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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02012

F5061 Corry, Mervyn Joseph

Recorded
at: City Beach, WA
on: 6 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.

Mervyn Joseph Corry, as a signalman, Royal Australian Naval corvettes HMAS Bendigo and Whyalla; North Pacific Area, South China Sea, Taiwan Strait and eastern Australian waters; 1943–1946; interviewed by John Roberts

Mervyn Corry talks about his early family life and education; scouting; enlistment in the Navy; basic training and training as a signalman; joining HMAS *Whyalla*; on board conditions and seasickness; convoy duties in Australian waters; operations in New Guinea waters; operations as part of the US Navy's Seventh Fleet; joining the British Pacific Fleet's 21st Minesweeping Flotilla; operations in the Northern Pacific; sailing in a typhoon; the end of the Second World War; transfer to the HMAS *Bendigo*; his discharge and resumption of civilian life; marriage; his career with the Commonwealth Bank; his wife's good works and her OAM, and his involvement with the WA Corvettes' Association.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, March 2002

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Transcript methodology

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

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

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

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This is an interview with Merv Corry and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA. Merv Corry is a Member of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, acts as our treasurer, and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

Merv was born in Victoria Park on 7 August 1925. He entered the Navy as a signalman – his official number was F5061 – on 20 May 1943. He served on the following corvettes: HMAS *Whyalla*, J153; HMAS *Bendigo*, J187.

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.

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

What is your full name?

Mervyn Joseph Corry.

And when and where were you born?

I was born on 7 August 1925 at Victoria Park in Western Australia.

And obviously I think you still live in that area, don't you?

Yes, about two mile away from where I was born.

Can you tell me something about your early life, or your early schooling, in Victoria Park?

Yes. I went to St Joachim's Primary School for the first few years; I started school when I was about five. I later on went to the Christian Brothers School in Wellington Street, Perth – known as St Patrick's Boy's School – where I went from 3rd standard right through to obtaining my Junior Certificate, which was in 1940. I then started work in January 1941 at a firm in the City of Perth.

Now, what work did your father do?

He was a fitter and turner and my mother was a dressmaker. My father worked in munitions through the war with Hoskins Foundry, working on quite big projects there. Later on the firm became Vickers Hoskins. He was working on some occasions there for fourteen-hour shifts, for months on end, and then eventually he got on to twelve-hour shifts and he stayed on twelve-hour shifts throughout the whole length of the war and into the peace time.

Obviously they didn't have much say in your future life in the business world.

No. My mother was, perhaps, a driving force; she wanted me to get a good government job, as she called it. I started work in 1941 with the Perth City Council, as a junior clerk, and from that position I eventually enlisted in the Navy. I tried to enlist in the Navy in late 1942 when I was seventeen and a few months, but because of lack of height I was knocked back. Subsequent enlistment in March 1943, they decided I must have stretched a little bit more because they accepted me at the five foot seven and a half height. I notice on my service history that three years later I'm still marked down at five foot six and a half, so I'm the only fellow in the Navy that must have shrunk an inch during his three years' service.

Now, you joined the Navy – we'll come to that shortly – but you obviously had an interest in the scouting movement which helped you in your Navy career. Could you mention something of that?

Yes. Briefly, I was in the Cubs for a couple of years, then I got into the Boy Scouts, and eventually rose up in the Scouts as Troop Leader, and then Assistant Scout Master, and eventually had to take over the troop myself, when I was aged about sixteen and a half. Our various scout masters had enlisted at different times and we were left to fend for ourselves. So it was my scouting days, of course, gave me a very good breakthrough, as far as training, in my knowledge of signalling – semaphore, Morse code, Morse flags – also I was very fortunate that I took an interest in all sorts of knotting and splicing, et cetera. So I received a very good background in the Boy Scouts, I was very, very proud to be a Boy Scout.

Now, you went into the Navy as a signalman. Did this have a bearing of your signalling experience in the Scouts? Did you become a signalman or did they select you as a signalman?

No, I volunteered for a signalman because I thought that with my knowledge from the Boy Scout days I was far better equipped as a signalman than as a stoker or a cook, or any other rating. So it was mainly on the strength of my Scout training that I decided to go in to the communications branch as a signalman.

Now, with your enlistment, can you tell me something about your enlistment? You received your call-up, and what happened from then?

Well, eventually you go into the enlistment section and you sign up your papers and you are officially in. That was on 20 May 1943. On 31 May 1943, of course, we arrived at Flinders Naval Depot for further training.

Could you mention something of your trip across from Perth to Flinders? Did you travel in air conditioned comfort?

