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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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F4493 Wallis, John Thomas

Recorded
at: City Beach, WA
on: 16 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.

John Thomas Wallis, as a stoker, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) corvettes HMAS Launceston and HMAS Gawler, Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, and HMAS Australia, Australian waters, 1942-1946, interviewed by John Roberts

John Wallis talks about his education and early employment; enlistment into the Army and subsequent transfer into the Navy; travel to the Flinders Naval Depot and conditions and training as a stoker there; working at HMAS *Leeuwin* before sailing to Colombo to join corvette HMAS *Launceston*; conditions aboard the *Launceston*, the ship's duties and experiences; shore leave; transfer to HMAS *Gawler* and return to Fremantle; being drafted to HMAS *Australia;* discharge; resettlement as a civilian; training as a welder and then as a health inspector; marriage, family and housing; retirement and travel and involvement with the 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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[This is] an interview with John Wallis and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA. John is a Member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA, and his interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

John was born on 29 November 1924 at Kalgoorlie and he joined the Navy on 20 August 1942 as a stoker. His official number was F4493. He served on the following corvettes: HMAS *Launceston*, J179, and HMAS *Gawler*, J188.

Sixty of these small ships, officially Bathurst Class Australian minesweepers, commonly known as corvettes, were built during World War II in Australian shipyards as part of the Commonwealth Government's wartime shipbuilding program. Twenty were built on Admiralty order for the Royal Navy and were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These ships were named after the Australian towns - *Ballarat, Bathurst, Bendigo, Broome, Burnie, Cairns, Cessnock, Gawler, Geraldton, Goulburn, Ipswich, Kalgoorlie, Launceston, Lismore, Maryborough, Pirie, Tamworth, Toowoomba, Whyalla, 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.

An interview is conducted by John Roberts on 16 January [1996] at City Beach [WA]

Jack, we are commencing the interview; would you tell me what your full name is?

My full name is John Thomas Wallis.

And when and where were you born?

I was born in Kalgoorlie on November 29 1924.

What was your first involvement with the RAN?

Well, my first involvement with the Navy was actually when I joined the Navy. I hadn't been a member of the Sea Scouts, or Cadets, or Naval Reserve, or anything, prior to joining, although I was always interested in matters naval – you know, any books, ships, warships, and reviewing the fleet at Spit Head, and all that sort of thing, always captured my interest. But my actual involvement with the Navy was when I joined.

Now, you stated that you were born in Kalgoorlie; did you join the Navy from Kalgoorlie?

No. My father was a miner and he became turned down - you'd be familiar with the phrase, it means that he'd got dust on the lungs, the silicosis, and he was pensioned out. And of course, at that time, it was about 1933 - I was round about nine years of age, as I recall, we moved down

and lived at Fremantle. We were actually living in East Victoria Park when I joined the Navy.

Now, can you recall anything of your early school days, or where you went to school?

Yes. I commenced my primary school in Kalgoorlie and went to what was known as the Kalgoorlie Central School. I didn't go there for very long, and after moving to the Perth metropolitan area I attended Fremantle, Cottesloe, Maylands State Schools, and finally I went to Perth Boy's School but for only on year; so I only had one year of secondary schooling.

And you left school, I assume, what, when you were about fourteen years of age?

Yes, fourteen. In those days it was a case of fourteen and out, get out and get a job, so that's what happened to me.

And what was your first job, or what were some of your jobs before you joined the Navy?

My first job was actually in a printing works in town, on the corner of Newcastle and Sterling Streets - John [Mewling] - I simply used to pedal around on a pushbike with a big carrier on the front delivering the printed matter and that. But I didn't stay there for too long, and then I moved to a small - I suppose you'd call it a small engineering works, in East Perth, where I did a bit of welding, and a bit of drilling, metal machining, that type of thing - metal fabrication - and I worked there, virtually, until I went into the services.

Have you got any indication of what your wages were at that time?

Oh, I think I started work on something like seven and six a week, I think it was, with the printing works.

That would be about a dollar fifty, or something.

Yeah - probably went up to about ten bob when I went to the engineering works, I think - about ten shilling a week, which would be a dollar in today's language.

And from that now you went into the printing works, and you stayed there until - but you didn't go in the Navy first up, did you?

No. I applied to join the Navy early in December 1941, having turned seventeen at the end of November. So I'd read in the paper where the Navy was taking people from seventeen onwards, and so as soon as I turned seventeen I filled in some applications. But I didn't hear anything back during December of 1941 - bearing in mind, I'd only be about seventeen years and one month at that time.
So I'd gone on to January 1942 and I still hadn't heard anything back, and with a friend of mine, who was about the same age, we decided we'd join the Army and we put our age up to make it look like we were eighteen, and we filled in our call-up papers. Well, the Army didn't argue too much, or check too much, and they soon gave us a medical exam and bang, we were in the Army. So I went in the Army on January 14 1942.
After a short time at Claremont, the showgrounds, where they used to induct you into the Army in those days, I was sent up to Northam. And it was while I was in Northam that the Navy finally responded and asked me to come down for a medical exam.

