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TRANSCRIPT
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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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F2739/09 Lewis, Edward James

Recorded
at: Melville, WA
on: 25 August 1993
by: William Gray Ritchie

Description
F2739/09 Edward James Lewis, as a petty officer, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvettes HMAS Shepparton, Whyalla and Benalla , Australian waters and North Pacific Ocean, 1941–1946, interviewed by William Gray Ritchie

Ted Lewis speaks about his early service as a naval cadet, an able seaman and a petty officer on HMAS *Marguerite*, *Canberra* and *Yarra*, 1926–1939; Naval training facilities; service on the Armed Merchant Cruiser (AMC) *Manoora*; other AMCs; the escape of the *Scheer* from blockade in Celebes; raider patrols off Tasmania and south of Albany; operations between Darwin and Learmonth; transfer to Rushcutter's Bay for medical treatment; a gunnery course on HMAS *Adelaide*; service on HMAS *Kuttabul* and transfer to the Flinders Naval Depot; declaring himself fit for sea service; service aboard survey corvettes HMAS *Shepparton*, *Whyalla* and *Benalla*, 1943–1945; camouflaging *Benalla*; survey operations in support of Kincaid's Seventh Fleet; the USN at Seeadler Harbour; US supply methods and dealings with the PX Store; survey operations before the landings at Biak; US and Japanese air operations; boiler cleaning and recreational opportunities in Tufi Harbour; survey operations and kamikaze attacks in Leyte Gulf; surviving a typhoon; hazardous air of operations at Tacloban airstrip; ship-borne boys from Nuakata Island and Christmas Day 1944 there; surveying Thursday Island to Darwin and in Exmouth Gulf; refit in Fremantle; more surveying in northern waters before paying off in Fremantle in November 1945; discharge in March 1946; explaining some naval jargon; the book *Birth, Life and Death of a Grand Little Ship;* awards to *Benalla* crew members; the end of the Second World War; the surrender of the Japanese in Timor at Koepang; several anecdotes and the fate of HMAS *Benalla*.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, February 2002

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Transcript methodology

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Identification: This is an interview with Edward James Lewis and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, Western Australia. Ted Lewis is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, Western Australia, and this interview relates to his personal experience in corvettes.

Ted Lewis was born in Fremantle on 14/01/1909 and he first joined the Navy in 1923 as a cadet. He served in the following corvettes: HMAS *Shepparton, Whyalla and Benalla*.

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 and 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, Eucla*[sic][*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 Bill Ritchie on 25 August 1993 at 503 Canning Highway, Melville.

Now, Ted, what's your full name, please?

Edward James.

And where were you born, and when?

Fremantle, 14 January 1909.

Now, tell me, Ted, I'd like to establish your naval beginnings and their lead-up to World War II. Can you tell me how you first became involved with the Royal Australian Navy?

In those days, at the age of fourteen, it was compulsory military service. As soon as you were fourteen you were called up for military service. And I attended the RE Drill Hall in Holdworth Street, Fremantle, and was inducted into the Navy as a cadet.
For two years you are on stand-by and then at the age of sixteen you commenced doing naval training. In those days the Navy had first call on any youths of fourteen who lived within six miles of Fremantle. Outside of that they automatically went into the military.

When you joined you were a cadet. Now, I notice from you record book that you were an Officer's Steward 4th Class on 1 July 1927 and later became to a 3rd Class a year

later and a 2nd Class in 1929. Now, the book ends in 1929 so you can tell me what happened in 1929.

Well, I can tell you something before then. My first sea-time was on HMAS *Marguerite* in 1926. The rule in those days was that every year you did twenty-one days, what we called, ACT – annual continuous training. So for twenty-one days we were on the *Marguerite*. We cruised up to Geraldton, down to Bunbury, did minesweeping in Cockburn Sound, off Garden Island, did shooting off Garden Island – coal ship over in Garden Island – she was a coal burner. But being an officer's steward I was lucky, I was plying the officers with drinks so I didn't have to coal ship; I was about the only one that didn't.

That must have been good because you would have got too dirty that way.

Officers and everybody in those days, including the skipper, all combined to coal ship.

And what was the *Marguerite*?

Marguerite was a sloop, a Flower class sloop. There was *Marguerite, Geranium, Nasturtium*. They were mainly used in those days touring around from port to port, doing reservist training.

Did you do any other times at sea during that period till 1929 besides the *Marguerite*?

Yes, I did time on the *Canberra* in about 1931.

That would have been after ...

Oh, that was after, that was after.

That would have been after you completed your compulsory training.

That was the only sea time I did during that period but we did other three weeks at a time, up at the Karrakatta Rifle Range, et cetera, et cetera, and in the drill hall, doing boat sailing – dipping-lug cutters, whalers, et cetera – and general knot splices, seamanship in general.

Now, 1929, as I understand it, compulsory training ended and it was open to you then to either leave the compulsory training system or to change over in a voluntary capacity in what was the reserve. Can you tell me something about what happened to you, or what decision you made, in 1929 when compulsory training ended?

When compulsory training ended I decided I didn't want to be an officer's steward any more, so I joined up, under voluntary training, as an able seaman.

Now, there was a special reason for that, not only because you didn't want to be a steward, but there was a monetary gain, wasn't there, to be a seaman at that time?

Well, it didn't make any difference whether you were a steward or what, but you got paid one-and-six a drill.

So that was the reason for changing over to the voluntary system?

Well, that was the reason I joined up under the voluntary system because one-and-six in those days, after twelve months, mounted to a few bob – one-and-six a drill, plus about thirty bob a week when you were on ACT. In those days money was scarce.

So you continued in this training from 1929, basically, right through to 1939. Can you tell us any sea time or any facets of the training that you undertook in that ten years?

Well, it was general parade ground work, instructing the lads, sailing in the dipping-lug cutters, whalers, rifle work up at the Karrakatta – up at the rifle range at – not Karrakatta, Swanbourne. I did, I think it was ten days on the *Canberra* in 1931 – she never left Fremantle wharf. Then in July 1939 I did ten days on the *Yarra*.

Where did the *Yarra* go to? Did it stay in Fremantle or did it go for a cruise?

She cruised around but she never – she cruised down to Bunbury and up to Geraldton, but never called in to either port.

Now, in 1939, by this time you had risen to what rank?

Petty officer.

So you were a petty officer seaman; did you have any specialisation at that stage?

No. In the interim, in May 1939, I was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal.

On Friday 1 September I understand a number of people realised that war was probably imminent and made some decisions. Now, what happened to you on the Friday 1 September?

On Friday 1 September, in the evening, I went down and volunteered for active service.

Right. And when were you actually called up?

Well, the following day, 2 September – it was a Saturday.

So the day before war was declared, in World War II, you were called up?

That's right.

And you went to HMAS *Leeuwin*?

No, there was no *Leeuwin* in those days, it was *Cerberus V*.

Cerberus V, right.

Cerberus V and the Fremantle Naval Depot in Croke Lane. There was no facilities there of any sort, apart from a couple of toilets, so we had to go home every night – those at [Rime Jetty] slept on the floor.

And what sort of duties did you do initially when you were first called up?

Parade ground, taking the boys out on the parade ground, teaching them squad drill, out in the boats, teaching them to sail, teaching them knots and splices, general seamanship.

> What were the personnel who had been called up doing it this time? Were they just all doing guard work – sorry, doing parade training – and then going home, or were they allocated guard duties or things like that?

A lot were allocated guard duties at [Abbot Cross] Wireless Station, around Port Arthur, around the oil tanks out in South Fremantle there, in [Gerard Road] – various places on guard duty. The rest of them were doing general training.
And there was no facilities down there at all for feeding or anything, we had to march thirty or forty lads up for lunch every day, up to town, up to the Italian cafés for lunch, then march them back again. And, of course, four o'clock, knock off and they went home.

> What about the people on guard duties? Were they well equipped with uniforms or were they still getting uniforms and the sort of rifles and things like that? What were they like at that time?

Everybody had their uniforms because they'd had their uniforms in the reserve but there was no extra for quite a while, it was just the uniform you were issued when you were in reserve – might have been issued ten years before.

> Now, when did you actually leave this area in Fremantle to go elsewhere during the war?

I think it was 19 October.

> That would be 1939?

