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TRANSCRIPT
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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S01797

F4900 Gell, Garnett Richard

Recorded
at: Padbury, WA
on: 10 December 1993
by: Lorna Dodd

Description
F4900 Garnett Richard Gell, as a stoker, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvette HMAS *Pirie and* motor water lighter *MWL255*, Australian waters and North Pacific Ocean, 1943–1946, interviewed by Lorna Dodd

Garney Gell speaks about his schooling and early working life; service in the Army; enlisting in the RAN; travelling from Perth to Melbourne by troop train; initial training and training as a stoker on internal combustion engines at Flinders Naval Depot: learning to handle landing craft at Port Stephens NSW; returning to Flinders for the steam course; joining corvette HMAS *Pirie* at Thursday Island; life aboard the *Pirie*; minesweeping routine; exploding mines with rifle fire; naked natives at Merauke; taking leave in Perth while *Pirie* was refitted in Brisbane and Sydney; rejoining *Pirie* in Fremantle WA; sailing via Sydney to Seeadler Harbour, Manus [Admiralty Islands] to join the British Pacific Fleet; supporting operations at Leyte and Samar Islands in the Philippines; the *Pirie* under attack in 1942; collision with HMS *Swiftsure* and subsequent refit; ship's routine and relaxation; the end of the Second World War; being in Tokyo Bay for the signing of the Japanese Surrender; being transferred to hospital ship HMS *Jerusalem* in Hong Kong Harbour for medical treatment; returning to Fremantle via Sydney as a passenger; getting married; being drafted to motor water lighter *MWL255* and sailing to Port Moresby; life aboard the MWL; raiding a warehouse; supplying fresh water to Japanese ships in Rabaul Harbour in mid-1946; some anecdotes of life around Rabaul Harbour; return to civilian life and training under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme as a carpenter, and his satisfaction with his subsequent life.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, February 2002

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

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[This is] an interview with Garnet Richard Gell, and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA. Mr Garnet Gell is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA, and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

Garnie was born in Wagin on 4 April 1923, and he joined the Navy in February of 1943 as a stoker, and served on the 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 order for the Royal Navy but were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These ships were named after the Australian towns – *Ballarat, Bathurst, Bendigo, Broome, Burnie, Cairns, Cessnock, Gawler, Geraldton, Goulburn, Ipswich, Kalgoorlie, Launceston, Lismore, Maryborough, Pirie, Tamworth, Toowoomba, Whyalla and Wollongong*. Also, of the sixty built, four were for the Royal Indian Navy and named *HMIS Bengal, Bombay, Madras and Punjab,* and they all left for their home base independently in 1942. The remaining thirty-six were built for the Royal Australian Navy and also named after Australian towns. They were *Ararat, Armidale, Benalla, Bowen, Bunbury, Bundaberg, Castlemaine, Colac, Cootamundra, Cowra, Deloraine, Dubbo, Echuca, Fremantle, Geelong, Gladstone, Glenelg, Gympie, Horsham, Inverell, Junee, Kapunda, Katoomba, Kiama, Latrobe, Lithgow, Mildura, Parkes, Rockhampton, Shepparton, Stawell, Strahan, Townsville, Wagga, [Warrnambool] and Wallaroo*. Of course, some of these towns are now cities.

This interview is conducted by Lorna Dodd on 10 December 1993 at Garnet Gell's home, Cunningham Street, Padbury, Western Australia.

We know you were born in Wagin; can you tell me a little bit about the town of Wagin – did you grown up there and did you go to school there?

Yes, Lorna, I was born in the Wagin Hospital, like you said, on 4 April 1923. I subsequently attended school – I only found this out a couple of years ago, when I went back to the anniversary of the town, the hundredth anniversary – and I looked up my old roll book there and I started when I was five years and about three months old. I always thought I was about six but when I started, in July 1928, this would have made me five years and three months old. And I attended school there until I was, oh, it would have been round about 1934 or ‘35, I think, before I left there.

Anyway, a little bit about Wagin. Even to this day it's a very prosperous little town – oh, it's not a little town, it's quite a big town really – wheat and sheep mainly. Like I said, it's a very prosperous town; it's an old farming area – the Great Southern.

The school I attended went right through from primary school right up to about 8th or 9th standard, and obviously I didn't finish my schooling there because when I was about eleven or twelve, Mum, being a widow, she up anchored and she bought a boarding house up in Wiluna, of all places, as far away as you could get from Wagin, and I was transferred up to the Wiluna School. From there I did about three years till I was about fifteen, then [Mum] decided she'd send me to – maybe to get a little bit more education – but she sent me to [Inorshia] – it was a Catholic boarding school. I couldn't say I was very happy about it but anyway, I went there for

about nine months to finish off my schooling.
By that time my mother and my stepfather – my mother married again when I was a child in Wiluna – and when I subsequently left [Inorshia] they had shifted from Wiluna down to a place called [You-and-Me] – and that's not a joke either, that's the name of the place. It's about eighty miles from Mount Magnet and Payne's Find, up on the goldfields, and that's when I started my working life there.
I didn't have any particular trade because there was nothing going in those days. Mum had a job lined up for me with a local grocer so I started off as a grocer's boy delivering all sorts of groceries to the local population of the town – it was only a very small town You-and-Me. I worked there for twelve months and in the interim my stepfather, he went into partnership with a couple of other guys on a small mine about three mile out of You-and-Me and I was only on a pound a week which was about equivalent, these days, to two dollars – two dollars a week I was getting – and he said to me, 'Would you like to come and work for us and I'll give you three pound ten, which was a great jump in wages, you see – three pound ten was a man's wages those days almost. So I worked with them for a while and, of course, when we were out there – that was about 1939, 1940, the war came on but in those days the war was – a little town like that was sort of as remote as the moon – it was fought on the other side of the world. Japan hadn't come into it by this time.
Anyway, when the war came on, the restrictions came in, petrol rationing came in, and stuff like that, and it made life a little bit harder. And I had an old motorbike at that particular time and I was rationed to about two gallons a month, which wasn't very good. Anyway, of course, the fact that our small show, the small mine that we were trying to operate, because operating costs were rising and we couldn't cope with it, so we all decided to go and get in the big mine which was still operating at You-and-Me at that particular time.
So away we went – and I worked on the surface for a while but I didn't like that very much – labouring work and it was hot and dirty, and dusty – and my stepfather, he was an underground shift boss at that particular time. So I said to him one day, I said, 'What about getting me a job underground?' He worked the oracle and I started working underground, which was a lot better and the wages were a lot better too.
Anyway, this went on and, of course, the war was advancing by that time and towards the end of 1941 a lot of the men had left to go to the war and stuff like that, and there was only just us few young blokes kicking around the place. And eventually, towards the end of 1941, the big mine closed down completely – kaput, finished, you see – and prior to closing down the Army had come around, the military had come around. By that time I was eighteen years of age and every man, eighteen years and over, had to attest for the military, you see; and the thought of joining the Navy those days was completely – I never even gave it a thought because I thought it was that far away and you had to, you know, you never gave it a thought.
But anyway, the Army came around and they gave us their tests – health tests and all the rest of it like that – and I never heard any more from them, you see. Anyway, when the mine closed down in 1941 – end of 1941 – I hadn't had a holiday for a while so I thought, well, I'll go to Perth and I'll stay with my sister in North Perth – she lived in North Perth in those days – and I'll just take it from there, I'll play it by ear from then on. I didn't even know what I was going to do. And I'd only been in Perth around about three weeks – and in those days you had to tell anybody, especially the military, that you've changed your address, you see. Well, while I was in the goldfields they never worried me, but soon as they found that I was in Perth – that would have been January or February 1942, and I was still only eighteen at that particular time – the next thing, I get a letter from the military saying to report down to the Claremont Showgrounds for military service. And I thought, oh well, anything is better than nothing, I suppose, so I fronted up there that particular day – and there were a two or three hundred of us, all about the