Oh, certainly, yes – with the windows open. No, John, we were eight to a cabin in the old trans-train, there were no sleeping facilities; you sat up the whole time. We changed trains at Parkeston, and you changed trains at Port Pirie, or Port Augusta.

Port Pirie, wasn't it?

Port Pirie, I think it was. And then, of course, you got into Adelaide, and you went from Adelaide to Melbourne. It was sit up all the way, there was no sleeping – you slept sitting up; that was the trouble, and there was eight of you to a cabin. You got your meals across the Nullarbor were by the side of the track and consisted mainly of stew and a chunk of bread, and a pannikin of tea.

Now, you've left home; what emotions were running through your mind as you left home and you were really going into the Navy at last? You are still barely seventeen, so this must have been quite a shock to your system, of leaving home.

It was, really, but under the circumstances you steel yourself up for that. You are leaving your mother and father for the first time; they came into the platform to see me off. I think they wondered what the devil I was going to get into, what sort of trouble I might find. But I was never really what you'd call homesick, it never worried me; I never had any acute homesickness once I'd arrived at Flinders, or once I'd left home.
Against that, of course, was the thought, well, alright, you were going away to virtually do your bit, and that was for the country, and that was the main thing.

What was your reaction when you arrived at Flinders? – I think we arrived at Crib Point – and you saw Flinders for the first time. Is this what you imagined?

We arrived at Crib Point after our trip down from Melbourne; I can remember it most distinctly, it was one of those clear, crisp, cold, freezing nights, we walked from Crib Point up to the barracks – [they] marched us along – as I say, it was a very clear, crisp night.
One thing I do recall is that every now and again, in the marching column, there would be this, like something scraped on the road, and there'd be a muttered curse, and then there would be a shuffling of feet. I couldn't work out what this was until my own case slipped out of my frozen fingers, landed on the road at my feet, when I cursed, and of course, the other people had to march around me while I staggered back into my position on the column. That was what the noise was because your fingers got so cold, holding your case, that they would just automatically let the case go and yet still have the feeling in the fingers that it was there.
If I might just add, that same night – it was very late at night, possibly after midnight, when we got to Flinders. I always remember my very first meal in the Navy, because we were so cold, and after we'd got into these barracks, and the first thing they did was took us up into the big mess hall and gave us a meal which was curried mince on toast, and as much as you can possibly want. I always remember that first meal, it was fantastic.

Well, that's the first memory; what was your second memory? Where did you sleep that night?

Well, we went to another barracks and they gave us these hammocks, which we had to thread up ourselves. They showed us how to tie them up, and they tried to give us a good lesson on how to get in and out of them. Well, of course, it was fun, of course, trying to see these fellows getting out of their civvies and into their pyjamas, and getting into these hammocks which they'd slung

themselves.
Now, I was very fortunate, I had a cross-bar right above my hammock so, being an athletic sort of bloke in those days, I managed to jump up, grab hold of the bar, and swing, and land in the hammock, perfectly balanced. But there were a lot of others, of course, that tried hard to climb into those hammocks without any success at all. In fact, one fellow badly injured his arm when he went over the hammock and landed on the deck.

The first few days at Flinders, how did you spend these?

Well, I'll tell you about the first morning at Flinders. Having in mind that this is May – end of May, beginning of June – although it was a clear, cold night, the night we arrived, our next reaction was this microphone, or loudspeaker, being clicked on and this raucous bugle played through the whole barracks, and within about two seconds there was a bellowing petty officer coming through with a flat paddle, hitting the bottoms of the hammocks to get everybody up; roaring and shouting and adding to the confusion. However that part was alright.
What we did do was make a run for the door so we could throw open the door and look out on this wonderful Flinders Naval Depot that we'd heard so much about. Our first reaction: throw open the door, freezing cold air, and rain and slush flew in – pitch dark, you couldn't see a thing. So if that was Flinders Naval Depot in the morning, we'd have to wait for a couple of hours before we could see it in the sunlight. So we shut the door and then went on with our normal way, but I always remember opening those big double doors and this cold blast of wet air came flying through the mess decks. That was our first impression of Flinders.

Can you recall your issue of uniforms ...

Yes.

… what you received or how you received them?

As you know, we would all go down in groups, in batches, to get kitted up as they called it.

There was always some confusion about what size jacket a fellow should have, what size trousers. Most of them knew their shoe sizes and sock sizes, and when it came to hats, well, the first hat that was put on your head by the fellow behind the – by the rating behind the counter – if that didn't suit, he would try another one bigger, or another one smaller, until eventually he got you the hat which, in his opinion, suited you well, regardless of what you thought about it. The same with all the standard stuff, like collars and underwear, and items of that nature – and lanyards, well, anything that wasn't with a particular personal size, of course, were just put in a big bundle and put on the counter in front of you – the things that didn't rely on size.