'39. I was in charge of about twenty-one lads, teaching them general seamanship, squad drill, et cetera, and volunteers were called to go over to Sydney to stand by the conversion of the *Manoora* and *Westralia* into our merchant cruisers. All but one of my squad volunteered so on 19 October, I left in charge of them and took them to Sydney where we had to report to HMAS *Rushcutter* Depot. There the boys were – it was more or less like *Leeuwin*, like Fremantle Depot. There was no facilities there for feeding or anything else so everybody was out on Lodge and Comp. so you had to find your own accommodation. So the general thing was to go up to Johnny's which was in ...

> Grosvenor Street in Sydney.

Grosvenor Street in Sydney.

> Known as Royal Naval House if I remember rightly.

Royal Naval House, that was right, it was – Royal Naval House, by the way, was given to the Australian Navy in perpetuity by Queen Victoria many, many years ago, for the use of sailors from the then RN Fleet which was based in Australia. Well, they used to call them the Eastern…

Eastern Fleet.

Eastern Fleet, I think it was called. And Johnny's was pretty Spartan; there was no showers. There was a great big bathroom with great big hand basins, all tiled floor, and you just stripped off and gave yourself a bath out of the hand basin. But it was cheap; it was a bob a night for a bed and one-and-six for breakfast.

Now, you were based at *Rushcutter* and you were on the instructional staff there. You told me that you came over to stand by *Manoora* [and] *Westralia* with this group; when did you actually join the *Manoora*?

I joined the *Manoora* – I think it was 5 December 1939, when the *Manoora* commissioned.

What were the other AMCs [Armed Merchant Cruisers] beside *Manoora* and the *Westralia*? Were there other ones converting at the same time?

Yeah, there was *Kanimbla, Arawa* – I think it was the *Moreton Bay*.

Right. And they ...

They were commissioned as RN, manned by Australians.

That's the *Kanimbla*, *Arawa* and *Moreton Bay*, were basically commissioned into the RN but manned by RAN crews?

Yeah. They were the first actually converted and they left before *Manoora* and *Westralia* were converted.

And *Manoora* and *Westralia* were commissioned actually into the ...

RAN.

... RAN and manned by Australians?

That's right.

Now, you stayed in *Manoora*, and where did she go after she commissioned?

She went up to New Guinea, round the Dutch East Indies, doing a show-the-flag cruise. Of course, Japan had not entered the war at that time but there was always the possibility of Japan coming in; so we did a show-the-flag cruise. At that time there was a lot of German missionaries in New Guinea and a lot of the natives were anti-British. One incident was, we went into – where the hell was it?
Yeah, we went into this place where there was a German mission and the natives were rather anti-British, and we went in late at night, and we put a barrage of star shells over the top of their village and then buzzed off before daybreak. And that scared hell out of them. From then we toured around Madang, Lae, then up around the Dutch East Indies – where the hell was it now? Anyhow, there were several German merchant ships hold up at Macassar in the Celebes, and we were to blockade a ship there called the *Scheer*– not the *Admiral Scheer*, by the way, the *Scheer*. She was a German ship, already loaded up, trying to get back to Germany. So we blockaded

outside, we patrolled up and down outside the harbour for about ten days to keep her from buzzing off. Then we were relieved by the *Westralia*, and I believe that after the *Westralia* had been there for a couple of days a tropical storm come up one night and the *Scheer* came out and buzzed off, she got away.

Got away under the cover of the tropical storm?

Under cover of the tropical storm. Then we did a general cruise around, all around the Dutch East Indies – Ambon, Bali, and those places. Then we came back to Madang and we were just going to enjoy the beauty of Madang – which was rather a lovely little place in those days – and we got an order to come south. There was a German raider prowling around Tasmania and we were to come south and go chase her. Of course, we were snatched out of the nice, warm tropics into the middle of winter – it was about June or something – prowling around Tasmania. We never saw any raiders, thank God.
From there we proceeded to Fremantle and we were doing convoy duty. At that time the AIF were moving across the Bight in the *Mauritania*, the *Aquitania*, and all those bloomin' ships, and we were doing a raider patrol south of Albany. We did several weeks at that then we came back to Fremantle, and then we went north. We went north up to Darwin, we carted stuff down from Darwin to the Air Force base at Potshot[1], wasn't it?

Potshot; that was at Learmonth Gulf.

Up Learmonth Gulf – we brought stuff down for there. Then we did prowling round Darwin and around the Dutch East Indies again. And then, in December – late December 1940 – I left the ship with an injured shoulder which I'd sustained on the *Yarra*, just prior to the war, and I was drafted to Rushcutter's [Bay] for medical treatment.

And were you placed in a medical category at this time?

I was declared Category C at that time which was unfit for sea service.

Alright. Just going back a bit, what were you duties in the *Manoora*?

I was Crumb Boatswain.

Crumb Boatswain, right.

In other words, in charge of the mess decks.

And you did that the whole time that you were on Manoora?

Yep.

So you arrived back in *Rushcutter* at the beginning of 1941, or the end of 1940; what did you do then in *Rushcutter*?

I was on the instructional staff doing general seamanship, teaching the lads, irrespective of whether they were going to be stewards, cooks or what's-a-name, of general Navy routine – took

[1] Second World War codeword for what is now RAAF Base Learmonth

them boat sailing around Sydney Harbour, did a few trips – on supply launches – down to Watson's Bay from Garden Island. I even did a stint as coxswain of a patrol boat, the *Sea Mist*, which was Jack Davies' launch, taken over by the Navy.
And then, some time in '41 – no, that was – practically the whole of '41, I put in in Sydney, at *Rushcutter*.

> Where did you go after you finished at *Rushcutter* after '41?

[No reply]

> Did you go back to sea at that time in any of the ships, or did you go to another shore establishment?

From *Rushcutter*, I went to the *Adelaide* to take a gunnery course. Did several months on the *Adelaide* and then had a business commitment to wind up in Western Australia, got leave to come back, and in the interim the *Adelaide* came west to become one of the AIF. So when I got back to Sydney, no ship! So I went on the *Kuttabul* alongside at Garden Island – she was the depot ship at Garden Island. I was on her for a couple of months waiting for the *Adelaide* to come back, but she never came back. From there I was drafted to Flinders Naval Depot in early '42, to the new [entry] school as an instructor.

> Could I just clear up; you mentioned that the *Adelaide* became the AIF; what do the letters A-I-F stand for?

Always in Fremantle.

> Now, when you took this leave in 1942 – mid-1942, or early 1942 – to come back to the west, was that the first time you'd been on leave from the time war had been declared, or had you had any other leave once you left Western Australia to go ...?

That was me first leave back to Western Australia.

> So after you went over to the *Manoora*, that was the first time that you ever actually got some leave to come back, which was some time in the early part of 1942?

That's right.

> Now, you went down to Flinders on the instructional staff, and you stayed there for how long?

I stayed there until December 1942. I'd applied for sea duty, they told me I was Category C, and I insisted that I be made Category A. So I had to sign a paper making myself Category A and taking the responsibility, and I was drafted – having no right-arm rate – I was drafted to Williamstown to stand by the building of the *Shepparton*, the corvette the *Shepparton*. Williamstown had no accommodation facilities, and Williamstown in those days was a stoker's depot only, they didn't go much on having any seamen round the bloomin' place. So I used to have to go back to Port Melbourne every night. And then they put me on lodge and comp.. I used to stay at the YMCA in Melbourne, that was me accommodation while *Shepparton* was being constructed. And towards the end of January '43 *Shepparton* commissioned; we did a shake-down cruise around Bass Strait, across to South Australia, up to Sydney where a four-

inch gun was installed; did another shake-down up round Broken Bay, and then we shoved off direct for New Guinea via Townsville.

She'd been fitted out ...

Shepparton, by the way, was a corvette but she was taken over, during construction, and converted as a survey ship with the installation of survey equipment, extra officers' accommodation, a long chart room on the upper deck in place of the minesweeping winch, and flying bridge, taut-wire machine for measuring distances with miles of piano wire on a huge drum. And the commissioning captain was Captain Morison, he was RANR(S), seagoing; he was a commissioned captain only. He commissioned her and then took her to Sydney, then handed over to Lieutenant Commander George Tancred, a permanent Navy survey officer, who took us to New Guinea.

On arrival in Milne Bay – things were pretty warm still up in those days, there were still plenty of air raids – and there we met up with a whaler – in Milne Bay – commanded by Commander Oom, who was the senior officer in survey in New Guinea, and he had been working on the *Whyalla* which had been temporary doing survey duties during the construction of *Shepparton*. When *Shepparton* arrived he transferred with his staff over to *Shepparton* and Lieutenant Commander Tancred, with a couple of officers, myself and several survey hands, transferred to *Whyalla*.

