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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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S6666 Eves, Wallace Alfred

Recorded
at: City Beach, WA
on: 5 March 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.

Wallace Alfred Eves, as an able seaman, RAN ships corvette HMAS *Bendigo,* destroyer HMAS *Queenborough* and frigate HMAS *Barwon,* North Pacific Area and Eastern Australian Waters, 1942–1946, interviewed by John Roberts

Wally Eves talks about his early life in Coogee; his service in the Army as a gun layer; his discharge on medical grounds and enlistment into the Navy; the journey to the Flinders Naval Depot; basic training and advanced training as an Asdic operator; travelling to Cairns to join HMAS *Bendigo*; being in action during escort duties between Milne Bay and Oro Bay; escort duties off the east coast of Australia and in the North Pacific Area; brief spells of duty aboard HMAS *Barwon* and HMAS *Queenborough*; surviving a typhoon aboard the *Bendigo;* his discharge from the Navy and return to civilian life; marriage and family life; housing; his subsequent career and transfer to Western Australia; and his activities after his retirement.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, March 2002

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Transcript methodology

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

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This is an interview with Wally Eves and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, Western Australia.

Wally is a member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes. Wally was born in Coogee, New South Wales, on 26 July 1922, and joined the Navy in July 1942 as an ordinary seaman and later specialised as an Asdic operator. He served in the following corvette: HMAS *Bendigo*, J187, for a period of three years. He later also served on a Q-Class destroyer, the *Queenborough*, and finished up on the River Class Frigate, the *Barwon*.

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.

This interview is conducted on 6 March 1996 at City Beach [WA] by John Roberts.

What is your full name?

Wallace Alfred Eves.

When and where were you born?

I was born in the suburb of Coogee, New South Wales, on 26 July 1922.

Now, Coogee is a beach suburb and obviously you had an interest in the sea, I should imagine.

Ah, yes, I spent most of my young life in a street called Arden Street, which is up in the high area of Coogee, and the house that we lived in had a beautiful glassed-in back veranda, and we had a panoramic view of the northern end of Coogee, Coogee Beach itself, and of the Pacific Ocean – a beautiful panoramic view.

Well, this certainly encouraged you to be interested in the sea, I should imagine.

Yes, it certainly had a part in it, but I think too, I was very interested in water sports. We used to do a lot of surfing; I swam in the [inaudible] in the Coogee Swimming Club; I used to do a lot

of swimming at Wiley's Baths, which were the baths just down the street from where we lived; so I had an affinity with the water, yes.

What about your early schooling?

I began school – I think I was about five and a half years of age – and I started off at a little Catholic convent school, St Bridget's, and I was there for about three years and then I transferred to the Marist Brothers' College in Randwick, which was the neighbouring suburb of Coogee.

And from there you would have, what, left school there with the equivalent of ...

Intermediate.

... Intermediate, which is, I think, equivalent to our Junior.

Yes.

And what happened then?

Well, then I left school in 1938 and I enrolled in the East Sydney Technical College in Darlinghurst and studied wool classing.

But wool classing seems a far cry from the sea. What gave you the interest in wool classing, Wally?

I don't really know. When I left school I wasn't too sure what I wanted to do. My father worked for a wool company, Dalgety and Company, in Sydney and he had a fairly senior position, and I think he suggested it. It rather appealed to me and I went along with it, yes.

And after completing your course in wool classing, obviously you didn't remain in Sydney, or did you remain in Sydney?

Well, I did actually. The story is that I did – the wool-classing course was two years, I did the first year in a six-months' full-time period, and the final examinations were held in July. The idea was that the student then went out into the shearing sheds because the general shearing started in July. But instead of going out into the shearing sheds I got a job with a company called [Grascoss] and I stayed there and I finished off my course at night-time. I think I finished it about 1941.

So you remained in Sydney?

Yes.

Had you become involved in any naval cadets at this time, or anything like that?

No, no. The war had started, of course, in 1939, and I felt that eventually I would go into the Navy – the Navy was my choice.

But you didn't go into the Navy first up, did you?

No, well, that's another story. There were some extenuating circumstances involved in that because I turned eighteen in July 1940; I cannot remember why I didn't get called up in 1940, but I think, from memory, I filled in my registration papers for the militia – or the 'chocos' as they were called in those days – but I still had some time to do to finish my wool-classing course. And I was also playing first-grade rugby union football for Randwick and it looked like we might win the competition. And so I sort of stalled off going into the services until it was virtually too late, in a sense, because in July 1941 I got a call-up from the Army and I had to front up to the drill hall with a couple of hundred other fellows that were the same age as me; and I told the sergeant, who was at the desk when we went into the drill hall, that I didn't particularly want to go into the Army, I wanted to go into the Navy. And he said, 'No, come into the Army, it's a good life, you'll meet some good mates and it's outdoor living, it'll do you good.' So on that advice I went into the Army and so that's how I got involved in the Army.

> But did you serve in the Army before you went in the Navy? Or were you kind of deferred because of your Navy enlistment?

No, it wasn't deferred, no, I served in the Army, I was in an artillery unit called the First Medium Regiment, and I became a gun layer, a sort of a specialist. But actually, life didn't appeal to me at all, and I'd been in the Army, I suppose, about three or four weeks and I put in an application for leave to go and join the Navy.

Now, the set-up was that it being an artillery unit, there were four gun subsections, and the officer in charge of those particular troops, I suppose you'd call them – he was a troop captain – was a chap named Captain Oliver, and to me, anyway, he was a real father figure. But I put the application in for leave to join the Navy, but it had to go to the officer who was above this Captain Oliver, a chap named Merchant.

And after about three or four days after putting the application in, Captain Oliver came to me and he said, 'No, your application has been rejected by Captain Merchant.' So Captain Oliver suggested that I put in another one, which I did, about a fortnight later, I would think – and that was knocked back.

