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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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F4267 Reed, Albert Edward

Recorded
at: City Beach, WA
on: 17 January 1996
by: John Roberts

Description
Part of a collection of nineteen oral history interviews conducted by the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association of Western Australia. Interviewers included John Roberts, Margaret Rickard, Lorna Dodd, William Gray Ritchie and Jack Shepheard.

Albert Edward Reed, as an able seaman, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvette HMAS *Wallaroo*, minesweeper HMAS *Mercedes* and general purpose vessel *GPV-954*, Australian waters and North Pacific Ocean, 1942-1946, interviewed by John Roberts

Bert Reed talks about his early life and schooling; early working days; enlistment into the RAN and Naval training at HMAS *Cerberus*; being drafted first to HMAS *Voyager* but then to HMAS *Wallaroo;* conditions on board the *Wallaroo* and operational routine; shore leave; both the official and personal accounts of the sinking of the *Wallaroo*; rescue from the sea by HMAS *Dubbo*; the after effects of the experience on himself and others; being drafted to minesweeper HMAS *Mercedes* and minesweeping off Fremantle and Darwin; being drafted to GPV-954 and service in the New Guinea-New Britain area; return to Australia and discharge; post-war employment; marriage and family; housing; retirement activities including the WA Corvettes' Association.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, March 2002

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Transcript methodology

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

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

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

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Identification: This is an interview with Bert Reed and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, Western Australia. Bert is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association and the interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes. He was also our president of the Western Australia Branch from 1992 to [19]94.

Bert Reed was born in Victoria Park on 4/12/1924 and he joined the Navy on 11 June 1942 as a seaman, and he served in the following corvette: HMAS *Wallaroo*, J222, as well as two other ships which he will mention later.

Sixty of these small ships, officially Bathurst Class 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, 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 was conducted by John Roberts on 17/1/1996 at City Beach [WA].

What is your full name?

Albert Edward Reed, John.

When and where were you born?

I was born on 4 December 1924 in a small hospital at Victoria Park.

And you obviously had lived in Victoria Park all your life?

No, John, we didn't actually; we lived in Bayswater for almost all of our lives. I had an aunty in Victoria Park who tended to help mum look after the kids and that's where she went, to that little hospital to have me.

What about some of your early schooling?

Schooling was all at Bayswater: kindergarten, Sunday school, and schooling, right through the Bayswater School, and also Bayswater Sea Scouts, I spent some years there.

With your involvement with the Sea Scouts, do you think this possibly created an interest in the Navy?

I think it ultimately did, John. I did want to join the Army at first, mainly because my brother had already joined and I thought, being quite naive and young, that I could just join the Army and join up with his unit - which, of course, was rather naive those days.

And at what age did you leave school and what occupation did you follow?

I went from Bayswater School to Perth Boys' High School and left halfway through the 8th Year at fourteen – just fourteen and a half – and went to the jewellers, [Caris] Brothers, Proprietary Limited, who were, in those days, the biggest jeweller in Perth. Started there as a boy doing the usual chores of those years - cleaning counters, sweeping floors, cleaning toilets, running messages, and that kind of thing.

Now, obviously, when you were working in Caris Brothers you came in contact with other people who had enlisted at the beginning of the war.

Yes, well, see, I joined Caris Brothers in 1939 – in May 1939 – and, of course, it wasn't very long after that that the war was declared and there were quite a few who were in reserve – naval reserves, and army – and, of course, they were called up straight away. There was at least half a dozen that I can recall and at my tender age of fourteen this all seemed rather strange, to see these guys one day, and then the next day they weren't there.

And so you remained with Caris Brothers until such time as you enlisted in the Navy?

I did. I remained there, and because of these more senior people going, not just in the first instance but gradually over the next twelve months, two years, more and more joined up, and even though I was only sixteen I was put in charge of a department because the senior people were gone. And I recall mum and dad saying I should get a rise so I approached the manager and stammered out a request for a rise, which was rather hard to do for me those days, and I got a small rise of one and six a week, I think it was.

Was it difficult to get into the Navy at the time you decided to enlist?

No, not then it wasn't. I had tried to get into the Army, put my age up, but of course, they wouldn't have me. But I was getting a little bit frustrated because customers were saying at the counter to me, 'Why aren't you in the forces?' and even though, at that stage, I'd barely turned seventeen, I became rather frustrated at this and made enquires with the Navy, and they accepted my application, which I took home to the family, to mum and dad to sign. Of course, mum was aghast at this but I convinced her that they wouldn't call me up until I was eighteen, which I knew was wrong, I told a fib. So they signed the papers and it was only shortly after that that I had my call-up and I reported to go to *Cerberus* in May of 1942.

Did you have any say in what rating or what area you wished to serve in whilst you were in the Navy?

I can't recall honestly, John. I know I went in as a seaman, whether I had a choice or not, I don't recall. I went in as a seaman and stayed as a seaman, but I've got no recollection of having a choice.

So you joined up in Perth and you went to Flinders, to *Cerberus*. How did you go? Were

you kitted up here or not?

No, we weren't kitted up, we went in our civvies with a small case, a minimum of a change of clothes and underclothes. Probably the thing I recall most there, on leaving Perth, or about to leave Perth, was that mum and dad came to see me off on the train and probably half an hour before we were due to board dad said, 'Come on, I'll buy you a beer' – and again, of course, mum was aghast at this, seventeen year old boy going into a bar. But dad took me in and told the barman that I was going away to fight the good war, sort of thing, and so I had a couple of beers with dad before I joined the train.
Dad, incidentally, was a veteran of the First World War, badly injured and hadn't worked for practically all his life after coming back, and he was well aware of what the possibilities were, of course.

Can you recall anything of your train journey?

Not very much, they were all young fellows like myself. Probably again, one of the things that sticks in my mind, where you had an overnight stay in South Australia, the showgrounds at - which I can't recall.

At Woodville Showgrounds?

Woodville, I think it was, yes. Slept on palliasses which were terribly uncomfortable. But the thing that sticks in my mind most was a lunch before we rejoined the train at the showgrounds there, and was a very, very nice lunch. But after the actual luncheon the tables were loaded with fresh bread, and butter, and jam, and cream, and our youth was fairly tight, money wise, and to have all this lashings of jam and cream, I made a pig of myself.

On the trip, any special recollections of the trip? Did you go in a troop train or on ordinary train?

It was a passenger train, not a sleeper; we sat up to sleep, or laid against each other, I guess. No, not a lot of recall, John. Some of those things are vague in my mind now.

You would have had a lot of changes.

Oh, yes, changed trains, of course, the usual thing.

Now, you've arrived at Spencer Street Station - I think that was the station.

Yeah.

What was your impression of arriving in Melbourne, the big city?

Well, it looked very, very large to me, and some trepidation, some concern, as to what the next step would be. But it was fairly quick - we were organised and on the train to Frankston and then I think we changed trains at Frankston to get on to *Cerberus*, if I recall, yeah.