I was coxswain of the *Shepparton*, by the way, from the day of commissioning till the day I left her, and I transferred to *Whyalla* as coxswain.

On the *Whyalla*, we served around over in New Britain, around New Guinea, up as far as Cape Ward Hunt, for several months. Then we were ordered south to go on leave, refit. We arrived in Townsville – or off Townsville – practically with our bags packed, ready to go on leave, and we were ordered out to Bougainville Reef which is off the north Queensland coast where there was fifteen Yankee small ships in trouble, all piled on the reef. They were LCIs and LSTs, et cetera, et cetera. So we were there for several days pushing and shoving, pulling them off – I think we lost two of them.

Then we came into Townsville and along the other side of the wharf was a brand-new spanking ship, *Benalla*, also had been converted from a corvette into a survey ship, similar to *Shepparton*.

Could we just stop it there?

[Tape change and identification details omitted]

Ted, you were telling me that you arrived back and there you found *Benalla*, a brand-new survey-converted corvette. Can you go on from there and tell me what happened from then?

Well, here again, the *Benalla* had been building to replace *Whyalla*, so again, George Tancred, the captain, several survey officers, myself and several survey hands, transferred from *Whyalla* to *Benalla*. Now, *Benalla* was a nice, brand-new pusser's, crab-fat grey colour, and George said, 'This will never do; we want to do something about this.'

Now, Lieutenant Commander Tancred had already, prior, early in the fighting up in New Guinea, had done survey work around Milne Bay, Jackdaw Passage, et cetera, et cetera. In those days the coast of New Guinea had never been surveyed – different ports had been surveyed and the only way you could approach them was from the open sea. If you wanted to go from Milne Bay to Buna you went so many hundred miles to sea, in a straight line, and then you went at a tangent into Buna. Well, you couldn't send barge fulls of troops out into the open sea so the

coast close in had to be surveyed because the place was alive with niggerheads and reefs, and all the hazards of the sea.
Now, Captain George, as we called him, he'd been on a small tender, the *Polaris*, doing survey work round there and he knew the hazards. So he said, 'This pusser's grey is no good to us, Lew', so we mapped out a camouflage. We had special paint made – chocolate and olive green – and the ship was camouflaged. And I think that was the only thing that saved us from disaster all around the years we were in New Guinea. Even the survey boats, when they were away working, had difficulty finding the ship because you couldn't see it, it was marvellous camouflage. Japs used to come over bombing the bloody place, and they used to practically go through our masts and not see us.
By then we camouflaged it and we went north. And, of course, we were attached to Kinkaid's 7th Fleet. Now, Kinkaid's 7th Fleet was part of MacArthur's invasion force who did the softening up of all landings from New Guinea, from Milne Bay, right through to Manila. So our job was to go in – in many cases we were working behind the Japanese lines, many times we put parties ashore – tide-pole parties to read tides, put up triangulation marks – and our instructions were never to fire unless we were deliberately attacked.
We were supposed to be looked after by somebody but the only bloke that looked after us was God. We never saw any other ship – allied ship – of any sort sometimes for months and months on end. And I reckon, to this day, that that camouflage was all that ever saved us, because we'd tie up – we never steamed of a night-time – we worked, had our survey boats – we had several survey boats – they were special survey boats, ex the old survey ship *Moresby*. One was the – oh, gees, what was its name? – had the Kitchener's gear on the stern – you know the old breaks?

I know the Kitchener's gear very well.

Yeah? – the [*Harty*] – the *Harty* was one – and then we had upper tenders, we had the *Stellar*, the *Polaris*, the *Winter*, all those working out all day, they'd go into shallow water, do all the running of the lines, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And as I say, they used to have bother finding the ship when they knocked off in the late afternoon to come back to the ship, they couldn't see it.
Anyhow, we surveyed, I think, every landing, every one of the allied landings from Milne Bay to Buna, from Buna up to Salamaua, Lae, Madang, Finschhafen, Alexishafen – we bypassed Wewak, there was a big Japanese garrison there but they were harmless because we used to pass within sight of them and the Fleet had their supplies cut off, they knew the AIF would eventually wipe them out. So we bypassed there and went through to Hollandia and Dutch New Guinea. I think we were the first allied ship into Dutch New Guinea. We were met by a dugout canoe with a white man flying a great big Dutch flag – I've got a photo of it somewhere in one of me albums. He was a Dutch coast watcher, had been there all through the war.
Anyhow, from Hollandia we went over to – after we done the survey of Hollandia – Hollandia was going to be one of the big push-off bases for the invasion of the Philippines. We surveyed there for several months and then we went over to do the Admiralty Islands. We ran lines there in Seeadler Harbour while the Yankee Fleet stood off and bombarded the place. We put in a couple of months there doing Seeadler Harbour which was another base for the retaking of the Philippines. It was only just a huge lagoon – and the island was just millions and millions of coconut palms, there was nothing there, not even a jetty. We went back to finish a job at Hollandia, and we came back to Seeadler Harbour after several months, and there was practically a city built there. The Yanks had built wharves, they'd built hospitals, they'd built everything there and they had a floating dock there to take the biggest battleship in the Pacific, all in several months – there's no doubt about the Yanks.

Their CB [Construction Battalion – the SeaBees] Division would have done that.

Yep. The Yanks had the bullshit but, by gees, they had the equipment to uphold the bullshit. And the Seabees there, they were equivalent to our Civil Construction Corps that we had working in the north of Australia, but they were mainly made up of miscreants from America. What they did, they went to the gaols and they said, 'Righto, you volunteered to be a Seabee and you can fight for your country.' Well, they didn't fight for their country; they were the workers who laid out the airfields and did all the construction.
I can remember going ashore in Seeadler Harbour – I'd run the canteen on board, ship's company canteen – to buy canteen stores. I went up to the store, I had five or six hundred pounds that the boys had dobbed in so I could buy American slops from their PX store. I said to the officer in charge, I said, 'I've got a list here of what I want', and he says, 'Righto, no bother, give us your list', and I gave him the list. And I said, 'How much is that?' He said, 'What do you mean, how much?' He said, 'You are not interested in how much it is.' I said, 'Yeah, I've got to pay for this.' 'No, Christ no,' he said, 'this is on lend-lease.' I said, 'No, this is a private canteen, ship's company canteen.' 'No,' he said, 'bloody lend-lease.' I said, 'No, I've got to pay for it.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Look, you give me that bloomin' money, we put it over there, we have to put a guard on it. During the night,' he said, 'one of these bloody murderous Seabees will cut the guard's throat, pinch the bloody money, just because you want to pay for it.' 'No,' he says. I said, 'Jesus, I'll get hung.' He said, 'Can't help it. No money here.'
So anyhow, he gave me a truck – great big truck – with a big Negro driver and a swamper [driver's assistant], to go down to the big stores. Dinky di, they must have had fifty huge big stores there, jam in this one, cigarettes in this one – nothing mixed up, everything was separate – no-iron store, okay, Yankee cigarettes, next one clothing, so and so, right down the end of it you come to a jetty. There's a lookout tower there with a bloke up there, with a great big bloody megaphone, there's about twenty little barges prowling around all the bloomin' time – 'Number so-and-so barge, come in here' – come alongside the wharf, in goes our stores, out to the ship. It was bloody marvellous.

They were great people, weren't they?

Oh, Dick, they'd give you their right arm. We never missed a beat as far as food was concerned off the Yanks, I mean, they lived like bloody lords, you could have ice cream three times a bloomin' day. We missed it when we went back on the Australian Station.

I could imagine. So you finished up there in Seeadler Harbour, and where did you go to?

