



# Australian War Memorial

## Sound Collection

### TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

**S01790**

**F3414 Beer, Percy George**

**Recorded**

**at:** Rockingham, WA

**on:** 23 January 1993

**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 Shephard.

F3414 Percy George Beer, as a Sick Berth Attendant, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvette HMAS *Pirie*, west Pacific Ocean, 1941-1946, interviewed by Margaret Rickard.

Percy Beer speaks of his recruitment as a RAN Sick Berth Attendant; his training; earlier service in the Army; serving in HMAS *Moresby*; having appendicitis and subsequent service at Balmoral Naval Depot and HMAS *Leeuwin*; joining HMAS *Pirie*; his return to civilian life at the end of the war; the sighting of an albatross that kept company with the *Pirie* in the Bight; operations out of Manus island; a close encounter with RN cruiser HMS *Swiftsure*; service as a unit of the British Pacific Fleet, engaged on mainly escort duties; being the first RAN vessel to enter Tokyo Bay at the end of the war; the signing of the peace treaty aboard USS *Missouri*; the conglomeration of ships and aircraft in and above Tokyo Bay at that time; experiences on station in Hong Kong; the food-collecting 'so-so girl'; departing Victoria Harbour as one of nine RAN corvettes; the *Pirie*'s visit to Port Pirie SA, after which the ship was named; his attachment to the RN prior to his discharge, and the *Pirie*'s transfer to the Turkish Navy.

**Transcribed by:** Chris Soames, January 2002

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## **Transcript methodology**

Please note that the printed word can never fully convey all the meaning of speech, and may lead to misinterpretation. Readers concerned with the expressive elements of speech should refer to the audio record.

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).

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

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Identification: [This is] an interview with Percy George Beer and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association of WA and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

George was born in Boulder on February 25 1917 and he joined the Navy in 1941 as a sick-berth attendant and served in the following corvette: HMAS *Pirie*.

Sixty of these small ships, officially Bathurst Class Australian Minesweepers, commonly known as Corvettes, were built during World War II in Australian shipyards as part of the Commonwealth Government's wartime shipbuilding program. Twenty were built on Admiralty orders for the Royal Navy and were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These ships were named after Australian towns - *Ballarat, Bathurst, Bendigo, Broome, Burnie, Cairns, Cessnock, Gawler, Geraldton, Goulburn, Ipswich, Kalgoorlie, Launceston, Lismore, Maryborough, Pirie, Tamworth, Toowoomba, Whyalla and Wollongong*. Also, of the sixty built, four were for the Royal Indian Navy and named HMIS *Bengal, Bombay, Madras and Punjab*, and they all left for their home base independently in 1942. The remaining thirty-six were built for the Royal Australian Navy and also named after Australian towns. These 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.

This interview is conducted by Margaret Rickard on 13 January [1993] at Rockingham [WA].

I would just mention at this stage that the word 'pusser' is quite often used in these interviews. The origin seems to be unknown at this stage but are strictly Navy talk for 'genuine' or 'the real thing' and is only used by Navy members.

Now George, we'll have some information about you. Where were you born and what is your full name?

Full name is Percy George Beer, I was born in Boulder [WA] on 25 February 1917. I was educated - most of my schooling was at Boulder Central School and when I left school I took up and became a member of the printing trade, which I worked at most of my working life.

Why did you join the Navy, George?

Well, I had been in the scout camp at the time and I was doing a bit of first-aid work, which I was very interested in doing, and I met the recruiting officer from HMAS *Leeuwin* at the scout camp at Point Walter. He was me attending to a lad who'd been injured and he said, 'You are just the bloke to join the Navy.' That's how I became interested in the Navy.

And you went in as a Sick Bay Attendant?

I joined as a Sick Berth Attendant.

Another reason I joined the Navy, I'd read a lot of books on the Navy and I had friends who'd joined the Navy and they more or less got me interested in it from there. As far as joining the Navy, I had no trouble at all to get in and join as a member of the sick bay staff because they were short of men for that particular branch.

I worked at HMAS *Leeuwin* for two to three weeks. I was then drafted to Flinders Naval Depot. I left Fremantle and went by passenger train and travelled to Melbourne in company with two other sick berth attendants who I remained good coppers with during the whole time I was at Flinders.

There was another troop train we travelled on the first time. After arriving at Flinders we went into what we called the 'macker' school and had to do a disciplinary course on the parade grounds, sloping arms with rifles and that sort of thing - which I thought was a bit silly but they know best. Then after four weeks on the parade ground, with various types of petty officers in charge of us, we started studies in the sick bay.