Crib Point I think the station was.

Yeah, Crib Point, that's right.

Now, you've arrived at Flinders; what are your impressions of Flinders?

Oh, at that stage, rather frightening to see all these sailors running around and orders being screamed, and the parade ground, that type of thing. You know, rather worrying, but we seemed to make our way and got into our huts, and got fitted out the following day, I think, and taught how to dress and how to roll a hammock, and mark all our gear with our names – we were given sort of templates and put our name on all our gear, and given a service number, and all that sort of thing – pay book, I think it was.

You did the normal seaman's course?

Yes.

You didn't specialise in any way?

No, did the normal seaman's course and found it quite easy because I was well up to date with knots and that type of thing, understood a lot of the terminology and found I got through that very easily.

Can you recall your first leave?

Yes. At seventeen I was on three and six a day, and I was sending one and six a day home to help mum and dad, so I didn't have much money. Yes, I remember catching the train and going in to Melbourne, and having a couple of quiet beers, and just generally – I think I had fish and eggs for the first time in a cafe – and just generally, went to the picture show and that sort of thing - had a look around.

Now, your time at Flinders, must be nearing the end of your stay there. Could you carry on now?

During that three months, John, we, of course, had our needles and inoculations. It seems quite usual, some of the bigger fellows keeled over when the needle hit them, but we were put into whalers and rowed all day to work the things through, the stuff through our system, and I didn't have much trouble at all.
By this stage, of course, the course was ending, we'd done our gunnery, and torpedos, and so on, and we were ready for draft. My first draft being the HMAS *Voyager*, a destroyer, of which I was rather thrilled to get – and carrying troops to Timor and taking off the commandos. It was at that point that I was later to learn that the *Voyager* ran aground and was eventually sunk just off Timor. At this point I am still at the *Cerberus* Naval Depot, being issued with tropical gear, ready to join the *Voyager*. That was recalled – and at that point I didn't really know what happened, but the tropical gear was recalled and I was given a job as a PO's mess dodger; that is, serving their food, washing their dishes and keeping their mess clean.
Then I had the dental problem which the dentists in their wisdom had been doing a couple of fillings. They suddenly decided to extract the teeth and I found out later that it was because it would be quicker for me to get another draft. So I was put in hospital, had the teeth extracted and the plates fitted, and then I was drafted to the HMAS *Wallaroo* on 11 June 1942 – which, incidentally, was exactly twelve months from my – no, I'm sorry, that was the sinking of the *Wallaroo* on the 11th.
I picked the *Wallaroo* up in Fremantle, had no idea what a corvette was in those days, I'd hardly

even heard the terminology 'corvette', but it looked to be a small destroyer to me as I approached it. Even going below decks, and being introduced around, it seemed, it felt, like a fairly large ship to me, but of course, once you put to sea it was like a cockle shell.

Can you give your impressions of the living conditions on a corvette?

Well, our living conditions were very, very tight. We had over a hundred crew and most of my nights I slept on the deck, on the mess deck, it was almost impossible to find a place to hang a hammock, or sling a hammock. So I lay mine out, I [wiped] everybody in the – or most of them anyway – it was settled and I'd just find a place on the mess deck and put my hammock out, and crash down there. The older hands, of course, had their own special places for their hammocks, but us newer guys; we had to gradually fit in.

And what about your gear, how did you store that?

The gear was stored in a small locker – not a terribly big locker but somehow or other you managed to fit in what you could – which had to be, of course, your hammocks had to be stored in the hammock bin. And just how we managed, sometimes I wonder, but we did. But the mess deck tables were always crowded, meal times were always crowded, but nobody seemed to worry, it was a very happy ship.
There were quite a lot of instances where a lot of fun was had. For instance, they used to throw apples over the side of the ship, which attracted sharks – this is when we were patrolling – I'll have to go back a little bit in a minute and just explain the system there. But they'd throw apples over and the sharks would nose their way up the apples; they'd shoot them with a .303 and put the motorboat over the side and capture these sharks. Then they'd run the motorboat into the Fremantle fish markets and sell them and buy fresh fruit and fresh vegetables and fresh salads, and bring them back on board. It was quite a nice way of supplementing the food situation.

Now, getting back to the food; what was your impression of mess deck food?

Well, our mess deck food was good because it was supplemented. They'd buy tinned fruit with the money, and good jam, and very often butter instead of margarine, which, of course was the general fare. So whilst we were operating in Fremantle we did quite well.
The system in Fremantle was three corvettes: *Dubbo*, *Horsham* and *Wallaroo*. One would be on patrol, patrolling the Gage roads, one would be in harbour for a week victualling and any necessary repairs, and the other one would be stand-by for convoy duties, which was every two or three days. So we were two weeks out and a week in, as a rule. The one week would be patrol, one week would be convoys, and then a week in, so it was quite a good ...

And so obviously you were getting a fair amount of leave ashore ...

Yes.

... which you ...

Very tidy.

... used to your advantage.

Yeah, we got every second day off while we were – well, I think we were in two watches, it

might have been three watches, I can't recall exactly. But yes, you'd have in that week in, you'd have at least two, sometimes three, days ashore.

And what were you impressions when you first went to sea on patrol?

Well, first of all, they moved around a lot, but that never worried me because being in the Sea Scouts I was used to small boats and I found it quite exhilarating actually, I had no worries whatsoever. We had some very, very stormy weather; having joined it in June, of course… actually, I joined it in May, early May – I just can't remember the exact date now – 13 May, I joined it, in 1943. May and June, of course, were notorious for heavy wind and heavy seas, but no, I found that rather exhilarating. Even on some of the convoys where the engines were probably running at something like sixteen knots, but we'd be lucky to be doing ten or eleven knots because of the bashing. But no, I found that very exhilarating.

What was your range from Fremantle on your patrol? How far out did you go?

We'd only go out to round about a hundred mile. The convoys we used to take out were usually two or three American Liberty ships, we'd take them out through the cleared channels – always at night, we'd leave about 16:00 in the afternoon, four o'clock in the afternoon – run them through till about midnight. Then they would disperse and go their own way, and from my understanding, they never went as a convoy, from then onwards they went independently.

So on the ship, you were mainly on escort duties – there was no minesweeping, nothing like that involved?

No, not minesweeping, no. On one occasion one of the Liberty ships went on strike, if you like to call it that; in other words, they wouldn't join the convoy. We were called upon to put a boarding party on board which was led by sub-lieutenant – we were all armed. Some were armed with Tommy guns, some with pistols, and some with .303 rifles with fixed bayonets. The rowing party stayed on the whaler whereas the armed party went aboard the ship.
One of the disturbing factors was that they had a six-inch gun on their forecastle which was trained on *Wallaroo,* and as *Wallaroo* was cruising around and around her, so this six-inch gun followed *Wallaroo* around, and *Wallaroo*'s four-inch gun was trained on this. But never mind, after about half an hour of arguments and so on, an American Catalina flew over with two 250-pound bombs under her wings and sent a signal, 'Weigh anchor or else'. By that stage we had left the ship and were making our way back to *Wallaroo*, and very quickly the anchor was weighed and very quickly she joined the convoy.