Now, what about your tally band[1], what did you do with that?

Well, we weren't too sure what the hell to do with that, we thought we'd pin it up. But anyway, someone discovered a couple of three-badge ABs somewhere in another mess deck that used to tie these bows in your ribbons – I think they charged sixpence, from memory – but they used to do a beautiful job of it because although we tried our hardest, but it was a real dog's breakfast what we produced on our hats.

[1] A hat band, usually inscribed with the name of the wearer's home ship or unit e.g. HMAS *Whyalla*

> Now, you've received your uniform, you've no doubt had a medical inspection and injections; what happened after that? What did you do for your next period of time after that?

We went through the medical, and we went through the dental and then eventually we got down onto the square for training in marching and manoeuvres, which went on for about three weeks before we passed out of that new entry stage; then we were able to go on down to the signals school.

> Did you do kind of a basic seaman's course for the first part – basic course?

No, it was just marching and drill, as they called it, down at the drill hall. We didn't do anything to do with seamen or any other rating. Once we had passed through the drill square we were then formed into other batches and eventually went down to the signals school.

> Can you recall what happened each morning at Flinders? Now, you've got your uniform, and you are put in the division you are in; can you recall what happened each morning, usually about eight o'clock?

Yes, well, you had your fall-in and you had to march-in in your units, all round the big parade ground. And many, many thousands seemed to be lined up there. Whether it was good weather, or cold weather, or whether it was raining slush and mud, you still formed up out there on the big quadrangle. And, of course, the commander always had a few things to say.
I can remember the first morning, the commander got up there – it causes a laugh around that every new entry crowd, for the first day only, till they were told to shut up, and that is, he said, 'You will carefully listen to what I have to promulgate.' And, of course, this used to send the new entries into gales of giggling because they'd never heard the word 'promulgate' before. But it only went on for one day, and you could always tell a new entry batch because if they giggled, well, this was the first time they'd ever heard it, you see.

> In the signals school you had some background in signalling and therefore you found the course, well, it wasn't strange to you, but no doubt there were things you had to learn the Navy way which were totally foreign to what you'd learnt previously.

Oh, yes. It was one thing knowing semaphore and Morse code, the actual signalling part – we were trained in the mechanical semaphore [inaudible], we picked that up pretty quickly, that was quite good but, of course, you had to learn your signal flags, and this, of course, was quite a difficult job because none of us had ever attempted to do this before. And the signal flags – I say it in general terms – there's twenty-six – this is what we called the British Fleet Code. There's twenty-six alphabetical flags, all different. Of course, there are ten numeral flags also, and there are ten numbered pennants, and there are also special flags, about fourteen or fifteen. So you are somewhere up around the sixty different flags, which you must learn. Their sizes were the same, except the numerals, the pennants, of course, were longer and thinner. But you had to know the colour of that flag – whether it was flag A, or flag B, or flag Y, or flag Z – you also had to know the meaning of that flag when it was hoisted singly on a yardarm of a ship.
Well, of course, it was quite difficult for a lot of us to sit down and learn these things off, just from the look of the flag – the colours of it and the shape of it – and, of course, you also had to know the numbered pennants, the numeral pennants; they all had a specific meaning, and your special pennants had a special meaning, and your special flags had a special meaning. So you were learning something around sixty or seventy different flags with their individual meaning, it

was quite a feat, you know.

And how long did this course actually take?

This must have gone on for about three months. You had to know what a flag was hoisted singly, as they called it. For instance – I'll only give you two examples – one, the flag A was enemy aircraft sighted. If you wanted to show how many, or if you wanted to show a bearing from the ship, where it was sighted, you had to add extra flags after that with what they called a tack line – a tack line is a gap between a flag and the next one. So you might say that there was three aircraft bearing 180. You would have your flag A, for aircraft sighted, you'd have your 'three' for the number, and you'd have your tack lines with your three numeral pennants for your bearing.
These are the sorts of things which we had never learnt before and which, of course, we found it very hard going, particularly some of the students, or some of the ratings, that did not have a type of study ethos behind them, they weren't used to sitting down and actually studying, and learning, and retaining things. Some of those found it, oh, very, very hard indeed. I was pretty fortunate because I'd been used to studying for many years and before I joined the Navy I was studying accountancy. I found it very easy – or less difficult anyway – to read these flags and know what they meant.

Now, Merv, after you'd been at Flinders for a couple of weeks you went up the line. Can you explain what this was and what you did?

Well, I didn't get up the line until August, till after my eighteenth birthday.

Now, there was a reason for this, wasn't there?