same age, eighteen, nineteen – and so started my military career.
Well, I can't say that I was over enamoured with the Army, I just didn't like it from day one, you know. Although I went along with everything, I did it and I started my military training. Along with a lot of other fellows we were sent down to Point [Waldon] which was a beautiful venue, close to the river there, and then in Picton, there it was a lovely place. But the old Army style, you know, leave was restricted to one night a week and all this, and for a young man of – I'd turned nineteen by this time – it wasn't the life for me, I just couldn't hack it at all, I didn't like it. And there was no outlet; I didn't know how to get out of it at that particular time.
So anyway, after about six months training there they up anchored and they took us right up to a place called Dandaragan out towards Jurien Bay, where we were camped in the bush there. Oh, the conditions were pretty primitive, you know, sleeping on the ground and all this sort of – and flies and goodness knows what. Anyway, one day we were looking through a newspaper and one of the chaps in this tent, he said to me, he said, 'Hey, look at this, Garnie, they want recruits for the Navy', and I said, 'Give us a look at it'. I looked at it and they said [that] even if you are in the miliary service you can still apply. And so I said to the chap – I can't recall his name now – I said, 'Look, anything has got to be better than this'. So I promptly wrote away to the recruiting office in Forrest Place in Perth. About a week, ten days, later I got a reply to come down and have an interview, you see.
So I went down – I had to get leave off my commanding officer, of course, official leave – went down in the train, and I fronted up in Forrest Place – that was where the recruiting office used to be in those days, you see, upstairs. And, oh, they asked me a few pertinent questions, and the eyesight test – not a full health test, but eyesight and everything like that. I passed it okay, no problem, and they said, 'Before we could do anything about it you have to have a character reference and a certificate from school saying that you attended 8th Standard school'. I don't know what for because I've seen some of the fellows in the Navy consequently and they could barely write their name.
Anyway, so I got the necessary documents and I presented them – had them presented – and I never heard any more – this was around about October 1942 – and I never heard any more, and I went back to the camp. Subsequently we shifted down to Chidlow Wells – that's up in the hills, in the Darling Ranges – and we were fiddling around up there for a while, this was getting close to Christmas in 1942. And the next thing, we up anchored from there and we trooped right down to a place called Quinana – that's where the old Quinana wreck is, it still lies there today – and we camped in the bush there. By this time it was round about January of 1943.
And I went up to the recruiting office once – the Naval Recruiting Office – to find out if there was any further development of my recruitment into the Navy because I'd waited that long I thought I wouldn't hear any more. 'Oh, you'll hear from us, you'll hear'. Okay, so I went back to the camp.
And it would have been around about the middle of February 1943 and I was called up to the headquarters down there – office – and I said, 'What am I wanted for?' and he said, 'Oh, your release has come through for the Navy', and I said, 'Oh, my godfather, at last.' And it was almost to the day, I went in on 23 February 1942 in the Army, and I walked out of the Army on 23 February 1943 which is exactly twelve months to the day.
So I had to go back the… had to go up to Claremont to get my official discharge from Army, and when I was in possession of that I went down to the recruiting office in Forrest Place again and the fellow said to me, 'Oh, yes, G-Gell?' – I said, 'Yes' – 'Now,' he said, 'we've got two propositions. You can go down to *Leeuwin*' – which was HMAS *Leeuwin,* which is the Naval base – or was the Naval base those days – down in Fremantle, on the river – or, alternatively… on full pay, that is' – you can go down there an you can peel spuds, do a few odd jobs, you see, on full pay; or alternatively, you can have a week's leave without pay. Now, what do you want

to do?' I said, 'Would a duck like water?' So I promptly grabbed the week without pay because I had to wait a week because the troop trains only went on certain times and the Naval training in those days wasn't done in Fremantle, or Perth, they had to go to Flinders Naval Depot to do your full training.

And you go across by troop train?

Yes, you go by troop train across from Perth right over to Melbourne, you see. So anyway, I promptly grabbed the week's leave without pay and that was no problem, I just went and stayed with my sister and I had a bit of a look around Perth for a week. Then I came back, on the proper date, and I was rounded up with a lot of others and I was put on a troop train, which was a very long journey in those days because there was no standard gauge railways right the way through like there is today, you had to go to Kalgoorlie on a troop train; you were crammed in, about eight to a compartment, I might add, it wasn't very comfortable. It was alright during the daytime but night-time you finished up with somebody's feet in your face and whatever. But anyway, that's by the by.
And you go to Kalgoorlie, and out to a place called Parkeston which is about two miles out. That was the changing place, you changed from one train to the other, then you changed into the Commonwealth train.

To the standard gauge railway.

To standard gauge railway, that's right – and the standard gauge railway goes all the way from Parkeston, in those days, to Port Augusta in South Australia. Then again, you change trains again; you come to Port Augusta and then they change over to the five-foot-three gauge, you see, and that five-foot-three gauge, that used to go through to Melbourne. Anyway, it was around about a four or five day trip across the Nullarbor and it was pretty rough, but it wasn't that bad really, you know.
Anyway, we get to Melbourne and, of course, Flinders Naval Depot is around about forty minutes, forty-five minutes, in the train, so they loaded us all in, down to a place called Crib Point. So they loaded us all in to the train and that's where my Naval career – call it a career if you like – started, in February 1943, or just after February 1943, down at Flinders Naval Depot. Now, each and every services, they had their own discipline, you see, and the Army, the military service, wasn't very strict at all. I mean, you know, you could get away with a bit and stuff like that but what I found the difference was, when I went into the Navy the type of discipline there – especially in the training centre, not so much when you got on board a ship, but when you are in the training centre – it's very, very strict, you know. But I fell into it quite easily because I'd already had the training in the Army so, I mean, discipline wasn't a ...

No problem.

... no problem to me at all, I just went along with it quite easily. And furthermore, I found that if you played by the rules in the Navy, there was always plenty of leave, you know. You could go up to Melbourne two weekends out of three and nobody wanted to miss out on that, unless you were an utter fool; but if you kicked over the traces just slightly, like that, you would stop with your leave and stuff like that, so okay, you wouldn't get your weekend leave. But I didn't go along with that, I played by the rules and I obeyed the discipline, so therefore I never had any bother with losing leave entitlements or anything like that.

How long did your training take?

Oh, it must have been about three months, I would say. I couldn't remember now because it's nearly fifty years ago, you see, so I couldn't tell you exactly how much unless I looked at my service certificate, how long I was there. But it would have been roughly round about three months.

And what did you train as?

