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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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F4052 McLaren, John Cram

Recorded
at: City Beach, WA
on: 30 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.

John Cram McLaren, as a telegraphist, RAN corvettes HMAS *Wallaroo, Tamworth* and *Gawler*, 1941–1946, Australian eastern and western waters, Indian Ocean, west Pacific Ocean, South China Sea and Arafura Sea, interviewed by John Roberts

Jack Mclaren talks about his early life; emigration to Australia; his early life in Victoria and West Australia; entry into Navy; family's reaction to his enlistment; naval training; training as a wireless operator; posting to HMAS *Wallaroo*; sea trials and shake-down cruise; anti-submarine patrols; convoy duties; sea sickness; departure from *Wallaroo* before ship sank; postings with HMAS *Tamworth* and HMAS *Gawler*; being in Darwin at HMAS *Coonawarra* during Japanese air raids; shipboard recreation; enemy action; cessation of hostilities; discharge 16 April 1946; rejoining the Shell Company in Western Australia; marriage; post war housing problems; family; recreational activities, retirement and membership of the WA Corvettes' Association.

Transcribed by: Chris Soames, March 2002

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Transcript methodology

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

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

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

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Identification: This is Tape 1, Side A, of an interview with Jack McLaren and forms part of the Oral History Project of the Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, WA. Jack is a member of Royal Australian Navy Corvettes Association, Western Australia, and this interview relates to his personal experiences in corvettes.

Jack was born in Scotland on 13 April 1922 and he joined the Navy on 27 November 1941. He joined as a telegraphist and his official number was F4052. He served on the following corvettes: HMAS *Wallaroo,* J222; HMAS *Tamworth,* J181; HMAS *Gawler,* J188.

Sixty of these small ships, officially Bathurst Class Australian minesweepers, commonly known as corvettes, were built during World War II in Australian shipyards as part of the Commonwealth Government's wartime shipbuilding program. Twenty were built on Admiralty order for the Royal Navy and were commissioned and manned by members of the Royal Australian Navy. These ships were named after the following 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 by John Roberts on 20 March 1996 at City Beach [WA].

Jack, could you tell me your full name?

Yes, it's John Cram McLaren.

Where and when were you born?

I was born in Broughty Ferry, Scotland, on 13 April 1922. Now, Broughty Ferry is near the mouth of the River Tay and it's about three miles from Dundee. We emigrated to Melbourne, Australia, in 1925 and I was then three years old.

Now, you went to Melbourne, what work did your father carry on there?

Well, dad at the time was working for a customs agent on the wharf at Melbourne but he always had a very strong desire that he wanted to be a farmer. At the time we were living in a suburb called Prahran.

And from there what happened? Did he achieve his wish to be a farmer?

Well, what he did, he was able to get a orchard in a place called Queenstown which is about

sixty miles from Melbourne – it's now called St Andrews and it's the bottom of King Lake. It's actually in the heart of the apple country of Victoria.

Did you stay in Victoria?

No. We stayed there for, I would think, about three years because the first school I went to was in Victoria and it was in this Queenstown, but in the meantime, with dad's complete urge to be a farmer, he wrote to Western Australia and applied, and was successful in being accepted as a group settler in a scheme devised by the then Premier of Western Australian, Sir James Mitchell, who opened up the south-west to dairy farming.

As a matter of interest, how did you get from Victoria to Fremantle, or to Perth?

Well, actually, we came in a ship – and that really brings another story – I don't think it's got much to do with this, but my dear old mum played the piano, and she loved to play the piano. The ship was alongside in Melbourne and there's a big Irishman there too, and they were singing songs and they thought we were going to have a wonderful voyage. But when the vessel went outside the rip and started to bounce around, we didn't see mum or the Irishman till we got to Fremantle.

Now, from Fremantle you were then taken to your new farm.

Yes. We went for a short time to a little country spot called Boallia – it was Group 59 near Busselton – and I went to this little school. And then we'd only been there a few months when they shifted us to Rosa Brook, and then I went to Rosa Brook School, and that was on Group 22 near Margaret River.

From there, how long did your father remain on the farm?

He remained on the farm – and that was 1930 – he stayed there, we were there till about 1935 and then we came up to Perth and I finished my primary education at Subiaco State School and my secondary education at Perth Boys.

And what age did you leave school, Jack?

I'd say, fourteen, John.

Then you went into employment?

Well, after I left school, of course, I worked for a couple of years with a customs agent called [Greaven] Piper Limited in Bowen Street Fremantle, and then I obtained a job with the Shell Company, Australia, as a junior clerk.

And you remained with the Company until such time as you joined the Navy?

Yes. I joined the Navy from the Shell Company because I wanted to be a sailor.

What motive was behind you, or what created an interest in joining the Navy?

Well, why I joined the Navy was this. I was in Number 4 Sea Scouts and my three close pals

were telegraph messengers and I used to go up to the operating room on the third floor of the Perth GPO and read telegrams. And my best pal and I wanted to be wireless operators and believed that the Navy was the superior service in this field. In the Sea Scouts we'd been taught semaphore, and heliograph, which we considered would also be a great advantage to us when we eventually joined the services.

Now, what age and where did you join the Navy?

