up as certainly sailors who had just arrived.

I can always remember the heavy – I think we had two pairs of boots, a light pair and a heavy pair – and we always seemed to be cleaning our boots all the time because of the mud from the parade ground and some of the other areas around.

Did you have any difficulty with the discipline applied?

No, that didn't really worry me, I mean, as long as you went left, right, left, right, and went in the right direction, I think that seemed to be the main learning. Probably my VDC training had helped me.

After doing your normal parade work, which I presume you did, what can you tell me about your training?

I can't remember much about the training except it seemed to be mainly involved in marching, and getting straight lines, and learning how to shoulder a rifle, and running around either the gym when we couldn't go outside – because it always seemed to be raining – I can't ever remember that anybody asked me if I could swim and nor did we ever have any swimming lessons.

And after you completed your training – at least from your parade ground work – did you then go into any course?

Well, I finished training as an ordinary seaman and was transferred to Lonsdale for a little while. Then I heard of the radar course being offered and applied for the course, and was drafted back to Fremantle to learn how to be a radar operator.

And you completed that course at *Leeuwin*, was it?

No. It was rather unusual the course because the course was held – if people know Fremantle – down below the Round House. There was a railway line at the back which led to what they called the Old Fruit Sheds – I think it was where they used to store fruit for export – and we were camped in there in fairly primitive circumstances. We had a cook but we were away from the restraints of *Leeuwin* and therefore we learnt how to operate a few radar sets and also spent our evenings on watch, with people who had been trained, operating the radar base. I think it was called Grouse Head which was directly over where the old slipway used to be, where the corvettes were often dragged up.

And did you join your first ship in Fremantle?

I arrived back in Fremantle, or finished the course, probably at the end of 1943 and the portion – there were several corvettes in Fremantle, mainly around – well, H Shed seemed to be the place where we berthed – and the *Horsham* had been having quite an extensive refit and I was transferred to the *Horsham* as a radar rate on 4 March 1944.

And it would have been shortly after that that you first went to sea.

We went to sea actually – *Horsham* was based in Fremantle mainly for escort work, and at that time Fremantle was quite a large US Navy submarine base, and we spent a lot of time working up American subs before they headed off into the Pacific or other parts of other war zones.

How did you feel upon joining the *Horsham*? I don't suppose you knew anyone else aboard and you go as a complete stranger.

No, quite a few of the fellows, Dick Jackson and one or two others, I'd remembered from the course we first went over, were also appointed to the *Horsham* at the same time.

Well, that was good, you felt at home at least.

Well, *Horsham* was quite – they seemed to be – although originally a lot of them were

Tasmanians and from Victoria. By this time, the West Australians had started to move in because *Horsham* had already been in Fremantle for twelve months and there were quite a few West Australians on board.

And what about adjusting to the shipboard routine – watch keeping and so on?

Well, I think I always learnt to observe and noticed what was going on. I remember the first time we went to sea, we were wallowing around behind Rottneest on an anti-submarine patrol or working with the US subs, and I heard this 'Away sea boat's crew'. And whatever was drilled into us at Flinders, everybody had to go, irrespective. So I went up there and they said, 'Into the boat, into the boat', and I noticed that all the 'mackers', or the ones who had just joined, were the ones up there first. And then gradually bodies started to appear to man the falls and then we were lowered away to go away in this sea boat practice. But it occurred to me that people were appearing after the boat was full so the next time it happened I waited and I noticed they kept running round the mess decks and I followed them and found that I never went away again but was there to man the falls when the next occasion occurred.

And did you enjoy those early days in your life at sea?

Oh, yes. *Horsham* was a good ship, we were well looked after, we had as skipper old [Boogie] Newby who was a very fair sort of a man; I had no complaints. The fact that we would be at sea, in many cases we would go out early in the morning and we might be back next afternoon – we seemed to have plenty of leave in Fremantle and it – as many lived in Western Australia a lot of our social activities were around Fremantle.

Did she make any other voyages longer than that? Eventually, I presume, you did leave Fremantle in her.