To cut a long story short, I finished up, I'd put in about five or six applications for leave, the whole lot of them were rejected – this is over a period, probably, of about, I don't know, two or three months. When the last one was rejected, Captain Oliver came to me and he said he'd been instructed by this Captain Merchant that I wasn't to put in any more, that was the finish, he would have no more part of it; I was not allowed to have leave to join the Navy.

Anyway, we were transferred from our original camp, in a place called Glenfield, down to Wollongong, and fate played a hand on my side. I got sick, I got a sickness called shingles, and I was put in hospital up at a place called Ingleburn which was a big military camp area. I'd been there a couple of weeks and then I was transferred down to the Sydney Showground, which at that particular time was called 103rd Army General Hospital. I was in there for about ten days or so and then one early afternoon I was called into the office and told that I was going to be discharged and I had to go back to my unit. And I guaranteed them, yes; I could get back to my unit by midnight that night.

So I was given my discharge papers and was walking across Moore Park, which is just outside the Sydney Showground, and I thought to myself, this is a golden opportunity to get out of the Army and into the Navy. So instead of going back to camp I went home. So I decided, what I'd do: I'd go down to the Naval recruiting office the next morning; I'd go down in my Army uniform; I'd be quite truthful; I'd tell them the whole story – the whole truth and nothing but the truth – and if there was any problem, any hassle, I'd go back home, I'd throw my Army uniform under the bed, put my civilian clothes on and go back, and join up and say nothing about being in the Army.

As it turned out, I went down to the Navy the next morning and I spoke to the chappie there in the recruiting office, and he told me, after hearing my story, he said, 'Did you join the Army or were you called up?' and I said, 'I was called up.' 'Alright,' he said, 'fill this form in and bring it back – we'll want a copy of your birth certificate, we want two character references, and,' he said, 'bring it back when you've filled it in.'
So I walked outside the office and I stood out in Loftus Street, and I read it. I thought, right, I'm going to act on this straight away. Anyway, I got a copy of my birth certificate, I got the two character references – all this took about three days. Technically, I was AWL from the Army. I took the form back to the Navy office and when I gave it back to the chap he had a look at it – and it was quite satisfactorily filled in and everything. And he said to me, 'Now, whatever you do, don't do the wrong thing by the Army because if you go AWL or if you get into any trouble, it's going to make it difficult for us.' I said, 'Yeah, that will be okay, no problem.'
So that night I got on the train back to Wollongong where we were encamped and I was a bit apprehensive getting back because I thought, 'Well, now, I don't know whether this Captain Merchant is going to be there or not, but I've got to take a punt'. So anyway, I went back to camp; I deposited my gear in my tent where I was staying, and went up to where the officers were all encamped. And I knocked on the tent post of Captain Oliver's tent; he had a great heap of officers in there with him and they were all pouring over maps, and one thing and another. They all looked up and Captain Oliver walked out, and he said, 'Oh, Gunner Eves ... ' and he grabbed hold of me by the arm and he sort of pushed me away from the tent. He said, 'Where have you been?' and I said, 'Well, I've joined the Navy.'

> Now, you returned to your camp. Now, what happened then, before you joined the Navy?

Well, we are still on the point of talking to Captain Oliver.

> Yes.

Well, to cut a long story short, Captain Oliver said, 'Look, I'm not surprised that you've done this, as far as I can see your heart is in the Navy, and as far as I'm concerned, you can go.' He said, 'I'll make no issues about being AWL and I will not tell Captain Merchant anything about this. We'll just leave everything for the Navy.'
Anyway, in due course I got a letter from the Navy to go down and have a medical, an X-ray, and proper medical tests, which I did, and then I went back to camp for a little bit longer; and then I got another letter from the Navy to say to come down for attestation, be sworn in. And so I went down and I was sworn in, and I was given a certificate by the Navy to say that I was now an unmobilised member of the Royal Australian Navy and that I was completely exempt from all further military training. So I took that certificate back to Captain Oliver and I gave it to him, and I think the next day I was out.

> You are now, after your attestation, an Ordinary Seaman Wally Eves – and your official number was?

S6666 – four sixes.

> There would be some omen in that.

Yes.

Now, Wally, I believe you went home for a little while before you went to Flinders, is that correct?

Yes, that's correct. I had to go back to work, actually, to await the draft; I suppose they were getting the draft ready to send down to Flinders Naval Depot.
Anyway, finally – as a matter of fact, I was back at work and each day I would come home and I'd say to my mother, 'Did my Navy call-up arrive today, mum?' 'No, it hasn't arrived to day'. Four or five weeks, I think it was, back at work. Came home one afternoon and mum was in tears in the kitchen, and as soon as I saw her crying I leapt in the air with joy. I thought, 'This can only mean one thing, the naval call-up has come through', and that's what actually happened.
I've often thought, in years later, what a cruel thing it was for a son to do, but of course, when you are eighteen or nineteen years of age, and you are on the verge of this tremendous excitement and new venture, you don't think of those things.
Anyway, we were called back down to the naval recruiting office one morning and we were all instructed, we were given our official number – that's when I got my official number, S6666 – and we were all instructed to all muster at Central Railway Station, I think at seven o'clock that evening. So we did this – there must have been about 200 blokes in the draft – and we were all loaded onto the train and away we went, down to Flinders Naval Depot.

Now, you were loaded on the train, but you didn't stay on the one train, did you, to get to Melbourne?