Well, I joined the Navy at Cliff Street, Fremantle – I don't remember – well, it was round about 27 November 1941. What we did it, we reported to Cliff Street to join the Navy as wireless operators –Leeuwin hadn't been built then – and we were told that if we wanted to become communications branch we'd have to sit for an exam, but if we would sign up as cooks or stewards we could join straight away.

So you had some difficulty getting into the Navy, into the communications branch, which you wished to join?

Well, like all young fellows, we were keen to get going, but as our hearts were set on being wireless operators we decided to wait for two weeks and take the exam, which we duly sat for and passed.

What was your family reaction to you joining the Navy? Did they appreciate that you were going into the Navy and probably leaving Western Australia?

Well, it was rather mixed feelings in a lot of ways. I did talk about that. To ad lib, mum – dad was very keen, he was very proud of the fact that his boy was going to join the services, thought that this was wonderful, but of course, naturally, like all mommas, she had a very mixed feeling towards it all.

So she wasn't impressed that you were joining the Navy?

No, no, she was quite happy I joined the services, but she was like all mommas, she didn't want her boy to go away to the war because he might get killed.

Now, Jack, have you got any more to say about your family reaction on you leaving home to join the Navy?

Well, John, what emotions were running through my mind when I left home, I can tell you that I had very mixed feelings at leaving home, indefinitely, for the first time in my life. See, I'd never been away from mum and dad before. As an only child, I'd never been away like this before and they knew that my dear momma would miss me terribly, as I knew that I would miss her too. I was also a little concerned that dad, who was a World War I veteran – 51st Highland Division Black Watch – and keen to join up again, may join the Army soon after I was gone; that would leave mum on her own. Despite this, actually, I was really excited about it all as it was, to me, the start of an unknown and thrilling adventure which I had willingly volunteered for. Whilst dad was very proud of his boy joining the services, mum, of course, didn't want me to go in case she lost her only boy, but despite her inward feelings, she gave me her blessing and full support.

Can you recall anything of your trip from Western Australia to Flinders Naval Depot?

Well, actually, yes. We were immediately sent to HMAS *Cerberus* – that's Flinders Naval Depot – to commence our training as wireless telegraphists. There were about eight or nine of us from WA on this course.

How did you travel from Western Australia?

We travelled by train.

Was it a troop train?

To go with us there was my best pal, Ron [Coney], from the Tax Department; there was a Bill Townsend, his people owned the Park Hotel in Fremantle; there was a Neddy Warnecke, his mother owned the Orient Hotel in Fremantle; there was a Stan Spears, a piano tuner by profession, and two other lads named Andrews and Phillips, plus little me. A couple of days later we caught the trans-train from Melbourne and [sic] Flinders Naval Base to commence my naval career. We were all in civilian clothes as we were to be kitted out on arrival at Flinders Naval Depot.

Now, can you recall anything of your arrival at Flinders, your first day or your first night in Flinders?

Yes, actually I can. I mean, the journey actually took about four days. To me, who had not travelled like this before, it really was a great thrill.
When we arrived at Crib Point the train unloaded its cargo of would-be sailors, most of whom were in civvies, a motley crew if ever I saw one. We made our way to the main entrance of the Depot and reported to the personnel who manned the office situated just inside the gate. Later we learned that this office was known as the Regulating Office.
We were eventually marched through the Depot to a prefabricated hut called D Block. It was one of ten similar buildings used for the reception and housing of new recruits of all categories.

Can you recall your first night – what happened the first night at Flinders?

Well, not really, but we were delivered into the hands of an elderly chief petty officer called Mr [McGenty]. He was a delightful, fatherly figure who really looked after us while we were under his [superintendent].

What were your impressions of the hammock you were issued with?

Well it was quite a business – you know, that day, fifty of us hopefuls, thrown together from all different states of the Commonwealth, and from all different walks of life, and the sorting ourselves out, peer pressures, et cetera, which lasted for a few days, was indeed a wonderful lesson in human and public relations. As you say, all these strange things, like suddenly hammocks, and hammock bins, and how to handle them. Of course, the place was cold, it was wet and it was miserable, and you know, we were a little bit homesick.

Obviously this is towards the end of the year, coming into the summer. Most other people seem to have gone in the winter and complained about the cold so it was no different.

Now, can you recall the food at Flinders? Were you impressed with that?

Well, there was always so much of it that it was so wonderful. We used to get dixies full of cream, and we used to have afternoon tea with jam and thick slices of bread and cream – all the best of food. The only thing that really got us was the fact that food was an expensive item in our day when we were at home, because we were very poor, and you got to Flinders and the waste was enormous; I've never seen so much waste. And the man, I believe in Crib Point had the best and fattest pigs in Victoria.

> Now, your early training at Flinders, before you went to the CB Branch; what form did that take?

[No reply]

> Now, your early training; you were going to tell us something about that.