On her way again.

Another instance of interest was that on a convoy, shortly after that incident with the ship going on strike, round about six or seven o'clock, it was just light, fairly heavy seas – we had three ships in convoy on that one. The Asdic picked up what they thought was a submarine ping and I remember the ship picking up tremendous speed, as I thought at the time, from probably ten knots to probably something like fourteen knots, and ranging out from the convoy and dropping a pattern of depth charges. There was two over each side and four off the stern, and then rushing madly around the convoy. I don't know how long it took to get around the convoy because our ships, the corvettes, weren't very fast, but it was going flat out – at that time it seemed to be tremendous speed to me – and then coming back again and dropping another pattern.
The interesting part later was when we came back and had our turn ashore, walked into the

Australia Hotel, which is just off the wharf, and the first thing the barman said was, 'The drinks are on you, guys, you got one.' He knew more than we did but officially, I understand that our captain claimed one but it was disallowed, but the barman knew that we had got one. And I found that rather interesting, that he knew a lot more than we did.
Most of our shore leave at Fremantle – most of *my* shore leave at Fremantle– was spent at home; we were a fairly close family. At this stage my brother was still overseas and I had three young sisters; a father who couldn't do much around the house; so I spent a lot of time chopping wood for them and building up piles of wood so that they could keep the home fires burning. But other than that, of course, one would go to dances, which were all the rage those days, there was nothing much else to do. You'd cobber up with your mates, go to a dance, pick up a couple of nice girls, and usually have a good fun time dancing; take the girls home – if you missed the last tram you'd walk them home. And that's about all that happened to me those days, I wasn't one for going any further with girls, or the girls weren't ones for going any further with me. I'm not quite sure what happened there.

Did the ship's company organise any ship's functions?

No, they didn't, they didn't, or not to my knowledge they didn't because a lot of the crew on the three ships, the three corvettes, were home based and I think they did, much as I did, spent time at home at local dances, and that type of thing.

You mention it was a happy ship.

Yeah.

Why would you say that?

A happy ship because the captain was probably fairly lenient and an example of that is, as I said earlier, was allowing the crew to shoot sharks, to put the motorboat over, and to take the sharks in to market. I'll mention now that on the – later on I'll tell the story of how we were sunk – but on that day the motorboat was ashore, with sharks, when we were called to do this convoy. So we went to sea, in a convoy, without a motorboat and without three of our crew. And that's not quite generally known because that was hushed up a little bit – but I'll come back to that as I come into the story of the sinking of the *Wallaroo*.

And obviously - well, the shark meat, I suppose any fishing at that time, any fish at that time, would have been sought after at the Fremantle markets.

The markets went mad over it, they couldn't get enough of it.

[Break in interview]

Bert, will you recount your experiences as a survivor of the *Wallaroo*? There is part an official report and then you will give your impressions later.

Yes, John. Before my own personal story I'll just read the official story of the sinking of the *Wallaroo*.
'HMAS *Wallaroo* was lost in a wartime collision, sixty nautical miles off the port of Fremantle. The 900 ton corvette minesweeper went down in heavy seas on June 11 1943 after sustaining serious damage in a midnight collision with a fully laden American ammunition ship, *Henry*

Gilbert Costin. Three *Wallaroo* crew members were lost in the incident, two killed on impact and a third lost overboard.'
As regards a third lost overboard, in my own reminiscences, I will go further into that particular incident.
'HMAS *Wallaroo* was the thirty-seventh of a total of fifty-six Bathurst Class corvette minesweepers to see service in the RAN during World War II. These little vessels, rugged in design, combining the capabilities of escort, patrol and minesweeping duties, and they were well suited to production in shipyards unaccustomed to naval shipbuilding. *Wallaroo* was built in the Sydney yards of Poole and Steel Limited. She was laid down on April 24 1941 and launched by Mrs A H Poole, the wife of a chairman of the company's board of directors, on February 18 1942.'
'Commissioned in Sydney on July 15 1942, the ship carried out her first anti-submarine patrol in September. The *Wallaroo* was suitably equipped for her role, being armed with a four-inch, quick-firing gun on the forecastle, three 20 millimetre Oerlikon guns, and two .303 machine guns, plus two depth-charge throwers and four depth-charge chutes.'
'In her relatively short life, HMAS *Wallaroo* was known as a happy ship, her areas of operation being between Adelaide and Fremantle, and Fremantle and Geraldton, and she also regularly exercised with the United States Navy submarines working off the south-western coast of Western Australia.'
'*Wallaroo* sailed off from Fremantle on June 10 1943, acting as an escort to two American merchant ships, the *John G Wittier* and the *Henry Gilbert Costin*. With HMAS *Wallaroo* leading, the three darkened ships formed up in a line ahead, steaming at eleven knots at 800 metre intervals. *Wallaroo*'s task was to escort the two heavily laden merchant ships to a dispersal point, sixty nautical miles north-west of Fremantle, under the cover of darkness, where they would then disperse with the corvette returning to Fremantle. There was a moderate westerly wind blowing with a moderate to rough sea running as they reached the dispersal point around midnight. The moon was obscured by overcast skies and visibility was down to one nautical mile.'
'The corvettes commanding officer, Lieutenant Ross, deciding that his task was completed, signalled by lamp to the following ship in the column, *John G Wittier*, to disperse, and altered course to starboard to return to Fremantle. As *Wallaroo* continued her swing to starboard, out of the darkness the huge bows of the second ship, *Henry Gilbert Costin* bore down on the corvette at eleven knots. Both commanding officers saw the imminent danger too late. Evasive action failed to avert the collision and the merchant ship struck the corvette amidships on the starboard side with a grinding crunch.'
'The *Henry Gilbert Costin* stopped only centimetres from the escort ship's magazines, smashing the bridge and the main mess deck. The ship's commanding officer, Lieutenant Ross, was badly injured in the collision and Lieutenant Hill took command of the stricken corvette. Sustaining only minor damage, and unaware, in the darkness, of the gaping hole in HMAS *Wallaroo*, the merchant ship reversed course, steamed back to Fremantle. On board she had two *Wallaroo* crew members who had somehow managed to climb aboard during the collision.'
I will further elaborate on that point later.
'Hastily rigging emergency lighting, Lieutenant Hill attempted to steam the stricken *Wallaroo* astern before the sea conditions worsened. He managed to turn the ship using its engines, stern to sea, but the weather deteriorated further and seven hours later, around seven a.m., two large waves flooded the upper deck as they crashed through the gaping hole in the corvette's side. It was obvious the gutsy little ship had lost the battle to stay afloat and the order to abandon ship was given.'
'In their Mae West life jackets, all crew left the ship without further casualties. The dazed commanding officer, aided by the first lieutenant, was helped over the side into the cold black