Now, here I ran into some problems with the Army. The Army was very loath to let me go down and it took a bit of insistence on my part to get a leave pass from Northam to go down to Fremantle to have the medical exam for the Navy.
In those days, or in my time anyhow, the medical exam was carried out at the old depot in Cliff Street, not around at *Leeuwin* - I remember, it was up on the first floor.
Perhaps there is one little incident there that's worth repeating, is the medical exam was carried out by a Commander [Martellie], a surgeon commander who was a gruff old fellow, and he had us all lined up there, stripped down to our underwear, measuring your chest and everything. He came back and measured my chest two or three times - I was a pretty little skinny fellow then. I thought, gee, he's going to fail me and I had to puff my chest out. Anyhow, I seemed to satisfy him on that point.
Well, then he came along and grabbed each recruit by the testicles and said, 'Now, cough, but don't cough in my face, turn your head to one side.' And of course, two or three did but one fellow forgot, coughed straight into his face, and he said, 'Get your clothes on and get home.' He failed him immediately, on the spot. So when it came to my turn I just about screwed my neck off making sure I didn't cough into his face because I didn't want to be failed.
But anyhow, we got through the medical exam okay and I went back up to Northam. And then it was some time then when they finally called me up. Well, here again I had trouble with the Army. I was told to report down – I'm not sure whether it was report to *Leeuwin* or down to the railway station, or whatever it was, on a certain date. Anyhow, when I told the orderly sergeant on my particular unit in Northam he said, 'Well, you are not going.' I said, 'Oh, God!' He said, 'No, we are not going to let you go.'
So anyway, I got on the phone and I rang a petty officer in the recruiting office, or somewhere and I can always remember his words, he said, 'You tell that sergeant that if you are not on that train tomorrow I'll have his guts for garters' – or words to that effect. Anyhow, I went back and told the sergeant – not quite in those terms but I said, 'Would you please ring Petty Officer So-and-so, he's rather irate about it.'
Anyhow, finally they let me go, so I came back down to Claremont, got discharged from the Army – and by that time I'd been in the Army seven months – and so I went in the Navy on August 20 1942.

> Now, to go to Flinders, did you go in your Army uniform, or did they take all that back from you?

No, they'd taken it back from me at that time, John, because they actually discharged me, and, of course, I then came home. There probably was a day or two between discharge – I'm not too sure – and actually reporting down to get on the train to go to Flinders. I was in civvies at that time.

> Can you recall the train trip to Flinders? Was it a troop train or did you travel in luxury?

Yeah, it was a troop train because there was many troops travelling on it. Well, we certainly weren't in the old cattle trucks, we had carriages. And yes, I can remember the trip quite well. We started off - and of course, with the break in gauge, first you went to Kalgoorlie and then onto the trans-train, as we called it and from there across to Port Pirie; and from Port Pirie we changed again, and from there to Adelaide; and we changed again there, and from Adelaide to Melbourne.
Now, at Adelaide, of course, you picked up another draft. The South Australians joined you and so by the time you got down to Melbourne you had the Melbourne people joining, plus the Brisbane and the Sydney people coming down, and the Tasmanians, and so some thousands of

you tended to descend on Flinders.

> Now, you've arrived in Melbourne and you've met the rest of your draft. Could you proceed from there and tell us about your trip to Flinders?

Well, eventually we arrived at Flinders Naval Depot, bearing in mind we'd been travelling for about three days by this time, and I was only thinking the other day if we had a shower, but I have an idea we had a bit of a shower and a clean up at Port Pirie.
We eventually got down to Flinders and I felt a long, long way from home by the time I got there – well, we were, and this is the first time I'd been out of the state, and you were starting to have some sort of doubts whether you'd done the right thing. There was plenty of POs and chiefs barking orders at you, you know – 'Fall in.' 'Answer your name.' and 'Stop talking in the ranks.' – and all this sort of thing.
But anyhow, eventually we got to Flinders and we were installed in the New Entry Block – we were known as 'New Entries' of course, in those days. The first thing, of course, you were issued with was your hammock, you had to have somewhere to sleep. As I recall we didn't get any uniforms for a couple of days so the first thing to grapple with, I think, was to get the hammock up and get that into place so you had somewhere to sleep. We managed to do that in some shape or form.
The building we went into was I Block, it was a brick building – a fairly new one as I recall at the time, we certainly weren't in the wooden huts – I think it was the stokers' dormitory. I'm not sure whether we were up on the first floor; they were two-storey blocks, as I recall, and I think we were on the first floor.
I remember I got the hammock slung and got into it that night, and I was feeling, you know, somewhat a bit melancholy, and bit sort of homesick, I suppose. You were still only about seventeen and a half years of age - or seventeen years and nine months, I think, about this time, so you were still only a boy. And there was a fellow in the hammock quite near to me, I could hear him sobbing away, and that didn't sort of cheer me up too much either. But anyhow, we managed to get through the first day and to gradually come to grips with the naval routine.

> How did you find the weather at Flinders compared to coming from Western Australia?

Well, that's the first thing, Flinders, of course, was all matelots with no ex-matelots. It's right on the south coast there and you get the full blast of the wind, straight up from the Arctic [sic]. As I recall, some thousands would go in each draft and about half of them would go straight into the sick bay with coughs, and colds, and flu, and everything else. I didn't succumb to it but it was certainly very, very chilly in August when I went there. It was a lazy wind, it certainly wouldn't go around you, it went straight through you. It was very, very cold, I found it.

> Now, after your first few days you were issued with your equipment. Have you any idea what equipment you were issued with?

Well, I can only recall the usual kitting up, you know, you got your various suits: your working suits – we got overalls, of course, because we were stokers – your ones, and twos, and sixes – sixes were the white suits, of course, and you had to come to grips with all them – your kit bag and everything. I'm not too sure whether we got steel helmets at that stage, I don't think we did. I think I can only remember the kitting up process, but of course, we also got needles and everything – and this is where you had to constantly start quoting your official number. I think it was then that you sort of started to remember that this has been ingrained in your brain ever since. And I think most of us, no matter what we forget, we'll never forget out official numbers.

With your living accommodation, you mentioned you were in brick quarters which, I should imagine, would have been reasonably comfortable. Can you remember the mess hall or any of the meals you received?

No, strangely enough, I don't have any great memories of that. You know, whatever the food was, it must have been acceptable - we ate it anyhow - probably there was no alternative, if you didn't eat it there wasn't anything else. No great vivid memories of the food situation or the mess hall - I can't quite remember where we did eat.