Well, the first six weeks we spent on the parade ground under that beady eye of a gunner's mate who taught us how to march, handle a rifle, and clean it, and get us to a reasonable standard of physical fitness with daily sessions of PT. We were also taught various drill movements which we seemed to make a real hash of, much to our instructor's disgust. We also had to regularly wash, polish and scrub out the chief petty officer's mess from top to bottom. I believe it had the reputation of being one of the finest messes in the whole of Victoria.
When my dad came to see how his boy was getting on in Flinders he was, in fact, entertained in this very mess that I helped to keep shipshape and Bristol fashion. Very soon after I had left home dad did, in fact, join the Australian Army with the rank of a warrant officer and had been sent to Geelong to do a course, so he took the opportunity to come down to see me. He always reckoned that naval hospitality was the greatest; I know that they treated him right royally.
At the end of our six weeks on the parade ground we were then shifted from D Block to C Block, a three storey block of dormitories used by the Communications Branch for all their personnel. Our new dormitory was CT1, that is, C Block, Top Floor, Dormitory Number 1, and so our serious training at the Signals School was about to begin.
The Signals School at that time was under the command of a Lieutenant Commander McKinnon and it was rumoured that it was his family that the famous weight-for-age horse race, the J S McKinnon Stakes, was known. He was affectionately known as the S, and our instructors were Petty Officer Telegraphist George [Ongal] and Dave Gribble.
The training was quite intense; we were constantly having Morse code and other aptitude tests. As the Morse code speed increased some were immediately having trouble reading it. Many decided forthwith to change to signalman and others to coders. Fortunately, I was still able to maintain a CBWT. I also had to become proficient in semaphore, Aldis lamp, heliograph and flag hoists, both naval and international. I also had to learn to code and decode messages in our brilliant naval code which the enemy were never, at any time during the hostilities, able to break. We were in the Sig School constantly on weekdays, from 08:00 to 16:00 daily and were granted leave up the line once a fortnight.
The people of Melbourne were so wonderful to us young sailors. We had a billet in Ripponlea with a Mrs McCarroll, whose son was also a sailor and, at the time, was serving on the cruiser HMAS *Sydney*. She had a player piano in her lounge room and we used to have a most enjoyable time pedalling it and having singsongs.
I found the course most interesting and challenging. Of course, I was doing what I joined the Navy for and I'm sure that this helped me a lot when, at times, the going got tough. We used to do fleet manoeuvres and the orders for the change of direction – that is, ninety degrees to port or starboard, or whatever – were sent by Morse code and, as you can see, there was no room for

error or hesitation on behalf of the operator, or you would have a collision on your hands in next to no time. I found this to be quite a nerve-racking experience. Naturally, our instructors emphasised and impressed upon us the importance of what we were doing.
Over the nine months we were training, we naturally had many tests and eventually the day of our final exams arrived. To qualify as a wireless operator it was mandatory that we had to be able to read Morse code at a minimum of twenty-two words a minute; be competent at receiving and sending by Aldis lamp; skilled in the art of coding and decoding messages; be able to undertake minor repairs to the wireless sets and the transmitter, and be able to read semaphore and flag hoists, both naval and international.

> Now, you've almost completed your course; could you tell us what qualifications or badges you received?

Yeah, well, after completion of my nine months of training – and I'd made it – of course, naturally, I immediately rose to the dizzy heights of an ordinary telegraphist. And we were that excited; we were issued with arm badges to sew on our uniforms. It was wings with a lightning zigzag through the middle, and we were all so proud of our achievements.
Our training finished on 21 July 1942. For those of us who had made it, excitement was high and for those who missed out, they were – naturally – bitterly disappointed. To cut a long story short, we all went over to Murphy's canteen that night for a few jars of Murphy's White Flash. This was our first time in Murphy's canteen, for it was out of bounds for all new recruits. The beer was considered, even by the hardened drinkers' standards, as a very potent drop. It made most of us quite sick and in the morning there were a lot of seedy sailors.

> Now, you've finished your course; what was your first draft?

Well, next day – that was on 22 July – all the drafts came out and this was a very emotional time for us all. We had grown into a fairly close-knit community and now we knew that we were to be split up and possibly never see each other again. The top operators all got drafts to destroyers; most of us were drafted to many newly commissioned corvettes. Some were sent to shore-based installations such as Coonawarra in Darwin and Harman and Belconnen in Canberra, also, Magnetic Island in northern Queensland and places in New Guinea like Port Moresby and Milne Bay. I was drafted to a newly built, yet-to-be-commissioned corvette called the HMAS *Wallaroo* named after the town of Wallaroo in Spencers Gulf in South Australia. Before the turn of the century the great grain races from Australia to England, by ships like the famous Cutty Sark, started from the grain terminal in the port of Wallaroo.

> Now, you've been drafted to a corvette, no doubt you hadn't heard of these before. Could you give me your impressions of your new draft?

Well, yes. To date, see, we had really only been playing sailors by going up the line to Melbourne, all done up in our uniforms, and having a real good time. But now I suddenly realised that I was to actually join a warship and really get involved in the war.
The next day I left Flinders, and all my friends for Sydney. Unfortunately, I was all alone. I had hoped that I would at least be travelling with one or two of my classmates, but this was not to be.
On arrival at Central Station, I rang Naval Headquarters in accordance with my instructions, to advise them of my arrival. They said that they would send a vehicle to pick me up and my gear, and take me to Garden Island to join the ship. It was early a.m. when I first rang. After a few more phone calls I was eventually picked up about 14:00 and deposited on the wharf at Garden

Island in time to see a tug pushing a corvette alongside. It turned out that it was, in fact, the HMAS *Wallaroo*. It had been launched and brought down from the shipyard and fitting out was to be completed at Garden Island. It was swarming with shipyard personnel but no naval personnel were present. I was the only crew member there at the time so I ventured aboard and eventually found the wireless office. It was such a little ship compared with what I had imagined.
I felt so very lonely and homesick, and there and then, I wished that I could go home to mum and dad. I found a record player and a few records in the office which I played. The first tune I played was *Maria Lena*. At that time I was close to tears and even to this day, if I hear that tune, it takes me right back to that very first moment when I stood all alone in the wireless office of the HMAS *Wallaroo*, wallowing in self-pity and suffering from an enormous dose of homesickness. About an hour later, a bus arrived with all the other ship's personnel and I was able to meet my new shipmates for the first time.