Yes. If you are under eighteen you couldn't go up the line unless you had someone to go to. If you had parents, or family, or friends that would more or less sponsor you, yes, you could be released into their keeping, but if you were under eighteen, and until you passed your eighteenth birthday, you weren't allowed up. So I never got up the line until, well, the middle of August.

What compensation did the Navy make for this, in weekend leave?

Oh, well, it was just bad luck. You stayed at Flinders Depot and you couldn't leave the Depot. So we used to just walk around the Depot. You couldn't even get into a pair of old overalls, if you were staying at the Depot you had to be in the rig of the day, all day. But you avoided any other duties on that weekend, but the fact remained that all your friends went up to Melbourne and came back Sunday night, and you were stuck there until then. So your first trip up the line, of course, was something to really look forward to.

And you were filled with envy of all their doings, and all the things that you wished you were with them, no doubt.

Well, even if you believed only half of the things that they told you, they still had a good time. And, of course, the first time I went off up the line, as they called it, a couple of other fellows I was with – we used to go to Navy House in Melbourne – and there was always a family there that would be, maybe, taking two, or three, or four, new sailors, say, for Sunday lunch, something like that. Some would stay overnight; some would go for Sunday lunch, which was quite good because you would find your way to these people's places and you'd treat them as

friends; you'd have to behave yourself, of course – well mannered – and you'd have your Sunday lunch. And then, mid-afternoon, you'd come back to Melbourne, of course, and then wait around for the train to take you back to Flinders.

Now, Merv, you've had your first leave up the line. Now, tell me more about Flinders and what happened after that.

Well, we were at the signals school, of course, for three months or so. That's where you'd gradually develop your training, you were learning all the time, consolidating what you'd already done – and of course, you had your practical side with your Morse light and your semaphore. Eventually, that wound up, of course, when we finally sat for our exams to pass out of Flinders and be able to receive our draft to our first ship.

Now, how were you told? Did you have any choice in drafts or not?

Well, we did nominate a preference, of course, but I notice the Navy ...

What was your preference?

Oh, I think it was an overseas cruiser, from memory, but I don't think the Navy took the slightest notice of that, they just sent you where they wanted you to go.
Most of the two classes we were with seemed to go – from memory anyway – seemed to go to minesweepers, as they called them. One man went to HMAS *Australia*, a cruiser, some went to sloops and frigates, some went to [inaudible] [port war] signal stations, and one man finished up on a tug boat somewhere. But in the main, most of the fellows went on to minesweepers, which we later knew as our corvettes.

What was your lucky draw?

Well, my lucky draw was the HMAS *Whyalla*, a minesweeper, which was located in Brisbane, undergoing a major refit up there after she'd returned from surveying the islands in and around New Guinea. So when we finished our exams and said our goodbyes, we got on trains and went to our respective ships, wherever they may have been.

Now, you joined the *Whyalla* in Brisbane.

Yes.

What was your reaction when you saw a corvette, the real-life corvette, for the first time?

Well, I reckon I was pretty lucky to see any sort of ship but I saw it, of course, from across the Brisbane River. When I got to Moreton Depot, after leaving Flinders – a couple of days', or several days' travel – I had to go to Moreton Depot because that was the only way to get across to the *Whyalla* which was undergoing the refit at what they called Miller's Wharf. It later became the site for Expo-88 in Brisbane. But there was the refit going on, and of course, a work boat was going across from Moreton Depot, straight across the river, to the boat, every day about one o'clock, half past one.

What was your reaction to the size of the ship?

I got on there and I looked at this ship, with J153 on the side, and I thought, well, that's to be my new home. Of course, when we got alongside the ship and I climbed on board with my sea bag, and hammock, and ditty bag, the first officer I saw, of course, I saluted – he happened to be the first lieutenant – he immediately called for the leading sig. and the bosun's mate, and they escorted me down to the communications mess.
My first thought when I got to the communication mess was, well, this is not a bad size for three or four signalmen. It was shortly after that I was to realise it was eleven men in there, not three or four of us. So that was the communications mess.
I can recall, quite vividly, my first impressions of the ship. When it's undergoing a refit, of course, you've got a lot of new cable; you've got welding fumes; you've got paint fumes; red lead fumes; everything is in disorder – there's cables crisscrossing the deck; everything is grimy and unpainted. It was quite a shock for me to see it, I imagined Navy ships were the acme of cleanliness and polish, but of course, all those things, later on, were cleared away and some form of orderliness took place with the whole ship, and the painting was done, and in the end, by the time the refit had finished and we were ready to go out on her trials, sure, that ship was like a new pin, and one you could be very proud of.

Did you imagine the cramped living situations on the ship?