Now, as you arrived there at this time of year when it's fairly bleak, naturally you didn't do any swimming; but were you ever asked, or ever encouraged, to learn to swim when you were in the Navy, or were you ever asked if you could swim?

Yes, I think we were asked if I could swim, and although I was born in Kalgoorlie, I learnt to swim in the Kalgoorlie baths. That's one thing I could do before I came down and had much to do with the sea, I could swim. So yes, I believe we were asked if we could swim. I'm not too sure; perhaps they taught people to swim who couldn't swim. But I remember being asked if I could swim anyhow, and I could.

Now, in your early days of your training, could you give us an indication of your first few weeks of your training? You said you went in as a stoker, but obviously this would have been the second stage of your training, I should imagine.

Yes. I went in as a Stoker 3rd Class because I was under eighteen years of age, that's the lowest form of life that existed in the Navy then and I think it still is.

Can you remember your pay?

Ah ... I think the pay was somewhere round about only one and nine pence a day, as a Stoker 3rd Class, and I think by the time I turned eighteen - you had to apply, but it was pretty well automatic - you became a Stoker 2nd Class - and by that time I was back in *Leeuwin*. And I think I had a meteoric rise in pay from something like one and nine - one shilling and nine pence - a day to about three and five, or something of that order.

And your first few weeks of training at Flinders, what happened?

Well, I can remember the first few weeks, of course, was on the bullring but I still got quite a pretty clear picture of how you would all go down on a parade ground of a morning for morning divisions, and the band would be playing, and the guard would march out, and they'd play the National Anthem – God Save the King in those days, of course – and the White Ensign and the Australian Ensign would be raised. Then there would be church service, the RCs would fall out – they used to double off behind the drill hall there somewhere to have their own service, presumably. Friends of mine who were Catholic boys use to fall out, they said they just used to go behind the drill hall and have a smoke or something, but I don't know if that's the case or not; I'm sure there was a service for them.
We'd have a service and then you'd break off your various squads. Well, whilst you were in the initial stages you'd have to do your parade ground training; that is, rifle drill and that sort of thing, the bullring stuff. So if you were at that stage you would go off to your squad and do your bullring training, your rifle drill. We had an old RN PO used to put us through the ranks. You

didn't want to step out of line too much before he'd have you running around the parade ground with your rifle held high over your head. You'd often see two or three young new entries running around the parade ground there because they'd faulted in some shape or form.

Can you remember what that was called?

The parade ground?

Running around with a rifle over your head.

No, I can't.

Was that jankers?

Oh, jankers, they called that jankers, did they?

Yes, I think jankers was the term they used, jankers, I think, I'm not too sure, it was something like that.

Now, you had some knowledge of engineering because you'd worked for an engineering firm. Now, could you tell me something about – did this help you when you moved into your stoker training?

Oh, yes, to a degree, I suppose, although the bit of training I'd had, working for this small engineering place where they used to just do metalwork mostly for the building trade – the cottage building trade – so it wasn't very elaborate.
Yes, I can remember the engineering training. After you finished your rifle drill, or your bullring training, on the parade ground, you used to march off each morning then to engineering school, we'd go to. Well, of course, signalmen, and seamen, would go to their various schools, their part of ship as we called it. And you'd march off, usually with a notebook tucked under your arm, or in your arm, swinging the other arm.
I can remember now quite a few aspects of it. The main concentration was what was called the course of steam and water, how when water is let into a boiler, or pumped into a boiler, it was heated into steam, and then it's piped across to the engines. On corvettes, of course, they have reciprocating engines and you have what you called 'wet steam'. But with cruisers and destroyers you'd have turbine engines and they've got to have what is known as 'superheated steam' so the steam had to be heated for a second time. And so, you know, you remembered this sort of thing; how, after it is used in the engines, it goes back into condensers where it's condensed from a gas back to water again, and pumped back into the boiler, and so on.
There's a couple of little things I've always remembered from those days. When you turn a valve on, or a tap or something, you open the thing up wide and always turn it back one or two turns in case somebody comes rushing out to it, and if you would open it wide and they think it's closed, they will jam it against the spindle trying to open it all the time; and that stood with me. And also, when you are opening a cock – a cock is like a little tap, of course – when the handle of the tap runs parallel – the same way as the line – that's open, when it's at right angles to it, it's always closed. And those little pointers have been ingrained with me; they are only little things but they've stood me in good stead many times.

How long was your course of training and what did you do at the conclusion of the course?

Well, at the conclusion of the course, of course, you had an exam - and the training, when I look back on it now, was quite brief. By the time I got to Flinders and got back to *Leeuwin* - because I was drafted back to *Leeuwin* - was barely three months. I was back in *Leeuwin* before my eighteenth birthday - and bearing in mind I'd only gone over there on 20 August - which is the 20th of the eighth month - and I was back in *Leeuwin* just after 20th of the eleventh month.

How did you return to *Leeuwin*?

We returned to *Leeuwin*, I think there was about three or four of us was sent back there. I remember, we went as far as Adelaide and we had a break there in the depot there – I think it was known in those days as HMAS *Glanville* – *Glanville* or *Granville*? I'm not too sure. Anyhow, we had no duties there to do and we stopped there for two or three days and eventually got on the train and got back to *Leeuwin*. But I think it took us a week or two because we had this break at [inaudible].

And at *Leeuwin* you were going to be put into a pool, waiting draft to a ship. How long did you have to wait before this happened?

Well, I got back to *Leeuwin* – I think it was the day before my eighteenth birthday; from memory I got back there on 28 November 1942, and of course, I turned eighteen the next day. We were working party down on the ships in Fremantle. On one occasion there, there was a Royal Navy cruiser came in - HMS *Devonshire* – which is the same class as the *Australia* and the *Canberra*, an eight-inch gun cruiser – and they drafted about fifteen of us on board, to live on board for, oh, I think it was up to about six weeks. It was doing quite an extensive refit and boiler clean and that. So they drafted us on board, to live on board, rather than going backwards and forwards to *Leeuwin* each day.