Now, tell me about when the ship first went to sea.

Well, after a couple of days of further fitting out by the dockyard personnel we went to sea for the first time to try and test all our equipment. Our sea trials covered all aspects for all personnel: speed, gunnery, consumption, radar, WT, Asdic, depth-charge setting, action stations, lifeboat drills, et cetera, just to name a few.
We would steam out through Sydney Heads, usually in an enormous swell and heavy seas, and proceed at full and various speeds, straight out for about an hour. After I while I would feel myself getting squeamish but seemed to be able to hold on long enough, and when we turned around and began to run with the sea things would start to improve.
One day, in the middle of all this pitching and tossing, I was sent aloft by my boss, Leading Telegraphist Jack [Marnie], to clean the wireless aerials, both fore and aft. That most certainly was, for a young ordinary telegraphist, straight out of Flinders and going to sea for the first time, a very scary, frightening experience. I remember hanging on for grim death as the old girl constantly rolled and pitched. I very soon realised that it was true what was said about these corvettes, that these things could, in fact, roll on wet grass.
The Indian corvette, HMIS *Bengal*, also did her sea trials at the same time as us and eventually we both went to Broken Bay, in the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, for a ten-day shake-down cruise, prior to commissioning and getting down to reality. As the Jap subs were beginning to make their presence felt on our eastern seaboard, it was rumoured that we were to start off doing convoy work in this area and this proved to be correct.
The ten-day shake-down cruise was indeed a very pleasant experience which was thoroughly enjoyed by all. The boys picked bags and bags of rock oysters and, being in protected waters, it was like being on a holiday. We also had the opportunity of getting to know one another better and were able to further hone our skills in preparation for whatever may lie ahead.
The moment of truth had arrived. Our first job was an anti-submarine escort of a convoy from Newcastle to Melbourne and bring another convoy back from Melbourne to Newcastle. Unfortunately, I cannot recall the name or names of any of the other escorts. After taking on bunkers in Sydney, we then proceeded to Newcastle. We did not enter the harbour, the convoy assembled outside. The trip was via Gabo, Eden, and Wilson's Prom[ontary], and the weather was wild and woolly all the way down and back.
When we got to the entrance to Port Phillip Bay the convoy entered the bay but we stayed outside until the north bound convoy had assembled, then we escorted it back to Newcastle before proceeding back to Sydney to replenish our bunkers, ready for another trip. Over the years, when I read or see and hear about the lads who volunteered for the annual Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, I honestly reckon I have a fair idea of what they experience. It certainly is a

dirty bit of ocean.
On arrival in Sydney for bunkers, some of us would get about three hours' leave. The only thing we could do in the time permitting was to head for the nearest boozer, like the Ship Inn or the Fortunes of War, and proceed to get a belly full of beer. From time immemorial, sailors worldwide have been guilty of this practice and I do not blame them one bit now that I understand why.

Now, what was it like adjusting to shipboard like?

Actually, John, adjusting, at first, to shipboard routine was not all that easy to get used to as they were all so different to what we had become accustomed to in Flinders. For example, I had learnt my Morse code on an [Interna] buzzer line, where all the signals were all loud and clear, with no outside interference whatsoever. But when I went on watch for the first time, the noise was deafening, with about a dozen radio stations all having a go at the same time and I had to pick the right station out of that lot. Also, the signals would fade and that made life difficult. The constant rolling and pitching also made it very difficult to actually sit at the desk and write the messages; sometimes lying full length on the floor was the only way to manage.
No-one ever told me that the telegraphist I would be relieving on watch for the first time would, in fact, have had his head in a bucket for the previous four hours. The smell, in the tiny little wireless office, when I first went in, most certainly set me on the road to ruin. Fortunately, on the second day out from Newcastle, and when I was in the throes of seasickness, and eating pockets full of dried biscuits, and then feeding it to the fishes, our leading signalman, a Laurie Innes, who had been in destroyers on Arctic convoys, could not do his watch because of chronic seasickness. To have a third signalman, I being the new boy straight out of Flinders, and therefore reasonably proficient in the use and reading of Aldis lamp semaphore, and the reading of flag hoists, both naval and international, I was to be used as a signalman until Laurie could be replaced when we finally reached port.
For me this saved the day. Being stationed on the wing of the bridge in the fresh air, instead of the stinking wireless office, I was able to get my sea legs and overcome my seasickness. I was proud of myself for on the third day I was able to venture down to our mess for breakfast and all future meals. Actually, it was a speedy relief to my sufferings for I was beginning to wonder just how much more I could put up with life on the ocean wave. That's how it was.
I think I said I wondered how much more I could put with, this life on the ocean wave. It is a dreadful feeling, believe me.
I can recall, whilst on the wing of the bridge one very dark night, and during the middle watch, seeing a straight line of phosphorous heading for us. The immediate reaction to my untaught mind was that it was a torpedo. As it reached the ship's side it turned at right angles towards our bow and I then realised that it was, in fact, a dolphin, not a torpedo. Thank goodness, for if it had been a torpedo we would have been blown sky high long before I could have done anything about it.