waters of the Indian Ocean. They were the last men to leave the ship.'
'Ten minutes after the abandon-ship pipe had been made, HMAS *Wallaroo* slowly capsized to starboard and sank, its boilers exploding with a dull thud as it made its final plunge. A sister ship, HMAS *Dubbo*, was quickly dispatched from Fremantle to pick up survivors, along with United States Catalina flying boats from Fleet Air Wing then based in Perth.'
'The survivors were found scattered over a ten-mile radius by searching Catalina, which dropped three rubber floats and directed HMAS *Dubbo* to the area. HMAS *Dubbo* arrived at nine-thirty a.m. and quickly began picking up survivors in the heavy seas. She steamed back to Fremantle, berthing at Victoria Quay that afternoon, less than twenty-four hours since *Wallaroo* had sailed on her last and fateful voyage.'
'HMAS *Wallaroo* was the first RAN corvette to be lost through collision, but not the last. A sister ship, HMAS *Geelong*, suffered the same fate on October 18 1944, some thirty nautical miles off Langemak, New Guinea, when the American tanker, *York*, cut her stern off at a night-time collision. Fortunately, there was no loss of life in this second wartime incident.'

Bert, can you give your impressions of the sinking of your ship?

Yes, John. Even though I've gone over that official thing, there are a few little points of interest. First of all, *Wallaroo*, at that stage, was doing her stint as patrol in Gage Roads; *Dubbo* was in harbour and the other corvette , the ...

Horsham.

... the *Horsham* – my poor old memory – the *Horsham* was actually convoy ship. However, *Horsham* had engine troubles and had to go into harbour. We being out, in Gage Roads, were ordered to pick up the convoy and *Dubbo* then came out and took up patrol. So really speaking, in a sense, we shouldn't have been on that convoy at all, however, we were and we took the convoy out.
Incidentally, because we were just doing patrol, we had, that day, shot sharks and the motorboat was ashore with three sailors, including a sub-lieutenant, selling the sharks whilst we were busy rounding up the convoy and putting to sea. So we did go to sea, that afternoon, ex-three crew and ex-our motor boat.
It was rough, even though the official report, they call it 'moderate weather', it was very, very rough, it was one of the roughest trips I'd had, and even though I was never seasick in the Navy, on that particular trip, round about ten o'clock at night, I was standing in the waist and was just starting to feel a little bit offish, but not enough to be sick, but I felt, okay, this is how you feel when you get seasick.
Well, that night I had the morning watch so I was going to tuck in round about ten o'clock and again, as I've mentioned earlier, there was no where for me to sling my hammock so I put it down on the mess deck floor, just close to the lockers. Unless anybody knows a corvette mess deck, it was fairly well aft of the mess deck, just alongside the end mess deck table.
My next impression, it was just an observation of noise, I didn't actually hear it; I was obviously knocked unconscious during the collision. My first real impression was feeling around for my life jacket, which I had used as a pillow, and having a feeling that I must find my life jacket, I must find my helmet – my tin hat – and my respirator and get to my action station at the port depth-charge thrower. And I'm rummaging around, there's lots of muck and stuff around everywhere, and, of course, I'm thinking at this point of time that we'd been hit by a torpedo. It's black, black as the ace of spades, and I can't see a thing.
I don't know how long I rummaged around, but I know I was getting into a slight panic that I would be in trouble not being at my action station, when I heard, in the distance, a ‘Abandon

ship' order.
Now, this seems strange because nobody I've ever spoken to heard that 'Abandon ship' order at that point; however I did, and I thought, 'Now, it's no good searching around any further, I'll find my way out of here'. I was obviously the last one on the seamen's mess deck, there was certainly no-one else – no other noise, or talk, or calling – and I had to then get my bearings – water up to my waist, tables and lockers and that floating around and I eventually decided to head a certain way, which was aft as it happened, and I was trying to make for the waist.
I hadn't gone very many steps, no more than probably four or five steps, when terrible cries of help came rending through the air. I stopped dead where I was, felt around, and all I could feel was great hunks of steel. Again, I didn't realise where I was. As it happened, it was the hole in the ship's side that I was heading for, but I didn't know that then, I couldn't see. These cries were coming from, obviously, outside the hole.
Earlier in this report it said that a sailor was lost overboard. I believe he went out through that hole and I believe he was hanging on to the side of the ship when he was screaming for help. I couldn't move, I didn't know where I was or what to do.
Shortly afterwards a sailor came from the stoker's mess deck with a torch, calling, 'Anybody there? Anybody there? Of course, I gave him a yell, he shone the torch, he said, 'For Christ's sake, get out of there as quick as you can.' I said, 'There's somebody calling for help.' He said, 'He can't be helped, get away from there.' Well, of course, I moved then across towards the port side and in doing so I noticed that the hatchway down to - I think down to the PO's mess - is that right, John?

Yes.

... was not locked so I locked that as I went past as an automatic procedure, and then proceeded out through the port waist.

My next impression is, for some reason or other – I think by this stage –walking out I was probably told that we were rammed because I didn't make for my action station, I made for the searchlight platform because at one stage earlier, that had been my action station. What prompted me to go there, I don't know, however I did, and there were three or four sailors there trying to get it working. The cries of help were still coming from the ship's side. They did eventually turn it on but were ordered immediately from the bridge to turn it off because of possible submarines in the area. They screamed back that their friend was ... their best mate was over the side, but however, the order was very, very strict, very definite: 'Turn it off'. So with that, of course, the cries gradually diminished in the distance.
My next recall is then walking up to – incidentally, I had no life jacket and I had only on a pair of underpants. I remember then going to the forecastle where they were working flat out to get a collision mat down. When I got there I could see that the collision mat was fairly well under way, I think the forward lines had been passed and was being pulled under. There was glass everywhere, which I recall; however I don't recall trying to miss it or trying to step over it but why I didn't cut my feet, I don't know. Before I was there very long an order came to me to get off the forecastle, find myself a pair of shoes and a life jacket, before doing anything else. Fair enough, but how I didn't cut my feet I've got no idea whatsoever.
I don't know where I got a life jacket from, but I remember, soon afterwards, having the old Mae West on - certainly didn't find any shoes or anything else to wear, and I still had only a pair of underpants on.
We had a terrible list to port at this stage and I remember then going to the boat deck – whether by order or not, I don't recall – and moving all the heavy timbers from the port side to the starboard side of the boat deck. The whaler was completely crushed in on the starboard side, and

of course, no motorboat on the port side.
My next recollection was being in a bailing line where we were bucket-bailing out of the bailing waist. I don't know how long we bailed for but we were bailing water out for quite a considerable time. It was found that whilst we were taking a lot of water out, it was finding its own level. When we stopped bailing it did stay at its own level so the bailing situation was ceased.