Well, we did, but one of the interesting things, working with the US subs out behind Rottneest, we weren't allowed to throw depth charges at them as these were apparently regarded as expensive at the time, so when we made contact, either by radar and Asdic – and radar had just been finished at the *Horsham*, that's why we went on board, as radar rates – we would then get a ping where the sub was and we used to throw fruit boxes over there. And when the sub would come up, with the fruit boxes somewhere near them, we regarded this as we'd scored a hit.

That was good. Did you get any hits?

Oh, yes, we were the terror of the US Submarine Fleet, they were frightened of us.

You said you weren't allowed to throw any depth charges, I bet the Yanks were pleased about that.

Yes, I think so too.

Where did you go from Fremantle?

Well, late in '44 we left Fremantle to go to Darwin. I remember quite well, we towed an oil barge laden with oil up to Exmouth Gulf where it was taken over and used for the US subs which were based there. And from there we went to Darwin where we joined HMAS *Moresby*,

the hydrographic ship, and we formed a hydrographic – well, fleet. Under the *Moresby* there was *Horsham*, *Echuca*, *Junee*, *Benalla*, *Inverell* – and I'm not sure whether the *Castlemaine* was with us, I know the *Castlemaine* was in Darwin at that time.

And is there anything else that you would like to particularly record with regard to that time in *Horsham*?

Well, in Darwin the corvettes would work five abreast with the *Moresby* – or six abreast – we'd keep station by Asdic and by radar contact so that we had distances – and from Darwin we steamed towards Thursday Island, which took roughly about five or six days, where we refuelled, turned, and came back again. We then used to go away around the Kimberley coast to Scotts [Scott] Reef, to Browse Island, Ashmore Shoals, and also surveying the ocean bottom. And the interesting thing is that it is many years since – I think it was originally done by Bass and Flinders – but the depth was still the same. Nobody really told us why we were doing this but we believed, later on, this was in preparation for the invasion of Asia, or Malaysia, and Singapore, and this was for the British Fleet to come in so that at least they knew where they could go because we were doing the recent survey.

And how long were you in *Horsham* then, John?

Well, we were in Darwin – we left Darwin early in '45 – I think we must have been there about five or six months because we were overdue for a refit and we returned to Fremantle for quite an extensive refit. We were in Fremantle for only a matter of six weeks or so before we returned to Darwin and then took up work again with the *Moresby*.

Whilst in Fremantle was the *Horsham* slipped or did it just go alongside?

No, it was slipped. We were given leave, it was slipped and repainted. Prior to that it had been repainted when it was first commissioned with quite gaudy camouflage colours and that which weren't needed around Fremantle. But then it was painted grey and then it remained painted that bluish grey, that naval grey.

Yes, which was what most of the corvettes finished up with, I think. John, would you like to continue your story then about your time in the *Horsham*?

Andy Andrews, who was the HSD – Higher Submarine Detector, I think that was the title on board – collected information a few years ago when he put forward a booklet on the *Horsham*, it was called 'The Story of a Small Ship – Not One of Great Drama'. Well, that was one of the things with *Horsham*, that I don't think we did anything dramatic, I don't think we bombarded anybody. But we spent a lot of time at sea, either on escort work and [sic] anti-submarine patrols, and apart from... I remember one or two reconnaissance planes coming overhead and dropping depth charges at suspected subs which probably were large fish. Other than that our war was a kind of a very pleasant war.

After we'd returned to Darwin the second time and completed our work. We used to go to – take us – for recreation leave. I remember on one occasion we went to – I think it was called Scott's [Scott] Reef and this was well off the Kimberley coast of Western Australia, had large, very deep water, and this, I believe, was to be used – or was never used but it was to be used – as a place where they could store tankers or where they could use repair ships if ever Malaysia was to be taken.

We went in there, it was beautiful clear water, a clear bottom, you could see very deep, right to the bottom, and there seemed to be a breeding ground for the great manta rays, and these were in profusion. And I remember somebody found we had a few grenades that weren't working too well and they used to drop these over the side and the manta ray suffered a mortal wound. Fishing was good, everybody seemed to be able to fish and we had particularly – that seemed to be the staple part of our diet, in fish, as we also found we had numerous faulty depth charges at times.