I trained as a stoker – I joined up as a stoker, I put my name down as a stoker. I didn't know much about it so I just put my name down as a stoker and I subsequently found that being a stoker was to fire a boiler or look after engines and stuff, the mechanical side of the sort of thing, see. It wasn't the gunnery type part of it at all.
When I was doing my training some petty officer come round one day with a book and a pad and pencil and he said, 'Can you drive a motorcar?' Well, I'd driven a motorcar even before I was old enough to get a licence for once, you see, so I just opened my mouth and said, 'Oh, yes, I can', and he put my name down. A couple of days later they called me up and I said, 'What's going on?' and they said, 'Oh, you're going to do an ICE course'. I said, 'What does that mean?' He said, 'Internal combustion engines.' He said, 'You won't be doing a steam course, you'll be doing internal combustion engines.' I said, 'Oh, well, fair enough.'
So anyway, I started the course there in Flinders and I passed that quite okay, no worries at all. And when I came out of it, I graduated out of the school and I got drafted up to a place called Port Stephens – it's about thirty mile north of Newcastle in New South Wales. I subsequently found out it was a training depot, or training place, for landing craft. There was quite a few hundred of us there, there were a lot of Americans, Army personnel, they were training on big landing craft because, I mean, that was all the go those days, this island hopping and stuff like that, and they had to land troops and stuff like that. And it was our job to learn how to handle the landing craft, subsequently, if you went on to one of the mother ships for the landing craft, you see.
The three main ships was the *Westralia*, *Manoora* and the *Kanimbla*. They were ordinary merchant ships during peacetime but they converted them to AMCs, or armed merchant cruisers, during the war, and then they converted them again to carry landing craft, you see, with their crews and all the rest of it – and troops as well.
Well, I must have trained on that up there for about six months on these – six or eight months – on these landing craft. We used to practise landing and all the rest of it, sort of thing, see. On each craft there was an AB – an able seaman – he was the coxswain, he'd steer the boat, you see, and the stoker, he would be down the after-part of the boat with two big diesel engines, one on either side. Some had diesel engines, some had the old Ford V8 motors in them, you know. Anyway, if and when we got up to the islands we would have been loaded up with troops to land on the landing beaches. But as it transpired, it didn't turn out that way for me because, see, the whole exercise, they took too many personnel and they subsequently found out they had too many personnel for the amount that they needed. So consequently there was quite a lot of us – might have been a hundred of us, or more, I suppose – we became redundant but we couldn't go to sea on a steam-powered ship because we hadn't done a steam course, you see. So consequently we had to troop all the way back to Flinders Naval Depot again and do a steam course – how to fire boilers and how to run steam engines, and all the rest of it – so that was another school I had to go through. I graduated out of that without any problems, it wasn't that hard really.
The next thing, when I graduated out of the school, they called us onto the parade ground one

morning, they told us where we were going, which ships we were going to be drafted to, and all the rest of it. Anyway, they came to me: 'Stoker Gell.' 'Yes, Sir.' 'You are being drafted to HMAS *Pirie*, it's a corvette.' So anyway, I had to get my kitbag and hammock – everybody had a kitbag and hammock those days – wherever you were, you were like a snail, you carried all your gear with you.
So back onto a train again, up to Sydney, and on up to Brisbane, and then onto another train – a civilian train this one – went right up to Rockhampton and up to Cairns in northern Queensland. From there… like my subsequent destination was Thursday Island – that's right up the tip of Cape York in Queensland – where the *Pirie* was waiting.
Anyway, I think we got to Cairns and they couldn't go any further by train. In those days they had the old – what was the name of the plane? Those old – oh, what's the name of that plane?

Flying boats?

No.

The Dakotas?

Dakotas, yes. So anyway, they bundled me and – oh, there were a few others, we had to go to TI – and they bundled us on to this Dakota and we subsequently flew up to a place called Jacky-Jacky, that was just on the tip of Cape York. We left the plane there, with me bit of gear and stuff like that, and we got on a big Army barge and went from Jacky-Jacky over to Thursday Island by this Army barge. I forget how long it took – around about an hour, I suppose, might have been a bit longer – and when we got to Thursday Island, *Pirie* was tied up alongside the wharf. So that was my first introduction to a seagoing ship; that was almost twelve months after I joined the Navy so it was quite a while before I went to sea.

What was it like adjusting to shipboard routine and life at sea?

I didn't find any problem with it at all really. I mean, the corvette itself is a very confined space but I don't know, it's just the camaraderie amongst the fellows; it made it very easy for me to adjust. Actually, I didn't have to adjust too much at all because I just liked the life, you know, it was quite good really. Of course, when I first went on there I got a bit of chiacking, they said, oh, you know, 'Ever been seasick?' and I said, 'No, I've never been to sea before' – 'Oh, you'll cop it, you'll cop it'. Anyway, one bloke had the temerity, he said to me, 'When we get outside,' he said, 'and get a few greenies coming over, we'll dish you up a big pork chop.' I didn't rise to the bait, I said, 'Okay, mate –' I can't remember the fellow's name now but I said, 'Okay, mate, you put the big pork chop in front of me and I'll eat it.' And as good as my word, I must have steamed thousands and thousands of miles in *Pirie*, from that day onwards, and never once did I ever even feel like getting seasick.

You were lucky.

I was one of the lucky ones because, I mean, even the skipper, he used to have his bout of seasickness; but it never worried me, fortunately.
So anyway, we are laying there and the next thing we fired up the boilers. I just fell into the routine, just like putting an old pair of slippers on because it was quite easy for me really. And the discipline on ship – well, there was virtually no discipline at all. If you did your job and stuff like that, but there's none of this 'Yes sir, no sir, three bags full', like it is in a training depot

where you've got to salute everybody and stuff like that. I mean, you didn't even have to wear a rig of the day, up in the tropics there, a pair of shorts and a pair of sandshoes, or whatever, you know, that was your rig of the day.

What about when you went down to the engine room on duty?

I used to wear a shirt because of the… you could get a burn, you see, especially… you used to have overalls, you used to wear overalls, you see, when you were on watch, because of the… I mean, especially in the boiler room, because you were passing down between two boilers with 200 pound of live steam in them, and some of the pipes weren't all lagged and they were very hot; so, I mean, if you happened to touch them you could get a nasty burn off them. Used to just wear the overalls when we was on watch, in the engine room or the boiler room for that matter. So anyway, we got out at Thursday Island and I said to the fellows, 'Where are we going?' – 'Oh, we are going down to do some minesweeping' – of course, that was all new to me too, this minesweeping; but I soon found out what it was all about. But there's one thing I liked about minesweeping in as much as you couldn't operate of a night-time because, obviously, you couldn't see what you were doing because it was dark and you had to darken ship them days; you couldn't have lights all over the ship because it was a case of getting torpedoed from maybe an enemy submarine, or something like that. So we used to only operate during the day, minesweeping, and around about four o'clock in the afternoon, half past four in the afternoon, we'd go into an anchorage inside the reef, and drop the pick, and you'd have what you called an 'all night in'. That meant that you'd sleep all night, you know, whereas when you are steaming at sea you are four hours on, eight hours off, all the time, you see, right around the twenty-four hour clock.

So really, it was quite an experience to do the minesweeping. I mean, it was a bit hazardous at times. I recall one time there where… when the mines are swept, they cut the cable; the mine floats to the surface because they've got a flotation chamber, and theoretically they are supposed to be safe, you know, when the cable is cut, but it doesn't always apply. Anyway, this chap, one day, he had a .303 rifle and anybody could have a go at them if they wanted to, and you just fire away at them until you burst the – put holes in the flotation chamber and they sink, sink to the bottom and just hopefully, stay there forever.

But this particular time – it wouldn't have been much more than about 200 yards off, I suppose – and this bloke, the bullet hit one of the horns and there was about – oh, from memory, it's round about 400 pound of TNT in one of these things – and oh, there was a heck of an explosion and then I felt the ship sort of heel, you know. Although I didn't exactly see the explosion I felt the blast of it.

Yes, anyway, I felt this blast and I run out of what they called the waist of the ship, and I looked up and everything is sort of dark. I could hear bits of pattering on the upper deck, it must have been a little bit of shrapnel, I suppose, from the mine. And I thought – I had an idea that maybe we'd hit it because it was such a heck of an explosion. In those days I used to smoke and all of a sudden the thought went through my head, my God, if you are going to go over the side in a boat you'd better get your tobacco, or your cigarettes. So I run back on the mess deck and got my tobacco, or cigarettes, whatever it was, and stuff like that. But by the time I got back out on the upper deck, of course, it was okay, we hadn't hit the mine at all, but it just felt as though we had, the way the ship shuddered. But that's about the closest I ever come to, you know, having trouble during the minesweeping. And oh, you know, after that it was alright.