Where did you go, and it what area, and what other ships did you serve on, Jack?

Well, John, I served on the following vessels, I listed them this way: HMAS *Cerberus*, which was the Flinders Naval Depot, Crib Point in Victoria; HMAS *Wallaroo* in the eastern and western Australian areas, 1942–1943, and we mainly did convoy work; HMAS *Coonawarra*, Darwin, the Navy's major shore based communications centre from January 1943 until May 1944; HMAS *Leeuwin*, Silo Signal Station, on top of a Co-op Bulk Handling wheat silo on North Wharf, Fremantle Harbour, from July '44 until September '44; HMAS *Tamworth* from 4/9/44 to 19 September '45, Eastern Fleet, based on Colombo, then British Pacific Fleet based

on Manus Island in the Admiralty Islands – did trips to Darwin, Enewetok [now Enewetak], all round New Guinea, and was in Hong Kong for the surrender; HMAS *Gawler* from 19/9/45 until 8/3/46, joined her in Hong Kong, chased pirates, did surveillance runs, took Netherlands Civil Administration Troops to places such as Gorontalo in the Celebes prior to the Dutch being kicked out of Indonesia, also took may surrenders and brought many Japanese back to Morotai to face trials for war crimes; and finally, HMAS *Leeuwin* from 9 March '46 until 9 April '46, leave and demobilisation.

> This is an informal question, Jack. You obviously left the *Wallaroo* before it was sunk; what were the circumstances? It was just another draft you received, was it?

Yeah, that's right. As a matter of fact, that was just the way the cookie crumbled. I got a draft and I went straight up to *Coonawarra* in Darwin.

> Now, you jumped from the frying pan into the fire because when you were at *Coonawarra* this would have been the time of the bombing, and no doubt, your WT or your signal station would have been under attack.

Well, yes, we were pretty fortunate in a way because I was at *Coonawarra* and *Coona* is about, you could say, eight-odd miles out of town, right next to Winnellie, but really and truly the only watch – they used to come over very regularly and was in many air raids. Actually, they didn't have their sights set on *Coonawarra* until one particular time – I think it was about raid number 55 – they came over our way; they dropped the bombs, and they came over the top of our huts, but they landed in Winnellie and unfortunately, they took a few soldiers. But then, when the raid had finished, we all came out of the slit trenches and were standing around socialising when suddenly, over the trees, came three which we thought were B-25s, which were Mitchells, and we thought, gee, our blokes are nice and low, and as they got – and we could see them, you know, only treetop level – we suddenly saw that they had huge red dots underneath their wings. Well, then we all went to the burrow. These fellows, the three of them, came over the complete station and filled the whole place up with incendiary bullets. As a matter of fact, John, the rear gunner, he was that close you could see him grinning as he was having a pot-shot at us. But I'm very happy to say that not one person was hurt. It made a horrible mess of the houses and the dear old chief was going south, after all his stint in Darwin and all his clothes, and all his shirts, and all his lovely suits, and they all had holes in them where the bullets went in one side and out the other. But luckily, overall, with bombing in Darwin, whilst it happened a lot, we were pretty lucky to be that little bit further away and it really wasn't levelled at us, apart from that once.

> How did you spend your time, at sea or ashore?

Well, John, at sea on corvettes, relaxation and amusement at sea was not all that varied. We played card games of all sorts; they seemed to be the most popular. We used to do crosswords, write letters, and occasional game of tombola – I think it's called pussers huckers, it I can recall correctly – and there was a ludo type match spread out on the deck and two huge dice were used, and these were shaken in a bucket and then tipped out on the usually heaving deck, and much excitement was had waiting for the dice to settle. If we were lucky enough to have a shipmate who could play a musical instrument, we would have many a rousing singsong or a concert. Of course, all ships seemed to have at least one character aboard that had the ability to keep most of us entertained.
In port or at anchor, it was a vastly different ball game. For example, while in Colombo we were invited to play hockey against the Tamil Indians; cricket against the local side, and also ran a

marathon from the passenger jetty to the Galle Face Hotel – stopped all the traffic, held them all up, acted as policemen, it was quite magic really – and ran our marathon. At times we would be invited to pictures in the hangers of aircraft, or challenged to a game of water polo against other ships in our flotilla. Goals were hung over the side and fellows armed with Lanchesters [submachine guns] were on guard in case any sharks or any other unwelcome visitors came around.
We were often anchored in very deep water, quite a long distance from the shore. At Manus Island in the Admiralties, Aussie Rules was all the rage, and I'm pleased to report that the *Tamworth* was the champion team; we played eighteen games for seventeen wins. We were only beaten once and that was by HMAS *Ipswich* by one point, but we got our revenge in the return match.
It is true that we had a couple of champion footballers aboard. One of our seamen, [Peterman], was [Stan Pop's heel] who eventually captained and coached West Perth to a premiership and played for WA in AFL clashes with Victoria. We also had a Pricky Reed, at centre-half back who had a few games with Collingwood. One ship had Jack Sheedie aboard but we still came out on top.
Coonawarra was where I played a great deal of sport from Aussie Rules, soccer, hockey, tennis, basket ball, for both *Coonawarra* itself and also the Navy. We were always being challenged by the Army or the RAAF. We also had pictures once a week, they were always held at a place called Winnellie and soldiers, sailor men and airman all flocked there – and you had to bring your own chairs. We were even silly enough to play rugby in the mud at Milne Bay.