It's like many men leaving home to the great unknown, getting into the Navy was something I'd never thought of doing seriously, but when I left home I thought, well, we can only get home again.

What sort of training did you do as a sick-bay attendant? What were you learning other than what you'd already known in the first-aid?

Oh, the work was much deeper. We had to learn how to nurse patients and work in an operating theatre, had to be able to do any kind of medical work that was required of us. We spent many days in the various departments in the sick bay, and the sick bay at Flinders is a very big establishment and we spent a lot of time going into various wards. Each ward had a different type of nursing case to be looked after.

I had very little trouble falling into the routine of the life of [inaudible]. I'd just finished three months in the Army where I worked at doing similar work in the regimental aid post. As regards wearing uniform, I thought that might have been a bit of a problem but really it didn't because I had no trouble. I had worn the Army uniform for three months and prior to that I had been a member of St John's Ambulance for many years and I wore a uniform quite frequently on public duties for that organisation.

How did you come to be in the Army for three months?

The government caught up with me.

Oh, it was military ...

It was military call-up.

Military call-up, I see, right.

And ... after a period I became a sick-berth attendant first-class and my first sea-going ship was HMAS *Moresby* which was a survey ship at the time - a very old ship, she'd been working around the islands in the northern waters prior to my joining her. When I joined her, I joined on Christmas Day 1941. I immediately applied for leave because I'd been invited out to Christmas dinner - I was in Sydney as a stranger, complete stranger, never been to Sydney before, and I went to the home of a friend who became a very close friend. When I joined the ship I was made to feel very welcome and I was shown as much as possible in a couple of hours out on the ship

before going off on leave.

Anyway, the chap I relieved, he was very kind and looked after me, gave me all the help he possibly could. The ship was doing a refit and they had a lot of work that had to be done during that refit, and we spent about eight weeks in Sydney at Garden Island and at Cockatoo Docks. We didn't take the ship to sea for any length of time while I was in her and shortly after joining the ship - or about eight weeks after joining the ship - I was sent off to hospital with appendicitis. When I returned from convalescent leave they put me on to Garden Island [which] later became HMAS *Kuttabul* and I spent quite a considerable time there. And then I went to Balmoral Naval Depot from where I was sent back to *Leeuwin*.

While I was working at Balmoral Naval Depot again I had to do long hours of working in the wards, same as I was doing at Flinders Naval Depot, so the work tied in very nicely.

When I went back to Fremantle I was sent to work with Doctor [Martell] who was the recruiting officer for *Leeuwin* when I joined the Navy, and he was running the dockyard surgery in the main street of Fremantle. So I worked with him for about four months and I was drafted from the Naval Dockyard Surgery to HMAS *Pirie*.

Where was *Pirie* at the time?

*Pirie* was stationed in Fremantle. She'd come over from [inaudible] when she came across from Brisbane they had a terrible time coming over. One day they progressed forward about five miles in twenty-four hours. The seas were so rough they could hardly keep their feet. Nobody ate anything because they couldn't get anything to cook.

This was out in the Pacific by this time?

No, they were coming across the Bight, coming to Fremantle. When we came to leave Fremantle, after about three weeks in Fremantle doing exercises outside Rottnest Island, we left for Sydney and went to...and we stayed long enough to fuel in Sydney and then we went up to Manus, where we spent quite a bit of time waiting for things to happen, more or less. What they were doing, I don't know, but anyway we had varying types of jobs to do.

My job, to fill in time - we had a very, very healthy ship, I'm very happy to say, because nobody got sick, whether by design or otherwise, I don't know. But anyway, nobody every got seriously ill and I had to fill in my time. I spent a lot of time reading and I was very fond of writing letters and writing other information. And I was just - spend - sitting out on the...when suitable weather sitting out on the Carley raft, under the whaler.

One of our cooks was due to leave to go back to the islands and one of our cooks had been suffering terrific toothache and he didn't report it to me. At the last minute I had to take him to HMAS *Morton*, the depot in Brisbane, and he was discharged medically unfit for sea service because of his bad teeth. We sailed that same day without a leading seaman's cook so we had to - a senior cook short - I know how to cook a little bit so I went into the galley and I spent quite a bit of time, which suited me right down to the ground.

During my full time in *Pirie* - this may sound rather strange but I've never heard of a man who shot fire - although just prior to my joining *Pirie* she was bombed and strafed by the Jap aircraft off Oro Bay [New Guinea] and the gunnery officer was killed plus six other able seamen on the main arm, on the forecastle of the ship.

There was only one long leave period during the time I was in *Pirie* and that's when we returned to Australia. It seemed very hard having to leave home again for an unknown time, especially when I had a second daughter to leave behind - I had one little girl and a second came while I was away.