Oh, no, no, no. What happened was that we pulled in to Albury the next morning, about six o'clock – and it was as windy and as cold as anything – and we were all mustered in the railway refreshment room to be given breakfast. And then after breakfast we had a bit of a wander round the long railway station; I think Albury is about the second, or the longest, railway station in the southern hemisphere.
Then we were loaded onto a train which impressed me very much. It was a Victorian train, the Edward Henty, and it was, oh, a beautifully streamlined engine. We got into the carriages and the windows were all sealed; it was fully air conditioned; the seats were beautiful; the compartments were large, it was a really nice train. And that left about seven o'clock in the morning and we got to Spencer Street Railway Station, I think it was somewhere round about one o'clock, one-thirty, in the afternoon.
I remember getting off the train and being sort of marshalled on the platform, and seeing the masts of ships. And I thought, 'Gee, the water can't be too far away from here'. That was just a thing I sort of noted, a little observation I made.
Anyway, we were then loaded onto a Victorian suburban train for the trip down to Flinders Naval Depot; I think which, from memory, took a couple of hours. That was a very pleasant trip down, it was a sunny afternoon. By this time a lot of the blokes on board had started to make friendships and cobbered up with one another. The closer we got to Flinders, of course, the more excited we became. We realised we were getting a bit sick of train travel and we were looking forward to getting into the depot, which we did, I think it was about half past four in the afternoon. The train pulled into the little platform inside the depot and we were inside Flinders Naval Depot, at last!

What was you reaction to Flinders?

It was one of excitement and it was one of great curiosity. I remember, we pulled in alongside this platform and there was an asphalt road running along behind the railway station, and along

the road was spread out about ten or twelve senior naval people – they were obviously mature naval men, they weren't young. What impressed me was that they had their blue uniforms on; their white hats, and they had white webbing around their waists and white gaiters around their ankles. And there were about eight or nine of these blokes, I think, from memory, and we all mustered around them. They marshalled us in a sort of a long line, three deep actually, and we were marched across to a covered-in area where we all had to then fall in where they had our alphabetical cards, like E for Eves, and A for Alfred – all this business. So that's how we fell in there.

So then you were allocated to a dormitory, I assume – and what was the first thing you were issued with?

Yeah, the first thing we were issued with was a police card which had on it our full name, religion, next of kin, and the watch that we were in. From there we were marched up to the dormitories – I remember, I was in Mess 78 in B Block – we were put in there.
We'd been told to bring with us a suitcase – a small suitcase – we deposited the suitcases in the dormitory. Then we were taken along to another area and issued with our uniforms: our blue uniforms, our shorts, shoes, towels, the whole bit, everything.

Is that the first thing you were issued with?

That's the first thing I can remember being issued with.

Where did you sleep that night?

Oh, well, let me think up a story. We were marched back there to the depot – sorry, to the dormitory – our gear was all sort of put into our lockers. By this time it was about six o'clock. Anyway, we had our dinner that night in the depot, in the mess, in Mess 78, in D Block, and then after dinner we were taken along and issued with our hammocks and our kit bags. So we brought those back to the mess and then our instructors then showed us how to sling a hammock; and then how to climb into them, and how to unsling them. And we went through this exercise and we slept that night in our dormitories in our hammocks.

So this is quite an experience, at last you are in the Navy.

That's right, yes.

Now, what about your early training at Flinders, what did that consist of?

Well, the early training was, of course, simply marching and forming ranks, and all of this, as they go through, then it was rifle drill – marching with rifles, learning rifle drill. That was the basic training and then we emerged then and the training that came after that was sort of in different segments: we did sort of gunnery; torpedos; physical training, of course, was involved in it. And the idea, I think, of these other things, like gunnery and torpedos, et cetera, was to give the blokes an idea – the trainees an idea – of what branch of service they might like to go in when their training was finished.
I found the physical training was pretty solid. We used to get out of bed, I think, in the morning about six o'clock; get into our white shorts and white singlets and white shoes and we'd go down and we'd do PT, which was pretty rugged and they laid it on pretty thick. Then we'd come back; we'd have breakfast and then we'd get into our blue uniforms, then and we'd muster down on the

enormous parade ground. We'd get there just before eight o'clock – quarter to eight, or something – and then, of course, right on eight o'clock there was colours, the raising of the White Ensign, and the full guard. That was a very impressive ceremony.

I think that left an impact on most of us, wasn't [sic] it – the band and the colours?

Oh, yeah.

We were really in the Navy then, we were aware that we were part of it.

That's right. And I remember, there was a – I don't know, I think he was in charge of the new entry school – was a very elderly naval retired officer, and we called him 'Poop Deck Pappy'. I think the bloke that was in charge of the new entry school himself was a fellow we called 'Pusser Collins'. I remember those two personalities well.

It was surprising, if you'd been in a gunnery unit in the Army, that you didn't do a gunnery rate in the Navy.

Well, I thought about it and something else bobbed up later on towards the end of the course. There was radar, which was called RDF in those days – Radio Direction Finding – and I heard also of this other one, Asdic, which was a fairly relatively new course. And for some reason that appealed to me and so I put my name down to do the test. And it was quite a novel test; the test itself probably convinced me that this is what I wanted to do.
And the test consisted of – there were two officers came down from the Asdic training school in Sydney. One of them had a ukulele type of an instrument and his offsider was there and his offsider was issuing all the candidates with pieces of paper, and the pieces of paper had on them questions – or answers they were – one to twenty. And the test consisted of the officer with the ukulele type instrument plucking a note and then he waited for a few seconds and he'd pluck another note, and you had to write on the piece of paper whether the second note was the same in pitch, or higher in pitch, or lower in pitch, than the first note. And there were twenty of these questions and you had to get seventy per cent; anybody under seventy per cent was out.

You would have completed your normal initial training, which took about three months if I can recall.

Actually, it took about five.

Five. And then Asdic training became, once you'd been selected, became a further training – still done at Flinders, I assume, was it?

No, no. The formal training at Flinders had actually finished and the blokes that had qualified to do Asdic were then sent up to Sydney, to HMAS *Rushcutter*, and that's where they had the training school for Asdic. That course lasted about six weeks, I think, from memory.