And of course, then when we used to anchor of a night-time, we'd drop the lines over, then we used to catch all the fresh fish and stuff like that, and that used to supplement the diet, although the diet was pretty good normally. This went on for quite a few months. Then we went back to

Thursday Island, which was our base at that particular time.
Then there was a place called Dutch New Guinea those days – it's since been taken over by Indonesia – a place called Merauke. We had to escort this merchant ship over there, across the Arafura Sea. We did two runs, if I remember rightly, two runs over to Merauke. I went ashore there in Merauke; oh, it was the most primitive place I've ever seen, I think, the natives, they were almost wild, they used to chew betel nut and walk around with no clothes on at all. It really was a bit of a shock to the system, but, you know, you sort of took it in your stride after a while. I mean, it was their nature, that's the way they lived and no-one worried too much about it; but it was a very primitive place.
I remember one of the trips we went – I think it might have been the second trip we went across there – like the Arafura Sea is not very deep. I don't know what it was but anyway, we are steaming along there and all of a sudden we felt this bump and the sonar dome underneath the ship hit something. It must have been an old wreck or something, but it did enough damage. We had to go… finish up, we had to go down to Brisbane and dock and get it fixed up, [inaudible]. So anyway, we did those two runs up there, we did the minesweeping and stuff like that. Then we came back to Brisbane and down to Sydney. And I took some leave there, I came home, I had some leave accumulated there, like that. And back in Perth, my leave was just about finished – oh, this would have been around about, getting on towards the end of 1944, just before Christmas 1944 – and I get a telegram from the ship's captain, I suppose, to report back to the ship in Fremantle. Of course, in those days nobody ever knew where the ships were going to be because there was very tight secrecy where ships were operating from.
Anyway, I went down to the docks in Fremantle and low and behold, there's the *Pirie* laying there, waiting for me to come back, so I stepped on board. We stayed in Fremantle for a while and did a couple of runs up towards Shark Bay, just on the sort of minesweeping exercises and stuff like that, but nothing really untoward, in the way of any enemy action. At this particular time, of course, the war was getting closer to being finished, but we didn't know when it was going to finish. So we steamed back to Sydney from Fremantle, went across the Bight. When the ship came over they had to put one of the fellows ashore because he got chronically seasick coming across, but when we went back we had a following sea all the way and it was, more or less, like a cruise, you know, the sea was quite good, fortunately.
Anyway, went back to Sydney and the powers that be, them days, they were organising all the ships to go back up into the Pacific, and by this time they'd formed what they called the British Pacific Fleet – BPF – that was then a lot of English ships came out because at that particular time Germany had been defeated and all the ships – well, not all of them, but the majority of ships of the British Navy were concentrated in the Pacific to try and knock Japan out as quick as possible – and they attached us to it, for what we were worth. I suppose, with capital ships, we were just like little toys against some of those battleships, and cruisers, and aircraft carriers, and stuff like that. But nevertheless, we did, I suppose we performed a useful purpose as well, you know.
So anyway, we finished up in a place called Seeadler Harbour, that's up in the Manus Islands, you see, and from there we operated up towards the Philippines – we did a couple of trips up to the Philippines. There was two islands called Leyte and Samar, they were minor islands but they were the first islands they landed on when the allies had their first push up towards Japan. [There] was a mighty battle there, land battle and everything, there. But we were, more or less, just to – don't know, might have been sightseeing, I don't know what you'd like to call it. But anyway, we did a couple of trips up there.
One trip up there, there was an English destroyer – I don't recall the name of it now but it had been in action at Okinawa, that's an island just south of Japan – and it took a bomb right on the bulkhead, between the engine room and the boiler room, blew a great big hole in it, or massive

hole, round about ten foot across, I suppose. We could see it from where we were anchored. Of course, they had to tow it back because the engines were flooded, and the boiler room was all flooded, and killed all the crew in the engine room and the boiler room. It just reminded me of just how dreadful it would have been, you know, when you really get into the big stuff. I suppose, touch wood, we didn't get into it with the smaller ships.

You didn't get into real action?

No, I didn't get into the real action, no, but, as I said, that reminded me of just what it could be like when I seen that big hole torn in the side of that ship, just how nasty it could be.

Pirie had been in action at Oro Bay.

Pirie had been in action in Oro Bay in 1942, that was before I joined the Navy, of course, and she was convoying some ships out of Oro Bay in New Guinea and she was attacked by a Japanese float plane. It was a very unfortunate bit of action because the float plane came in from aft apparently. As he flew across the ship he dropped this bomb – I don't know how big it was but it was a fair sized one – and it went right through the bridge. And the gunner officer, who was leaning over the bridge apparently, leaning out to instruct his gun crew, which was on the forecastle, what to do, he was unfortunate – [Sub] Lieutenant Ellershaw his name was – and he was decapitated at that particular time when the bomb went through. And it didn't actually explode, it just hit him as it went through, but when it hit the forward gun on the forecastle it exploded and it just blew the gun to pieces, and about six of the gun crew, they were unfortunate, they were all killed. It blew a fairly big hole in the forecastle.
To this day – and there was another chap actually, we went to the same school together down at Wagin, unusually. He was a telegraphist in the wireless room, and when it got blasted – his name was Lindon Gladstone – and when the bomb went off, it blew this hole and it blew the gun and killed them all – all these fellows, and stuff like that – and the blast, it went into the bowel of the ship, you see, like that. And Lindon had the door of the radio room open and he copped the full blast of the bomb. And to this day – I haven't seen for a while now – but he's got ear trouble, it's affected his ears, and that was over fifty years ago, and he still suffers with the same trouble. He and I went to school together, down in our home town of Wagin. Poor old Lindon, he was one of the lucky ones, he didn't get killed but he's had a lifetime of hearing loss which wasn't so good.
So anyway, that was the action that the *Pirie* got stuck into but that was before my time, of course.
So anyway, then we went back to Seeadler Harbour and we were doing a bit of… not convoy duty, we were just sort of patrol duty outside the harbour in case of submarines, but by that particular time the enemy was driven right back and there was no problem with submarines then.
Anyway, we used to go with the British Fleet a couple of times. And I don't know, it was up in the Pacific there, there was a cruiser named the *Swiftsure*, that was an English cruiser named *Swiftsure* – this was the nearest to what you might call a bit of action, I suppose. We were delivering mail or something – I'm not too sure, but we were delivering something to the *Swiftsure*, and we were steaming alongside her, you know. An English cruiser to an Australian corvette is, you know, just like a little beetle alongside it sort of thing, see. And I remember, I was on watch this particular day, and we were steaming alongside each other, not that far away, and you could even see the big screws of the cruiser just gently turning over in the lucid green water. And all of a sudden, for some reason or other, the two ships came together, you know.

We were on the port side – our port side was on the starboard side to this cruiser, you see. I can still see it now, on the port side of the *Pirie* there was a motorboat, and this motorboat's on davits, and on each wing there's a bridge, there's an Oerlikon gun on the corvette, see. And for some reason or other – I don't know how it come about – but the swell of the sea, and the slow movement of the ships, they came together, and as the *Swiftsure* was in the trough and we were on top of the swell, and as the swell changed we went down and the *Swiftsure* came up. And I heard this, oh, screeching of metal, you know, and crunching, and stuff like that, and it was all over in, well, fifteen to twenty seconds, it was all over. And of course, the coxswain on the *Pirie*, he swung the wheel hard to starboard to get away from the *Swiftsure*, but the damage was done, and the poor old motorboat, that just finished up matchwood, you know.