Now, the mess they put us in, on this occasion on the *Devonshire*, was an enclosed mess - which I thought was a bit strange at the time. It had like a heavy metal – pressed metal – all around the mess to enclose it. It was almost like a giant meat safe, you might say. I thought that was a bit strange.

Anyhow, after a few days on board I hear one of the RN sailors telling his mate, he says, 'Here, did you see that draft of Aussies that come aboard?' he says, 'They all got the clap and they've gone into pox [tent].' What it was, of course, it was an isolation mess for those that were on board who had VD were being treated. Of course, we were simply using it so there was a bit of a stigma attached to us for a while there while we were aboard the *Devonshire*.

Anyhow, we also got a draft to the *Gambier* for about a week, which was another RN cruiser – it was a Colonial Class cruiser, six-inch gun cruiser – and they even bunged us on the *Horsham* for a couple of days once when she was doing her first boiler clean, when she'd just come around from Melbourne.

And from there I also had a couple of temporary seagoing drafts, one on the *Medea* for about two weeks, and one on the *Alfie Cam* for about a similar time. These were coal-burning ships and I didn't take to that too good at all – I was only about eight stone, fifty kilos or something, and I had great trouble trying to chuck the black diamonds onto the fire. I used to get terribly seasick and boy, I was glad to get off those and get back to *Leeuwin*.

Right, now, after working party and the temporary drafts to the *Medea* and the *Alfie Cam*, we got the draft one day – I think there was about twenty of us – we were to join a small passenger freighter called the [*Tanda*]. She was a British-Indian Navigation Line ship which, I understand, was a subsidiary company of P&O or one of those.

Anyhow, we got on board that – we knew we were going over in the Middle East, or over that

way somewhere, because when we got aboard we knew that our destination was Colombo. So we went aboard this – and we were passengers aboard, we didn't have any, well, we did have some duties to do, they expected just to keep watches on the wings of the bridge, but that's all we had to do. And we lived in cabins, and we had stewards waiting on us, and one thing and another, so it was quite a good voyage. And from memory that took, oh, somewhere around about ten to twelve days, I think. I understand we pretty well went due west out of Fremantle and turned due north to avoid the Cocos Islands and, of course, the East Indies where the Japs were in possession at the time.

Were you part of a convoy, have you got any idea?

No, we weren't part of a convoy; there was no escort - except that the *Wallaroo*, the corvette HMAS *Wallaroo*, did escort us out for the first day or so. It was not until I got into Colombo, and about a couple of months later – six weeks or so later, when I got some papers – that I realised that *Wallaroo* had been sunk about that time. I think it was after it was returning that an American freighter, I think, rammed it and sunk it, as I understand it. So we had an escort out for a day or so from the *Wallaroo*, but there was no naval escort with us all the way.
So when we arrived in Colombo – Colombo is an open harbour where there was only one jetty there at the time, where tankers could go alongside – but it was a sort of an open harbour where you just went in and dropped pick. And the first thing I saw when I got inside the harbour there was a small armed merchant cruiser, HMS *Hector*, which was laying on the bottom, only the funnel and the superstructure protruding above the water, and further over near the shore was the bow of a destroyer which was HMS *Tenedos* – it had been one of the destroyers with the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* when they were sunk off Singapore – but she'd made it back to Colombo. There'd been a raid on Colombo some time before and these ships had been sunk, and knocked around, during that raid. So the first thing that went through my mind was, Christ, you know, the war's for real here. You come through the harbour entrance and see an armed merchant cruiser sitting on the bottom, with the bow of a destroyer poking up above the water. But of course, this raid had happened some time before. In fact, nearly two years I was over there, the old *Hector* and the *Tenedos* was still there when I left to come home, so it's not like it happened last week. But that was the first thing that hit me that right, there is a war on, you know, this is dinkum.

Now, you are there; what happened to you after that?

Well, we got off the *Tanda*, of course, and we went into the local naval depot - it was known as HMS *Lanka*, it was also known as RNB 2 which was Royal Naval Barracks 2 - I don't know where RNB 1 was, but usually it was referred to as HMS *Lanka* - I notice on my papers it was put down as HMS *Lanka*. And we were there for some time, I think, about six weeks or so, and we used to go working party down the wharf, much the same as what we were doing in *Leeuwin*.
We used to go down and have to assemble onto a ship with a magnificent title of HMS *Tarantula*. HMS *Tarantula* had been a Yangtze River gunboat and consisted of no more than a barge with about one metre of freeboard and just a flat deck on it. But they tell me it had a six-inch gun on it when it was up on the Yangtze, I don't know whether that was right or not. But anyhow, HMS *Tarantula* was no more than just a flat barge moored in Colombo Harbour. And there you would assemble and they'd allocate you out to working parties on the ship.

And from there you received your first draft to a ship?

Yeah, eventually I was drafted to *Launceston*, went aboard her in Colombo Harbour.

> What was your reaction, your first corvette – now, you'd been on the *Horsham*, you mentioned, so you had an indication of the living standards on board. What was your reaction to your first ship, the *Launceston*?

Oh, well, I was pretty pleased to get eventually drafted to a ship and that. As you say, I'd had some experience working on ships in Fremantle so, you know, I knew my way around a corvette a little bit. And well, you had to get aboard to start to learn your duties pretty quickly, like. There was nobody there to hold your hand and that. I think we were doing a boiler clean at the time, or a minor refit, or something. After perhaps – I can't recall exactly, but perhaps three to five days, even a week or something – we steamed out of Colombo for the first time.

> And what was your reaction: you are at sea for the first time on your own ship, to working watches, and the work, and the duties you had to do?