> How long before the first action you were involved in, or your ship was involved in, Jack?

Being a corvette sailor, my first encounter with the enemy was when we detected an enemy submarine whilst on convoy duty. When the alarm sounded I had to gather up a portable transmitter/receiver, a set of semaphore flags, an Aldis lamp, and a few more bits and pieces and head for my action station which, unfortunately, was in the tiller flat. It was right down aft, damn near as far aft as you could go. It was pretty dark in there and I would be perched amongst tins of paint, mooring ropes, et cetera. I could not see what was going on but every time they dropped a pattern of depth charges I feel them drop. When they exploded the old girl's stern would be lifted out of the water, then me and the paint would go up together and the prop would also be lifted clear of the water and would rev like mad, all in all, quite an experience for a growing boy. Fortunately, there was no aftermath, damage or injuries. This used to happen at fairly frequent intervals while we were on convoy duty.

> And on the other ships, were there any instance like this?

Yes, a few times. I would always be unlucky enough to get the tiller flat as my action station.

> And the tiller flat was down aft and you were locked away from the action happening outside?

Yes, you could only just wonder what was going on because the idea was that if the bridge got blown away, or something happened with our communications, I, at least, had a transmitter and a receiver and you had communications, that was the idea of it.

> Now, how often did you get leave ashore and for how long?

Well, if we went to, say, Adelaide and Sydney, just to pick out any – it doesn't matter – we would endeavour, where possible, to ensure that, say, the Adelaide boys or the Sydney boys got shore leave, that seemed to be a general practice. This applied anywhere and created a great spirit among us all. Apart from that, I found that I was able, for the most part, to get leave usually between drafts: once whilst I was in Flinders after my sixteen months' straight stint in Darwin; then after I returned from overseas on the *Tamworth,* prior to rejoining her and joining the British Pacific Fleet.
Whenever we were in port we just had to take pot luck, of course, depending on what watch you were in and just how long we would be there. Quite frankly, I don't think that I fared badly in respect to leave, considering that we were fighting a war.

> On your first leave home, what was the effect on your family, as the sailor returning home?

Well, John, naturally, as time went on, it was getting harder and harder to say goodbye to those nearest and dearest to me because, to date, I had been one of the lucky ones. A couple of my pals had copped it and everyone had this in the back of their minds when the time arrived to depart. My dear mum found it hard to take although she tried to be very supportive of me.

> Now, being in the CB Branch – Communications Branch – you would have had the first information that the war had come to an end. What information did you get?

Well, we had not long returned from escorting the oil tanker from Enewetok to a rendezvous with the American Fleet off Japan, and had, the night before, anchored in Manus Harbour as was our usual custom. I had the eight-till-twelve watch, or 08:00 to 12:00 watch, and it was around about 11:00 when I started to receive a message in Morse code addressed to commanders-in-chief of all areas, every fleet commander, and repeated to every high-ranking and to every important person and place imaginable. I immediately realised that something big was about to be announced, and when I read, that as from a certain hour hostilities with Japan had ceased, and finished up with the phrase, ‘Splice the mainbrace’, I knew, much to my joy, that at last the war was actually over.
I left the wireless office at a rate of knots, took the stairs two or three at a time, and was in the old man's cabin before you could say Jack Robinson. When he read it and realised what it was all about, he grabbed me and we hugged each other and we danced around his cabin in sheer joy.
He immediately called for the boatswain and having [inaudible] clear lower deck. After our skipper had made this momentous announcement, we all went mad, embracing each other. Lofty McKenzie, one of our cooks, was so excited that he jumped over the side; unfortunately, he couldn't swim so we had to dive in and save him. We did splice the mainbrace with beer and a rum issue. The only decorations we had, other than our signal bunting, was toilet paper which we all had streaming from our yardarms. Most of our 22nd Minesweeping Flotilla were all tied up together so we were able to also celebrate this momentous occasion with our pals on the other corvettes, anchored alongside.

> Now, Jack, what information did you get as to your discharge at the end of the war?

Sorry, John, I missed that.

> What information did you get on your discharge, and where did you take your discharge after the war?

Oh, well, what happened was, if I can tell you. While we were in Hong Kong it came to the situation where those of us who were only single and, say, engaged – first was those that were married and had children, or whatever the case – the points came up and they transferred. The *Tamworth* was coming home so I was transferred from the *Tamworth* to the *Gawler*, to stay up on duty while the men who were married came home first, which I thought was quite a fair thing.

> And then you later – what about your own discharge, what were the circumstances of that?