From Seeadler Harbour – we went – to do the landing at Biak, in Geelvink Bay, up in northern Dutch New Guinea. And Biak was a place where the Yanks had one hell of a bloody trouble digging the Japs out of the caves. There were huge – up there there's very little soil, it's all coral outcrops – I've got photos there. The caves are huge and the Japs had built their villages down in the caves; the buildings were down inside the caves. And the Japs, they couldn't get them out – they had their geisha girls and all there – and they rolled drums of petrol down in them and set fire to them. That was the only way they could get rid of them was burn them out. We went down there – the bodies were still there when we went down – the geisha girls and those sort of things. But there was an escarpment, and up on top of the escarpment they had all these guns; British guns from Singapore, their fortifications were.
So we surveyed Biak there – Biak was an island in Geelvink Bay – we surveyed there for several weeks. Oh, I suppose we were there for a month, I suppose, surveying the whole place. There we were bombed. One day there was a hell of a lot of bombing going around, there was

air raids, four or five air raids a day. The Japs would come over and the old Yankee pilots would go up there and dogfight all around us, but we got about our work. As I said before, we weren't allowed to fire at anything unless we were deliberately attacked.
And one day the Yanks, when they… they always flew from the airfields down in Buna and Milne Bay, they never flew over the mountains, over the land, when they were going on their bombing attacks, they always flew over the ocean, over the sea. There might be two or three hundred Libs and fighters going up but they were always followed by half a dozen Catalinas, and the Catalinas would be flying down low to pick up anybody that happened to be shot down. Anyhow this Cat came in, for assistance to us – there were three Zeros on his ginger – and a Catalina can't fire downwards, it can only fire upwards, there's no gun can go down on a Catalina. So he's skimming low, above the water, to dodge these three Zeros, and he came around circling us for help. And of course, as I said before, we were instructed never to fire unless we were deliberately attacked. I suppose he thought, you bastards – he didn't go much on us. Anyhow, he circled us two or three times and eventually he thought, Jesus, I'm not going to get any help here, so he went over a little island and dodging round just above the palm trees, and he shot the three Zeros down – they had to come down low – he shot the three of them down.
But anyhow, that was the only place that we were deliberately attacked. A couple of days afterwards a Zero came in – we were busy running lines – and a Zero came in and, of course, we never had a gun's crew closed up or any bloomin' thing. The Zero come in and chucked a bomb on us but it must have been the last of his bombs. It started a bit of a fire down in the ward room, I think it was more or less trying to dodge the bloody bomb than anything. The actual fire wasn't caused by the bomb itself, it was just caused by the action of trying to avoid the bomb. The Zero went past – I could see the bloody bloke scowling at me, he was that bloody close, went down the side – and apparently, he never had a bloody shot left in his guns and that was his last bomb. Anyhow, he got away.
But we had some hairy moments. One night, in a place called [Dreega] Harbour – as I said before, we used to anchor of a night-time, we never steamed of a night-time we were anchored at Dreega Harbour, a couple of hundred yards from the shore, and just before daybreak about thirty Zeros came in, and bombers, to bomb Dreega, and they practically went between our bloody masts; but they never saw us. They bombed all the installations ashore but not us. We were just damned lucky, that was all.

> But when you finished up in that area, at Biak and Dreega, where did you go from there?

From our ...

> Sort of what time in the – what year and time of the year?

Well, Dreega would have been in – early '44, Dreega Harbour. It would be '44 when we went into Hollandia, and it would be – no '43, Dreega Harbour could have been 1943 – late in '43. Hollandia – I'll tell you what, I've got a diary down below.

> Alright, at the end of this, what we'll do is, we'll put the key dates on the end of the tape. But one of the things was, what sort of – you were up there operating all the time; what sort of time did you go for a refit, or maintenance periods? Did you get any maintenance periods or refits?

No. We had a Lieutenant Commander Engineer on board, who was a gem – he was a gem at scrounging and repairing things – and we had to make do. But corvettes, after so many steaming

hours, have to have a boiler clean. Early in the piece, when we first went to New Guinea, we used to go down to Cairns to boiler clean; and that, three of four days boiler cleaning, that was the only time we ever saw civilisation, except for major refits. Then, when things eased off a bit in New Guinea, a mother ship called ...

Platypus?

No – bloody *Platypus*! – mother ship? – no – she couldn't bloody well service a bloody rowing boat. Yankee mother ship – she was anchored ...

Whereabouts was she anchored?

Tufi Harbour.

Tufi Harbour, right.

Dobbin – Yankee mother ship called the *Dobbin*, she'd anchored in Tufi Harbour and she could pull a bloomin' destroyer to bits and rebuild it, she had every modern equipment. We used to tie up alongside of her and boiler clean – there might be four or five destroyers alongside of her – and that was our only recreation. Of course, in New Guinea it gets dark around about five o'clock of a night-time so each end of the *Dobbin* they'd have a picture show. So we'd go first up forward, then down aft, then we'd go to each destroyer and watch a bloody picture show – until daylight. Of course, the Americans, they had the game right; the armed forces had the first release of all pictures made. We used to all… Lena Horne in 'Stormy Weather' up there before it was even shown in the United States. And the funny part about it was, we were in a forward area, having pictures – even ashore in Buna they had a huge open-air theatre there where we'd watch the pictures, and down in Australia they was in complete blackout – and we were the forward area watching picture shows.

As a matter of fact, in Buna the Yanks used to reckon that the Japs used to come out of the ruddy jungle and watch the pictures because there's that many Japanese-looking people in the American forces that nobody knew who was who – nobody wore uniforms, you always wore jungle greens or shorts. Our standard of dress was a pair of shorts and a pair of sandals, and an old Army hat or any bloody hat that would keep the sun off us. You never saw anybody in uniform. As a matter of fact, our postman, a bloke by the name of Nulla Thompson, he was the only bloke that ever went ashore in uniform because he wasn't game – he looked like a bloody Japanese – he was pockmarked, his face. He said, 'If I go ashore without a bloody uniform the bloody Yanks will shoot me, they reckon I'm a Jap.'

Anyhow, after we done our last stint at Hollandia then we – our first refit – we came down to Sydney for a refit in I think it was December 1943, that was our first refit after eight months up in the islands. Our second refit was around about July in '44, in Brisbane; and our third refit was in Fremantle in May '45, that was after we'd come back on the Australian Station. But prior to that, after Hollandia, we went back to Seeadler Harbour to finish off a job there. Then we came back to Hollandia to join up for the invasion fleet for the retaking of the Philippines. The bases then were – the big bases – were Seeadler Harbour in the Admiralties, and Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea.

I suppose there had been 150 or 200 bloody ships in Hollandia Harbour, and in September 1944 we took part in MacArthur's 'I Will Return' in Leyte Gulf. The survey ships in Leyte were the *Gascoyne*, *Benalla*, and HDML [Harbour Defence Motor Launch] – I don't know what the name of it was. They are the ships that did the surveying off Seeadler Harbour for the landing.

HDML was an Australian ...?

Yes, HDML was an Australian ship. The Yanks never had any survey ships, all they had up there at any time was coastguard ships.
I can remember, one morning we had to go up, a volunteer party, myself included. We were taken ashore in a Yankee barge with a Jeep and our survey equipment, to climb a mountain near – in Leyte, near the town of Tacloban to put up a survey mark on the mountain. And we made it to the top – we were fired on by small arms fire – Japs, during the what's-a-name but we put the mark up alright. We came back, got into the barge, got our Jeep in, just shoved off for the ship, and a typhoon hit us. Well, all we could do was run with the bloody typhoon, we had no chance in the bloody world of getting back to our own ship. A Yankee coastguard vessel – what the hell was the name of it? – I'd have it in my bloomin' what's-a-name down there anyhow. She saw us in bloody trouble and she come and picked us up, but she couldn't pick the barge up, the barge broke, she had to keep running. They found him in Samar, I think the name of the bloody island is, about two days later, he'd run with the typhoon. That was hairy; we never got back to our own ship till the following day.
There was hardly a ship left Leyte Gulf there, in the six or eight weeks we were there, that hadn't been damaged by a kamikaze. They had sterns blown off – the LSTs had big concrete walls built up in front of their bridges to protect them. Every day, and all day, there was big raids there. I watched ...
As I said before, we never took part in fighting, we weren't a fighting ship, we were supposed to bloody survey and get on with our business. Anyhow, one afternoon there's a bloody air-raid siren go so we all go around – those who are not doing any survey work – get the old binoculars. The Japs used to get up there at about 30,000 feet or some bloomin' thing, and then they'd circle round, round the whole of Leyte Harbour – come in lower, and lower, and lower, in a spiral like that. Apparently what they were doing was, each one would pick out his bloody ship and then they'd lock their instruments on that ship so that if they got shot, or killed, or something or other, the plane would still go on, see.
I watched this bloomin' bloke anyhow. He come round, and round, and his bomb bay opened, and the bomb was practically like that. And I watched the bloomin' thing, by the time it left the bay – and I thought, by Christ, he's going to hit that bloody tanker – there was a great big bloody tanker, way over the other side there, a couple of miles away – he'll hit that bloody tanker for sure – and the bomb was – As fortune would have it, the tanker was a water tanker, just full of water, and it would have sunk it except there was an LCI [Landing Craft, Infantry] alongside of it and it hit the LCI. It killed fifteen men in the LCI but saved the tanker. That bloody bomb, you know – watched it from the time it left the bay – it must have travelled a couple of bloody miles. It was very hairy up there but they left us alone. I don't know whether they couldn't see us or whether it was just we were too bloody small to worry about.
But there, early in the piece, when we first went in there, Tacloban Airstrip – there was an airstrip ran along, right along the water's edge – and the planes were flying in from New Guinea and the Admiralties, the big Libs and the Mitchell bombers and all them were coming in there and landing. The Japs held that end of the airstrip, the Yanks…

[Tape identification details omitted]

Now, you were saying that the Japanese were at one end of the airfield and the Americans at the other.