No, that came as quite a shock to me. To get to the communications mess you go up through the seamen's mess deck, and then down a hatchway into a mess that fits between the two sides of the ship, with the Asdic compartment underneath and a big Asdic hatch in the middle. And, as I said, looking around when I first got down there, I thought, what a nice spot for three or four signalmen. However, there was the whole communications branch down there of four telegraphists, and four signalmen, and three coders, so in harbour, of course, it was quite a squeeze for eleven fellows to live, and work, and eat, and live, generally, in a spot about the size of the average suburban kitchen.

What was the feeling when you first went to sea?

Well, apart from being terribly seasick – I might add here, John, that my greatest memory, of course, of first going to sea after we'd gone out for our trials and evolutions, and then we got stuck into convoy work, my first impression, of course, was the dreadfulness of seasickness. This kept in my mind for the first three months I went to sea, I was seasick every trip. I was even seasick going up the Brisbane River when a ferry crossed our bows and left a bit of a wake behind. But no, it took away a lot of the shine of my Navy service, it took away a lot of pleasure of serving, was to me the fact that for three months, every trip, all I could face was continuous seasickness, not being able to keep anything down. But I still had to stand my signal watch, of course; four-hour watches, all coming up constantly. I never missed a watch but I missed many a meal.

Now, we've heard your misfortunes. Now, you are going up to a war zone.

Now, Merv, you are on your ship now, the *Whyalla*, and you are heading north. Can you tell us something about your experiences on the *Whyalla*?

Yes, right, John. There's quite a number of stories, some are amusing, some are of interest to the people, but the convoying work, Brisbane to Gladstone, and Gladstone to Sydney, it was all fairly non-eventful as far as any action goes, it was quite a grind really. But I really started to

enjoy things when eventually we left the east coast convoy system and we suddenly went from Brisbane and realised we were heading for Milne Bay in New Guinea.
In New Guinea waters we adopted several roles, apart from convoys and escorts, and anti-submarine patrols– we landed troops on odd parts of the coast; we took troops off different parts of the coast; we helped with towing ships off reefs; we helped, at one stage, to pull the *Kanimbla* off, out of a beachy lagoon. We covered all sorts of work with patrolling and ferrying. But I think, even up there, the convoys were quite different to what they were down on the east coast; they had much bigger ones. We had a variety of convoys; I suppose the biggest convoy I was engaged in was one involving fifty-six merchant ships and twenty-four escort vessels, when we left the Admiralty Islands and headed towards Leyte Gulf, which had recently been invaded. Other times we had as much as just a single ship, we were given the task of convoying, from, say, the Admiralty Islands down to Milne Bay, or Madang, or those places.
We got to know the northern coast of New Guinea fairly well. Our favourite spot, of course, was either Admiralty Islands, Manus Island in the Admiralty group, or a place called Madang in Northern New Guinea – that appeared to us to be the most scenic place and certainly, with the river running through it, which we could go up the river a certain way before we had to anchor, that seemed to be the choice of all the towns, all the little towns that we pulled into in that part of New Guinea.

> You mentioned various places like this. Now, did you get recreational leave, did you have any facilities for going ashore?

When we got up to New Guinea we found that we were attached to the United States Seventh Fleet, which was very handy as far as victualling was concerned, and supplies. But at the same time, we found that we were on call as a task unit for all sorts of odd jobs, we were never too sure where we'd be from one week to the next. But we did like working with the American ships, their supplies and their food was far better than ours. But at that time, in that run – it would have been about six or seven months there – I don't think I put my foot over the side of the ship in all that time. We seemed to be either running from one harbour to another; one convoy to another; a sole mission to some other part to pick up a ship; rendezvous with someone else. It was, in my memory, it just seems to be a hotchpotch of missions that we were running all round that area. But from all those memories there comes lots of other good points, good days we had, good periods we had, and I can recall several of these incidents that may be of interest to other people.
At Manus Island in the Admiralty group, we were in a place called Seeadler Harbour, and the Americans, with their efficiency and know-how, and go-ahead and this, established a big island in the middle called [Ra Ra] Island which was the recreational island. And, of course, they had a huge number of ships and troops there, and they just levelled this island and topped it with coral, and put up various buildings, and they called it the recreation island for baseball, and horseshoe throwing, and swimming – you name it and even Duffy's Tavern – you name it, they could supply some form of recreation. We used to enjoy that on odd occasions.
Of course, the island next-door to that was called Pityilu Island, and of course, again, the Americans, in double-quick time, had bulldozed straight across this island, which was one of the outer islands surrounding the lagoon of Seeadler Harbour, and built and enormous airstrip there out of the crushed coral. Apparently it was done in very record time and it was a very important airstrip, but it seemed to us to be about 200 metres wide, and of course, ran from the water, right across the island to the lagoon on the inside.