A write-off.

I was watching the whole kit and caboodle of it, you know, but I tell you what, it frightened the daylights out of me too. You see this great monster ship sort of crunching into you, you know – and the Oerlikon, the Oerlikon gun on the port side of the *Pirie*, the whole wing of the bridge was standing at about a forty-five degree angle. When it just got hold of it but it just pushed it up in the air like that. But that, as I said, is the nearest I came to having any ...

Were there any injuries?

No, fortunately there was no injuries, no, it only just sort hit the superstructure of the ship, it didn't actually do like the body of the ship, it was only just the superstructure of it, you know, the wing of the bridge and the motorboat, you see, and pushed that all in. And of course, they slewed it away to starboard so that there was no further contact with the *Swiftsure*. Then we had to go back and get all that fixed up, you see.

Did you get much leave?

Oh yes, well, when we was up there, up in the islands, we didn't get much leave up there because there was nowhere to go in any case. When we was in Seeadler, I mean, you could go ashore there – I think there was a picture theatre there but that's about all, you see. Likewise, in Thursday Island – this is going back a little bit when I first joined it – they had a picture theatre there and we used to go ashore and go to the pictures and stuff like that; but that's about all, there was no other entertainment. Maybe the bigger ports and that, they might have had entertainment parties, or concert parties, but we never saw inside any of them at all. Anyway, where was I? So the entertainment was virtually nil, you know. When you were on board ship, well, the only entertainment you had was just writing a letter, you know.

What about relaxation?

Well, when you are working four hours on, eight hours off, by the time you do your bit of 'dhobi' – and that's your washing, of course, if understand what it means – and the first thing you do is sit down and write a letter. Well, I was engaged, I was engaged to my present wife at that particular time. I reckon I was about the most prolific letter writer on the ship but how the hell I ever done it, I don't know, because what was there to write about? You doing your washing, having your tucker, that's about all you could do because you couldn't say where you were or nothing like that, you weren't allowed to because of censorship regulations those days, you see. But anyway, that's about all. Well, you might read a book or have a game of cards with a couple

of the fellows, but apart from that you didn't do anything else on board a ship at all. Some of the time you'd want to go and have a sleep because two or three of the watches, I mean, you do the first watch, that's eight o'clock till twelve o'clock at night, and then the middle watch, that's midnight to four o'clock in the morning, so your whole sleeping pattern is all disrupted all the time so that at any one time you could try, just grab forty winks whenever you possibly could, if you weren't writing letters or whatever sort of thing, see. So you know, everything was… oh, I don't know how to explain it but just… well, you didn't worry about entertainment sort of thing, see, you just did what you could.

Where were you when you heard that the war had ended?

Oh, well, I couldn't put a finger on exactly where we were – we were away at sea – because we'd been operating, like I said earlier on, I'd been operating out of Seeadler, in Manus, and we were with a big convoy. I don't know exactly where we were going because being in the Engineering Branch you didn't even know where you were or what you were doing, and stuff like that. But we were somewhere between Japan and Seeadler Harbour, you see. Where? I don't know.
But anyway, when I first go the news of the end of the war; well, I was on the first watch – or middle watch, I don't know, it was night-time anyway – could have even been the morning watch, but I was on watch. And we used to come out of the boiler room, half-way through, or whatever, like that, and we used to come up and we used to make a jug of tea, or coffee, and then take it back to the boiler room. Now, in the boiler room there was two stokers and a petty officer, you see – petty officer stoker, he was in charge of the boiler room. In the engine room there was about a stoker in there plus an engine-room artificer. But this particular night I'd come up out of the boiler room to make some coffee and I was rattling around – because they had those metal jugs and stuff, like that – and the radio room, the door opened and the telegraphist, he put his head out, he said, 'Who's that?' and I said, 'Oh, it's Garnie.' I said, 'Why, what do you want?' He said, 'I just got a flash over the radio.' He said, 'They've dropped a bomb, it's an atomic bomb. I've never heard of it before but they've dropped this bomb on Japan and,' he said, 'my godfather! From what I've heard it has done terrific damage.' And that was the first time I heard of it, that was in the dead of night when I heard that, you see. And I said, 'Oh, yes.' So anyway, I made my coffee and I went back into the boiler room, and I told the fellows. So that was my first intimation that the war was getting towards a close. Well, mind you, it was still on, that was the first bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. Subsequently, later on, they dropped another one on Nagasaki, I think about four or five days later, just to give them a bit of a gee up to pull the pin, you see.
Of course, after they dropped the one on Nagasaki – we were with a big convoy, there was all sorts of ships there, there was cruisers, and battleships – *King George V* was one of them – *KG5* they used to call it in those days – and there were Americans and all the rest of it like that, and aircraft carriers. Anyway – I think it was just after they dropped the bomb on Nagasaki, the second atomic bomb – I mean, it's a dreadful thing to see all those poor unfortunate people get killed, but it saved us a lot of bother too, I suppose.

Millions of ours.

Well, that's right, you know, because they reckon if they'd have landed, had to actually land on Japan proper, the loss of life would have been horrific, really horrific. So, I mean, I suppose you've got to weigh one against the other, which was the better thing to do. Anyway, the poor unfortunates, they got devastated there.
So anyway, then the news came through, the war's finished, you see. We are all running around

calling each other mister; none of this saying I'm Stoker this, or AB this, I'm Mister Gell, or Mister Smith, or Joe Blow, or whatever; just fooling about, stuff like that.
So anyway, we kept on steaming – when did they sign the surrender? – I think it was on 2 September 1945, 2 September I think it was.

The Japanese surrendered on 15 August.

Yeah, on the 15th, but they signed the surrender on 2 August 1945 [sic].

Yes.

15 August, well, it would have been round about 15 August, it was just before that when they dropped the atomic bombs, you see, and then on the 15th they officially threw their hand in, you see. So that was okay.
So anyway, we are steaming away there and – I don't know, we are probably thousands of miles from anywhere – and then they said, 'Oh, well, we are going up to Japan.' I said, 'Oh, are we?' So away we went. The next thing, we are steaming in to Tokyo Bay.
Now, Tokyo Bay is a very, very big expanse of water, you know, you can see for miles and stuff like that. And you go past Yokohama – Yokohama is on the left-hand side, or the port side, as you steam in. Anyway, by the time we dropped the pick there, this would have been around about, oh, towards the end of August, I suppose, when we dropped the pick there and stuff like that. When we settled down and looked around you couldn't see anything else but capital ships – north, south, east and west there was aircraft carriers, there was cruisers, bloomin' dreadnoughts, all sorts of ships – and little *Pirie*. She wasn't the only one, there was a few others there too; it was in amongst all this lot, you see. And what transpired, we were there when they signed the surrender, you see, which was a very historic occasion for me – well, for everybody, you see.
So anyway, come 2 September, the big signing day on the *Missouri* – we could see it in the distance but we couldn't [sic] we were too far away. So that particular day – we were always 'dry' ships, like you could have beer, liquor was issued to you when you was in harbour and stuff like that sort of thing, you could get beer, but never any rum. You see, the British Navy, they had a daily issue of rum, or Jamaican rum, every day, you see, and that was the only time that I ever partook of a splicing the mainbrace. They sent the motorboat over to a 'kipper' – we called them 'kipper' ships, you see – that's the Pommy ship, English ship, might have been a destroyer or one like that –and they come back with a great big demijohn of rum.
So anyway, we were all lined up, we got a cup each like that, and we were all lined up, and they give us half a cup of rum, splice the mainbrace, because that day, that particular time, they were going to sign the surrender on the *Missouri*, you see. So anyway, we spliced the mainbrace.
In the afternoon, or just after they signed the surrender, or before they signed the surrender, somebody got the bright idea, I'll get a blank envelope, you see – anybody, any of us – go round the whole ship's company, as many as you could possibly get, you see, like that, and get them to sign, get them to put their signature on this envelope, you see. And you just leave a little window in the envelope for to whom you were going to address it to, you see; which, in my case, I addressed to my present wife, and she still holds that envelope today.
So anyway, I got as many signatures as I possibly could – I got the engineer officer, and oh, all me stoker mates, and some of the ABs, and all the rest of it like that – the ERAs. Obviously, I couldn't get them all on because there was about, from memory, about eighty personnel on a corvette, you see, sixty to eighty personnel.
Anyway, no stamps – you couldn't get stamps them days, you just write up in the right-hand corner, 'No stamps available' – 'NSA' we used to put on it. And then I got the ship's writer – the