Sounds as though you dined pretty well. You've told me about the areas pretty well, what you operated in; do you still wish to talk about *Horsham* or should we move on to the other ship?

Well, whilst we were in *Horsham* the end of the war came, not that we knew too much about it. We heard that there was – cables had been sent to the ship – and I have a copy of the message, it was taken by one of the ...Coder Curly McDavitt who decoded it. '13:14 hours on 10/8/1945. The Japanese Government has just announced to the Swedish Government that they were willing to accept the terms at Potsdam and inform the Swedish Government to relate to the United States. One condition exists, that they be permitted to keep their emperor.' In other words, although they had signified that the war was at end it was not until 07:10 hours on 15 August, Coder Noel or Curly McDavitt on duty, the *Horsham* received the signal the world had been waiting for: 'Japan has surrendered; cease offensive action.' Our war was over and we hadn't fired an angry shot.

Prior to that how often had you had leave and if so, where did you generally have that leave?

Well, our leaves were mainly in Fremantle because the ship was based in Fremantle, but before return to Fremantle we were part of the Occupation Force that went to Timor under the charge of *Moresby* which was the major ship – some of the corvettes, *Horsham* – we went to Kupang and received the surrender of the Japanese forces there. Kupang was on the Dutch side of Timor, and one of the interesting things, we had to tow Army barges and we had about fifty swotties [soldiers] on board who were to be part of the occupation force – they were scattered around amongst ships – and had to keep up, or keep down to the speed of the slowest boat – and I think it was called the *Bombo* or some name like that, and its speed seemed to be about five knots, and we were barely making way but our skipper, Boogie Newby, arranged for a sail to be put up in the forecandle and the corvette coasted along under sail so that we could maintain way and allow the ship to keep up with us.

After I returned to Darwin I was then received a draft, I was to be sent to or drafted to Sydney. I don't know whether I was to be discharged because I was a trainee teacher or not, and I took passage on the *Warrnambool* which was returning to Sydney and was on, I think, approximately about four or five weeks. But the thing I can recall on that journey is the fact that going down through Whitsunday Passage, the beautiful islands and the tropical scenes which weren't very obvious around Darwin or the areas around there.

John, a little while ago you told me about how you learnt of the cessation of hostilities. You didn't actually tell us the reaction of the crew; was that of delight?

Well, we got the message, we had this buzz, I think, something was happening but we didn't know the circumstances. The only story we got, that a bomb had been dropped on Japan – at

that time I don't think anybody was aware of atomic bombs or the damage it caused. Of course, naturally, everybody – I think the skipper put on and gave us a drink of beer each or something like that to celebrate the occasion. I remember the lights were turned on on the ship and this showed that the war was over.

Yes, your reaction is similar to mine, that it was pretty low-key. One thing you could say, I suppose, the *Horsham* would have been about the only corvette that ever moved under sail.

Well, I think so. I have some information about it which might be of interest to you. It was laid down, or the keel was laid in June 1941, it was finally launched about twelve months later and went into commission in November 1942 at Williamstown Dockyard. It was paid off; after we left Darwin station it returned straight to Fremantle without me and was paid off in December 1945 and went into – I think it was called F Reserve – and spent the next few years after that, till 1957, over at Garden Island. Then it was sold as scrap and finished up in razor blades in Hong Kong or China, somewhere like that. Interesting statistics. It steamed 95,872 miles; it spent 11,302 hours under way and that meant going back 471 days of continuous sailing.

Having spent that time in the *Horsham* there must have been those times when things were just not quite as pleasant as they might have been with regard to, let's say, particularly weather conditions.

One event that I think we'll all remember, those who served on the *Horsham*, particularly after our first tour to Darwin where we were coming back for the refit to Fremantle. As we rounded the North West Cape we ran into a terrific cyclone, and the way the ship bounded around and heeled, and did all those things, I think most of us didn't think that we were going to reach back to Fremantle. In one case one of the air vents was ripped off, water kept pouring in into the mess deck and the mess deck, as the nose dived the water went up to the bow end and as it went the other way it went down to the stern. Everything was awash, everything was wet, and we had two or three days of very miserable existence. And I think then people would have said what had I joined the Navy for because this certainly wasn't a very pleasant memory.