That's correct. And they gave me the job of taking Leading Radar Mechanic – What was his name? – I'll have that in me little book – ashore, to get him transport back to Australia. So I took

him ashore, we landed on a 'gutless wonder', which is a Lightning fighter – the old Lightnings, the double-fuselage jobs, it was in the creek – that was our landing spot, we landed on that. I took him up to commanding officer, told him what I wanted. He says, 'Right, I'll have him in Australia this afternoon' – 'I'll have him in New Guinea this afternoon' – and the following day he was back in Melbourne.

That's not bad.

And there was bloody bombs dropping and fights going on all round the bloody place. [inaudible] They were good those bloody Yanks.
Anyhow, on this strip, as I said, the Japs were one end, the Yanks were the other. One of the Yankee aircraft carriers had been sunk by the Japs and all her planes that were in the air were ordered to land on the airstrip at Tacloban. And the Yankee fighters were all single-engine jobs, similar to the Zeros, and the bloody Yanks thought they were bloody Japs and they shot half the buggers down – their own bloody planes – they were trigger happy, they'd fire at anything. But the Mitchells and those that come in – and the Mitchells had a cannon on them – the Mitchells would come in after doing run, they'd land. If they were whole, a tractor would take them in tow and take them to an area; if there was any damage done the crew would just take out their papers, and a bulldozer would push the ruddy thing over into the drink. No buggerising around, no repairing and there were scores of bloody planes in the drink there, just been pushed over, they'd been damaged.
But they were coming in there – it looked like Heathrow Airport, bloody landing one after the other – taking of – they'd come in. The Yankee pilots were bloody mad; if they had a kill they'd do a victory roll, and we saw quite a few of them hit the bloody mountain doing their victory roll – kill themselves. So eventually they had to ban the victory rolls.

Now, from the Philippines, where did you go after you finished operations in the Philippines?

Some time in December we came out of Leyte and the Americans had finished with us because the Philippines, apparently the whole of the Philippines had been surveyed. So job was done with the American squadrons so we were transferred back to the Australian squadron. So we were ordered back to New Guinea, we called in at Hollandia, which by that time had been practically evacuated by the Americans. They'd destroyed all their gear ashore, driven their trucks, et cetera ...
That's one thing about the Americans, they didn't much around like the Australians. The Australian Army would land in Milne Bay, put up a camp, put up a store, then when they got ordered to shift on they'd laboriously load everything on to barges, take them out to ships and move up the coast. The Americans had supply ships – I've seen as many as a hundred Liberty ships – anchored in Milne Bay with steam up the whole time – some of them had weed on them that bloody long, they'd been there that long.
Apparently, what the score was with the Americans, if MacArthur ordered a shipment of a certain thing, it was duplicated, and the ships would go by different routes to the destination. If one got sunk the other one would continue. If they both got through, the spare one would go to Milne Bay and be a floating store ship until such time as wanted. Some of the poor buggers had been there eighteen months, at anchor the whole time – hadn't been wanted. So that was their system.
Righto, they go up to Buna – and they had a huge bloomin' encampment at Buna – but when it was finished, not a thing was loaded back on the ship. Everything ashore was damaged, set on fire, pushed into the swamp; and then on to the next place and the same thing would be

repeated. They never ...

Ever picked up their goods and chattels and carried on.

Now, Hollandia, as I said, was the big base for the retaking – one of the big bases – for the retaking of the Philippines and there is a big mountain – when I say a 'mountain', a mountain up there was only, you know, seven hundred feet high – and a precipice. They drove all their trucks and their tanks, and everything, up, they drove them over the top of the precipice before they left, destroyed them.
But they'd give you anything, you'd go ashore and everything was on lend-lease. All you had to do was sign 'HMAS Never-Set-Sail - Jimmy Smith' and they'd give you their right arm; as long as you signed, they didn't care a damn what you had. They used to give us a Jeep; when we were based at a certain place for any time, a Jeep and a barge. When we were finished with it we could do what we liked with it. We could take it with us – which we didn't do because being a small ship we had no facilities to ...

[inaudible]

Well, we had no facilities for getting them on board anyhow – no bloody wharves or jetties up there. So we'd just leave them on the beach.

Right, so you left the New Guinea area ...

That's right.

On the way home.

Then we were coming south and the old man – oh, we went into Leyte – the skipper said, 'Christ, if we get out of this I promise you a bloody Christmas you'll remember.'
So anyhow, we are coming down – we are running short of bloody fuel and luckily we met up with a tanker in Tufi, a Yankee tanker. We fuelled just a couple of days before Christmas, and the following day we met up with the *America* – and the *America* was a Navy supply ship, she was an ex-German passenger ship, had been handed over in reparations from the First World War, she was a sister ship to the Kaiser's yacht, the [*Morella*]. Anyhow, she was chock a block with beer and all the things that are necessary for Christmas. Anyhow, we stored.
Now, during our whole period in New Guinea we had several native boys on board, a couple of them we had inherited from the *Whyalla*, and they lived on the island of Nuakata which is an island just out from New Guinea. Now, each time we were going on leave we'd land the boys at their island, give them plenty of stores – cigarettes, tucker – to keep them till such time as we came back. And we'd also give them several rolls of survey cloth – we had red, white and blue survey cloth, you know, about a metre wide, rolls and rolls and rolls of it, putting up marks – and they used to go into business selling lap-laps.
Anyhow, we picked them up each time we went back so this time the skipper says, 'Righto, we fill up with goodies off the ...'

America?

The *America* and we head for Nuakata' – the boys' home village. At that time we had four native boys on board; we had [Sali], Jimmy, Leo and Peter. So we'd been ordered back to Australia so we had to call in at Nuakata anyhow. So we called in at Nuakata on New Year's

Eve…Christmas Eve, Christmas Eve; I took a boat ashore with several of the boys and we chopped down umpteen palm trees, and we decorated the bloomin' ship up like a bloomin' Christmas show. We had a big Christmas tree on the forecastle, I sat up all bloomin' night, Christmas Eve, wrapping up parcels. The next morning we invited the whole village of Nuakata out for a Christmas party on the ship – mum, dad, the kids, the whole lot of them, come out in their dugout canoes and all the rest of it. I've got some pictures up there of them.
So Christmas [dawned], old Father Christmas, Guts Barry, one of our telegraphists, a big bloke, he dressed up as Father Christmas and he come up over the bloody ship's side, gave all the bloomin' natives presents, and there was lolly water, and biscuits, and lollies all round the bloody ship for what's-a-name. So we went to town till about two o'clock in the afternoon and then we shoved them ashore, then we replaced the lolly water with beer, then we went to town. I was still bloody crook when we got to Thursday Island about five days later. I reckon it was the happiest Christmas in my life, seeing those natives.
And after all these years, recently… we ran one of our… an ex-corvette bloke was touring in his yacht up in New Guinea and he called at Nuakata, and one of the lads there made himself known. He was our original Tommy, one of our boys. And the Benalla Association has been trying for the last twelve or eighteen months to get him recognised as a member of the RAN during the war, get him recompensed. But we are fighting the ...

Bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy, it's in the too-hard basket.