Well, I had no doubt what I wanted to do, John. See, in 1939 a job with the Shell Company was considered one of the plum private enterprise opportunities available in this fair city of ours, and as I'd only had a very short taste of working for such a corporate giant, and feeling that my future lay in the many and diversified opportunities that a place like the Shell Company could offer, I was more than eager to return to the commercial world as soon as possible.
Now, the Navy were good; they offered me an immediate promotion to a Leading Telegraphist with the promise that I be a Petty Officer Telegraphist, within a reasonable time after that. Both of these offers I declined and, John, not because I was in any way sour on the service and its shortcomings in certain areas, but I knew in my heart that the Shell Company was for me.
On 16 April '46 I returned to the Shell Company to recommence my commercial career. My first love was, and has always been, ships and shipping and I'm please to say that eventually, after serving my apprenticeship, I was appointed shipping supply manager for the Shell group of companies in WA, a job I held for many years until my retirement. I was responsible for all imports and exports – both bulk and packed – in all WA ports, that is, from Wyndham in the north to Esperance in the south, and all ports in between and the payment of all customs duties on all imported products, both bulk and packed, was also my responsibility. Then, on behalf of Shell World Wide Bunkering Service, we were also responsible for the arrangement and supply of bunker fuels to passenger liners and cargo vessels calling at Fremantle and other WA ports.

> Jack, you were going to give further recollections of the silo at Fremantle.

Yes, John. As a matter of fact, the Silo Signal Station, to me I have very warm feelings about it. When I came south from Darwin and I'd finished my leave, I was sent to the Silo Signal Station. Now, this was a hush-hush set-up on top of the Co-op bulk handling wheat silo in North Fremantle. The silo itself was coupled up by teleprinter to the *Maidstone,* that was the RN submarine mother ship based in Fremantle Harbour.
Now, at the silo I had six glorious weeks there before I was again drafted to another corvette, this time, the HMAS *Tamworth*, attached to the Eastern Fleet and based in Colombo. The silo was the best six weeks I had in the war actually. It was there that I met a leading teleprinter operator named Betty Howse. We fell in love and in due course, on 18 January 1947, we were married and to date have had forty-nine magnificent years together – I would say another successful naval engagement.
I left for Colombo on 4 September 1944 and whilst in the silo we also had what we used to call 'lovely snacks for happy jacks'. And the girls were very good, at night-time, on watch, they would cook us all delightful things and six weeks there was the best war, as I've said, that I ever knew.

> Now, Jack, you've returned and you are married. Now, tell me something about your early housing situation.

Yes, well, as a matter of fact, the early housing was a little bit awkward. When we came out you couldn't get a place for love or money so fortunately my dear old – my wife's sister, or my sister-in-law – she had her house in Swanbourne and she was kind enough to give us a room, and we stayed [with] her for twelve months till we could find accommodation. Then we went to Mount Street in Claremont and we had another two rooms with an old gargoyle who used to sing to make life pretty tough for us. But anyhow, we had a huge room, it was like a football oval, and so we had to buy a lounge suite to put something in it. That's all there was there then. Eventually, we got another room, or two rooms, in Cottesloe – in Perth Street in Cottesloe – and from there we were then going to have our first child. Then, as time went on, like we all did, I applied for a War Service Home. And I can remember going in and seeing a dear old fellow called Mr Fred Graham and he said, 'Well, we've got blocks of land in Mount Pleasant', and I looked him in the eye and I said, 'Where's Mount Pleasant?' and he said, so and so. So we came out in a bus, on an old white rock road, and we came up towards what is now Reynolds Road. And we walked through a little bit of bush, and then we found a little bit of road, and then it went into bush again. And we got up the hill and we stood there, and he said, 'Lot 597', so we stood there. I looked and I could see Perth and the river, and I thought, 'This will do'. But the big proviso was: you pick the block, you take the house we build on it, or reverse: you can either have your house but we will tell you what block you are going to be. So we decided to take the block and their house, and that was our War Service Home. We moved in to 81 Reynolds Road, round about 1951, and we've been in Mount Pleasant ever since, but not in the same place.

> Can you recall what allowance you were given towards that home from the Defence Homes as they are called now?

Oh, I had deferred pay and the price went up, and all our deferred pay was swallowed up in our deposit for the house, but I think it was thirty-seven and six a week rent, and you could build on garage or you could build on – I'd have a hot water system but you couldn't put on anything other than – oh, bedrooms – but we couldn't put anything else on the houses.

> And the War Service Loan at that time, can you recall how much that was?

Oh, I think it was £2,000.

> Well, $4,000 in the present currency.

Something like that, yeah.

> And that really wasn't sufficient to buy the block and build your home, but at least it was part way there; was that correct?

That's right. And we were very thankful for it, believe me, and I'm sure we all were.

> And you are still in that original home?

Oh, no, no, no. As time went on we wanted to build on but not bedrooms; we had sufficient bedrooms and they wouldn't lend us any more than to do what we wanted to do so in the end, I sold it and bought another block in Mount Pleasant and built the house what we wanted and that's been magic too. But I didn't want to leave the area because Mount Pleasant is very handy, a bonzer place to live.

With your family, could you give us some information on them?

Yes. I have a boy and two girls; the boy's the eldest and the two girls. The young fellow, he's now in Queensland and our eldest daughter is in Queensland, and their baby daughter is here in Western Australia.

Your son had no intention of following you in the Navy, no doubt?

No, no, he's very settled in the commercial world. My two girls are very happily married and they've got all the grandchildren are all around about the sixteen, seventeen year old mark, except for one little girlie who is twelve.

Apart from your work during your return to civilian life, what other interests did you have?