> Did the *Whyalla* at this time – I realise you were in enemy waters, to a degree, and there was possibility of submarines – but was there any time that the *Whyalla* was under

attack?

No, not in my time, John. A couple of times we had a few little scares but it wasn't the real thing, as we found out afterwards. So although we were in these convoys, and although we were operating in forward areas, as they called it, and we used to have our dawn and dusk action stations, and we used to carry on with our others training with anti-aircraft and anti-submarine, but there didn't seem to be – we were never under any serious threat or attack from any enemy forces.

You spent, what, 1944 to 1945 in this area?

Well, we spent most of 1944 up there, and then we came down for another minor refit late '44, and then I got sent home on leave to Western Australia, from Sydney, for three weeks leave.

This would have been your first main leave?

This would have been my first main leave, it was about sixteen months I was away before I got leave, or perhaps a bit longer. But that was my first leave home.

And then you returned to the *Whyalla*, which you picked up and returned to?

Yes, I would have been ... we went back to the *Whyalla*, that would have taken up to about December, and by that time, I think, we were down around Melbourne way. Then we came up to Sydney and we then joined in with the British Pacific Fleet as part of the original 21st Minesweeping Flotilla. There was a big ceremony at Watson's Bay Wharf where the Admiral, Bruce Fraser, came along and accepted the 21st Flotilla into the British Pacific Fleet. We never, ever saw him after that, of course; he was the Admiral of the Fleet and, of course, well above our station.

Now, where were your operations after you joined the Minesweeping Flotilla?

We then went back up to the Admiralty Islands, and then across to the Philippines; Leyte Gulf, of course, had been well and truly established, and the Philippines had been almost liberated by this time. And then we were heading further north to help in the campaign at Okinawa, and backwards and forwards with convoy, occasionally coming back to Admiralty Islands, or back up to Leyte and even some parts of New Guinea. We were kept fairly busy through that part. Our worst time then was in May – April or May '45 – we were on a big convoy and we got hit with an enormous typhoon. That was five days of real bad sailing, it was quite frightening actually, at the time, when this typhoon came across and hit the whole convoy.

How did the *Whyalla* withstand the typhoon?

Well, it was like a cork in a whirlpool, but it stood up to it. They were marvellously built ships, they were tough as seal boots sort of thing. They could really ride out those waves, and the buffeting they got, corkscrewing and tossed around; it's a wonder they didn't roll right over. But after five days the typhoon passed over and then we got back on an even keel.
I always thought afterwards that it wasn't the knocking about and the buffeting that worried us; it was the sheer intensity of the noise on the ship, the noise of that wind through that rigging and everywhere. We always reckoned that any part of that ship that could vibrate into a certain musical key, that wind would bring it to that point where it would either hum or vibrate. I've

never heard noise like it in my life.

> Now, you would be coming up towards the surrender. Did you get any indication, or were you aware, that the war was coming to a close?

We were up in the North Pacific midway through June, and then in early July we went up and joined what they called The Fleet Train, a whole armada of ships there to service the main fleet. And that went on for a whole month, continuous steaming for a month, all through July until we had to leave them in early August.
But to answer your question on when we heard, on the night of August 6, we heard that they had dropped the first atom bomb on Hiroshima [pronounced 'Hirosheema'] as we called it then – it's Hiroshima now. And then again, on August 10 they dropped the one on Nagasaki and we heard about that on the American radio.

> Were you informed it was an atomic bomb, or just a bomb? Were you aware of the intensity of it?

We heard, on August 6, we heard that they dropped an atom bomb, an atomic bomb – this was stipulated in the news broadcast, I believe – it was an atomic bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima and causing considerable damage, it almost wiped out the city.
How I remember the incident so well it because the next morning, August 7, we called into a place called Eniwetok [now Enewetak], which is in the Bikini group of atolls – and you may recall, in 1956, in Bikini, they set off the first hydrogen bomb – and also, it was a marvellous day on August 7 when we pulled into Eniwetok, about two o'clock in the morning. A barge came up – an American barge – came up at eight o'clock, loaded with great big bags of mail. When we got them eventually sorted out and down to the mess decks, all this stack of mail which we hadn't seen – we hadn't had any mail for six or eight weeks – there in the midst of the mess deck table was a nice, beautiful parcel addressed to me from my mother, done up in the white calico that they used to use, and of course, it was my birthday cake which arrived on my birthday, August 7. That's one of the little things, John, that you don't forget, so this is how it helps you keep your mind clear on these events.

> After the war, you are still on the *Whyalla*; how did you spend the rest of the time?