Well, it was pretty crowded as most would know who served on corvettes – they were built to take about sixty-five people, most of them had about eighty or ninety on board.
Because of the overcrowding on board there was no place to sling a hammock and so the only place I could find to doss down was underneath the mess deck table. I always jokingly say that this is where I learnt to play five hundred, underneath the table, because the day workers, those that didn't have any watch keeping duties to perform, used to sit up half the night playing cards, and they'd be thumping the table, you know – three no trumps, and all this.
Anyhow, eventually, as time moved on, and your seniority became more to the fore, people moved off the ship, you were able to get a place to sling your hammock but that wasn't for some months. And also, the locker I had was right up forward near the paint locker and I had to hold my breath and run up there, and grab some soap and towel out of the thing, because the smell of paint and the movement of the ship right up forward would make me terribly seasick.
So yeah, it wasn't easy being aboard an overcrowded corvette for the first time, you simply had to learn your duties very, very quickly because there was no-one to hold your hand, and the fact that you were seasick, well, a lot of them were seasick, you know, it wasn't counted as any sort of a disability.
The other thing that used to turn me off was that if I wasn't feeling reasonably well, but when I got to the boiler room door, I opened the door and out would come the smell of burnt oil and hot steam – your stomach would sure turn over then – but down you'd have to go and do your job. In the end I overcame the seasickness. But the point is that you were thrown at the deep end and you leant your duties very, very quickly on board a corvette.

> Can you recall, in your mess, about your mess deck duties and the type of food you were getting, based with the Eastern Fleet?

Yeah. The scranno[1] wasn't so hot over there in those days, in fact, for a time we went on to what they called canteen type messing where we actually drew the money from the paymaster and fed ourselves. But the variety of food wasn't very good and that didn't work out so hot either.
But while we were in places like Colombo and Bombay, the bigger cities, the food wasn't too bad; but when you got up into the Persian Gulf, where you only had a supply ship there, things were very, very sparse at that time. We even had to ration the water while we were up there. And so you could only get a few tinned items off this supply ship, and for months you'd be

[1] Derived from 'scran'– naval slang for food.

patrolling up across the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and right up the northern end of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, was pretty grim in that respect.

> Now, you were mainly on escort duties with corvettes, going to the – what, predominantly tankers, or a variety of ships you were escorting, or what?

Yeah. We were based mainly in Colombo in the initial stages when I joined the *Launceston*. We'd start in Colombo with a convoy – and you've got to go down south, round the bottom of Ceylon as it were, up into the Bay of Bengal – and we'd take these convoys to a place called Chittagong, which was on the Indo-Burmese border. This was to supply the British 14th Army with supplies and often there would be tankers laden down to the gunnels, as it were, and they'd have three or four planes strapped on the deck. Of course, these would be a good prize for an enemy torpedo; you'd not only sink the tanker but you'd also dispatch three or four planes, perhaps, or whatever they had on deck, too.
We used to take these up and, more or less, hug the coast of India, to a little port called Vizagapatam, and the escorts, which didn't have very long range – the corvettes – we'd sneak in there then and refuel, and come back and pick up the convoy again, and take it across to Chittagong. We never went into Chittagong but we always knew when we were near it because you could see the muddy colour of the water from Chittagong River, and we'd turn around and back we'd come.
Other times we took convoys from Colombo to Bombay, Bombay to Karachi. We did anti-submarine patrols across the Persian Gulf, as I've mentioned, for some time, which was almost like being in gaol. Not infrequently we'd pick up convoys from the mouth of the Persian Gulf - which would be predominantly tankers, of course - and take them down to Aden. And only on one occasion can I remember we ventured up the Red Sea as far as a port called Jeddah[2], which is the port for Mecca, and included in that convoy was some ships which pilgrims on, making their pilgrimage to Mecca.

> Can you recall, on the *Launceston*, was there any action whilst you were a member of the ship's company?

Yeah, we did run into some enemy action on one occasion. Frequently, as we would go up the Bay of Bengal we'd be parting flotsam and jetsam, and wreckage and that from ships, and quite often we'd go to action stations on reports of enemy action.
But on this one occasion – I can remember it quite clearly – I'd come off the morning watch and was in the stokers' bathroom with a couple of other stokers – and we were chiacking around, as you tend to do while you are having a shower – and suddenly there was a big, strong, metallic clunk on the bottom of the ship, and I looked out of the porthole and I could see one of the ships in the convoy heeling over badly to starboard, and smoke and some flames belching out of it. And, of course, about the same time then, the alarm bells rang for action stations.
Well, we were in the stokers' bathroom, actually stripped off, so you had to quickly get dried and try to get out of the bathroom, get into the mess deck to get your necessary gear – your life jacket and anti-flash gear and all the other stuff that you required. But, of course, at the same time there's a big throng of humanity streaming out of the mess deck, past the bathroom. It was a bit like trying to get into Flinders Street Station at five o'clock, against the traffic. As we were trying to go forward the mass of humanity was carrying us back.
But anyhow, eventually we made the mess deck, three or four of us, got our gear and got down to action stations. And of course, by this time we were starting to do a wide sweep around – the

[2] Now Jiddah

ship – and we picked up quite a few pings and started to drop depth charges, and fire depth charges and we depth charged pretty well all day. Finally, there was some oil and debris come up, but very little. We stopped once and took some samples of oil – I don't know what they did with it, probably sent it off for analysis. Well, we were credited with sinking this submarine which turned out to be a Japanese submarine, RO-110. With us at the time was the *Ipswich*, the Australian corvette, and the Indian sloop, *Jumna* –HMIS *Jumna*. We were credited with the sinking, between the three of us, but I think we did most of the work. In fact, we run out of depth charges – we depth charged it all day – and finally the Asdic recorded the perfect outline of a submarine. We were all invited up on the bridge to have a look at it – where the Ping Centre, as we called it, had pinged the perfect outline of the submarine laying on the bottom. I understand, later on, because this was quite close to the coast, near the little port of Vizagapatam – 'Visak' as we called it – they sent divers down and I think they ascertained it was the RO-110.