A lot of broken crockery I should imagine.

Oh, broken crockery, lockers, people with minor injuries, but it was quite terrifying when you consider how small a corvette it, to be bounced around in a very severe cyclone.

That's a remarkable thing about those small ships, they were just so seaworthy. Any other particular incident, John, that might be worth recording?

No. One I can remember, when we were heading to Darwin up through Broome, I can always remember – being a radar rate we worked as two on watch at a time so you had time off where you usually went up the bridge to see what was happening or to hear the latest buzz. And I remember going up there when somebody was on watch, and it was a moonlit night and the sea was like glass. In fact, during the day the sea was like glass and you could see the flying fish and the turtles and other fish quite close by, but this was the contrast to the rather terrifying experience of the cyclone.

Now, out beyond Rottneest, when we were out [doing] anti-submarine work or working with the

US subs – this wasn't a picnic either because, as you know, you can get some very, very rough seas out behind Rottneest. Other than that, I think, hopefully, we all sailed in pleasant weather.

And so when did you finally leave *Horsham*? I suppose that was to be drafted to *Echuca*.

Well, no, I left *Horsham*, as I say, at the end of the war and took passage on the *Warrnambool* to Sydney. This was at the end of 1945 or about November 1945. I was given leave to come home and thought that possibly that I would be discharged. But that wasn't to be because by this time the *Echuca* had also come back and had a refit and I was drafted to the *Echuca*, not as a radar rate but as an AB. And I joined the *Echuca* in 1946 in Brisbane and we were there preparing to go north again.

Identification: This is an interview with John Roberts.

John, from *Horsham* you've now joined *Echuca*. Would you like to relate some of your experiences whilst in that ship?

I joined the *Echuca* in February '46 and found that there were only a few fellows who – well, I suppose, were experienced – I'd had about almost three years. Bill Goddard, who is well known in the Corvette Association, had been transferred there as a leading seaman and was the buffer. And I don't know whether Bill organised this or not, but going to the *Horsham* we were going north and we were to be engaged completely in minesweeping, that was our task. We left Brisbane, we headed to Port Moresby. I remember pulling into Moresby and there were the Papuan boys diving for money which the Yanks had been generous in throwing around, and we had some pennies and halfpennies which we painted with silver paper, and silver paint, threw these in the water and apparently we weren't very popular with them because they weren't the right value.

From Moresby we went onto Finschhafen and over to New Ireland, New Britain, Bougainville, and doing a little bit of sweeping but our main sweeping seemed to be in Rabaul Harbour.

John, you mentioned Bill Goddard, who is also well known to me and is a prominent member of the Corvettes Association, but you described him as your 'buffer'. Perhaps it might be worth explaining just what a buffer is.

Well, Bill was the person in charge of the work on board and other works, to see that the seamen, if there was chipping, or painting, or minesweeping, he was responsible for the everyday work that had to be done on the deck of the ship.

And times ashore whilst away in those islands? Were there any sporting activities or anything?

Oh, a little bit of football. We now, for example, I remember going – I think it was in Finschhafen – we used to go ashore there, the war was over, and I can always remember that all the palm trees, the tops had been lopped off them because of heavy bombardment. As we'd wander around there were still a few Americans there, quite a number of Papuans or people from Bougainville and New Ireland, and these were kindly disposed to us. And I can always recall where some of the bomb craters were and the large snails – they were roughly about half the size of a football – which the Japanese had brought in and I believe they later became a pest

in the plantations in New Guinea and that area.

We seemed to go...there wasn't much entertainment. Occasionally, I think, we may get a picture show but most of it seemed to be on board. And the fact that you could sit out – because you couldn't work at night, you'd sit out on the deck and have lights on – I think they used to give us a beer ration of two bottles of beer a week or something like that. This seemed to be the main thing, apart from some people played cards and that, and most of us played huckers. What I found, I was able to sit on the forecastle, or areas like this, that there were often people you could talk to and engage in conversation as to what you hoped to do when you returned to civilian life.