Well, we had great celebrations, like everyone else, on VP night, August 15, and then shortly after that we set sail with a convoy of six wooden hulled fishing vessels which had come under their own steam, all the way from England, starting some many, many months beforehand. And we had to escort these wooden hulled fishing vessels to Hong Kong for use around Hong Kong Harbour, as Navy general purpose vessels and launches, et cetera.
It took us about three weeks and we hit another typhoon coming up on the west side of the Philippines, and one of the boats we lost for several days, until it eventually came into Hong Kong after our convoy. So we got five of them in and one missing for three or four days, but he eventually straggled into Hong Kong; we'd lost him in the typhoon.
Shortly after we got into Hong Kong, and enjoyed the sights and sounds there, there comes along in September, a couple of weeks after arriving there – in which case we'd had a lot of minesweeping duties to perform – and we had, believe it or not, been chasing Chinese pirates in junks around the various waterways all around Hong Kong and north of Hong Kong.
But eventually came the time when I had to transfer from the *Whyalla* to the *Bendigo* on 21 September '45, and said goodbye to the *Whyalla* as she sailed out of harbour next day, coming back to Australia. After she had gone the flotilla then went up to a place called Amoy on the

Formosa Straits, and we mineswept there for some four or five weeks, to minesweep the channel for the returning repatriated Chinese ships. Then we returned back to Hong Kong, and after a couple of days there, the 21st Flotilla left Hong Kong to come back to Australia; the nine ships to make, virtually, a triumphal return back to Sydney. As it turns out only six of us were left when we came to Sydney; the others had gone to Brisbane and Townsville for repairs and other service emergencies, service contingencies.
Got back into Australia, we went around to Melbourne and back to Sydney. And then I went off on my second leave, arriving home on Christmas Day 1945.

Can you tell me about your discharge?

Yes. After finishing my leave at home and coming back to the *Bendigo*, which was in Sydney at that time, we made a few trips around but there seemed to be no purpose in what we were doing, except to help the Army ships and troops from Sydney to Melbourne, and also some Navy personnel we had to take down to Melbourne. But eventually came my signal that drafted me back to HMAS *Leeuwin*, a depot in Fremantle, from which I was to await discharge. This eventually took place when I got to Leeuwin Depot. I worked in the signal distributing office there for some several weeks, and then eventually my discharge routine came forward, and I went through the discharge routine and was discharged on 4 June 1946.

Following your discharge – you'd previously said you'd worked for the Perth City Council – did you take advantage of CRTS [Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme] training? I think you said you were studying accountancy but that wasn't to be your future career, was it, with the Perth City Council?

No, I was discharged on 4 June, John, and I started work back at the City Council on 5 June; I never even had a day off. But it was a case of going back there because my job was protected under a moratorium; they kept my job open for me. So I was able to go back there and continue on with my junior clerkship, continue on with my accountancy studies, for what I could see for the time being.
In August 1948 the Commonwealth Bank advertised for people, if they wanted to change their career.

Now, the Commonwealth Bank advertised for positions, I believe?

Yes, John. And of course, by this time I was married; I was married in January 1947. My wife and a couple of other Navy friends talked me into taking the exams for the Commonwealth Bank, which I did so, was successful, and I started employment with the Commonwealth Bank then in early September 1948. And my life has been with the Commonwealth Bank then for thirty-six years following that, until I eventually retired as a branch manager in 1984 at the age of fifty-nine.

Now, you obviously served in many positions in the bank, and as you say, you were a bank manager. This would have been your final position, I assume.

Yes, that was the position from which I retired – it's time run out, I couldn't go any further.

Now, you mentioned you were married. Could you tell us something about your wife, who is well-known, I think, in ex-service circles?

Yes. I knew my wife before either of us joined the service. She went into the Australian Women's Army Service [AWAS] at the age of about sixteen and a half, and we only met up once or twice on service, in the eastern states, because she was attached to an Army command in Victoria. But she was discharged before I was and then, of course, we continued on with our friendship and courtship and eventually married, as I say, in January 1947.
Alice was a corporal in the AWAS, in the signalling section, mainly on switchboards, et cetera. She's gone on and always retained her connection with the AWAS, and has been the President of the AWAS Association for twenty-eight years straight, and part of her life is looking after her AWAS 'girls', as she calls them. She is very well-known in ex-service circles, particularly with the RSL and the Department of Veteran [sic] Affairs. She has done quite a lot of good work in helping some girls get their pensions, straightening up things after matrimonial troubles, or death of husbands. To my mind it seems that forever she has been devoting a big part of her life to the AWAS Association, looking after the welfare of her girls and doing all sorts of things for their benefit.

She received an award, I believe.