engineer's writer – he printed on the top of the envelope, from memory, 'The signing of the surrender on 2 September 1945' and then I put Lily's address; she was in Hollywood Hospital, she was a nursing aid in Hollywood Hospital in Perth at that time. Anyway, I posted it off to her, and she received it alright, and we've kept that letter, or she's kept that envelope, ever since for posterity, and she's still got it now, wouldn't part with it for anything.
So that's my experience as far as – when I heard the war finished, and where I was when the war finished.

What were your thoughts about returning to civilian life?

Well, at that particular time I didn't know how long it was going to be before I returned to civilian life, and it turned out it was quite a while after that before I returned to civilian life. So I'll go a bit further before I return to civilian life.
I came back – that's right, when we left Tokyo Bay, went down to Okinawa – we only stopped there for a couple of days, then we went down to a place called… in the Philippines, used to be the big naval base there, Yankee naval base just after the war – Subic Bay. We stayed in Subic Bay there for a little while, then we went over to Hong Kong. We were doing a bit of patrol duty out there because there was supposedly pirates and all the rest of it, but we never saw any of them at all.
It was during one of these patrol periods that I fell ill – not physically ill, or not mentally ill for that matter, don't get me wrong – but I developed a massive abscess in my left thumb, of all places, right on the joint of my left thumb. And it got that bad that I couldn't even keep a watch, my hand was just all swollen and it was just very, very painful. So when we went back into Hong Kong Harbour they sent me on to a hospital ship – it was called *HMS Jerusalem*, of all things – and they operated on me there to release the pressure on my thumb, and stuff like that. I was on the hospital ship actually longer than I should have been really, and in the meantime, blow me down, the *Pirie* set sail for Australia, didn't she, left old Garnie like a shag on a rock. I remember, I put my head out of the scuttle of the *Jerusalem* and the *Pirie* went past and she was only about fifty yards away, and everybody was waving to me. I nearly cried, you know, just left every… you know, well, the blokes I'd been with for the last fifteen or eighteen months, I just left them like that, you know. And I never saw the ship from that day to this, I was completely cut off, you know.
So anyway, I convalesced and then I got… you know, I just had a sore hand, it wasn't that bad really but anyway, I convalesced and I went to a ship called the *Bonaventure*. It was a Pommy ship, a kipper ship, it was a midget submarine mother ship, you see, and I took passage on the *Bonaventure* from Hong Kong to Sydney, as a passenger; I didn't keep a watch or anything, I was just a passenger. There was two or three of us, passengers on the same ship.
Anyway, gets to Sydney and I walked ashore there, nobody knew me from Adam, you know. I didn't have any money, unfortunately. If I'd had a bit of money I think I could have had a bit of a holiday, but nobody knew where I was, you see.
So I fronted up to the police office in Balmoral, that was *Penguin*, that was the depot in Sydney, you see – HMAS *Penguin* – and he said, 'Who are you?' I told him. He said, 'Where are you from?' I said, '*Pirie*; I left her up in Hong Kong; I just come south on the *Bonaventure*, on a Pommy ship.' He said, 'Oh, I've never heard of you.' I had my uniform on so obviously I was in the Navy. So anyway, it took them a couple of days. They had to send a signal out to find out where I was from, and what ship I was on. I got all my gear together eventually. That would have been round about – getting towards Christmas 1945 by that time. I'd been engaged to Lily at that time for about twelve months or more and we'd arranged [inaudible] to get married.
So anyway, I said, 'Will they give me leave' – and the only way I could get home – well, the only

way I got home from *Penguin* was there was a big ship called the *Aquitania*, she was a big troop carrier, you know, and she was going back to the old country, you see. Anyway, they shipped me onto that and I took passage on that to Fremantle. I came ashore with quite a few other fellows on the *Karangi*, that was the old boom defence vessel in Fremantle that particular time. And I stepped ashore and who should be waiting for me but my eldest sister and Lil, you know Lily, they were waiting on the wharf to meet me, you see, which was good – and we got married and that was that. So that's the finish of that.

So after we were married – Lily, she was still serving in the [EMWARS], that's the Medical Services, Hollywood Hospital – and she said, 'When do you think you might be coming home?' I said, 'Oh, I'll go back to *Penguin*, I'll go back to Balmoral and I'll probably be home in a couple of months, might even be less – get me discharge and back into civvy street' – you see. Little did I know what was in store for me.

So I went back to Balmoral and I was twiddling my thumbs there, not doing anything, no duties or anything at all, just sort of hanging around, waiting. And next thing: 'Stoker Gell.' 'Yes, Sir. Going home am I?' 'No, no. Where's home?' I said, 'Fremantle, Perth.' He said, 'No, you are going up to Newcastle.' I said, 'Oh, come on.' He said, 'Yeah.' This was around about February 1946. So I said, 'What am I going to do up there.' He said, 'You are going to pick up *MWL255*.' I said, '*MWL255*, what's that?' He said, 'It's a motor water lighter, it's like a little tanker, little water tanker.' He said, 'You've done an ICE course in the early part of your career in the Navy?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well, it's on your papers so you can work diesel engines.' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well, that's where you are going, you can help to commission this confounded thing up in Newcastle' – my old stamping ground earlier on when I was having my leave, I used to have my leave round Newcastle, you see, from Port Stephens.

So anyway, I go up to – the depot up there was called *Maitland*, HMAS *Maitland*, so I reported up to *Maitland*. And I said, 'Where's this *MWL255*?' 'Oh, she's still on the slips, she's not quite finished yet.' So I went over to the docks where they were building it and to all intents and purposes it was just like a little tanker, all the working part of it was down aft and the centre part of it and the forward part of it was all water tanks, you see. It turned out there was only about – oh, I can't remember now – there was only about eight or nine of us in the crew, there was about three stokers, a petty officer, and a motor mechanic because any mechanical work, he would know what to do, I can fix it up sort of thing, see.

So anyway, we fiddled around there and eventually we commissioned it, dropped her into the water and stuff like that. And that particular time, it wasn't big enough to carry a cook, we used to have to do all our own cooking, we used to get our own stores in, and we used to take it in turn cooking and stuff like that, you see. I'm going to tell you this because this is a little bit humorous – oh, well, I think it's a bit humorous anyway.