> Now, did you have any other action on the *Launceston*, or was it mainly carrying on, closed up at times, when you were on escort duty?

No, well, of course, we used to close up every morning at dawn action stations and that, but that was the only time we had any enemy action - there wasn't any other time.
The only other time we saw some action – but it wasn't enemy action – we were lying in Bombay and an ammunition ship was approaching the harbour, and it was apparently on fire and it blew up, and it was the biggest explosion I've ever seen. We were just about ready to leave port, but that wasn't due to enemy action, but it was a huge explosion and it devastated two or three ships nearby, and you could see debris going into the air, and it was really a sight.

> When you returned to port from these various escort patrols, what recreation did you have, or what entertainment did you have, when you went ashore?

The bigger ports, like Colombo and Bombay, had a bit to offer, there were movie houses and restaurants where you can go and get quite a good meal. That was always something to look forward to, to go and get a Chinese meal, away from the ship's food and that.
In Colombo they had a Fleet Club and they used to issue us with two tickets where you could get two bottles of beer. If there was an Australian ship in, it could be Richmond Tiger; if it was an English ship it would be McEwans; if it was a Canadian ship in it would be [Dow], they were about the three beers. After that you had to drink, if you wanted to keep on drinking, there was the black coloured 'wog beer' as we called it, you know, the local [May] beer which is black. Also in Colombo there was a place called SWOC, which stood for Service Women of Ceylon. It was a canteen type of thing where you could get a substantial meal there, or just a light snack meal, and it was very cheaply [sic]. So they were the things to look forward to.
The other thing that Ceylon generally had to offer was that when you had an extensive refit or boiler clean – and I think this happened on two occasions, certainly one to me – they would send you up into the middle of Ceylon where the tea is grown, right up in the hills there, where you got away from the hot humidity of the coast, to a place called [Diataloa]. And we'd go up there for, I think, somewhere around about ten days – half the ship's company would go off at one time. As I recall, it was about a six-hour train journey from Colombo. You had no duties there, but it was cold enough to wear your long strides and sleep with blankets on at night. You know, you felt completely revigorated [sic] after the humidity and the heat of the coast. So I had at least one up there and I've got an idea we had two – we had no duties to perform up there, you simply wandered around tea plantations. We used to make ourselves some improvised golf clubs and play a bit of golf, but it was quite pleasant.

Bombay had quite a bit to offer too in the way of the theatres and the sights, and one thing and another, but they were the two main places. The other little ports had very little to offer.

Now, you are still on the *Launceston*, but you weren't to remain there very long; would you carry on now, Jack?

Yeah, the *Launceston* came into Colombo Harbour one day, and those of us that had been away less than fifteen months, I think it was, had to pack our bag and hammocks and away we went across to *Gawler*. I think there was about a third of the ship's company changed hands, that's about a third or even maybe half even, of the *Gawler* crew came onto *Launceston*, and the same amount of people went off the *Launceston* onto the *Gawler*. The *Launceston* and the *Bathurst* came back to Fremantle and the *Gawler* went straight back up the Persian Gulf. I whinged all the way and I never stopped whinging since because I reckon it was a great disservice and that. However, that was September 1944 and eventually the *Gawler*, with the last of the other seven corvettes – or six others beside *Gawler* – came back to Fremantle and I think we got back to Fremantle, either at the end of January or early in February in 1945.

What was your feeling as you steamed into Fremantle?

Oh, I can remember that quite vividly. I had the morning watch and I come off watch at four o'clock and, of course, I had a shower and got in my number one suit and was standing there looking for the – I could see the Rottnest lighthouse and it seemed to be a hell of a while coming but I was ready to step off about four hours before I actually did. But it was a great feeling to be steaming back into Fremantle again, and home we went.
We got leave straight from the ship, we had about two weeks' leave, came back to *Leeuwin* with many others, and I remember the drill hall there ...

You'd left the *Gawler* by this time?

Oh, yes, I got drafted off the *Gawler* – oh, well, I'd left the *Gawler* and then I had to report back to *Leeuwin* after the two weeks' leave. I didn't know where I was going; I assumed I'd go back to the *Gawler*. There were many other corvettes too that had come back with us, plus other sailors, and the drill hall was chock a block full of people returning from leave.
Well, Dale, the drafting officer – whom anybody who ever passed through *Leeuwin* would know because he was there all the war, I think – he started thinning people out right, left and centre. Anyhow, it finally had come down to seven of us, which I was one of. He had no draft for us so we just go ourselves 'dittled' into *Leeuwin* books and stayed there. So I stayed at *Leeuwin* from - that would be about February, or early March perhaps, after the leave, 1945 until January 1946 when I got caught up with a draft of the *Australia*.
But I had some good jobs while I was down at *Leeuwin*. Once I got drafted down to the ML [motor launch] base, which was a lodge and comp job, where you'd just go home every night and be brought down to these little MLs every day; that went on for a month or two.
Another time I was working in the garage, myself and another stoker called Wimbridge. We reckoned that it didn't take two men to do that job so Wimbridge used to do the job one day, while I went over the fence and scootered off, and then I'd do the job the next day while he did the same. So we got away with this for quite a few months.
But anyhow, eventually, the *Australia*, which had gone over to England via the Panama Canal, came back round via Cape of Good Hope, into Fremantle, and myself and another stoker got drafted aboard. We went aboard of a Saturday and there was a lot of hilarity and hooting as we went off, you know, and chortling and that.