We'll come back to that in a moment. Now, can you remember your first leave up the line, up to Melbourne, up to the big city?

Yes, I can actually. In the new entry school office they had a list of people who were sort of hosts for young sailors that wanted to go up the line, strangers to Melbourne. And I don't know, it was just by coincidence, there was a name on the – I think somebody mentioned this

particular person – her name was Pirani, she was a Miss Lila Pirani, and I suppose, to a young bloke, this sounds interesting, we are going to go up and stay with this miss.
Anyway, there were three of us who cobbered up together and we went up from Flinders on the Friday night, up to Flinders Street Railway Station, we were given the address to go to out at St Kilda – Hotham Street, St Kilda – and this woman turned out to be a very elderly Jewish lady. Her nickname was 'Ma', and she was the most remarkable woman I've ever come across in my life. She had a beautiful home, she'd never married, of course – being Miss Pirani – and in her home of a weekend there would be as many as fourteen or fifteen servicemen, mostly sailors but there might be an odd soldier and perhaps a couple of airmen. But they just slept anywhere and everywhere, she'd bought extra mattresses and she strew them around the floor, and we'd all sleep wherever we could. She provided us with our meals, she told everybody where their churches were if they wanted to go to church, if they wanted to go to the synagogue, wherever, she gave us all that information, and she really mothered us.
Years later, I was impressed by this lady so much that I wrote an article for the *Reader's Digest* called *My Most Unforgettable Character*, but it was never published.

> And what else happened? When you first went up the line, we used to use the term 'macker', wasn't it, you were in your issue uniforms, and your hats were on your head. Now, that was your first time. Now, when you went up the line after that, I'm sure you were encouraged to go to Robbie's and see all those tiddly suits that were being made.

Oh, that's right, yes. That 'pusser' business was, you know, the hat flat on your head, and the square – a real rookie, you know, a real macaroon.

> Well, we used a couple of terms there – 'pusser'. Now, pusser, I believe, the derivation, was 'please use strictly service articles' as the derivation, and they used the term 'macker', I think it might have been macaroons for new entries, and we used the term 'tiddly' – and what did you think tiddly meant?

Well, I don't know what I thought first, originally, but I think it pretty soon was explained to me that a tiddly uniform was one that was not naval issue, it was made according to slightly different lines of dress. The collar, for instance, was narrower, and the front of the pullover, the jacket, it came down lower and narrower, you know, tailored slightly differently to the pusser issue one.

> Did you get one of those uniforms, or leave it till you returned to Sydney?

No, actually I did, I left it till I returned to Sydney, yeah.

> Let's go back. You've been selected for the Asdic course; you've gone back to your home port of Sydney. Tell me something about your Asdic course.

Well, I settled into it pretty quickly and I rather liked it actually. It was a bit of a challenge, learning to work the unit, and of course, it was a pretty primitive thing in those days and you had to listen very, very carefully to echo notes coming back. They had a proper, what they call an oscillator, in the depot, and they could transmit a sound note identical to the one that would go out underneath the ship.
It had been established actually, long beforehand, that if an object is travelling – if you've got a transmission point under the water, to transmit a sound note, and it hits an object that's coming directly to you, you get a very sharp higher echo; and the same if the object is travelling away

from the transmission point, you get a marked lower note; and if it's stationary, of course, the pitch in the two echoes is the same. And it can be worked out that an object travelling at any angle, away from or to, the variation in this difference in the echo. This was the importance of doing our test and being able to detect the difference in the pitch.

So really your course, there wouldn't have been a great number of machines, would there, there would have been the one or two?

Yeah, that's right, just the one actually.

And you were more or less trained to listen for sound?

Yeah, that's right.

What was the range of the Asdic sets?

I think, from memory, it was about – the effective range of the transmission note was about 2,800 yards, but, of course, the machine itself could pick up propeller vibrations for, oh, a lot longer than that.

Now, you've completed your course; what happened after that, Wally?

Well, when it finished I was given fourteen days' leave and I went home thinking, oh, this is going to be nice, fourteen days' leave. I'd only been home two days and I got a telegram to say, 'Report back to *Rushcutter* forthwith for draft'. So I had to pack up all my gear again in the sea bag, and get my hammock, and trudge back down to *Rushcutter* depot, and I was advised there that I was to be drafted to a corvette, HMAS *Bendigo*.

Now, what was your reaction? Had you heard of a corvette before? Had you any idea what they were?

No, actually, I had a secret hope that perhaps I might be drafted to a glamour ship like the *Australia*, or the *Canberra* – the *Canberra* had been sunk – the *Shropshire* or one of the destroyers, or something. 'This corvette', I thought, 'what's a corvette?' you know. Anyway, I thought, 'Well, I can't do anything about it; I've just got to go'.
Anyway, we left Sydney that night on the Brisbane Express and we got to Brisbane the next day – we were told that the ship was in Brisbane, the Brisbane River, but when we got to Brisbane the next afternoon we were told there, by the Navy bloke, that no, the *Bendigo* is not here, it's up in Cairns. So I think it was the next day, we loaded on to – oh, it wouldn't be a suburban train at Brisbane, a Queensland country train – for the trip right up north.
It was a horrible trip and it took us nearly a week. The narrow gauge railway; the old fashioned train with the open windows and coke and stuff flying through, and it was an awful trip. To make it worse, when we got up north of Mackay it started to rain and it rained very, very heavily. I remember, at one stage of the game, that the train was stopped for something like four hours – we just stopped out in the middle of the Queensland bush. The problem was that I hadn't had a bath for about three days or something, and I was feeling very uncomfortable. There were four sailors on board, two of us going to the *Bendigo* and two going somewhere else, and we commandeered the toilet end, and the washbasin end, of the carriage. Fortunately, there was another one up the other end; we thought, well, there's not a lot of people on the train, but this was going to be ours. But the water supply ran out of the toilet and also the hand basin.