> Bert, from the time of the collision until you actually took to water, how much time elapsed, during this time?

John, it was seven hours actually. We were hit at midnight and we didn't actually abandon ship until seven o'clock in the morning. We did a lot of work to try and keep her afloat.
I'd just like to digress slightly here as to what happens in life sometimes. Because we weren't on convoy duty, I had taken aboard some photograph albums of my girlfriends of my youth, and my Sea Scout days, intending, of course, to return them home on my next leave. I had also been officially made an able seaman and had been paid some back pay. Before we went on convoy that night – which we hadn't really intended to be on convoy – I decided to ask the paymaster, or one of the officers, to put my money in the ship's safe because it was quite a lot of money to me then, this back pay from ordinary seaman to able seaman. And I recall asking somebody to put my photo album somewhere safe – where they were put, I've got no idea now. But, of course, that was all lost when we went to sea.
But answering your question, John, yes, we were hit at midnight and didn't actually sink until seven o'clock.
One of the other duties I found myself doing – and it's strange, I have no recollection of any orders being given to me at any time, apart from to leave the forecastle, and yet I found myself doing all kinds of jobs. One of the rather disturbing jobs I found quite harrowing, was being with a leading hand called Jack Bradfield, and we were disarming the port depth charges. The idea was to take the primers out, throw them overboard, and roll the depth charges to the starboard side and lash them, to try and again, transfer weight from port to starboard.
Now, it was very rough and the ship was wallowing and very jerky action, nothing definite, and on two or three occasions, as Jack removed the primers from the depth charges, he would be about to throw it overboard and the ship would give a sudden lurch, and he'd hit the guard rail and the primer would fly into the air and we had to pray that it didn't land back on deck. Fortunately, each time they landed outboard and nothing of any untoward nature happened. But it was very difficult, rolling against the list of the ship, to roll the depth charges – no room, just two persons rolling the depth charges and lashing them to the starboard side.
Now, that was rather harrowing, rather disturbing, and poor old Jack found that over the years that affected him badly. He finished up quite a nerve-stricken man after that and died in rather bad circumstances.

> Did the balance of the crew remain on board until they were given the order to abandon ship?

Yes, they did, John. Nobody actually left the ship. A little later I will go into a couple of fellows who were badly injured, who tried to leave the ship too early, because they were stunned and, I think, had concussion and so on. But there's another little incident I'd like to relate that has got a little bit of humour in it for a change.
We'd finished this job on the depth charges - and it was generally considered then that - by this time it's getting light, it's probably about six-thirty in the morning by this time - seas are very, very heavy, big rollers, absolutely huge. But it was generally thought that by this stage

somebody would be on their way out to us. Earlier our telegraphists had sat at their sets, with water up to their waists, sending out their SOS calls until they just couldn't stay there any longer. We weren't receiving but it was considered that the message had got through; it was also considered that the *Costin*, the merchant ship would also have reported, but he didn't. He didn't know we were so badly hit.
But we thought there would be somebody out and the senior sailors – the petty officers and the CPOs, the chief petty officer – all thought that we would be towable and that we would be towed back to port. This is about, say, six o'clock in the morning.
I decided I felt like a rest, I was feeling very, very weary. I went around to the other side of the officers' quarters, which are raised above the deck, away from the wind, and I came across two sailors who were obviously very badly injured, they were sitting there, shivering. One obviously had a broken collar bone, the other one was I don't know what, but he was shivering, they were sitting there. I thought, this is terrible, I've got to try and do something.
So I went down into the officers' quarters and grabbed a couple of blankets and wrapped them up, thought I'd done a good job, and then along came an officer and wanted to know where I got the blankets from, and railed like mad that I had no right to use their blankets. Just at that point, the officer steward came along. Between us we managed to make the officer understand that these guys were in a pretty bad way and we thought we were doing the right thing.
So while the officer steward was there, I said to him, 'Listen, would you mind asking Lieutenant So-and-So if we could get a little bit of brandy or something, to give these guys a sip?' and the officer's reply, as incredible as it may seem, was, 'Steward Foster, you should know better than that. We have stock inventory at the end of the month.' So we were unable to get a little bit of brandy to help these two guys along.

> Obviously concerned with the stock-take to see that no stock was lost. Would you carry on from there.

I found that quite incredible because having been in the retail game I know how important stocked inventories were. But I thought, under those circumstances, some concession could have been made. However, it made no difference because half an hour later we were sunk anyway.
But these two fellows, one of them must have had a sixth sense because it was about that time when the ship took a rather heavy lurch that he jumped to his feet and rushed to the guard rails and said, 'She's going to sink, she's going to sink.' We grabbed him and took him back again, and wrapped him up in blankets, and a few minutes later, when another sudden lurch, he did the same thing.
Most of the crew were on the port side, which was the low side – for some reason, I don't know why, but they were – and I'd been on that side most of the time. So we took these two fellows around to that side. And we went just by the officers' poop deck part and the rest of the crew were strung out all over the ship. But it was only a few minutes, maybe half an hour, later that the ship rolled over. But in that time this one fellow made three more attempts to go over the side because the ship was going to roll over, which it eventually did at seven o'clock. Two or three huge waves just seemed to pick it up, roll it across to starboard – as we'd had a port list all the time – rolled it over to starboard and it didn't recover. It seemed to try, it shook itself, it seemed to try to come back, but it stayed over and gradually went further, and it was obvious by then that it was going to roll over.
At this stage the order was given to abandon ship, and one by one the sailors slid down the side of the ship and swam away. I sat on the gunwale for a little while, I still had a feeling she might right herself, and I was in no panic to go into the water. But eventually it became obvious, and whilst I wasn't the last to go over, I was one of the last. When I hit the water I looked up and I

could see still other sailors coming down, so I thought I'd hang around a little while in case somebody hurt themselves or were in trouble. But a young middie said, 'No, get going as quick as you can, get out of the road', which I did. But I hadn't swum far when I noticed a fellow was really struggling, he was more under the water than above it. I swam to him and asked him what was wrong, and he said, 'I can't blow my Mae West up', so I blew it up for him, which was rather difficult in heavy water – he was a big fellow, Peter Bickford. After some time I was able to get enough air into it to keep his head above water, and then we began to swim away from the ship.
By this stage most of the other sailors were quite well away and it was then that we looked back and could see it going down by the bow – her screws were still turning astern – and gradually she went down, and then the boilers blew, and that was something horrific. We were probably too close and we both thought our stomaches were coming out through out mouths. They blew at about two or three minute intervals, and I don't think I've ever swum so fast in all my life. Poor old Peter, even though he was injured, he kept up with me.

By this time there were no other ships in the vicinity?

No other ships in the vicinity at all. The ship that hit us had turned and gone back towards Fremantle and, of course, the other ship had continued on her convoy duty. We were out there alone and not knowing whether any of our messages had, in actual fact, got through.