But a few anecdotes: the two original native boys, Sali and Manuel, they were recruited from Port Moresby on the *Whyalla*, late in 1942. The story was, they had been in gaol, they'd killed a bloke out in the Solomons but in New Guinea language 'killum' is only to badly damage a bloke so he has to go to hospital. 'Killum finish' is dead, they'd only 'killed' him. So they done their time and the law, apparently, then was that any native released had to be out of the jurisdiction of a white man for so many months before he was free. So we took them on board, on the *Whyalla*, thought they'd be good as interpreters round New Guinea. We didn't realise there was hundreds of different dialects up there, so they were useless for that. But anyhow, we kept them on board; one was my mess man and the other one used to do part of the ship, chipping the painting.
But anyhow, at that time things were too hot in New Guinea to break down your engines so we used to go to Cairns to boiler clean. So one of our blokes on board, Guts Barry, he had false teeth and on the mess deck he used to pull these false teeth out and tease the bloody boys and say, 'So you do this' – no, only God made bloody teeth, he was a bloody whiz this bloody bloke. So I convinced the two boys, Sali and Manuel, next time we go to Cairns I take you and show you the man who makes teeth. And they laughed, only God made teeth, nobody else made bloody teeth.
So the first time we are in Cairns – I had a mate over in the dental shop in Cairns – and we got Manuel into the chair – of course, his teeth are black with betel nut, black as pitch. Anyhow, first of all we showed him the dentist pulling teeth out, and making teeth, and filling teeth, and all this thing, and he was enthralled. So eventually we talked him into getting into the chair and the old dentist got the buffer, and his teeth came up like pearls. Well, from then on he comes back on the ship, smiling to everybody, showing off his pearly white teeth.
So Sali got bloody jealous. I said, 'Next time we go down there, Sali, they'll do the same for you.' So the next time we went to Cairns – I think we did three runs into Cairns, for boiler cleans. I took Sali over and did the same to him. Well, from then on they used to come down the canteen every Saturday for a tube of toothpaste and a new toothbrush, they used to polish their

bloody teeth, oh, grin at everybody. They were characters, we had a lot of fun with those boys. But they were meticulously clean.
My mess man would go down – I'd be sitting at the bloomin' table having my bloomin' what's-a-name – of course, you didn't have bread and butter plates or anything in those days, or bread and butter knives. I'd go to put my knife in the butter and he'd whip it out of my bloody hand, you know. Gave me a clean knife.

Is that right?

Yeah. That was Manuel, he'd been mission trained, he could talk good English. Sali never knew a word of English when we first got him on board, and he was one of these head-hunter types, he had bloody holes in his nose, and holes in his ears, and all this sort of thing – always scowled, you know. I always used to think, one of these days I'll wake up with my throat cut. And he'd sit round the bloody mess deck listening. And of course, the first words he picked up were all the wrong ones, the most emphatic I'd say.

Right, as only sailors can use.

So anyhow, we are going to Cairns this bloomin' trip – I think it was the last trip into Cairns before we started boiler cleaning up in New Guinea. So we dressed the boys up in uniform – I think there's a photo of them there somewhere.

Don't worry about it, we'll have a look at it afterwards.

We dressed them up as bloody sailors and the boys took them ashore. So, of course, we go into Woolworths store in Cairns and the boys are buying stuff there, see, and the lass comes up and she says to Sali, 'What would you like?' – no, 'What can I do for you?' or something – no, 'What do you want?' and he says, 'Fuck off'. Well, he never knew, I mean, the word most used, you know, or emphatically used, and he picked this up first. Christ, the boys didn't know what to do about that lot but gees we had a lot of fun with them.
We had a cat on board named Herman – Herman the German – he was supposed to be white but he was bloody filthy black. We had a dog called Ben, after the ship *Benalla*. And we had a little New Guinea cocky. Well, the three of them used to get up in the bloody forecastle there. Of course, we used to pipe down at mid-day, every day, in the tropics; the only poor buggers at work were the survey hands, they were away sounding and all the rest of it. And we'd get up on the forecastle and have these bloody dog and the cat and the bird putting on this show. And the ruddy cat would swallow the canary and all you could see out of it's bloody cat's mouth was the tail; old Ben would go over and give him a clap on the bloody ear and he'd go whoop! And out would come the bird. But the poor old bird flew overboard one day and drowned himself. So we finished up with the bloody cat, and the cat deserted us – the cat deserted us somewhere.
But Ben, when we went ashore, I don't know how the hell Ben – he had channel fever. The moment we tied up at the wharf at Cairns, Ben was first off. He'd go up the bloody town. Now, we'd be in Cairns for five days, we wouldn't see Ben, but the morning we were to leave Ben would come staggering down the bloody street and on board, never missed. How the hell he knew we were leaving, I don't know; he had a sixth sense or something or other.

When you finished surveying altogether and came back to Australia, where did you go then?

We were surveying – we came back to Thursday Island was our first port of call, I think, then

we went across to Darwin – we did a bit of surveying on the way. And then we were surveying between Darwin and Thursday Island, surveying for the course for the British Fleet to take the shortcut through for the retaking of Singapore and all those places, instead of them having to go round up north. We were surveying there.
And then, after we'd finished that survey we went down to Exmouth Gulf to do a survey there – that was going to be the jumping-off place for the retaking of Singapore. We did some surveying there, then we went south for a refit; in May '45 we went down to Fremantle to refit – the last place I ever expected we'd do a refit was Fremantle, otherwise I would have had some bloody [inaudible] trophies. We did about a five-week refit at Fremantle, then we went north again and we continued on with surveying the channels through up north for the fleet. And we were somewhere off Thursday Island, I think, when war was declared finished.

So we continued there for a while – and then that was August, wasn't it?

Yeah, round about that time.

Round about August. We continued finishing surveys around in Darwin Harbour and places around there – up at Cape [Don], over round Bathurst Island. And then we came down to Fremantle in November '45 and eventually paid off early in January.

Did you pay off in Fremantle?

Yeah.

So it would have been one of the ones that went down to Garden Island later on?

Yeah, over to Hoot's – Hoot's Circus.

Hoot's Circus, right – Hoot Gibson's Circus.

Hoot's Circus, yeah. I was about the last to leave the ship, it was my job to destroy all the papers, and all this sort of bloody thing, before we handed her over to the Garden Island crowd. I brought home the ship's name and address book so the first Christmas I sent all my ship's company a Christmas card and I've sent them one ever since.

Oh, well, that's great. So you would have gone into *Leeuwin* after that? *Leeuwin* would have been established ...

Some of the boys went home in December, the main lot left in January, but I didn't leave the ship until about 6 March. Then I went into *Leeuwin* and was discharged immediately.

Right, so you just went straight outside from there?

Yeah. By that time I had a couple – that's right, I went – 6 March I think I paid off, if I remember right – 6 March 1946, I went straight back into civvy street.

Right, we'll take a break here for a few minutes and then we'll continue with some specific detail.

Ted, just looking back over what we've said, one of the words that you used early on in

the interview was the word 'slops' and the other one was 'crumb basin'. Now, anyone looking at this interview later on may not realise what 'slops' and 'crumb boatswain' mean. Would you like to explain what they mean.

Well, 'slops' is the clothing and equipment store in the Navy. You go down there to draw your clothes or your boots, or whatever you want to buy. That is called 'slops'. In the Yankee Navy it was called a PX store.

What about 'crumb boatswain'?

Now, 'crumb boatswain' is the PO or chief, whoever he happens to be, in charge of the mess decks.

Alright, that clears up those two points. In other words, the person in charge of mess deck personnel and the heads of toilets, as they were.

Now, have you got any other antidotes [sic] that you'd like to recount on your service in the corvettes, which were basically, in your case, all related to the survey world?

Well, the survey world was a department of the Navy all on its own. Once you got away from Australia all rig of the day and all this rigmarole was completely forgotten. You had a job to do and as long as you did the job, that's all there was to it. As a matter of fact, being up in the islands, and not being ashore at any civilised ports, we had very little reason to hold captains requestment.
It was my job officially to fill in the punishment return every month and send to Navy Board, and we repeatedly got signals from Navy Board, 'We have not received your last month's punishment return.' And the skipper would send a signal back, 'Didn't have any.' The skipper had told me earlier in the piece, when we first – you must remember that I had the same captain took me to three ships with him, as coxswain, and we had a very good understanding. He had a job to do and he told me that he didn't want to see frivolous requests and all this sort of thing, and to punish everybody in my own way. So he left it to me, so we didn't have any punishments.

Now, one of the other things you did mention to me before, something about the fact that living on these survey ships, which were designed for 65 people, you had a compliment of about 125. Would you like to just mention what the living conditions were and how you tried to overcome some of the disability of having such cramped – people cramped in such small spaces?