Your family were in Perth at this time, were they? Your family were here in Perth?

Yes - I was stationed here in Perth – various parts of WA actually. We were doing escort duties south of Tokyo when the finish of the...the first news of the [end of the] war came through. When it was heard there was a long period of time for some of the men who'd been on the ship since she was commissioned and it was a relief for everybody on the ship because we had had a long time at sea, and they said, 'Thank heavens it's all over'.

The thought of returning to my trade after so long in the Navy was not a cheering one; however, once in Civvy Street again I more or less settled down quite comfortably. Life as a civilian again was much – it's actually an easy one but fortunately my wife has been a tower of strength to me at all times. She helped me come to terms with the ordinary life that I was about to take up again.

Now, tell me, George, about your experiences - I believe you went to Tokyo for the signing of the peace treaty.

That's right.

After you were drafted from Balmoral Naval Depot.

We were drafted back to *Leeuwin*, and then from *Leeuwin* I joined the *Pirie*, *Pirie* to - we finished up in Manus, we spent time there, we spent a lot of time in [Laity] and from Laity we went to join the British Pacific Fleet train and went out to - up to Tokyo where we got 150 to 200 miles from Tokyo most of the time after leaving Laity.

And what was it you saw after you left Brisbane? – the albatross.

Oh, on the way across, going over to Brisbane?

Yes.

Coming across the Bight one of the most amazing things - I've heard about these albatross being able to stay in one position over the stern of a ship, or the front of a ship, whatever they happened to latch on to - but this one was over the main mast at the back of the ship and it was amazing how long it was there, for days on end — five or six days. I didn't know it was there at the time because I was so abominably seasick at the time. Anyway, I was dragged out to have a look at it and from then on I more or less got used to it and got over my seasickness, to a greater degree.

Then you went up to Manus?

Went to Manus and to Laity, and from there we went to – did different trips in and out of the harbour, like a yo-yo part of the time.

On one of these ships we had to deliver a large quantity of mail to the British Fleet. We delivered quite a bit of mail during the day and had to go alongside the *Swiftsure* - HMS *Swiftsure*, she was an RN cruiser. And we got instructions to go out on the starboard side of the ship - the seas were pounding the daylight out of that side of the *Swiftsure*.

Well, they tied us on with grass rope and we were all sixes and sevens how we'd feel about what would happen. Anyway, as the *Swiftsure* was coming up - we were coming down alongside of it and there was only about eight or nine feet between the two ships - and the *Swiftsure* came

down – it was coming up and caught the wing of our bridge and our motorboat. The wing of the bridge was turned at about nearly a ninety-degree angle to where it should have been and the motorboat was smashed into two halves, cut it right down the middle. There was no damage done to *Swiftsure* except scrape a bit of paint off. If the ships had come together in the opposite direction, I hate to think what might have happened because we had all our depth charges on the stern of our *Pirie* and I believe they were all set, ready to go bang.

That could have been pretty grim.

It could have been very serious – if they had been run over, of course, none of us would have been here today.

Where did you go for repairs to the ship?

We didn't. As a matter of fact, the engineer officer was a very clever engineer. With block and tackle he was able to pull the bridge almost back to a normal fitting again and when we came back to Australia, shortly after that, for a couple of weeks, it was made as good as new. We were given a new motorboat because it was an integral part of our equipment. So we had to carry on with our duties again.

When we joined the fleet train after leaving Laity we spent sixty-three days out at sea, not very far from Tokyo. We were steaming twelve hours in one direction and twelve hours back again - up and down, up and down.

Was this doing anti-submarine...

Escort work we were doing there, escort duties with the fleet train. I might mention here that the fleet train which we were attached [to] had comprised two escort carriers, a frigate – which was often in charge of the fleet train – there were four corvettes, four fuel supply ships, a store ship and an ammunition ship. And we were cruising, as I have said, anything up to twelve hours in one direction and twelve hours back again. The fleet would come out, we would get notification that it would be at a certain spot, and we'd all turn up. And the seas would be like a sheet of glass until the fleet came over the horizon and the seas became very, very rough. And on one occasion it took us nearly four hours to get the fuel line from the tanker into our ship so we could have more fuel supplies.

After the big ships had gone – the usual practice was for us was to take in fuel we required – after being at sea for seemingly endless period we finally got our orders to make our way in towards Tokyo, closer to it. We had hardly started on our way and the orders came to make for Tokyo Bay.