Yes, in Australia Day 1987 she was awarded the Order of Australia Medal. This, of course, dates back – or goes back – to many years of service with St John Ambulance, and the Home of Peace, and the Association for the Blind, and the AWAS Association, the Combined Ex-Service Women's Association. I can't say, or she couldn't say, that it was for any specific thing, except, of course, helping others and, in particular, looking after ex-service men and women, mainly ex-service women.

What about yourself? You must have shown interest in activities other than your banking world in your life after discharge.

Well, I have one interest, of course, being in the Corvettes Association. I've been treasurer for nine years now and probably will keep on going – this group of people, that are all ex-corvette sailors. So I'm treasurer of that and I'm quite happy to serve in that position.
Of course, at home, I have quite a big garden, all the way around the house. The whole block is full of garden and well reticulated. So I've got gardening, and I've also got a wood lathe, I've always had woodwork as a hobby for, oh, ever since I was married. Now, I'm turning on to wood turning and I hope to get more time to devote to that hobby because it's only in recent times that I've found that I'm now getting time to devote to some action in that regard.

Our corvette association has a reputation of conducting very good Australia-wide reunions. Merv, would you like to tell us your part, as treasurer, in the last reunion, or other reunions you've been involved in?

Yeah, thanks, John. I've been to quite a few myself, but we've run two over here in Western Australia; one in 1984 and another big one in 1994. I was on the Reunion Planning Committee for both those reunions, and of course, I think the second one in 1994 was by far the most successful. We had more variation in the reunion, we put a lot more work into it, and we had a lot of detail to consider. We worked for about two and a half years before that reunion.
To give you some idea of the problems we faced, when we first mooted the idea of having the reunion and got stuck into the details, we estimated we could perhaps rely on 600 sailors, 600 people attending. If we got 700 it would be great; if we got 800 it would be a bonus. So we calculated everything on about 800 people attending the reunion, that's all your bookings, and your meals, and your buses; everywhere where numbers had to count, we relied on 800.

So you can imagine the consternation when we opened up applications to come to the reunion and slowly but surely, it crept up around the 1,000 mark, and then it got to the 1,100 in numbers. We had to recount all our operations and arrangements to make sure that we could accommodate this eleven and nearly 1,200 people that were coming.
We had a lot of extra arrangements to do, such as extra marquees at Garden Island to accommodate the crowd for a spit roast. We had to plead with Gloucester Park to make a bigger room available. Everybody gave us cooperation, but the fact was, we'd geared up for 700 comfortably and we finished up with very close to 1,200 attending the reunion. That, of course, gave us a great boost and was one of the highlights; the mere fact that we doubled the numbers what we expected.

So yes, it was a very successful reunion, John, our one in '94.

> Now, as a result of that, there are negotiations with the Navy at Garden Island, hopefully, to put some form of a window in the chapel. Is that correct?

Yes. We are negotiating – early negotiations – to put a stained glass window in St Paul's Chapel over at Garden Island. Everybody – the Navy and the chaplains, and the Association – everybody is supporting it, they are well behind it. We know it's going to be appreciated, but at the present moment we are still negotiating with the Navy chaplains as to what form the design on the stained glass will be. We've had one suggestion knocked back, or disallowed, and now we are still approaching them to find out just what we can put on the stained glass window. But whatever the Navy chaplains want, well, of course, we have to give it to them, otherwise we won't get our stained glass window in.

> Now, you have some further recollections of your service in corvettes.

Yes, a lot of recollections, mostly good. But to get rid of the bad ones first, of course, was the recollection of the cramped conditions. In heavy weather the air used to get very bad, very foul; there would be water everywhere, wet clothing everywhere.
The overall factor of weather – rough sailing – of course, was a bad feature, but against that, of course, was when good weather turned out they were very happy ships. We had no complaints about the food; the food was as good as what the Navy could give you under those circumstances. If we were in Australian ports you'd get your fresh milk and your fresh vegetables. If you were up in the tropics for any length of time, well, then you'd go onto dry, dehydrated food, and you'd go onto diced food – diced carrots, diced beetroot. The food, overall, was good. In the tropics, mainly, of course, you'd be on bully beef but we had a cook that could turn up bully beef; serve it up in thirteen different ways – everything bar soup and the sweets – so we were quite happy with the way he used to cook it up. But overall, my recollections of the Navy food, et cetera, was quite favourable. Not like some, I just can't complain about the food that was on there. But it was the rough weather that used to knock us about a bit, but that was something which you soon learned to forget when you think of all the happier times we had on our little corvettes.

> That concludes an interview with Merv Corry who served on the corvettes the *Whyalla* and the *Bendigo*. Merv, by the way, was made a life member of our Association for his contribution to the sound financial position that the WA Corvettes Association is in.

03/02