Well, I was very much originally associated with surf lifesaving in Western Australia and liked it very much, but then, after the war – I was a member of Scarborough Surf Club – but after the war I just couldn't get out to Scarborough because only the rich had motorcars and living in Mount Pleasant made it impossible.
So then I played hockey with Cricketers for a while, with another old shipmate of mine, Jimmy Black – we played it in Darwin – we like hockey so we played hockey for Cricketers. I played soccer with East Claremont; I played first division with East Claremont but I got hurt so I went back to hockey. And then eventually I got tied up with amateur rowing and got very much involved, and I became one of the first five west Australians to sit for Australian AARC licences so we would conduct our own regattas. [King's Cup], instead of letting the eastern states run our regattas, we would rather run our own. And I had many happy years in the Rowing Association – was a property officer at one stage – and also, with the rowing, it was a real involvement for many a year.

Obviously, with your activities, when you were in the Navy playing sport, you certainly carried them on into civilian life with all your interests there, and no doubt, you are still associated with some of them in an interest capacity.

Well, that's right, I am still a member of Swan River Rowing Club and the Legion of Oarsmen, and the Scarborough Surf Club – we've got a veteran's crowd going. It's all been wonderful, these sporting associations.

No doubt you are interested in other organisations, Jack.

Well, yes, John. I have always been a bit interested in doing various things so apart from taking part in activities in the rowing club – and also I officiated at Head of the River for year after year. But getting away from the sporting side, I was also very interested in Rotary, and about twenty-odd years ago I joined the Mosman Park Rotary Club and still have very enjoyable times in Rotary. I am a past president of the Club and I was privileged to be made a [Paul Harris] a few years ago. I think I was a very lucky boy but I've enjoyed my time in Rotary and we've been able to do things. I'm interested in Probis now, that to me is more of a relaxing type of thing and not doing the things that we do in Rotary.

Now, a question I'm going to ask you is in connection with your naval background. Do

you feel that what you learnt in the Navy – the discipline or other things you learnt – had some effect on your later life?

I really do, I feel the Navy was a very good background for an awful lot of things. I think one of the great things you are taught – and it all just happens – but when we are all thrown together, a hundred fellows, from all walks of life, and you are thrown onto, say, a corvette – as you know, we had eleven or twelve in that tiny little mess down below, and there's not much room, and everyone's on top of each other – one thing you really do learn, I believe, is tolerance of people. You learn to get on with people; you learn to accept various things because we are all different – it would be a poor old world if we were all the same – and I believe the Navy had a wonderful training in that sort of thing. And also you had a standard of hygiene that was worthwhile, and I mean, if you didn't come up to it well, the rest of the boys saw that you did anyhow. And all in all, I think the Navy was a wonderful background – discipline never hurt anyone, I think there's not enough of it these days, that's my honest opinion.

And particularly on a ship, there was a self-discipline, wasn't there. You've mentioned the fact of hygiene and other matters like that, but I can't recall any great instance – there may have been an occasional fist swung – but other than that, people seemed to live a fairly harmonious existence.

I found that we were a particularly happy crowd, and I think it manifests itself, quite frankly, on the success of the Corvette Association here now. I mean, here's every three months there's two hundred-odd fellows get together; we are all corvetters but we seem to have a bond that perhaps was different on other ships. I think it was because we were all cross-sections of the community; we also did all different things on the ship, but we were all responsible, or all dependent, on each other, and I found we became quite close. I mean, in big ships the sparkers went with the sparkers; the sigs went with the sigs; the gunners went with the gunners, et cetera. But in the corvettes you'd go ashore with your mate who was a stoker, or your mate who was a seaman, or a mate that was a radar mech – it didn't matter who – and I found that, really and truly, it was a wonderful background and I would say, without a doubt, that the Navy did do me a lot of favours in learning how to get on with people and how to be responsible.

Now, we are up to your retirement, Jack. Are your interests still the same as you had when you were working?

Ah, yes, to a big degree; I mean, my Rotary is still on the go. The main thing is now that about the only difference is that now we do what we want to do, when we want to do it. I mean, it's great and we've been able to live comfortably, is a help. Quite frankly, now it's great because we want to go over to Queensland to see the kids, we go over to Queensland to see the kids. If they have them over here, well, that's different. All of us now have been overseas a few times, and really enjoying – I think that after you've worked for forty-odd years there's a time for you and your wife to enjoy. I mean, there's a time to work and a time to enjoy it, and I think we've earned it, and so I thoroughly enjoy every minute of it.

Now, obviously, the ships you've served on, you may have visited interstate, either our biannual corvette reunion in various capital cities and possibly you may have become involved in some of your ship reunions. Has this been the case?

Well, no, not so much. I've been involved when they've been here, but when they've been east, I haven't. But when my son-in-law was stationed in Tamworth we went to Tamworth and I had

the pleasure, through Rotary, going to Rotary one night and sitting next to the fellow who was the administrator of the hospital in Tamworth, a Mr [McAlister], and Mac and I sat together. I found out also that he was the mayor or Tamworth and I told him that I had the pleasure of having served on the HMAS *Tamworth* during the war. And he asked me a lot of questions and I said I was surprised that Tamworth didn't have anything tangible about the vessel. So he said, 'You leave it with me, Jack, we'll do something about it.' Mac and I met a few times, I went to Tamworth quite a bit, and eventually, I'm very proud to say, that when three of our boys went through about four years ago, there in the town hall, in a lovely glass case, is a model of the HMAS *Tamworth*. So dear old Mac kept his promise.

> Identification: That concluded the interview with Jack McLaren. Thank you, Jack, for the time. This interview was held on 20 March 1996.

03/02