Yes, that was pretty common practice to spend watch time on the forecastle, sitting on a bollard. What about provisions and that sort of thing? Being involved with the Yanks, did that mean that you were pretty well supplied?

No, we weren't getting much from them but we were getting it through the Army. But I was appalled at the great waste of materials from the Lease Lend. I remember – I think it was at Finschhafen – where there were great piles of beautiful Manilla ropes, and cords, and everything else, great mountains of it, they just poured acid through them. I remember another pile, there was a great pile of motorcar parts, and rifles, and other things, just chucked in that somebody had put a flame thrower through. And then littered off the shore there were Jeeps, and refrigerators. It was appalling that this was Lease Lend but then they were the conditions, it couldn't be brought home, and then waste that went on.

Rabaul was more interesting because we could go ashore there, and as Rabaul was quite a large Japanese – well, POW or interment camp – we used to go off and get working parties. And I remember going off in a motor boat with a .45 strapped to my waist, without any bullets, and towing a whaler back with all these Japanese. We used to sit back and get them to chip the decks and do all the things that we would have been doing previously.

With the minesweeping, we spent about four months in all minesweeping. A lot of us were a bit disgusted the fact that this didn't entitle us to the minesweeping medal. But the minesweeping cable, which had to be paid out, apparently the motor couldn't be repaired and all had to be paid out by hand and wound in by hand, and this was quite a laborious task and something that we weren't very pleased about. Then, if you were in the motor boat you had to tow it around, then all of a sudden you'd hear a bang and up would go a mine. Not that we got many mines but there was still the possibility of danger that you could have been sitting over one that you didn't know anything about.

You couldn't take the Japs to sea with you to do that hard manual work apparently.

No, we weren't permitted to have them on board except when we were at anchor, and they were the conditions.

The other point I remember, going ashore at Rabaul there's the tunnels which were dug into the hillside, and I can remember – not that I ever went in and examined them but they seemed to be stuffed with material and I believe, later on, people up there made their fortune of [from] the military vehicles and other things that had been buried by the Japanese in the tunnels which were a feature of Rabaul.

That's right, I had a bit of time there myself. When you did go ashore were you going to wharves or just beaching the motorboat?

No, we were going into rather temporary wharves and we put them in the whaler – put about twenty of them in the whaler – and towed them back to the ship.

Is there anything else that you would like to mention regarding your period in *Echuca*?

After *Echuca* – well, *Echuca* was – a lot of the crew were fairly young, who had just come into the Navy, and I suppose we were regarded as the old salts who were waiting to be discharged – I know of people had been discharged before us. Then after four months minesweeping we returned, I think, in August of 1946, back to Brisbane – I know we went to Brisbane, whether we went on to Sydney I don't know – and I went ashore, was taken to – I think it was Rushcutter or somewhere like that, and then put on a troop ship and sent back to Fremantle. It was a well-known liner, the *Indies* or some name like that; it was a British ship and there were many, many thousands of British troops and British Navy who were returning home and it was just a seething mass of humanity. And it seemed that meals were on all day and there were always these great lines of people shuffling whether as to go to have a meal or go to the toilet – I don't think we were offered too many showers. But after four or five days we finally arrived back in Fremantle and I then went to *Leeuwin* for discharge.

By that time you would have had enough of that journey I should imagine.

Oh, yes, I pity the poor old Poms who were going home to England. I mean, I'm sure they'd remember that trip, it certainly wasn't a luxury trip by any means.

And you say that the *Echuca* went into Brisbane and from there you went to Rushcutter?

Yes, I was for discharge.

By train?

By train I believe, yes.

I see. Now, discharge, is there anything else relating to your service experience, before we get onto your post-war life?

The only thing I can remember, as far as my service life – I've asked other people this as to, you know, sure we knew people on board, we knew their reputations of all the things they'd done somewhere else, but most of the fellows on corvettes seemed to be about my age – they'd gone on as eighteen and nineteen years of age – and you only seemed to become an oppo [naval slang, derived from Opposite Number] or a friend of somebody who you were on watch with, or at the same mess deck, and these are the ones you went ashore with. I've kept contact with a few after the war years, particularly as I was living in Fremantle for a couple of years, but then, as I lived for the rest of my life after that in country areas I seemed to lose contact with people who I'd served [with] on corvettes, although, through the Corvette Association I have re-established some of the friendships again.