So you'd had your shower so at least you are clean and people like you once again. And where did you go from there? You went to Cairns, did you, to join the *Bendigo*?

Yeah. We arrived in Cairns about six o'clock in one particular evening – I can't remember if it was the same day or not.

You saw this small ship at the end of the wharf and this is the *Bendigo*. Wally, what were your impressions when you arrived in Cairns and you saw your ship, the corvette, for the first time?

Actually, we were picked up from the Cairns Railway Station by a Navy utility and taken down to the wharf where *Bendigo* was tied up alongside it. And I remember getting out of the utility on the wharf, and looking at the Bendigo. The gangway I think was up forward, from memory and I remember going on board it and we went up on the forecastle, and it had the canvas awning that ships used to have in the tropics in those days. I was very impressed with it, I think it looked bigger than it actually was, and I felt quite impressed and quite happy to be on board this particular ship. I think I also felt a sense of shyness – it was self-consciousness, I suppose – because most of the original crew was still on board and some of them were standing around up on the forecastle, and of course, an OD or a greenie comes on board, you know, I've got to go down onto the mess deck and there's more blokes down on the mess deck. You are sort of a new boy coming to a school and I felt quite uncomfortable a bit.

Now, this was January 1943 where you joined the ship in Canberra.

Cairns.

In Cairns, sorry. Now, what was the previous background of the *Bendigo*?

Well, actually, the *Bendigo* was commissioned on 10 May 1941 and the original crew that went on board were involved in all the punch up in Singapore, and *Bendigo* was one of the last corvettes to get out of Singapore. And so by the time I joined it in Cairns, ninety per cent of the crew were still the originals and, of course, on that basis they were really seasoned war veterans. And I think this is what made me feel a little bit more uncomfortable as well – oh, here's an OD coming on board, and all these blokes have been through the mill; they were certainly war experienced blokes.
But the situation was that I was one of a number of young replacement crew members coming on board, and bit by bit they were drafting the older chaps off, back to depots and to other ships.

Now, what was your reaction when you arrived on the ship – the mess deck, the number of people, the confined space – what were your thoughts on that?

Yes. I remember going down the ladder from the forecastle onto the mess deck and I thought, gee, whiz, there's not a lot of room down here – and the blokes were sitting around at the mess table and talking and yarning. And yes, I remember thinking to myself, there's not a lot of room. I had to report to the coxswain, of course, and I was given my police card with my name and my action station, my abandon-ship station, and the mess that I was in – I put my hammock in the hammock bin. I wasn't able to get a locker because there were about four blokes too many for the number of lockers they had on board, so myself and a couple of other blokes had to live out of our sea bags.

So you would have had, roughly, the best part of a hundred crew on board?

Yes, that's right, there would have been close to a hundred then. The *Bendigo* finished up with a hundred and four blokes on board.

What happened after your first few days in Cairns? What happened, what did the *Bendigo* do when it first went to sea?

Well, I remember pulling away from the wharf. The first thing that I remember about it was how smooth the ship's moving – I didn't realise that it was under way and it was actually moving away from the wharf. I imagined something like a Manly ferry where you could feel the vibrations of the propellers underfoot. But no, the *Bendigo* was just gliding through the water. I remember leaning over the guardrail and looking at the water, and thinking to myself, well, here you are, you are in the Navy now, this is what you wanted. You had all the hassle in the world getting out of the Army, and here it is now and the chips are down.

What was the destination of the *Bendigo*?

Well, the *Bendigo* was to go across the Coral Sea to a place called Milne Bay. The assignments then – there were a couple of corvettes involved in it – they were taking ships from Milne Bay, up the north-eastern coast of New Guinea, to a place called Oro Bay, because the AIF were fighting for possession of Buna. In fact, I think they may have even just captured Buna. But the Japanese were still very active up there and the corvettes were only allowed to take one merchant ship at a time, because the Japs had an airstrip about three miles away from Oro Bay.

Now, you were going into it straight away, into a war zone, and therefore this must have had some impact on your feelings at this time – you know, why did I join the Navy?

I think those thought went through my mind, as I said, when we were pulling away from the wharf in Cairns itself and I thought, 'Well, blow it, I'll leave it to fate. If I get killed, well, I'll get killed; if not ... ' and I'd put it out of my mind. I remember going across the Coral Sea and being very much aware that this little ship – it was a little ship then – I was standing down on the quarterdeck and the quarterdeck on the ship was only about eight or nine feet, maybe ten feet, above the water, and the horizon was all around us – we were right in the middle of the ocean. But then, when we approached New Guinea, going up through the China Straits towards Milne Bay, I was impressed by the beauty. I don't remember sort of thinking much about the war aspect.

Being fearful. Now, what were your duties on board?

Oh, Asdic operator, of course. I fitted in pretty well, I'd been well trained at *Rushcutter* – which was the normal thing on the old *Kybra* – we did a training cruise up and down the coast of New South Wales. So by the time I got on board the *Bendigo*, like all other Asdic operators, we could say that we were efficient, even though we, perhaps, weren't experienced.

Now, this ship was heading into a war zone; how long was it before the ship went into its first action, can you recall that?

It was only a matter of a couple of days actually. We went into Milne Bay and we picked up a

ship called the *Samuel Jacob*; we had to escort that up to Oro Bay. I remember – I can't remember how long it took, maybe a day and a half, maybe a bit over two days – but anyway, we weren't travelling very fast; we were keeping an Asdic patrol, of course, and watching for aeroplanes. But we got up to Oro Bay around about one o'clock in the afternoon – it was a beautiful afternoon, real typical tropical afternoon that you read about in travel magazines. As we edged in close to the shore I could see AIF troops and the fuzzy wuzzies – the New Guinea fuzzy wuzzies – camped right down on the water's edge, like in an ambush. And they were waiting for the signal; when the *Samuel Jacob* stopped, to come racing out and unload it as quick as possible.
But that didn't happen. We were attacked by some Japanese aircraft and bombs fell all around us, but five of them hit the *Samuel Jacob* direct. The first thing I remember was rushing out onto the quarterdeck and seeing this ship, with all the brown and white flames coming up out of it – not flames, I'm sorry, smoke – and the people running around madly trying to get the lifeboats into the water. I could hear our anti-aircraft guns firing. The aircraft would drop their heap of bombs and they were heading out over towards the open ocean.