So after we'd swung the compass – not me, but the captain – he was a lieutenant of some sort and we got going, you see, and we left Newcastle. We finished up on Thursday Island again, you see, back to the old stamping ground. Anyway, we stopped in Thursday Island for a short time and then we went over to Port Moresby. One particular day, Norm Browning, he was one of me stoker mates on the MWL, you see, and we'd brought a swag of tucker in, you see. Of course, I didn't know what meat was there. Anyway, he grabbed this chunk of meat and he put it in the oven – he was going to roast this bit of meat for tea, or whatever it was – for dinner. Half-way through roasting he called me, he said, 'Hey, Garnie, come and have a look at this.' I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'That bit of meat, I put it in the oven. I just put a knife in and it's still red.' He said, 'It's been there for about an hour or more.' And I said, 'Give us a look at it.' I said, 'You silly bastard, you're baking bloody corned beef.' This is fair dinkum. He said, 'I didn't know the difference.' I said, 'Oh, well you do now.' We tried to eat it, you know, but it was like salt lick. We finished up casting it over the side. This was just one of the little interludes

cooking, you see.
And another time… they supplied us with a cookery book, you see, so you could make puddings or whatever, you see. So anyway, he was on duty this day, he was going to do some cooking. He said, 'I'll make one of these spotted dogs – plum duff.' I said, 'Yeah, righto.' So he got the bowl out and he got all the ingredients, and gees, it looked nice and he beat it all up. And when he was ready to boil the confounded thing he didn't have nothing to put it in, you see, didn't have a calico bag or nothing. 'Oh, gees, what can we do?' I said, 'I know what I'll do. I grabbed one of his singlets and I tied the arms of the damn thing up like that, and we dropped it into the old singlet, you know, tied the neck of the singlet, and tied the bottom of the singlet, and boiled it up. It turned out alright, it was a good puddin', you know.

Would this be the meaning of any port in the storm?

I haven't seen him from that day to this but I'd like to meet up with him, just laughing, reminisce about things like that, you know. But anyway, the puddin' turned out alright, it was pretty good. Going up the reef, somebody said to me – we went up inside the reef because it is more calmer there, you see. Before we left Newcastle somebody said, 'Get some good hooks,' he said, ' and a good line and you can trawl for mackerel on the way up', and I've still got photos somewhere around. We dropped a line over, going up the reef there like that – and I was on watch in the engine room that particular day – we were doing round about ten knots, I suppose. Then all of a sudden, there was a strike. All you do it get a great big hook like that, and tie red and white bunting on it, and as it goes through the water it flashes around like a fish sort of thing, see. And anyway, they started pulling it in, like that, with the ship going forward and the fish trying to pull away from it like that, it just parted the line, it must have been a big mackerel, you know. So anyway, he said, 'The next strike we have I'll give you a yell,' he said, 'and you can cut the engines.' I said, 'Righto, fair enough.' He rigged the line up again. Before hardly anything happened at all he said, 'Cut them, cut them, Garnie', so I just cut the throttle and let the ship go like that, and they pulled in this great big mackerel. He was a Spanish mackerel, he was a beautiful big fish, he was about three foot long, you know, and I suppose he'd weigh about forty, fifty, pounds; he was a beauty, you know. So we had plenty of fresh fish that particular time, you know. But all these little things, you know, they were quite good.
Then, when we left – what do you call it? Port Moresby, went down to a place – I don't know what little island – it was just a little island, it was off Milne Bay. We got onto a bit of a shady business there, I don't crow about it too much. There was a big warehouse there and it was stocked up with all sorts of stuff – tinned meat and goodness knows what. And this particular night Norm said to me, 'Come on, Garnie' – there was a couple of us, two or three of us – 'We'll get into this place and see what we can find, knock a bit of stuff off', you see. We all used to smoke, them days. So anyway, we gets into this bloomin' warehouse and I came across this big box – well, not big box, it was around about two foot square, it was about three inches deep, like that, you know – it was all sealed up and all it had on it was, across it in broad English, was 'Tobacco'. I actually called him Whimpy: 'Look at this, Whimpy, Tobacco.' He said, 'That'll do, Garnie, whip it back.' We pinched a couple of cases of fruit or something like that, tinned food, but it wasn't that bad really.
Anyway, we get the damn stuff back on the MWL, you see – in the evening, it was dark, you see – and we ripped it open – it was full of bloody nigger twist, it was like black straps. The New Guinea natives, they used to go mad over the stuff, this nigger twist we used to call it, you see. And I said, 'Cripes, we can't smoke that bloody stuff.' He said, 'Oh, Christ, I'm not going to smoke that, no, no. Oh,' he said, 'anyway, leave it.' So we just left the damn stuff.
This is digressing a little bit. That particular place, we were tied up alongside the wharf – this is

before we knocked the warehouse off, you see – and I was talking to a bloke on the wharf, he was an Australian bloke, you see. And he said, 'See that ship coming in?' What they call the Civil Administration boat, it was – the Civil Administration, they used to administer just after the war, they sort of administer all the native population, stuff like that, you see. I don't know whether you've ever heard a New Guinea native talk pidgin English, but it's really, really cute, some of the sayings, what they come out with, you see. Anyway, we were tied up and Smoky said, 'There's the Rasputin' – that was the name of the boat – he said, 'There's the Rasputin coming in now. When it comes in it will tie up, just walk up and ask them what name belonga your ship', you see. So anyway, of course, I waited until it tied up, and one of the fuzzy-wuzzies there, he's fiddling around, tying the ship up, and I went up to him, I said, 'What name belonga your boat?' He said, 'Rice Puddin." Their comical way of talking – he probably said Rasputin but it just sounded like Rice Puddin', you know. That's when he wised me up because he said, 'When he tells you you'll laugh your bloomin' head off.' I said, 'I did too', you know, this Rice Puddin'. So that was a couple of little highlights on the MWL.
So anyway, we left there, still in possession of this bung twist, you see. So we get up to a place called HMAS [*Torangau*], that was on the New Guinea mainland, a bit further north. We stayed there for a little while. Then we shipped out for Rabaul over where the Japs had it during the war. And our prime work there was to fill up Japanese ships with water because in those days, at that particular time, the allies, they'd just cut up Rabaul, they didn't land there because it was too hazardous to land there, it was too well defended by the Japanese Army, you see. And there were thousands and thousands of Japanese troops still there and they had to be repatriated – I'm talking around about May 1946 by this time – April, May 1946.

The Royal Navy commandeered the Japanese ships, had they?

No, no, no, they were fully manned by Japanese crews, everything, but they were all disarmed cruisers, or anything at all, didn't matter what it was, you know, and they converted them into troop carriers, you see, to take the troops back home. But the stumbling block was that they had to have fresh water for the trip from Rabaul back to Japan mainland, you see. During the war years Rabaul got flattened, I mean, they never landed any troops there but the aircraft, they just flattened everything, all the wharfs and any installations at all, they just bombed them almost out of existence. The only way they could get fresh water – they'd rigged up what they called a water point, you see. We'd go in there because we were only shallow draught, you see, and we'd pick up about 400 ton of water – fresh water – then we'd take it out to the Japanese ships in the harbour, and we'd tie up alongside them, and then we'd start our auxiliary engines going and we'd pump the fresh water into their water tanks. And we were doing this for about four months, off and on. Not on a regular basis, but nearly every day we'd be watering ships here and watering ships there. That's what we did so consequently I didn't get home till – even thought about coming back into civvy street until August, you see – I think it was 6 August before I even ...

This was '46?