John, so you mentioned you came back to *Leeuwin* for discharge; is there anything particular to note about that time, the discharge?

Well, the only thing I remember about *Leeuwin* is coming in and being taken – I think we were

told we could take our hammock and we were given our kit bag, maybe because our number wasn't – I think we had to pay something for the hammock if we wanted it because I remember the blankets were very good. And getting my gear, and getting ration tickets. I can't remember anybody ever telling me anything about training after the war, CRTS [Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme] or anything else like that. And I can vaguely remember being discharged and getting on a truck and being taken up to the traffic bridge and then finding my way home. I had an aunty who lived in Fremantle, I think I hopped on the tram or something, and arrived home – well, arrived with an aunty of mine, probably at the end of August 1946.

You mentioned CRTS; is that the post-war training that was commonly known as rehabilitation course?

Well, Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Service I think they called it. So when I returned I think I was given whatever leave was due to me – with Jock Lane who was on the *Echuca*, we went down and had a week or so at Albany where we hadn't been before and visited a lot of pubs. Then he went back to his pre-war, or to his during-the-war job before he entered the Navy as a baker, and then I then reported back to the Education Department and said, 'Here I am; what are you going to do with me?'

That answers the question I was going to ask about returning to civilian life. You haven't mentioned anything about meeting Judy, your wife to be, yet; is that still to come?

It's still to come. No, I reported back to the Education Department and they were rather embarrassed at the time because of the fellows who were coming back from discharge, they still had people – a lot of females, or what they called supplied people or temporary teachers in schools like that – and for us to turn up, not at the beginning of the year but halfway through a term, was an embarrassment. So I was sent back home to Boulder where I'd started my teaching and I was appointed there as a supernumerary teacher. Now, in those days teachers didn't seem to have sickies or take days off and I was supposed to go around – although I hadn't completed my training – assisting classes and help teachers. But myself and another fellow – there were two of us there – realised that if we didn't show nobody was looking for us so we used to go across the road to the Golden Eagle Pub and sit there until lunch time, and then resume for lunch and then disappear early. Well, after a while the Education Department, or the principal, woke up to this and I received an appointment to Number 5 Pump. I'd never seen a one-teacher school in my life before, I wasn't trained for it, and Number 5 Pump was at the end of the bitumen road once you headed out of Merredin before you got to Southern Cross. So I turned up there at about three o'clock in the morning, with my kit bag over my shoulder, from the train and went to this school where there were about ten or twelve children and I spent probably the last two to three months of the year at Number 5 Pump.

And whilst you were at this particular school, Number 5 Pump, what about accommodation? Were you billeted out with a farming family or something like that?

Well, the Pump was supplying water to the goldfields from Mundaring weir and it was very much like the Navy because they had stratas on it. You had the officer in charge, he was the engineer, and he only spoke to the engineers and didn't speak to anybody else. Then you had the engineers who didn't speak to him unless they were spoken to, but then they spoke to the next line who were the greasers or the stokers. Then there was the next fellow, the fireman, and so it

went down. There was one person who used to drive the horse and cart and take away a bit of the rubbish and clean out the dunny cans, and me as the head teacher of this school – and I think I rated with him, we were certainly the lowest of the low in the eyes of this ship establishment which was generated by the water supply at the time.

I remained there until the end of the year and I realised there was no future in this, and as I was entitled to CRTS training I had applied and was offered a two-year full-time course at Claremont Teachers' College.

And following that two-year course, or during that two-year course, is there anything of particular interest that you would like to record?

Well, in the two-year course, where more than half the male population were ex-service – Air Force, Army, quite a few Navy, and the rest were either young male teachers, and certainly a lot of young female teachers. I think, as ex-service people, we all seemed to have more money than they had because they were just on a very bare allowance, and as I wasn't married at the time, and had no intention of being married, I can assure you it was a very delightful two years of Teachers' College, and camps, and playing a little bit of hockey and doing other things, including – we had the first interstate trip to Melbourne Teachers' College.