What was your action station?

Well, in those days my action station, being a new member of the crew, was down in the powder magazine – it was down in the bowels of the ship – handing up the separate ammunition charges, the cordite. There were two of us down there and that was a fearful experience, I wouldn't want to go through that again.

You were certainly confined below decks there, you had no idea really what was going on.

No, all we could hear was banging, and the ship changing course and stuff; it was quite frightening down there really.

And obviously this was the first, no doubt, of other attacks that the *Bendigo* had in that area.

Yes. We didn't get too many air attacks but most of the danger come from submarines after that. When the *Samuel Jacob* sank, we got the survivors out of the water. Two blokes died on board, I think five blokes were lost. One was an American Negro, we buried him at sea, at dusk that afternoon, on the way back to Milne Bay and we put the dead body ashore at a place called Gili Gili. But then, when we got back to Milne Bay, to our great joy we were instructed that we'd got to go back to Sydney, that we are going to be based in Sydney. And that was a marvellous, oh, the reaction was terrific.

Did this eventuate?

It did actually, but we didn't have a clue what we were going into because at that stage of the game the Japanese had intensified their submarine activity against shipping on the eastern coast of Australia, and when we got back down to Sydney we were involved in escorting ships between Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, with a lot of other corvettes, and some of the destroyers and everything, and I could say that most of those convoys were attacked by Japanese submarines. In fact, I think it was the second convoy we took, we lost a ship called the *Recina* not far out from Gabo Island – it was torpedoed and sunk – it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon when it happened. But the Japanese submarines were very active.

In your role as an Asdic operator, what was your first impression when you got your first legitimate ping?

I don't really know; it's a hard question to answer. I remember being aware that I was in contact with something, but the problem with Asdic was that it was so sensitive that it could pick up anything under the water – a school of fish, a whale, porpoise, or whatever. There was one thing about a submarine echo; the echo note that came back was very, very clear, very metallic. Sometimes you'd get that same thing back from a whale; how you could differentiate was because a whale will alter course, change position, very quickly – quicker than a submarine. But once I had a suspicion that it was a submarine – all Asdic contacts had to be reported to the bridge straight away and we'd follow out a search procedure.
When I went into that point of the game, when I thought, well, it may not be a fish, it could well be a submarine, yes, I used to get a little bit tense. I was always frightened that I'd lose contact, which was always a danger in those days because the Asdic sets were so primitive – relatively primitive – and the human factor was so vitally important in the success or failure of an attack on a submarine.

Now, did you have anybody assisting you as an Asdic operator, or were you on your own in an action situation like that?

No, we only operated individually, we took it in turns. There was a little covered in area up on the bridge which was called The Hut, you could barely fit one bloke into it, and we had the whole thing to ourselves then.

So you had a great responsibility?

Tremendous responsibility, yes. But in the early days, there was an HSD on board; he was a Higher Submarine Detector. Once they suspected that it could be a submarine, the HSD took over, but later on, I, myself, took the part of an HSD because I remember, on one occasion, we didn't have an HSD on board, he was ashore sick, but I was experienced enough to be able to take it on.

And did the *Bendigo* score any kills – submarines?

Well, harking back to Singapore days, yes, it sank a submarine off Singapore and the success of the attack was signalled to the HMS *Grasshopper*, I think it was, but for some reason it was never recorded; but everybody on the *Bendigo* at the time said they definitely sank the submarine. Now, as far as I'm concerned, of all the submarine investigation attacks that were carried out, I feel that there was definitely one occasion, probably two, in my own opinion, it was a submarine attack, and I'm sure that on one occasion I was responsible for sinking one of them.

You worked with how many other corvettes? Did you work individually or did you work as a flotilla of other corvettes?

Oh, no, see, we'd be in convoy and there could be four or five escort vessels in the convoy – three or four other corvettes, maybe a destroyer or whatever. But once a ship got hit, once one of the corvettes picked up a submarine alert, picked up the contact, the ships would all scatter and usually another corvette would come over as well and they'd sort of work together. But there

were occasions when we had to just hunt for ourselves and carry out the attack on our own.

> You were based in Sydney; what was the other times, when you were on the *Bendigo*, did you remain based on Sydney or did you go elsewhere later on in the war?

Oh, yes, we only stayed in Sydney, I think – we were there from about March 1943 until, I think, very early 1944. Then we went back up north and we worked our way up through Langemak Bay and the Admiralty Islands, right up through there: the Philippine Islands, Leyte, Morotai, Wakde and all up through those places.

> Mainly on convoy duties in that area?

Yes, mainly on convoy duties.

> Now, is there anything else about the service, the war service of the *Bendigo*, you'd like to mention?

I can't think – nothing off the cuff.

> Now, what feeling did you get when you heard that the war was over? How did you get this information?

Well, there were two bits to this because when the war in Europe finished we were up in the Philippines, we were up the other side of the Philippines, and every body on board let out a great roar and a scream, and everything, and it was terrific.
When the war in Europe finished, I'd been drafted from the *Bendigo* – and I think I was at Rushcutter Naval Depot at that time, doing a refresher course, prior to going to the *Barwon*, I think.

> And what time was this?

This was when the war in Europe, when the whole lot finished – yeah, the whole thing finished – the Japanese had succumbed to the atom bomb.

> And the *Barwon*, that wasn't a corvette, was it?