When did relief finally come to you?

Well, we all had life jackets, fortunately. There was a fair bit of debris - some were hanging on to debris. At one point I finished up straddling a piece of timber, probably eight or ten foot long and twelve inches wide. I was picked up by a couple of big waves and surfed down them, and nearly hit some of the other guys, and they didn't appreciate it. They swore at me enough to get me off it so I finished up leaving that and just relying on my life jacket.
But some time after – I would say probably two hours – we noticed a plane, or heard a plane, in the distance, and saw a Catalina way out on the horizon, not coming our way, but we were waving and so on and we thought, ‘Oh, well, he's missed’. Almost on top of that, one came in closer and did see us, after circling, and did drop three life rafts. So we then knew that at least if anybody was going to come out they would know where we were, which was so. The *Dubbo* was on its way, having received a signal earlier to put to sea, and the Catalinas guided them to us. I was one of the fortunate ones to swim to the first life raft, and with the help of others, inflate it, and was able to climb aboard.
This is a rather strange incident, perhaps, it might be worth relating. I was having trouble with my waterworks, I wanted to pass water and couldn't – I had terrible pains in my stomach – and even in the raft, I thought, now, I will be able to pass water in the raft, and I couldn't. So I had to leave the raft – which was, you know, rather unusual – they let me get out but I was hanging on the side of it and I still couldn't. I went about three or four days and couldn't pass water after that, obviously the explosions had damaged some part of my waterworks which I wasn't aware of, but the pain was terrible.
Then eventually we saw the *Dubbo* in the distance coming along, it was really making heavy weather of it – full revs, probably doing something like fourteen knots through the heavy seas. But then, to see it picking everybody up so calmly.
At this point we saw the ship in the distance, which was the HMAS *Dubbo*, a sister corvette, and that was, I can tell you, a very, very pleasant sight to see. But it was obvious, as she was making very heavy weather because one minute you'd see her, and then it might be minutes later that she'd be out of sight. But eventually she got closer and closer and it was wonderful to see

the way that she rounded up. We were spread over an area something like ten miles, but she seemed to rise on the top of these huge waves, pick out one or two guys to go for, and you'd see her speed up and then stop dead in the water, and drift up very gently, and you'd see these fellows climbing up the climbing mats - what were they called, John?

Climbing nets.

That's right, climbing nets – and then you'd see it take off at speed again and then stop dead in the water, and this happening all around us. Being in a raft, of course, the ship was taking no notice of us, and after about an hour, of course, we started to wonder whether we had been seen or not - we certainly hoped we had been - but you could see the *Dubbo*, one minute right up on top of a huge wave, and down in the hollows again, and you'd just lose sight of her for minutes at a time. But she gradually went around. Where any of the survivors had trouble, the *Dubbo* crew were diving overboard and helping them to the climbing nets, and helping them up. So there were some very, very brave guys there.

Eventually, our turn came and I believe that we were the last of the rafts to be picked up. However, that's something that it's hard to say. My first recollection of getting aboard was that going down to the mess deck, the mess deck being in about six, or eight, or twelve, inches of water, seeing lots of fellows laid out on the mess decks, and seeing two sick bay attendants sewing people up and patching people up. Our own sick bay attendant was very, very badly knocked about himself but before we actually sank he spent his whole time on the bridge, looking after the very badly injured guys who were on the bridge after we were hit. So it was a rather startling sight, to see this, what you might call hospital, on a corvette mess deck.

I was then told to get a shower and try and get some of the oil off me; I didn't even realise I was covered in oil. I still had terrible pains and I think I still must have had concussion because I've got some very, very dead spots in my recollections, there's areas of time that I have no recall at all. But I do recall having a shower and then sitting down in a corner, out of the road of everybody else, but have very little recall of actually returning to Fremantle.

The next thing I can actually remember was being up on deck, in uniform. Obviously the crew had gone through their lockers and ditty bags, and scran[1] bags, and so on, and I think most of the crew were outfitted to some degree. But I've no recollection of that actually happening.

I remember sailing into Fremantle Harbour and, of course, the skipper trying to turn the corvette around in the harbour because we always faced outwards. But he made a miscalculation and rammed a Dutch destroyer as we were coming alongside. After I felt, myself, what a shame that he'd done such a wonderful job in picking everybody up, without a hitch, to suddenly have to come in, and under everybody's eyes – of course, there were all kinds of brass on the wharf; there was ambulances; and motorcars, and goodness knows what – to see the wind catch him and having to put his bow into the gunwale of a Dutch destroyer.

Just reflecting back a little bit too. In that harbour, when we were sunk, there were two Dutch destroyers and there was two Dutch cruisers. Yes, just on that point, there was the two cruisers and two destroyers – I can't recall their names – but it was too rough for them to put to sea when the message came through that we were in trouble, and it was left to the poor little *Dubbo* to do that job.

Also, on reflection and thinking back, there were several instances of part panic when we were in the water. We had several non-swimmers who, from time to time, were calling out that they were in trouble. Then there'd be somebody, either get brushed by a bit of seaweed+ or something, would call out there were sharks. I didn't see a shark and I don't think there were any, but just momentarily, when those cries came, you felt a sudden panic, I suppose, and you'd have

[1] Scran:– general term for food

a good look around you. But fortunately, I was able to say, well, no, there's not and convince myself as such, and it didn't cause me too much trouble. But some of the guys did, they were thrashing around and swimming, and all sorts of things, but I honestly don't believe we did run into any sharks on that particular occasion.
Right, getting back to where I was. We entered harbour and again, my recollections fail me, I do not recall even leaving the *Dubbo*, I certainly don't recall going to *Leeuwin*, although I understand everybody did - we were transported by buses - no recollection whatsoever - I'm sure I had a concussion. I've no recollection of having a medical examination, and I've no recollection of leaving the depot. My first recall after this was being in Perth city, talking to some girls at a milk bar, and the girls asking me about various sailors, they knew on board, as to whether they were alright or not.
My next recall is actually being at home - I've no recall at all of getting home, or going home, or how I got home. We were living in Meltham at that point, which was midway between Bayswater and Maylands.
My next real recall is being in the kitchen, in very dull light – those days mum and dad only bought very small globes because they couldn't afford electricity. I remember dad sitting over the paper, trying to read the daily news – this, now, I guess, would be something like eight or nine o'clock at night – and mum looking at me and saying, 'What are you doing home?' and I, for some reason, had no intentions of telling them what happened. But, you know, being a mother they have ways of getting things out of you, and she said, 'You look terrible.' I said, 'Oh, no, I'm alright.' She said, 'What's all that black stuff on you?' I said, 'I don't know, I shouldn't have any black stuff on me.' By this stage, of course, she said, 'There is something wrong; what is it?' and I eventually broke down and started to cry. Now, I think that was caused because I must have been holding myself together for all those hours, probably something like fourteen hours: seven hours before we rolled over; and something like five hours in the water, and two or three hours coming back. I broke down and cried, and eventually got over that and told them the story.
But I was still covered in oil and I had this shower on board – and, I understand, we were all showered in hot water at *Leeuwin*, but I've no recollection of that – and it was many, many days before I got rid of that oily slime off my skin and body.
From that point – I was on leave then, I remember being on leave for fourteen days survivors' leave – but of that leave I have very little recollection. I know I still had terrible pains in the stomach; it was several days before I was able to pass water. But I do recall meeting the boys at the Savoy Hotel and having a few beers, that type of thing. And later, as the leave went on, I began to have other pains – I had bad pains in the chest which, I'm quite sure, were cracked or broken ribs – but none of this was evident early in the piece, I must have been in some kind of a trance and these things came out as I sort of took the world in again, I suppose.
Hang on, where are we up to now?