Does that mean that joining the Education Department and becoming a teacher that you moved around the state a lot?

Well, one of the things in the Education Department – I made up my mind that I wasn't going to remain as a teacher for the rest of my life – I have somewhat regretted that instead of going to Teachers' College I think I would have preferred to have gone to uni and have done a degree but this wasn't to happen at the time. And so, after completion of the course, I had been involved in a fair bit of running camps and doing phys. ed., I was appointed to the physical education staff. I was sent then to run camp schools at Esperance which had started the Fresh Air League camps and that was at the end of 1948. I was sent to Esperance and spent about three months down there and from then went on to phys. ed. staff organising youth clubs in the Kalgoorlie–Boulder area for the year 1947.

Two questions, John. By this time you are still single, you haven't met Judy, you are moving around the state. What else would you like to add to that private life? Had you had any regrets about leaving the Navy, for instance?

No, I had no regrets on leaving the Navy, I was a bit disgruntled with the Education Department and I often contemplated leaving and joining the Commonwealth Public Service in Customs. I even had one idea of going back to New Guinea as a patrol officer but this didn't eventuate. As I mentioned, I was on youth education work and had been appointed to Kalgoorlie and I was there in the year 1949 and there I met my wife, Judy Parkes – some of you may know her – who was teaching home science at Boulder Central – whereas I had a roving commission there without the attachment of a class – and from then on we saw each other on and off, although we both waited until we were thirty to finally tie the knot.

Okay, so you've married, now, what about family?

Well, prior to that I had been involved in – as I say, I decided to remain in schools – I then decided that if I was going to be I was going to be a head, and from then on I was always in

charge of schools. I had about twenty schools in all and in all of them I was the headmaster or the head teacher, and finally became the principal. So I'm one of these fortunate, or unfortunate, people who've always been the boss. I don't know how I would stand in this situation. After Kalgoorlie I went to a place called Bakers Hill, I went to Augusta, and then Judy had returned from England and we were married, and we first lived at Parkerville and we had most of the children from Parkerville Home on the Parkerville School. From there we went to Shackleton where we spent six years and our two eldest boys were born there. From there I sought further promotion, went to Tambellup and my youngest son was born there. And then from there, came back to the city where I served at Ashfield, North Perth, [Cabinara], City Beach School, City Beach, West Balcatta, and finally at Bambara near Padbury. In other words, I ranged from schools of about ten kids until the last one I think there were about 700 children in the school. And our three boys – we lived in Woodlands – our three boys went to uni and have now got various jobs throughout Australia.

You have certainly moved around. You didn't actually say whether you were happy about having got out of the Navy or not. Did you, upon reflection, have any other thoughts about that?

Well, I've often thought back on Navy training and I believe I had the reputation in schools of being a disciplinarian. In other words, left, right, left, right, do as your told, look straight ahead. One of the things the Navy taught me that, you know, a place for everything and everything in its place, and I believe particularly the school situation, or even in your own garage, that if you put things where people can see them and display them well, they'll use them. And so I had this reputation at my schools, were well organised and where plenty of material which people used, and after a while people returned it to the right place. No, I had no regrets in the Navy but I think it taught me discipline and taught me to get things done, to be punctual and to be orderly. In fact, my wife says I'm too neat and tidy at times.

It's just a pity that a lot of that organisation and discipline can't be applied today, it just is something that is not accepted. You probably regret, like I do, that that is so.

Oh, yes, I think this is one of the problems. As I say, I'd always been a boss and then we were the bosses. In other words, we ran our schools a bit like a ship, I suppose – a school was always like a ship, I felt – ran it like a ship and we took the can if we had to and we took the pleasure, and we took the responsibility.

Apart from your teaching and the work that you were doing, there's two things I'd like ask you: how you filled in your leisure time and then how you felt about getting back together with your corvette mates.

One of the advantages of being a teacher is the fact that we did have three breaks during the year and this, coupled with long service leave, meant that we intended to use these fully. My wife was very keen to travel so every holidays, while we were in Western Australia, we had a caravanette at that time, we went to various places – Kalgoorlie, Esperance, or Exmouth and places like that. With long service leave, however, in 1959, Judy and I went to England, we did it on the cheap, staying in youth hostels, and using buses and public transport, but had a very complete coverage of UK. Our eldest son was two at the time and fortunately his grandparents took him over as they'd travelled as well, or previously, and said that we should have the opportunity.