No, that was a River Class Frigate.

> And you were going on as an Asdic rate on the *Barwon*, were you?

Yes, yes.

> And what about service on the *Barwon*, where did you go on that?

Oh, we didn't do too much work then – we went down to Jervis Bay. I remember this well, we did exercises with two British submarines off the coast of Jervis Bay, and we dropped a heap of depth charges over the side and killed millions of fish. The next day there was a complaint – there was a big fishing co-op down there, they complained to the Navy about these depth charges that had destroyed part of the reef where the fish were.

You mentioned you were on another ship for a short time.

The *Queenborough*. Yes, I was only a fill-in draft there – somebody was drafted off, was sick or something, and I came on as a replacement. But we only did a bit of patrol work, up and down the coast. I can't remember going anywhere on the *Queenborough*.

What impressions did you gain of live on a corvette – I mean a feeling of comradeship? And how did you fill in your time, your activities?

Well, you mean activities on board as distinct from going ashore?

On-board activities.

Well, I used to do a lot of letter writing and everything; that was about the only activity you could do. There was no facilities for sports on board – you know, cricket or football – everything was too cooped up. Playing cards and writing or reading were about the only facilities you could relax on.

There weren't any amenities on board. I think we had a radio or something – what did they call it? – a Panatrope system.

Yeah, that's right; we had one of those on board. And a funny thing, I used to play a few records, and there was three or four other fellows used to play their records – had quite a range of records – but it became a bit of a joke on board. The fellows on the ship could tell who was playing the records on a particular day by the selection of music that they chose.

What about relaxation ashore in New Guinea? Did you get any of that, or not?

Oh, not very much. I mean, there's nothing in New Guinea. We used to go – I think it was in New Guinea – we used to go on recreation leave for about, say, four or five hours – no, we weren't allowed to drink beer ashore, we couldn't, that's right – there was nothing much we could do. I think I remember playing in one cricket match somewhere.
One of the other relaxation exercises was a bottle of beer per man per day while the ship was in harbour; that was pretty good.

Now, in Sydney, what was your routine in Sydney when you were based in Sydney? How long did you go to sea for and what happened then?

Oh, we might go to sea, perhaps for – pick up a convoy outside Sydney Heads, which would have come from Brisbane and take it down to Wilson’s Promontory and swap over with units of ships coming out of Melbourne, and bring them back, perhaps, to Brisbane. We'd probably be away around about a week at a time, and then we might go into Brisbane and be there for a couple of days, or we might be in Sydney. We were at sea more often than we were in port.

I think being a Sydney-sider; I think one of the great feelings was the Heads coming in. Did you get a bit of a buzz out of this?

Oh, yes, it was terrific coming back. It's a funny thing about Sydney Heads, for some reason, when you are about ten or twelve miles off the coast, you can tell if you are getting very close to the Heads, particularly at night-time when you can't see the coastline, because the ship used to

start to move a little bit more markedly, you know, the waves were a bit bigger.
One thing I remember about the *Bendigo* that has endeared the ship to me in a particular way was we had to take a convoy – do you want to stay on the Sydney bit?

No, go on.

We had to take a convoy of three huge aircraft carriers from Leyte in the Philippines up through the China Sea. We had two British aircraft carriers with us, two corvettes – I can't think of the other one off the cuff – I believe it was the [HMS] *Woodcock* and another one – and we got caught in a typhoon. I've never, ever seen water like it before. Out in the middle of the ocean, the waves were just like as though you'd find them crashing on a coastline, there were huge whitecap waves. Our barometer fell from –1025 millibars was an ordinary day – and it fell right back to just nearly 900 millibars, which gives you an idea of the pressure.
Our radar went on the blink and our Asdic – not our Asdic – yeah, our Asdic had to be housed. The dome that stuck out underneath the ship had to be brought back – brought back inboard – otherwise it would have been smashed. And the gyro compass went on the blink.
I remember, we left Leyte on a Sunday and we were supposed to rendezvous with the British Fleet for the oilers to oil the warships on the following Tuesday. We didn't actually meet up with the British Fleet until the Friday. But I remember, when we did catch up with them and the storm had subsided, the British six-inch cruiser, the HMS *Black Prince*, was steaming not far from *Bendigo*, and she sent us a signal, 'How long did you have to endure that weather?' and the signal the captain sent back was – I can't remember exactly – something to the effect of, for five unending days, or for four unending days.
But the thing that I do remember was that a couple of minutes later, the *Black Prince* started to – the Aldis lamp signalling again, caught up our attention – and she sent us a signal which I think was not only a tribute to the *Bendigo* – or the *Pirie*, the *Pirie* was the other one with us – it was a tribute to all the corvettes of the Australian Navy in World War II, and the signal simply said, 'My, you must be tough!'

Now, Wally, you are on the *Barwon* at this time, I believe, and you must be due for discharge. Can you remember your discharge?

Yes, I can remember it pretty clearly. We were in Sydney at the time and it was early afternoon, and a pipe came round the ship – you know, the bosun's pipe – that Able Seaman Eves and a few other blokes, had to report to the quartermaster, or to the coxswain, and we were told by him that we were to get our gear and go over to Rushcutter Depot, that we were going to be discharged from the Navy. And so we did that and about an hour or so later we were over at the Rushcutter Depot – and I think, from memory, we handed in our sea bag and our hammock, but we were allowed to keep our uniform. I think that's how it worked out.
But anyway, we were then taken out to the Sydney Showground, for some reason or other, because there were a whole lot of people out there, all Army, Navy, Air Force, blokes, all being discharged, and in the exercise of the discharge we had to go through to talk to different people. And I remember, one of them was a bank bloke, and I think they were asking, you know, what about your banking security? Do you bank with this bank? All that was sort of trying to get blokes rehabilitated, I suppose, back into Civvy Street.