'46, yeah, that's what I said. And I said to Lil when I left, after my honeymoon, I said, 'Oh, I'll be home in a couple of months, and it was nearly eight months before I got home sort of thing, see. That in itself was quite an experience, you know, because you had the close association with the Japanese, that was my first association with Japanese, and you come across all stratas of them, you know, and stuff like that. Of course, they were very good to us, they wouldn't even say boo to you. We used to go on the ship and we'd go anywhere, we'd just walk through the ship – it

didn't matter where it was, we'd walk through the ship.
I remember one night there – of course, if you tied up late in the afternoon you'd just stay there till the next morning because you couldn't navigate in the harbour in the night-time. With this Japanese mob – and they were drinking saki, you know – and I can still remember now, they don't drink it out of glasses, well, they may do now, but then they had little teacups and I didn't know how potent this confounded stuff was. We all sat around the table – of course, I couldn't speak Japanese but they could see when my cup was empty and they kept filling up – they had, oh, great big, like a big flagon of this saki, you know. Oh, my godfather, I finished up as silly as a wet week, you know, and I staggered out of there. I don't know how I even got down the rope ladder back to the MWL, you know. I was crook for about two days after. That was my first and only foray into drinking saki. I thought, that's the finish, no more saki for me. But by and large, we had a pretty good life there.
One little tragedy – it didn't happen to me. Harking back to the early days, when I was up in Port Stephens, there was the *Westralia*, I was telling you about. She was, after this particular time, she was up there repatriating a lot of Australian troops from there too, taking them back home, you see, take them back to Australia. And we were tied up alongside the *Westralia* – her upper decks were well and truly about twenty-five feet above our little packet – and on the MWL, on each side of the ship, down towards aft, there were two pieces of angle iron, like that, and resting on the angle irons were Carley rafts so that if you ever got in strife at all, and you had to go over the side, you could just pull the rope and it would slide down these angle irons. Little did I know that it was going to be the demise of a person with these angle irons, you see.
This particular day I was sitting, just sitting there doing nothing particular and I looked up and over the ship's side – not my ship, the *Westralia* – they had a Jap, they had him on like a… what do you call it? A plank with a couple of ropes, and he was chipping the paint, bit of rust and paint like that. Now, whether it was deliberate, what happened, I don't know, but one of the ropes gave way. And I can still see him now in my mind's eye, he just tumbled down like that – and if our ship hadn't been there he would have just hit the water – it wouldn't have hurt him, it was only a twenty foot drop, you see. But the poor unfortunate devil, as he came down – I can still hear the thump, whoomph! like that – he hit his head on this bit of angle iron sticking out like that. Of course, he was dead before he hit the water, he was dead, you know.
But life, even in them days, was pretty cheap as far as they were concerned; nobody worried about him, they didn't even look for him, they just left him there. About four or five days later, of course, nature took its course and he became bloated and he floated. And I can still see the Army barge, the Army barge went out and they just dropped the front down like that and they hauled the body in like that – took it ashore and just dropped it on the beach, you know. I mean, it's not a very nice thing, but I explain this to you, they didn't care too much, you see.

That life is cheap.

Yeah.

Life was cheap.

They put the body there like that and they just chucked an old tarpaulin, left him in the tropical sun there for about two or three hours before they come along – oh, I don't know what, just disposed of the body, I suppose – they'd have to bury him, whatever, you see.
But that was another little thing that I experienced up there. It was a bit tragic really. Even though they were ex-enemy, I mean, I couldn't bring myself to deliberately hurt them, not like they did to some of our fellows, you know.

Talk about this Norm Browning – this is another little humorous side of it, you know. The Japanese, when they were on top they were very dominant, you know, very arrogant, and you had to bow to them and all this, call them 'sir' and all the nonsense sort of thing, see. We used to get a working party – they would send a working party down to clean the ship up and do all the dirty jobs around the place that we didn't want to do, stuff like that. And they used to come down – oh, there might be half a dozen of them at a time, you see – and they'd always call you 'master' . Fair dinkum, I used to feel about as big as a threepenny bit when they used to call me 'master' and all this bloody nonsense, you know. But they'd salute you, and they'd bow to you, and stuff like that.
Anyway, this Norm Browning – Whimpy – one day one bloke come up to him. He said, 'Master, water', he wanted a drink, you see. No, no, that's right – oh, that's right, he said, 'Water' – he didn't say… he just [said] 'water' like that and Norm said –I can still see him – he said, 'Come on' – he wanted him to salute him and all that. I said, 'You cheeky devil, getting a bloomin' Jap to salute.' He said, 'Oh, bugger them, that's what I'm here for, to get saluted and [be] called master. I like it.' He was only an AB. I don't know, it was funny to me at the time, I suppose.
But, you know, they were so subservient, you know, and call you 'master' and oh, it was – just used to ...

They were a very complex race, weren't they?

Yeah, very complex people. I suppose, if you wanted, you could turn around and give them a kick up the bum, do anything to them, but I could never bring myself to touch them, no way. A couple of times there – at that particular time they were holding the war-crime trials in Rabaul. It was open to the public – well, the public as is – and I went there once or twice. They had a big army marquee, you know, and they had the military tribunal set up, and stuff like that, and pews for anybody watching or listening. And I went in there a couple of times, and I'll tell you what, Lorna, some of the charges read out there, oh, they'd just make your hair curl.

They were horrendous.

Such horrific things that they were charged with. A lot of them, they were condemned to death, not at that particular trial, but I know a lot of them were condemned to death for their war crimes at that particular time.
But, you know, you'd wonder how anybody could treat a captive person the way they treated them, it was just unbelievable, some of the charges that were read out to them.

And the things they did were unbelievable to our standard of thoughts anyway.

Yeah. Well, see – and that was another thing – this is harking back to when I was on the hospital ship in Hong Kong – the hospital ship had previously come up from Hainan – there was a lot of Australians and Dutch personnel, they were captive there. And, of course, I was walking around, you know, and they were lying in their bunks and they were just skin and bone, starved, dreadful to see.
So anyway, that's when I – and I went back to [*Torangau*] and that's when news of my discharge had come through, and I was still right up in New Guinea. So I had to leave the MWL by that time and I subsequently came back to Fremantle.

When was that?

That was August 1946 – I think it was about the 6th, I'm not too sure now – 14th or something like that. I finally got my discharge but when I went back into civvy street I felt a bit strange for a while, very strange, because I'd been off since early 1942, and had a uniform on and everything is sort of done for you, and all of a sudden you've got to adjust yourself back to civvy street, and everything was sort of strange.
During the war years, most times the wife waited for the husband to come home; with me, the boot was on the other foot, I waited for my wife to come home because she was still in the Army and she couldn't get out because she was, more or less, essential there, to help to run the hospital sort of thing, see. And oh, I waited for quite a long time before she finally got her discharge.
But oh, once I got back into the swing of things – I got a job and stuff like that – I didn't find the changeover so hard.

Wasn't traumatic.

No, it wasn't traumatic, no. I just sort of settled down, I got a job, and that was it, and I just went on from there.
Previous to joining up, previous to going into the services, like I said, I had no particular training, I was only working in the mines and stuff like that, and I didn't have any trade or special training. But when I came out I made an application through the CRTS – that's the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, you see – you could learn a trade, or whatever. Eventually I went into the building trade and I learnt to be a carpenter, an occupation I subsequently followed right up until I retired. So by and large, I had a pretty good life, not bad at all. And the Veterans Affairs, they look after me very well – and I retired early because it was a privilege I had, I retired at sixty, I didn't have to continue full-time work till sixty-five like a lot of other fellows did. I used the War Service Loan to acquire my first new house. And by and large, I've had a good life. I've turned seventy now so I can't complain, I've had a pretty good go.

Well, that's great.

So I hope that just about explains my short life.

Thank you very much.

Not my short life, my long life, but everything in a capsule.

Well, thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us, we appreciate that. Thank you, Garn.

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