> Bert, could you give us a list of the people who were killed as a result of the sinking of the *Wallaroo*?

Yes, John. There was three actually: there was Able Seaman Davis Owen - sorry, Davis [Daris] Cowen was his name – he and Motor Mechanic George Garratty were two who were down in the PO's mess deck, over which I had locked the hatch. The official report says that they were killed on impact, but no-one would really know, but that sort of tends to bug me from time to time. However, it was an order that you closed all watertight doors under these circumstances, and that's what I did.
Joe Clarke was the one - John Clarke was the one who went, I think, through the hole in the ship's side, or over the side, whichever it might be, and he was not seen again, of course.

So over the three, there was something like fourteen or fifteen badly injured, who needed extensive treatment, and, of course, many, many, many minor injuries. Most of the serious injuries occurred on the bridge, however, some on the mess deck.
We were rather lucky, John, too – just a point of interest – being midnight there was only one watch on the mess deck because the other two watches were changing. So whilst it smashed the mess deck to pieces, and I was sleeping on the deck, wouldn't have been probably five feet away from the final impact, there was very few others on the mess decks. Those who were injured mainly were on the forecastle or on the bridges, and on the quarterdeck as lookouts.
Perhaps another little point of interest is that whilst the report says one impact, it is generally accepted – and I don't remember this because I was unconscious – that there was three very, very severe impacts, and that would be understandable because, at eleven knots, a 10,000 ton ship, ploughing into a 900 ton ship, would not stop dead. It obviously hit it, rolled it, bounced back and kept going forward - hit it again and again. The general consensus is that the *Wallaroo* was hit three times, and there is another report that ends up, 'Corvette thrice hit', and the story goes on from there.

> Now, there would have been, of the survivors, no doubt a lot of these people would have had – still have – ill effects or after-effects in their later life, as a reminder of the sinking of the *Wallaroo*.

I believe so, John, I certainly have. I've tried very hard not to but it does came back, particularly the closing down of that hatch, and even though I've got to convince myself that I wasn't ... Yeah, it had been hard. I have also found it hard where I can't fill in gaps, even though I've told the story of those seven hours, there's many, many hours in that seven hours that I have no recollection of whatsoever, and that is always disturbing, I don't know why. But you tend to get over it – or not get over it, but you have to go through life – but there are others who have. One fellow in particular, he should be on a disability pension, but each time he goes to see them about it he finds that he can't relate his experiences, it's just too much for him. He hasn't pursued what he should be getting officially and he's just one of those fellows you can't help either. He says, 'No, I just want to forget all about it.' And this has happened to quite a lot of them.

> What about the findings from, I assume, the Navy Board, as to this collision? What was the result of that?

Well, to our knowledge and of course, as you know, the Navy, the lower deck people never get the full story, but it's my understanding that the inquiry did lay the blame on our skipper, but the whole crew, and anybody else who has any knowledge of it, says, of course, that's most unfair. But he was stripped of any command and was not ever improved in his ... [inaudible]

> And he never received a further ship command after that?

No, he never received another ship command or any advancement in his career as an officer. I don't know where he finished up, but obviously in a depot somewhere. Incidentally, he was a New Zealander and we still maintain contact with him through one or two of our survivors.

> Now, you believe that the location of the sinking is slightly different from the official report?

Yes, the official report indicated north-west. Although I have no doubt at all that we sailed south-west, and I've no doubt at all that the location is something in the vicinity of sixty miles

off Bunbury, and that's generally accepted as being right. The official report just may have been in error in typing or some such thing.

> This concludes Bert's report on the sinking of the *Wallaroo* and we are very grateful for the amount of detail that he has put into this.
> Now, Bert, after you had your survivor's leave and, no doubt, went back to depot, your seagoing days did not finish then. What were some of the other ships that you served on?

That's right, John. I went back to *Leeuwin* and was completely re-outfitted again, and then was drafted to a minesweeper called HMAS *Mercedes*. She was up on slips at this particular time, having a refit, and it was a terrible looking ship, it came down from Singapore - it was an RN ship up there for a while. Prior to that I believe it was a banana cargo ship. It was a ship of some 1,000 tons, coal burner, and it was completely refitted here, in Fremantle, with new guns: what was called a 'light four inch', a very quick-firing anti-aircraft four inch; a rocket gun that fired twenty rockets, ten each side, each firing – tremendous weapon; - and lots of other small arms – Oerlikons, Bofors, and .5 machine guns, and so on.
Our task, at that stage, was to be along with her sister ship called the *Medea* - HMAS *Medea* - they were both refitted the same - and we were to act as front-line minesweepers. After refit we did some considerable minesweeping off Fremantle and then both ships went to Darwin. We swept off Darwin for about twenty months and there were a number of various incidents, of course, but as this is a corvette story I don't think I should go into those incidents.
When our time in Darwin was up we went to Sydney – was going to be refitted but eventually was paid off. In the meantime I was drafted to a general purpose vessel. They were 100 ton wooden ship being built in Sydney – I think they were turning out something like five or six a week. They had Navy crews crewing them to the north, to New Guinea-New Britain areas; handing them over to the Army and they were used by the Army for taking in supplies to small islands, and so on, as the advancement went on.
However, our crew was to stay on board this one – the GPV-954 – and we worked for the Army, mainly out of Jacquinot Bay, New Britain. By this stage the war was over and we were carrying cargo from New Britain to Rabaul, and also taking - they were called ANGAU officers - Australian New Guinea Administrative [Unit] officers – to examine the various plantations and assess damage that was done, and so on.

> As you'd been an AB, and you were in charge – well, not in charge, you were deck crew on these small ships – was that the end of your promotion as an AB, or did you go further than that?