But anyhow, we went aboard Saturday, we went to sea on the Tuesday, and when the other stoker, who went aboard with me, came down to relieve me, he said, 'Have a look on the mess deck when you get up there' - and here was five [Calick] stokers there, got drafted on very short notice, one of them being our esteemed president of the Corvettes Association at the moment, Jack Appleby. Another one was Eric Sweet who is pretty well known in football circles when he played for East Perth - and there was three other Calick stokers, they all got bunged aboard at the last moment.
But anyhow, we went around to Adelaide, where we marched through there, went around to Melbourne, marched through there. But, of course, we were getting the accolades for the crew of the *Australia* for what they'd done, but there was very few on the *Australia* at the time who had actually served on it during the days of action. I certainly wasn't one, so we were getting accolades from the public for what we hadn't done, really.
So eventually we got to Sydney and waited our time for demobilisation. I can always remember, I had 126 points when that came up and home I went. So back we came to *Leeuwin*, I finally got discharged there on 29 April 1946.

> Now, when you returned from Sydney, you returned by troop train. Was it the same comfortable trip as you originally had when you first joined the Navy?

Yes, it was as a matter of fact. I met up with this boyhood bloke – remember, earlier in the piece, when I said I joined the Army and this other fellow and myself put our ages up – well, he eventually came into the Navy too. Ken [Poleski] his name was, he was on the *Gascoyne* and we assembled on Sydney Station together, to come home together, for our discharge and that. Yes, we were in carriages, I never, ever travelled in a cattle truck, although I only went across twice, I think – three times – once across to Flinders, back to *Leeuwin*, then finally back for discharge. So only made three trips across the Nullarbor and they were always in carriages.

> Can you recall your discharge formalities?

Yeah, well, we had a little hiccough there because myself and this other stoker that had gone on the *Australia* got a little bit drunk in Kalgoorlie and we missed the troop train, so we arrived back a day or two late. And they were going to discharge us and then they said, 'No, you've got to be weighed off for punishment.' So they gave us punishment of fourteen days stoppage of leave, which only meant we just had to stay in *Leeuwin* for fourteen days. It just delayed the discharge for fourteen days.
So eventually, yes, I got out, and you start to wonder then what you are going to do. It took a little while to find your feet – bearing in mind, the Navy would be doing all your thinking and planning for you, it had been feeding and clothing you and suddenly you were out in Civvy Street again and you had to fend for yourself.
So I scurried around for a while, and I went up to Marble Bar for a short time, and I worked with a shearing team and on the mine up there for a while, but eventually came back to Perth. I worked in some odd jobs for a time there, nothing skilled, but I realised after a while that you are not going to get anywhere unless you've got some skills. So I applied for and was accepted in to a rehab course as a welder. It was one of these situations where you had to display some proficiency – I think you had to display either forty per cent proficiency and the employer subsidised your wages for the next three years – or vice versa; it might have been sixty per cent proficiency and they subsidised your wages for the next two years till you reached a hundred per cent.
So I went and did the test and got accepted, and so I eventually went to an employer where I just used to work in the daytime – but because you weren't fully trained he only paid sixty per cent

of your wages, or something like that, and the rehab made up the rest. And you had to go and study of a night-time, go to tech and that sort of thing.

> But that wasn't your later job, was it? What determined you coming into your next job which took up most of your life before you retired?

Well, after some years - I was working at a big engineering firm called [Forward Downes] who used to do a lot of the structural steel work for the major buildings going on in Perth. In fact, the Council House in Perth was one of them; I welded all the base plates on that huge job. But they would get jobs like that where you would be working twelve and fifteen hours a day, and then another part of the year there'd be nothing doing, they'd start laying fellows off. I never, ever got laid off but I must have been in the next group if there was some to go off.
So I thought, well, I can't go on like this, so I looked around for something else to do, and I hit upon training to be what was then known as a health inspector - the term's changed over the years, 'health inspector' has become 'health surveyor', they are now known as 'environmental health officer'.

> And was that under rehab?

No, no, I'd used up my rehab by doing the welding course, this I had to do on my own.

Now, you couldn't get into the health course unless you had a junior certificate – which I didn't have only having done one year at high school and left – so I went along for an aptitude test and I did quite well in that, and they were humming and hawing whether they'd let me go straight into the health course, but one bloke said, 'Oh, I think you'd better go and do twelve months of Maths A and English.' So I had to do those two subjects at junior level. I went down to Kent Street High School of a night-time, still working at Forward Downes at the time, and I got through those two junior subjects and they admitted me to the health course.
So I did these junior subjects in 1959; 1960 I did the first year of the health course; the second year I did in '61; then kept on studying, '62, '63 and '64. There's various phases of it you can do. But in 1962 I'd qualified enough to take my first job and I went up to York as the health inspector for the town of York. And I was there for about twenty-one months, and then my family come to live up there for a period. But our house, which had been occupied by some friends, waiting to get their house built, became vacant so my family – I had a wife and three daughters by that stage – they came back to Perth to live and I stayed there and just used to commute up and down weekends.
Eventually I left there after twenty-one months and I went with the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industry as an export meat inspector. It wasn't a job I relished very much but at least it got me home every night. So I worked in various abattoirs around Perth – Robb's Jetty, Midland, Anchorage, and for a time I was down at Green's Abattoir at Harvey – you always had to do a bit of a country service. And then I eventually left that job and went to the City of Perth as a health inspector, and I was with the City of Perth from 1977 till – sorry, 1966 to 1977 – went there in '66, I left in '77, so I was in my twelfth year.
From there I went to Subiaco where, after a time, I became the Senior Health Surveyor. I was there for about three years and then the opportunity came to go into what was known then as the Licensing Court of Western Australia; it's since changed its format and its title a bit, but at that time it consisted of a chairman who had the status of a judge, John [Syme], and there were two other members, Arthur Dunstan and Fred [Lockeedie], and they made up the court. And they had, amongst other staff, seven people who were known as Supervisors of Licensed Premises, and our job was to go around the state, inspecting all the licensed premises, from right up at

Kununurra, which is near the Northern Territory border, to Eucla, which is only thirteen kilometres inside the South Australian border. Some we did by car, some that we flew. We'd also process plans for additions and alterations to licensed premises, and so on.