Anyway, I got out, was finished with the Navy, and that was in about late March, 1946.

And you went back to your previous firm, did you?

Yes, I went back to the firm I was working for and I carried on working there. I'd qualified as a wool classer, wool sorter, just before the war, just before I went in, so I was able to go back and continue working.

Did they give you any incentives because of your war service?

No, they didn't give us anything, just come back and ... By government rule everybody had to be re-employed by the company they worked for before the war. But on 4 May, which wasn't long afterwards, I got married.

I was wondering about that, you never mentioned girls up until now.

No, well, the lass I married was a lass that I'd met when I was about seventeen years of age – she was still at school and I'd only just left school, not long left school – and we were sort of boy and girlfriend. And years went on and we eventually sort of – we got engaged and then we decided to get married. I think she had to marry me because I was such a pest.

What about your housing at that time? It was very difficult for people just after the war; you must have something to tell us.

Oh, yeah, it was virtually impossible to get a house, so when we got married we lived with my parents and then with my wife's parents, and then back with my parents, and depending on situations and circumstances, we were just going from pillar to post. Three of our children were born whilst we were in this sort of a transition business.
But anyway, by sheer coincidence, I met a chap I'd known for years and he was in the estate agency game, and it was through him that I was able to buy a house in the suburb of Maroubra, which is a little bit further south than Coogee. And so I drew my war gratuity money and put it into the house. It was an old wreck of a house, I finished up, I used to go to tech one night a week and learn the basics of carpentry. But to us it was heaven, and so the wife and I, and our three youngsters, moved in there, and a fourth baby was born in the Maroubra home.
Eventually I changed jobs. I kept changing – well, I hadn't kept changing jobs, I had changed jobs about three or four times, each one to a slightly better one than the one before it, and eventually – I think it was in about the 1950s – '55 or something like that – I got a job as a wool foreman – they called us an overlooker – in a subsidiary company of Dalgety New Zealand Loan; the two companies had amalgamated, it was called Day Loan.
I worked there for a couple of years and then I was selected to go to India on a Colombo Plan project to teach the Indian students wool classing and how to handle wool in industrial quantities. Four of us were selected, myself and three others, and there was a mission leader, and we went to India in 1963, and we were over there for seven months, and that was a terrific experience.
When I came back, I think on the strength of that business of being selected to go to India, I was appointed the wool rehandling manager in Western Australia, and I was sent over here with my wife to look after the wool rehandling department of Dalgety New Zealand Loan.

Wally, you mentioned that when you were discharged you couldn't drive a car. Would you tell us something of that?

Yes, well, I'd never, ever been in a financial position to be able to buy a motorcar when I was younger, and, of course, then, when I got married, I drew my war gratuity – I had a bit of deferred pay. But the wife and I went down to Tasmania for a honeymoon and what money I

had then was all blown on the honeymoon. But I didn't have a car, couldn't drive one. When I came over to Western Australia they offered me a motorcar. They said, 'Well, you can have this car for your convenience', and I said, 'I'm very sorry, but I can't drive'. Eventually, of course, I had to learn to drive and I finished up, I got a car, yes.

What were your thoughts on leaving Sydney to come to Western Australia? And obviously, you are still here so we've conditioned you to Western Australian living. What were your thoughts?

Well, quite frankly, I was devastated. I didn't want to leave Sydney, I knew everybody there, I'd grown up in the place, but I sort of accepted it. Things didn't go too well in the company I worked for and I eventually parted company with them. I had a little wool business of my own for a while and then a bit of an economic depression occurred in the wool business, around about – I think it was in the 1970s – and I finished up, I got out of the wool trade through another friend of mine. I've been tied up with rugby league – as a matter of fact, I'm a life member of the Western Australian Rugby League – and it was through a rugby league friend that I got into automotive parts and I finished up with my own business, and it was quite a good one.

And so until you retired you remained with this business, is that correct?

That's correct, yes. As a matter of fact, the only reason I still haven't got it is because I developed eye problems; I've got glaucoma, I've lost the sight in my left eye, and my health went down, and I finished up on a war disability pension. Anyway, I got over that okay with proper treatment and medication, I looked after myself. And the interesting thing now is that from Coogee, in New South Wales, Mavis and I are retired now, we live in Coogee in WA.

Now, Wally, what year did you retire in?

Well, I had to retire because of medical problems – I think it was around about in the 1980s – I'm not too sure, 1982 or something like that – round about then anyway.

And then what have you done since in your retirement? No doubt – you said you had four children, they are growing up – do they still live in Western Australia?

Three of them do. The eldest daughter lives up in the Pilbara, up in Wickham. Our youngest son, he lives in Norway, he married a Norwegian girl. He worked on the oil rigs in the North Sea and now he's got his own business in Bergen. Our eldest son lives down in Byford. Our youngest daughter lives in North Fremantle.

How do you fill in your retirement time? What are your hobbies or interests?

Well, I've been tied up with rugby league football, but I've found lately that I'm more inclined to just watch the rugby league from the comfort of an armchair rather than go to matches. But I attend meetings. I'm a foundation member of the Western Reds which look like it's going to become defunct.
The wife and I do a little bit of religion teaching up at the local school; we teach Catholic kids the basics of our religion – Catholic kids who attend state schools. It's only a low-key thing but we find it's a very interesting hobby. The preparation of getting the lessons ready and teaching the kids is pretty good.

We've got a camper van, we go up to see our daughter in Wickham, we go away occasionally – not too often – in the camper van to various places. And we do a bit of swimming, I like to take our youngest grand-daughter down to Coogee beach and have a swim.
I'm still tied up with the Corvettes Association, I attend our quarterly meetings here regularly – I've attended a few interstate meetings – and I could say this, the *Bendigo* prides itself in the fact that of all the corvettes in the Royal Australian Navy, we've got the biggest group of people who come along to the reunions.

03/02