Tokyo Bay, if you've never been there, is a terrifically big bay. We found that out and after we'd sailed across Sagami Bay which is even bigger than Tokyo Bay. We went across the Tokyo Bay and when we were looking back - we were near the front of the train, going across Sagami Bay in a line ahead - and we were the third ship and we had to ... we were spaced out with a full [bit] in between each of the other ships, corvette or a frigate. We heard on the pussers' grapevine about the number of ships that were going to be in Tokyo Bay during the signing of the peace treaty, and when we steamed across Sagami Bay all we saw on the way out and on the way in, in the shape of any seagoing vessel at all, were a couple of American minesweepers - they call them YMSs - they were going out to do a sweep outside Sagami Bay.

Our course as regards...straight across towards a point of land across the other side of Sagami Bay and we went around there, we went into Tokyo Bay. Tokyo Bay was much bigger than I expected. When we got there, there were ships, all sizes – and I mean all sizes, there were

cruisers...there were battleships, cruisers, destroyers, corvettes; I think there were some rowing boats taking out mooring bays in the harbour.

As we were steaming up Tokyo Bay to our anchorage we saw hundreds of aeroplanes and this is one of the most interesting parts that I've ever seen. There were planes of every make and shape; there were Superfortresses, they were flying either on their own or they came across in ones and twos worth [sic] of five or six of them at a time, flying not in set formation but they seemed to be just flying around all over the whole of the Bay. I'd hate to say how many Superfortresses there were in that area at the time. And not only were Superfortresses there, there were little fighter planes, there was torpedo planes, bombers, and they were all over the Bay like a rash; there was everything. Some were so high that when you looked up they looked like little sparrows, others dashed hither and thither and came down to mast-top height. Some opened their throttle and came down and frightened the life out of us - we thought they were never going to pull out - and they came and skimmed the water only eight or ten feet above the top of the water, and back they'd go up into the heavens and repeat it again - again. It was one of the most interesting and awe-inspiring sights I've ever experienced. I have an idea that it was done for a special purpose, to put the fear of God and the devil into the hearts of the Japanese.

I would like to mention here that HMAS *Pirie*, the corvette, was the first Australian built and manned ship to go into Tokyo Bay at the cessation of hostilities in World War II. We were followed later in the afternoon by HMAS *Shropshire* and HMAS *Hobart*; they came in later in the afternoon the day we went in. They were escorted by HMAS *Bataan* and *Warramunga*.

They were both destroyers, weren't they?

The *Bataan* and *Warramunga*, I think they were both Australian built destroyers.

We were anchored about five miles from Tokyo and from where we were anchored we couldn't see the city itself but we could see the clouds of smoke that were rising into the sky.

And this was the result of...

Bombing and shelling by the British Fleet - at least that's what we understood anyway.

In the evenings it was quite a contrast to what we'd seen, anytime I went outside the ship at night, all you could see was black – black and more black. When we were in Tokyo Harbour, or Tokyo Bay, no matter where you looked there were lights shining, through the portholes, from the masthead, everywhere there were lights, and it was one of the most beautiful sights I think I've ever seen.

It was the first sign of peace, I suppose.

The first time I'd been at sea where the ships had their lights ablaze. On September 2 I wrote to my parents and told them today it was the day we'd been waiting for, for a long, long time. Peace was to be signed on the Sunday morning and from dawn the skies were heavily overcast. And this, I think, was one of the most amazing things I have ever seen. Even though the skies were overcast it didn't stop the huge number of planes from flying in all directions around like they did the previous day.

I had a good spot in the nest egg [sic] in the *Pirie* and we were able to see *USS Missouri*. I stood there and I was listening to the broadcast of the signing of the peace treaty by Radio Australia, and the announcer – a very sincere man I should imagine because he spoke beautifully. And during the day, when the clouds were so thick and heavy – there was no sunshine, no way at all could it be seen – and the radio announcer said, 'For the first time today the sun is shining and



General MacArthur is now coming forward to sign the official document.' From where I was standing I could see the sun shining on the *USS Missouri* and that's the only part in the whole of the Tokyo Bay that the sun was shining, just round the big battle wagon.

Anyway, they signed the document and he went back to his seat. As he was going back the announcer said, 'The sun has gone, it's gone behind the clouds again.' And he said, 'Let us hope that this, now the sun has gone, and it's been shining for only such a short time over the *Missouri*, that there is hope for a better world to come.' It was only about three minutes the sun was shining anyway.

The British Pacific Fleet was formed on November 22 1944 and the [inaudible] to which HMAS *Pirie* was attached was constituted on November 22 1944. It was repeatedly on anti-submarine duties off Japanese shores. I should say there that we were doing mostly escort work. Another point of interest about *Pirie*. During her service she put into British Pacific Fleet train, she steamed in excess of 320,000 miles, not kilometres, miles, which is a long way in any small ship.<sup>1</sup>

After four days in Tokyo we set sail for Hong Kong where we spent about four weeks doing pilot duties and escorting ships into the harbour at Hong Kong.