Actually, John, I passed out for leading seaman on the *Mercedes* in Darwin, but whilst I was a good sailor and if the skipper ever wanted anything special done – I had a nickname 'Pricky' by then – 'Get Pricky Reed to do it'. But I was also a little bit anti-authority and I was inclined to do things I shouldn't do, so I didn't get too many recommendations because to be made a leading seaman you had to get, I think it was three good recommendations in a row, which was quarterly, and of course, I'd get one good one, and then I'd do something silly and that would be taken off me. So I finished up not being made leading seaman, but I was acting leading seaman on the *Mercedes* at various times, and also on the GPV-954. Our coxswain went south on leave from New Britain and I took his place, and was acting leading seaman on that for some nine months.

> Now, you are still in New Guinea after the war - you must have been due for discharge.

Can you tell us what happened then?

Yes, John. Well, those days, as you know, there was a point system - I don't know exactly now how the point system works, but you had to have so many points up before you got discharged. So those with the highest points got the first discharge. I had a fair number of points because I'd been at sea most of my four years in the Navy but about this time the GPV-954 was to be paid off, so we steamed from Rabaul to a harbour in New Guinea called [Torangau]. We stayed there for probably a month or two; the skipper went south for discharge and I was the senior hand – only by experience, not by age – so I ran that ship in that harbour for a couple of months, moving it around from buoy to berth, and so on.
But eventually my turn came and I was put aboard a merchant ship – and I have no idea the name of it now – and came south in a merchant ship. It towed a couple of Fairmiles with it, to bring them south. I do recall that the story is anyway, that the skipper had a couple of islands that were his, and we would anchor at night and would take ashore things like generators, and Jeeps, and so on, out of the hold. And one very, very stormy night, on the way down, all these goodies broke loose in the hold and I was called on, with some of the other crew who were coming south, to go below and try and recover and lash this stuff down. It was quite a hairy exercise. And I also understand that a lot of that stuff was smuggled off from Sydney, and there was trucks, and Jeeps, and motorcars, and generators, and goodness knows what. However, I didn't see much of that.
We reached Sydney and I was in depot in Sydney for a very short while, then on the troop train to Fremantle, and was eventually discharged in Fremantle round about May, I think it was, I'll get the exact date in a minute if ...

You were discharged on what date?

Yes, I was discharged on 23 March 1946 at Fremantle.

And was your discharge a lengthy sort of a business, or just a matter of a few days?

It only seemed a few days to me, John. I, again, don't have much recall of that period. I remember being in a line of sailors and being asked questions like, 'Are your eyes alright?' and, 'Is this alright?' and 'Is that alright?' – I don't recall having an actual medical. I do recall saying that my eyes were rather sore, but they had a quick look at them and said, 'No, they’re alright.' And with that, I think all I wanted to do at that stage was to get out.

Now, your thoughts on returning to civilian life; what happened then?

Yes, well, I'd just like to go back a little bit on that one, John.

When I was on the GPV in New Britain our captain was a very keen sailor and he wanted to buy a lugger. The Army was selling their luggers and people were buying them and going in to trading on the islands, and he wanted me to join with him and do that. I hadn't been home for nearly two years at this stage and I decided not to do that – sometimes I wished I had have, it would have been very exciting and very good.
However, to answer your question, I'd cobbered up with Peter Bickford, the fellow on the *Wallaroo* whom I'd helped and blown up his Mae West. He also was drafted to the *Mercedes* and we became quite good cobbers, finished up good mates. As the end of our time came with *Mercedes* – he had a different draft to me – but before we split up we said we would meet up after the war and consider going on to a farm together. He was from a farming family at

Narrogin and I thought that sounded a good idea. So on discharge, of course, I caught up with Peter and we still thought it would be a good idea. So I decided to go back to my job at Caris Brothers and he bought a truck and decided to do some wool carting to make some money, and then we were going to pool our resources and try our hand on a farm. However, he was only carting for something like three or four months, day and night, and he fell asleep at the wheel in Gilford Road, Maylands, and rolled his truck over and killed himself.
That put pay to any further thoughts I had of going on the land because I was not from farmer's stock and I had no idea where to start. So I decided to make my life in the jewellery trade and did eventually, by taking accountancy courses, and business courses, and so on, and so on, I did eventually finish up going through all the departments as department managers; through the branches as branch managers; through being in charge of all the branches was called a branch supervisor position – we had nineteen branches in those days – and eventually became managing director of the group, including the Lindsay's Group, and there was altogether twenty-five shops involved at that stage.

Obviously you settled back into business, this was the start, no doubt, of your married life, I assume.

Yes, John. I met my wife to be, in Caris Brothers. She had previously worked at another jeweller's shop called Stewart Dawson's, which was well-known in those days but had changed to Caris Brothers just before I'd come back. We took an eye to each other and started going out, and we eventually married in 1948. We had two children, a boy and a girl – the girl first, then the boy – and now we subsequently…my son had five daughters and my daughter has a son and a daughter.
Things were pretty tough those days, money wise, and we needed a house. We were living just in sort of rented premises and rooms, and eventually back at Joy's mother's place for a while, when she was pregnant with the first child. But I couldn't wait to get a War Service Home so I decided to get a self-help permit and bought a block in Tuart Hill and started building myself. I'd ride a bike from her house – from her mother's house – in Wembley, to Perth, to work all day, then I'd ride it out to Tuart Hill and work until it was too dark to do anything at all, then ride all the way back to Wembley again – and of course, each weekend and every spare minute I got. I eventually built a house out there, of twelve squares, and ultimately sold that and then moved to a house in Apple Cross.

Now, you developed business interests after this, I believe.

Yes, John. I wasn't one to think about going on my own and I was managing director of this pretty big company in those days; however, it was taken over by a family and they wanted their son to be managing director. And he and I, of course… I suppose I was in the road so it wasn't very long before I was given the sack on allegedly health reasons. I had had a bit of heart trouble then and my nerves had always been a bit of a problem, and I was inclined to argue at board meetings a bit. But it was quite easy to get rid of me, so at the age of forty-eight – yeah, I think it was forty-eight, I forget now – anyway, it was in 1980. So I had to start a business of my own, I couldn't get a job anywhere on the money I was getting then and I had commitments – I had house commitments and so on, and children commitments – so I started a business on my own at the Southlands Shopping Centre at Wellington, and since then have remained in business. Ultimately my son and daughter, and son-in-law, coming into the business, and they are actually running it now with just me there with the whip every now and then to keep them on course.

And regarding your retirement, what have been your interests since you've retired? Well,

you still haven't retired because you still show an interest in your business.

Yes, officially I'm retired – legally I'm retired – but I do play a bit of golf. For some years I've put a lot of time into the Corvette Association - I haven't put so much in the last couple of years because of business commitments and things not going right. The business suffered very badly during the recession and we've been fighting back. I don't attend work on any given basis, I help out where I can, but gardening and golf, and general maintenance work around the home, and helping people wherever I can, just about takes up my time. I put in a fair bit of time at the Naval Association and things like that.

Well, thank you, Bert, for your interview. This interview was conducted by John Roberts with Bert Reed at City Beach on 17 January 1996.

03/02