Well, the fortunate part about it was that we were in the tropics the whole of our career and apart from the back part, there was a sweat box down below, you could sleep around the upper deck, anywhere you liked because we very, very seldom steamed at night-time. We worked during the day on survey work – sounding and running lines, and putting down triangulation marks, and all this sort of thing – but we anchored every night. So you could sleep anywhere around the deck, in the waists, and eventually, on X-deck, which was on top of the extended chart room on the upper deck, we had a tent erected for the senior sailors and some of us slept there. But if it hadn't been for the fact that we were in the tropics, we'd have all died of something or other, crammed down in the mess decks. Some slept on the floor, some slept on the tables, some slept on the lockers, anywhere where there was a space, they slept. The storeman slept in his store, the supply assistant slept in the store, anywhere a vacant space.

> Now, what about in the tropics, because quite often the tropics at night, you get rain squalls come through? Any problems with rain squalls? Or how did you protect yourself against the water?

When I was on the whaler my sleeping possie was, I slung me hammock – about the only time I ever slung a hammock on the survey ships – from the jackstaff to the anchor winch, and over the top of it I had a sheet of canvas.

> Right, that kept you reasonably dry. Now, on the *Benalla*, was it, that you the tent rigged? Was there any other purpose that that was put to in your recollection?

The only time it was used for anything else was, we had a cook, a leading cook, on board – a Queenslander by the name of Lofty Kerr. He was a very good cook – ship's company cook – and a marvellous baker; he made lovely bread. Anyhow, he wrote home to his girlfriend and told her everywhere he'd been, and everything we'd done on this particular cruise. The censors picked it up and decided that he had to be punished. All his girlfriend got was a letter addressed, Dear so-and-so, and across was written, 'Your boyfriend talks too much'.
So Navy Board decided he had to be punished so he has to come up before the skipper, defaulters, and he got sentenced to twenty-one days cells. So where do you have cells on a corvette, there's not room for accommodation for ordinary sailors let alone cells? So you are supposed to transfer him to the nearest cruiser, or ship which had cells, but we didn't want to lose a damn good cook and a marvellous baker. So the skipper decided that the tent which had been erected on X-deck for the senior sailors was now to become the cells. So us senior sailors got kicked out of our luxurious upper-deck quarters and Lofty was put there for twenty-one days. Of course, an armed guard on duty, who slept most of the time, shut his eyes to what was going on while Lofty was receiving cigarettes and beer, and all the luxuries of life from the rest of his shipmates while we suffered in… [end of tape]

[Tape identification details omitted]

> Ted, one of the other things, I understand, is you put down, in print from a personal diary you kept – against the rules – of something about the *Benalla*. Would you just like to mention what you've done there and what use it's been put to?

Well, several years ago our secretary of our HMAS *Benalla* Association decided to start writing a book on *Benalla*, so I wrote out transcripts from my personal diary of dates and times from the time I joined the *Benalla* till the time she paid off in March '46 in Fremantle.

> So what you have really is the birth, life and death of ...

I call it 'The Birth, Life and Death of a Grand Little Ship'.

> That's fine. Now, is there any other antidotes [sic] that you can think of at the moment before we close of this interview?

> Is there anything you'd like to sort of ...

Well, I've told you about Sali and Manuel and their teeth.

What about in those days, during the compulsory training period? Is there any antidotes [sic] from those days or was it just all training and nothing fancy?

No, there was nothing fancy in those days.
I can remember one very amusing incident. We were doing a night drill in the Croke Street Depot in Fremantle, and we had an instructor, Chief Petty Officer Tubby [Heathcote]. He was quite a lad. During the First World War he had been in Q-ships over in the Atlantic. Now, the Q-ships were ships that were filled with timber to keep afloat if they were torpedoed. The idea was, to abandon ship but leave a couple of gun's crews closed up – because submarines in those days, the skipper had to authenticate that he had sunk a ship so he had to collect the ship's papers. So the submarine would surface, the old Q-ship would drop the sides of the shutters, and blaze away and sink the submarine.
But anyhow, Tubby this night had a class of us sitting around a little training ship which was teaching us – navigation lights and steering. And he always thumped into us, he had a great saying, 'Bullshit baffles brains'. So anyhow, this particular night we are all sitting around, learning the navigation lights, et cetera, et cetera, and one of the bigwigs – from the Navy Board in the eastern states was visiting Western Australia – and he came in, and he came over to the class, and he stood there for a minute of two, watching. Then he says to a lad, he says, 'Tell me what you know about this training teacher and navigation lights' – and the bloke's name was Fred [Knottley]. And he stood up and he rattled off for about ten minutes – a lot of bullshit. And the old commodore patted him on the shoulder and said, 'Very good, my lad, very good', and he went away. Old Tubby said, 'There you are, I've always told you, bullshit baffles brains.'

I think that's great. Just a second, righto, Ted, you've got another antidote [sic] to tell me. Would you just like to recount when you were over at Rushcutter?

That would be during 1941 when I was doing a stint in Rushcutter's. The Navy Board decided to admit or take into the Navy direct entry sublieutenants. All they had to do was to have ...

Leaving Certificate or professional qualifications?

[Long pause]

I know that they brought ...

What did they used to call them in those days? – Not Leaving Certificate – it was above the Leaving Certificate, the professional side.

Right, this would be probably the entrance into university standard, something along that line.

Yeah, that's right. They had an education qualification from an accepted college of some sort. And they came in direct entry sub lieutenants; within three months they were made lieutenants. So the chiefs and POs, some of whom had been in the Navy for twenty years or more, bucked against the idea because at that time, as far as they could go, was to warrant officer rank, they couldn't go any further. So they put in a request, a group of us put in a request to see the Commodore to voice our grievance. So we put it to the Commodore that it wasn't fair to bring in a bloke off the street just because he'd had a university degree – that was what, a university degree – and make him a sub lieutenant and start ordering around chiefs and POs who'd been in the Navy for twenty to twenty-five years.

So the Commodore listened to our grievance and he says, 'I quite agree with all you've told me and I sympathise with you, but,' he says, 'let's put it this way. We have a battleship – we don't have one,' he says, 'but supposing we did – and supposing there's a crew of 1,000 men on it.' He said, 'There'd be 100 officers, there'd 50 or 60 chiefs and POs, and there would be 800-odd, 850, sailors in the different parts of the ship.' He said, 'The battleship gets sunk and the whole 1,000 men drown.' He said, 'How do we replace them?' he said, 'We go to a college and we get 100 with university degrees and we make them officers.' He said, 'We go on the market and we get 850 unemployed blokes who want to join the Navy and we make them sailors.' He said, 'Where in the name of Christ do we get the chiefs and POs with the experience that you people have got?' He said, 'The unfortunate part about it is, an officer only has to know how to give an order; a sailor only has to carry out, and the bloke that has to see that it's done is the chiefs and POs.' He said, 'You are the backbone of the Navy, the chiefs and POs – it's not the officers, not the crew, it's the chiefs and POs.' He said, 'That's the unfortunate position; what can we do about it?' He said, 'Nothing.'

And at that stage the only rank to which – officer rank – to which a sailor, or senior sailor, could aspire would be to a warrant rank?

That's right – and warrant officers were controlled – the number of warrant officers in the Navy was controlled on what they called a Scheme of Complement, there was only so many allowed in the Navy.

I seem to remember that those warrant officers, particularly the ones who became lieutenant commissioned officers, were really like God ...

That's right.

... even captains took their guidance from those particular officers.

Well, that's right because they'd been chiefs and POs, they'd come up through the ranks and they knew the whole thing.

And, of course, that follows very closely my own background, coming up from a sailor.

Can you remember the name of the captain of HMAS *Rushcutter* at the time?

No. I know there was one little officer there, he was bloody funny – what the hell did we used to call him? – A little cock sparrow he was – no, I can't think of his name.

Right. One of the people who went on to become a Commanding Officer *Rushcutter* – possibly after your time – was a Commander Harvey Newcomb, who was in charge of training Asdic officers when the war started, and later on stayed on. Very interesting man because not only did he become the commanding officer who set up the Asdic Branch, he also was responsible for setting up the Radar Branch. And then after the war he had become an active captain. Instead of going back to England he stayed and set up the Electrical Branch. So your relationship with *Rushcutter* has this other connection.

Well, after I left *Rushcutter,* long after they turned *Rushcutter* into the Asdic School.

That would be when he had come into that particular area.

I was before his time then. I'd know the names, I suppose, if I heard them, but after nearly fifty years ...

Yes, it's a bit difficult.

Identification: This concludes the interview with Edward James Lewis on 25 August 1993. The interview was conducted by Bill Ritchie at 503 Canning Highway, Melville, the home of Ted Lewis.