I heard there were vacancies on the ship we were coming home on and they wanted an assistant welfare officer. So I applied for an assistant welfare, was summoned by the Immigration Department to London and told I was the escort officer and I escorted 450 British migrants from England to Australia, a journey of six weeks, and I can assure you it was full of experience. We have had numerous trips to England and to Europe with our family, and Judy's mother, who is quite elderly, came with us. Naturally, everybody – you know, you did the Asian trip; we've done that many times. But we've always tried to use our long service leave, or long Christmas leave, to advantage so that we have travelled Australia very extensively and many other parts of the world.

Is there anything else before we close the interview, John, that you'd like to have recorded?

Well only, on retirement I've – well, I was one of the original members when we tried to get the Corvette Association established and I'm delighted the way it's certainly established itself on the sound footing it is now. I've attended most of the – not the two earlier reunions but most of the other reunions, and have found them very satisfactory and very enjoyable, and meeting people that I served with, or fellows I remember, particularly from the *Echuca*. Every two years we return to Echuca where we are the guests of the town and we have a wonderful six days there, at Anzac Day, and this is something that we look forward to because of the entertainment and the comradeship that we have with people who served on the *Echuca*.

It seems that the Echuca – unfortunately there are not a lot that have been able to do this, maintain that contact and get together, as you just mentioned you do. Are there any other recollections or comments that you'd like to make about, perhaps, your retirement period?

Oh, no, well, like on retirement you – I've always been involved in being the secretary of this or president of that, I've been on the committee of this, and on retirement I decided I wasn't going to get involved in things because I felt I had to. But we play a little bit of golf, we used to play some bowls when the corvettes were over at Hollywood Hospital, but we do quite a lot of walking with community recreation in addition to that – I swim quite a lot as we live in a complex with an adjoining swimming pool.

You say you didn't want to get involved but I believe you are involved here with body corporate in some way, aren't you?

Oh, well, as a principal you never, never let control go – or an ex-sailor.

Well, John, seeing that we are conducting this interview and perhaps you'd like to record our reasons for doing this. Both you and I have been involved since we decided that we'd get this off the ground. I'll leave it over to you to make some comment.

When this was first suggested – and we had numerous meetings with the Army group who were doing their oral history – it seemed that it was to be a very good idea because I feel that, a bit like family histories, unless you write something down, or record it, it's forgotten and people say, 'Why didn't se do something about it?' And so after numerous meetings of what the plan was it was decided that we would purchase suitable equipment and we would record interviews with people on their experiences on corvettes or what led up to their life in the Navy, and their later life, so this would be something left for people who wished to research either individual

people or life on special ships that they are, the corvettes.

Thank you, John. Perhaps now, John, you'd like to make some comment. Next year the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA Branch, will be conducting a special event. Would you like to make some comment about that?

I'm looking forward to our reunion in Western Australia in 1994. As I say, I have attended Sydney, I have attended Brisbane, I have attended Melbourne, Perth naturally, and missed Adelaide. But with our reunion next year I feel that this is a great rallying point for people to come to Western Australia because I know the committee are working. While it might not be the biggest I know it's going to be the greatest and the best because this is a rallying point of people and we hope that they come and benefit from their stay in Western Australia because I'm sure that most corvette sailors have, at one time or another, sailed out of the heads at Fremantle.

That's the feedback we are getting and we are hopeful too that we'll have a real good roll-up. We've got no doubts about the quality of the reunion, well organised.

John, before we conclude the interview have you any other particular comment that you would like to make?

I would like to know who pinched my pussers dirk because I hung onto it for a long while and somebody lifted from me whilst I was on the *Echuca*. So if you've got it out there I'd like it back.

Perhaps we should play this over the PA at the national reunion, you might have some result.

Yes, thanks.

Seeing that is about all you'd like to record, John, I'll make the comment that this concludes this recording of an interview conducted with John Roberts.

12/01