That was Victoria Harbour.

Victoria Harbour, yes. When we were leaving, there were nine corvettes came out together, they'd come from various parts of the world – where, I don't know – but we all met in Tokyo [sic] and we came out of Victoria Harbour and nine corvettes – it was a marvellous sight to see all these little ships together, I hadn't seen so many of them. In *Pirie* we were saying, 'Look at those poor mugs over there, what a bollocking they are getting'. They were rolling so heavily that the screws were coming right out of the water. I met up with sailors from the other corvettes when we got back to Australia, and when we stayed a short time at Thursday Island. I said, 'By gee, you copped it going across out of Hong Kong' and they said, 'Oh, not as bad as you blokes, your screws were right out of the water.' Anyway, be that as it may, it was a marvellous experience. Every ship, all built in exactly the same pattern, they had to do exactly the same sort of thing.

We were given leave in Hong Kong and we were able to get ashore a couple of times and have a look round and see how the other half lives in places like that.

While we were stationed in Hong Kong – or hanging there – one of the local girls came onto the ship and she said, she called herself a 'so-so' girl. Of course, it can be well imagined, a so-so girl could be anything – didn't speak very good English. But anyway, a so-so girl got everybody intrigued and somebody got a bright idea that she was a girl who was going to do what 'sew-sew girl' would naturally mean: she was going to mend our clothes for us. And really, what she was doing, she came on board to make arrangements to collect any leftover food from the galley, she supplied the buckets for the reception of any – call it 'gash', if you were in the Navy – any leftover food – and the buckets were taken away every evening and they were taken ashore in a sampan, and they were taken to a place where the sampan spent the evenings or the complete night. And they were put into huge pots, or cauldrons – call it as you wish – and they were heated and mixed up together, sweets and leftover meat, anything, and mixed up into these big cauldrons and sold to the Chinese because their food at that time was, I understand, very much in short supply. They paid a very nominal amount, just two or three cents, for a load full of this food they were eating.

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<sup>1</sup> The RAN's HMA Ships' Histories gives a figure of 117,230 miles from the commissioning of HMAS *Pirie* in October 1942 to her reaching Sydney in February 1946.

When we came back to Australia we were given home leave – and it was especially good for me because I had a brand-new daughter waiting for me, one I hadn't seen. When we returned to the ship we did a variety of duties and finally sailed for Adelaide and Port Pirie. Port Pirie is the town in South Australia after which the ship was named. We stayed in the latter city for about a week and we were treated like royalty. They had dances arranged for us, they had parties, had everything you could possibly wish for to make a sailor's life, who had been away from home for so long, make our lives very pleasant and very happy. We had cricket matches, we had tennis matches, other forms of sport – if you didn't want to take advantage of those you did your own thing. There certainly was, at the time, plenty to fill in the time of a lonely sailor; and those of us who had been home to our wives and girlfriends it was certainly a marvellous thing for us to have somewhere to go like that.

While we were there we had some money left over from canteen funds, so somebody got a bright idea, rather than split it up amongst the ship's company, we were to make a donation to the hospital in Port Pirie. So we bought them two cold-water refrigerators and I have heard since they were a godsend to the patients in the hospital because they had plenty of cold water - Port Pirie is a very, very hot place.

As we returned to Sydney the ship was paid off to the RN and I was attached to it for - being West Australians - there was only three of us left on the ship - and it was some time before we could get transport home, so we were attached to the RN. We had no trouble, just treated as supernumeraries on the ship and we were able to do more or less as we pleased on it - went ashore when we wanted to. There were two other West Australians - I forget his name [inaudible] was Snowy Birch, and Wally Denham were the other two West Australians. And we left to go home, in the same taxi cab, to go up to catch the train back to WA.

Shortly after the *Pirie* was taken over by the Royal Navy she left Australia and went - as far as I can find out, she sailed to India where she was handed over to the Turks. And it was only two, maybe three years ago, that HMAS *Pirie* was paid off from service in the Turkish Navy.

It's a long time, wasn't it?

It was a long, long time.

Very old ship.

And it pays very great credit to the Australian workmen who built the ship. They did change her name from *Pirie* to another Turkish name<sup>2</sup> but I have lost the name of it in my ramblings.

Yeah, a fine old ship.

She was a mighty ship, no doubt about her.

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<sup>2</sup> *Pirie* was renamed *Amasra* in the Turkish Navy and was decommissioned on 26 March 1984.