Identification: The interview was recommenced at 9:40 a.m. on 3 November 1993 at 503 Canning Highway, by Bill Ritchie.

Ted, in reading your writings on 'The Birth, Life and Death of a Great Little Ship', the *Benalla*, there was some additional points I wish to raise. First, you mentioned George Tancred was the commanding officer during its time up north and that he transferred to *Benalla* from *Whyalla* at Townsville on 18 June 1943. Can you recall the commissioning CO's name?

Lieutenant Commander Morison, seagoing.

And the date of commissioning was 7 May 1943[2], is that correct?

That would be about right.

And do you know when and where did Lieutenant [Gale] become the captain of *Benalla*?

I think it was after refit in Sydney – I'm not sure on that, whether it was the refit in Sydney or Brisbane.

We do know that when he left this ship, however, that was in Darwin, I understand it.

That's right.

Do you remember the date?

No, I don't.

Well, from your notes it's 2 May 1944.

Well, that should be right.

And who took over from him at that stage?

I don't think it was Schofield, I think it was Tex Cody.

Tex Cody, was it?

[2] Actually commissioned 27 April 1943 [RAN *HMA Ships' Histories*]

Pretty sure it was Cody took over then.

> And Cody stayed with you throughout until just before you left Darwin for the final time, is that correct?

That's correct.

> And if I remember rightly, that date was 28 October 1945.

That would be right.

> Now, Schofield brought it down from Darwin to Fremantle.

Correct.

> And decommissioned the ship. And I don't suppose you remember the decommissioning date as such, do you, Ted?

I should have made a note of that somewhere.

> So it would be in December, some time, of 1945?

Yep. I think the first draft off her was about 28 or 29 December[3] – it was after Christmas, I know.

> After Christmas, right. Okay, Ted, just a couple of other points. Can you recall also who were the officers and rating who transferred with you, under Lieutenant Commander Tancred, from the *Whyalla* to the *Benalla*? You mentioned there were two survey officers and a sailor.

Lieutenant Wright, Lieutenant Crooks, Petty Officer Rodder, Able Seaman Brady, Able Seaman Stringer, and Tim [Odervoice], I think that was all.

> What about Morris, was he also transferred?

Oh, Morris, yeah, Able Seaman Morris.

> And the two boy's names were, what – Sali and Manuel?

Sali and Manuel, from the island of Nuakata.

> Now, can you also recall when and where radar was fitted to the *Benalla*?

In Sydney.

> And that was during the refit? And do you remember the dates of the refit?

[3] HMAS *Benalla* paid off into Reserve at Fremantle on 28 January 1946 [RAN *HMA Ships' Histories*]

[Long pause]

Alright, well, picking them up from your notes it was 9 December '43.

I think it was Christmas, yeah.

27 January '44. Having spent so much time surveying, often under enemy eyes and fire, did anyone in *Benalla* get a gong or be honoured in any way?

Yes. There was four DSCs awarded to – I think it was five, I'm pretty sure it was five – awarded to the officers, captain downwards, and one DSM to Petty Officer Kidd, survey rate.

Beside Lieutenant Commander Tancred, can you remember any of the names of the other officers?

It wouldn't have been Tancred.

It wouldn't have been Tancred?

No, it would have been Gale.

Gale, was it?

Mm.

I see, alright. So it was Lieutenant Commander Gale ...

Gale.

And?

Crooks

Cooper?

Cooper – Anthony Cooper – Lieutenant Cooper.

And what about the final captain, did he rate a mention – Schofield?

Yes, I think I'm pretty sure it was Schofield, and I'm not sure about Newby.

Right – Newby could have been the fifth officer?

Could have been the fifth.

Do you know where that notification was received in the ship as opposed to when the awards were made to them?

Well, as far as I can remember there was a signal received, or something, when we were around Seeadler Harbour; when it was, I don't know.

December 4, from your notes anyway.

Officially presented in Leyte Gulf by Collins.

Collins? – he'd be Commodore Collins at that stage?

I think he was a bloody admiral.

Admiral at that stage, was he?

I think so – that would have been well into '44.

Right, that would be correct – well, at the end of '44 in actual fact, when it was awarded.

Yes, well, we went into Leyte in October '44 and we pulled out early in December '44. So it would have been some time during that period.

Right, so the signal came through and he probably awarded them shortly after that, so it would be some time – according to your notes – in December.

Now, Ted, where was the ship, and when, when you learnt about the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima?

Well, somewhere in the Timor Sea – just where it was, I can't recollect at this stage, but it should be in me notes there.

Okay, from your notes it's [Pockum] Bay and it was 8 August '45.

That would be correct – that was from my daily diary.

Right, and I also note from there that you heard about the Japanese surrender on 12 August, when you were in Darwin, and that you received a signal at 8:30 a.m. on 15 August 1945 which said the war was over.

It wouldn't have been in Darwin, we were sailing out of Thursday Island.

Somewhere near Thursday Island, were you?

Yeah, because our first port was Thursday Island, a couple of days afterwards.

Were there any celebrations, like a beer issue, once you heard that the war was over?

Never had any beer on board to have an issue.

Right. Now, you mention some members going to church at Thursday Island after hearing the war was over. Can you remember who?

All I can remember is [Cockwarren] and myself, I can't remember any of the others – I think there was seven of us all told but I wouldn't be sure, I can't recollect the names, but I can always

remember Cock because he was the villain on the ship.

Right, so the villain was going to say thanks for surviving.

Yeah.

When the war finished was there anything else, besides surveying, that *Benalla* was involved in?

Oh, yes, the surrender at Koepang. We took over a group of swotties, accompanied by about another ten ships – ten or twelve ships – *Moresby*, *Horsham*, *Parkes*, *Echuca*, *Bombo*, *Kangaroo*, and the troop ships *Abraham*, *Crisp*, *Crijnssen* and *Van den Bosch*, and three HDMLs and a lugger. We were later joined by *Gladstone* and *Warrnambool en route*.

Can you remember when you got to Koepang?

No, I wouldn't remember the date unless it's in there.

Right, well, the date was 11 September and you stayed till the 14th.

Now, could you tell me about J.J. Pike's and [Doubley's] contest? I notice in your notes you make reference ...

Oh, they were always at each other's bloomin' throats, they were two – I won't say galahs – but they were always at each other's throats and they decided to have a great fight on the forecastle. We all lined up to watch the fight – I think there was two hits – they were both willing but nobody was game.

Now, also, there was an incident after, I think, you came back down to Fremantle, about a sailor and his girlfriend up in Monkey Island in the ship. Well, firstly, where was Monkey Island?

Well, Monkey Island was our flying bridge, right up the top – we had a special flying bridge on the forecastle, on the top there. There was only two had that, right up there.

I can see that on the picture that you've just shown me, good. And what was the incident there?

Oh, we were in Fremantle actually, having a refit, and old Sid Mitcham – he would be about the oldest bloke on board, he was an old ex-RN sailor that transferred many, many, many years ago. So he brought his girlfriend aboard and they went up on Monkey Island. Of course, the officer of the bloody watch caught them up there and old Sid says, 'Well, you bring your bloody sheilas on board, why shouldn't I?'

A typically good answer. Now, you mentioned, in the previous interview, that *Benalla* finally finished up decommissioning and going down to Garden Island. Now, what happened to it after that, Ted?

Well, she lay there at Garden Island for a couple of years – oh, three, or four, five years, I think.

Till about 1956 I understand.

Yeah – 1956, the tug *Reserve* came over from Sydney to tow her back to Sydney, to be refitted for survey purposes. But by the time she got back they changed their bloomin' minds and she just got put up for sale, and laid over in Lavender Bay there.

And then eventually, I understand, she went off to Japan.

On Anzac Day 1957, I think it was.

'58.

'58 – Anzac Day she was towed out by a Japanese tug on her way to Japan.

I understand the name of that ship that towed her up there was the *Tukoshima Maru*.

Yep.

Now, is there anything else, since I was here last, that you might have remembered that you want to record on the tape?

No, not that I can remember. I mean, I've got to go through my notes to jog my memory every now and again because I forget half the places we've been to.

Right. Well, what I've done, as I've mentioned to you, I'm having those notes of yours typed up and they'll be done in double space so that we can edit them, and they can be an adjunct to this particular tape, if you are agreeable, with the Corvettes Association.

That's okay with me.

This completes the interview with Ted Lewis. The time is 10:06 a.m. on 3 November 1993. The interviewer was Bill Ritchie of the RAN Corvettes Association, Western Australia.

02/02