> Now, obviously your training for your later life, you did it the hard way, being part-time and after normal work, but do you think your life in the Navy prepared you for this, or do you think this may have made some impact on your work habits later on?

Oh, yes, I'm sure, John. I think that the Navy taught you to be self-sufficient and you had to do for yourself, there was no-one there to hold your hand. And it also taught you that the world doesn't owe you a living, you've got to fend for yourself, and I think it made you self-reliant and that stood you in good stead when you got out of the Navy with no particular skills, you had to acquire those skills, and the only way you could do it was to go and train and study.

> Now, Jack, you've been a very good boy up to now, but I have noticed you haven't mentioned girls. Now, maybe when you returned to Fremantle this might have been a new avenue that was opening up to you. Could you tell us something about this?

Oh, well, there were girls; of course, you went out with various birds, as they called them today, or sheilas we used to say in those days and that. But during the time that I was still in the welding business, I went up and worked on the whaling station in Carnarvon. I put my pennies together there instead of spending them like many of them did up there – they used to booze it up and bet it up at the weekend – and I got a bit of a bank together, so when I came back to Perth I bought a little house that my parents were living in, which had come up for sale, in Hubert Street in East Vic Park. If I didn't buy it somebody else would have, and then wanted to turf them out; so I bought it. But I was unmarried at the time but I eventually met the lady who's now my wife. We got married in 1952 and soon after that my parents moved out of this little house in East Vic Park and we moved into it.
But along come a couple of daughters at that time, and it started to get a bit small, so I applied for and was granted a War Service Loan, the amount being £2,750 in those days. And we got a block off the War Service people, not far from where this house, [inaudible] in East Vic Park, in the house I'm living in now. On that vacant block we got plans drawn up and we eventually built a house - the house cost about £3,400 so we simply made up the difference. So we acquired a War Service Home in that manner.

> Now, you've moved up to the stage where you finished up on the verge of retirement. Could you tell me something about your life in your retirement, or your travels, or any other things you've done like this, to make it worthwhile?

Yes. I finished the last seven working years of my life with the State Licensing Court, which is a government instrumentality, and I realised that I couldn't get any further than what I was – and I didn't really want to go any further – so at sixty-three I retired in September 1987.
Now, soon after that - that was September '87 – in about October, at the end of October '87, we went for a trip up to Hong Kong and into China, and that went into November up there – we went out to the Great Wall and did all those sort of things, then came back.
But during my working years I'd had a couple of good trips too. Whilst I was with the City of Perth we got on a ship at Fremantle, we went round to Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Wellington, Tahiti, through the Panama Canal to Southampton. We did the usual things round England and Europe, then we flew back to Singapore and did the last leg from Singapore down to Fremantle by ship; virtually, a trip round the world. That was in 1974.

In 1980 we went to the Greek islands, myself and my wife and our youngest daughter – this is with the Western Australian Newspaper tour – and had quite a good tour round the Greek islands and Greece of course.
In 1983 I went on a trip to Singapore and Penang, and then in 1984 I went on my own on a trip that firstly went to Bangkok for a couple of nights, and then on to Athens where we picked up a camping tour. We went right up through northern Greece, into Turkey, including a stay at Gallipoli, right down the coast of Turkey, right up through the centre, into Bulgaria, Romania, Russia – right up through Russia and, of course, the Red Square bit and everything in Moscow, the Moscow Circus – Leningrad, of course, which is a great city – into Finland, across to Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, and from Belgium to England. So it was forty-nine days overland from Athens to England.
My wife and my eldest daughter had gone on a separate trip. They went to Hong Kong and then across to London, and they were on a Scandinavian trip. And while we were in Stockholm our two trips were there the same day, so I caught up with my wife and my eldest daughter and son-in-law in Stockholm for one day. Well, of course, they flew back to England and we carried down and eventually met in England.
I've been fortunate enough to have a few trips around, plus a couple of caravan trips after I retired. I've been around Australia about one and a half times.

> Now, what about your hobbies, or interests, or activities, particularly since you've retired? Have you developed any interests or volunteer work?

Well, I used to play a bit of golf when I was still working, and occasionally do, but I don't go to the golfing, I don't play bowls. It's not that I'm disinterested, but once you start these things I think you are expected to go along regularly. I've go a caravan and I like to be free just to go, you know, at the drop of a hat anywhere sort of thing.
So apart from a bit of walking, trying to get a bit of weight off and that sort of thing – cycling, I've got a bike; I ride the bike every now and again. I don't play regularly any sports such as golf or bowls which are the two main ones, I suppose, that retired people do.

> What about the Corvettes Association? No doubt you've attended some of the reunions. Have you found that you've got some benefit out of it since you've retired, of meeting fellows that you served with?

Oh, yes, this is great, of course. We, myself and another shipmate on the *Launceston* with me, we went to the inaugural meeting of the Corvettes Association in the Mouse Bay Sailing Club - whenever that was, ten plus years ago, I think it is now. So we've been members since the inception, rarely miss any meeting, and have attended all the reunions here - but I've never been to one interstate, but I hope to go to the one coming up this year in South Australia. I don't quite know why but although I haven't been to any national reunions of the Corvettes Association, I have been to ship reunions. We went over to Launceston for the fiftieth anniversary of the commissioning of the ship, on 9 April 1992, which was fifty years to the day of commissioning. And I've also been to *Gawler* reunions, and Gawler, and Whyalla, and various other places. But apart from the national corvette reunions held in this state – that's the two that's been held here – I haven't been to any outside the state.

> That concludes the interview, and the interview was conducted by John Roberts on 16 January 1996 at City Beach. Thank you, Jack Wallis, for your contribution.

03/02