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TRANSCRIPT
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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Victor Leslie Baker as a Leading Aircraftsman engine fitter, 77 Fighter Squadron RAAF, Korea 1952, interviewed by Dr Chris Clark

Recorded
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by: Lenny Preston, AWM Staff

Description

Victor Baker talks about his postings prior to 77 Squadron; the juxtaposition of Australian and Turkish graves at Pusan, Korea; an encounter with confederate state Americans at Taegu; tales of his time at Iwakuni, servicing Dakotas of No. 30 Transport Flight; an hour's training on the Derwent [the Meteor's] engine; an encounter with young wounded conscripts from the King's Own Scottish Borderers; leave at a BCOF [British Commonwealth Occupation Force] hotel; conditions at Iwakuni; earth tremors; the sinking of a USN aircraft off Iwakuni; Whitie, a useful American contact; the lack of Australian winter clothing; 77 Squadron early morning routine at Kimpo; an argument with an equipment officer; winter clothing reaching Iwakuni but not beyond; icing up of aircraft overnight; being promoted to corporal with no available insignia; using a derelict US aircraft fuselage as a ground crew rest room and losing it in a clean-up before the arrival of General Eisenhower; a problem trying to get a beer after a late shift; poor catering at Kimpo; a heavy working routine, especially for engine fitters, resulting in loss of weight; Jacky Lee being sucked into an engine; Baker's return to Australia; losing seven days' leave; three weeks in hospital with pneumonia; a poor opinion of Australian organisation for forces in Korea; relationships with pilots on 77 Squadron, a fully professional unit; his employment prior to joining the Air Force; his recruitment; serving at Uranquinty; a comparison between serving in Korea and in Vietnam; a training evacuation of an airfield in Korea and a comparison with the evacuation of Hamhung.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, December 2002

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Identification: This is an interview with Mr Vic Baker, it is conducted by Dr Chris Clark on 5 June 2002 at the Australian War Memorial Sound Studio. The topic covered is his experiences as LAC and Corporal Engine Fitter with 77 Squadron RAAF in Korea during the period October to December 1952

Mr Leslie Baker was born on 9 April 1927 at Leichardt, Sydney, and educated at Christian Brothers High School at Darlinghurst. He joined the RAAF in 1948 and received his trade training at the School of Technical Training at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, prior to being posted to 30 Transport Flight Base at Iwakuni in Japan. After serving in Korea he was later posted to 1 FTS at Uranquinty, New South Wales; 35 Squadron at Richmond, New South Wales, including doing a year of units time based at Vung Tau in Vietnam, and 30 Squadron at Fairbairn, ACT. He finished his RAAF service as a warrant officer at Headquarters Operations Command at Glenbrook, New South Wales, and in his retirement does charity work.

Well, good morning, Vic, and thanks for coming in for this session. Perhaps for the record could we just run through the series of postings you did between completing your trade training at Wagga and the period that you went to Korea?

Well, after my fitters' training at Wagga I went to 21 Squadron in Laverton in Victoria - the City of Melbourne Squadron, which is a Melbourne squadron - and I went from there to 86 Wing at Richmond to get some training on Dakotas because I was posted to 38 Squadron in Changi. When that was changed at a minute's notice I was on my way to Japan, landed in Japan, and I was put into the Maintenance Squadron and did an hour's training on Meteors - and they still had a few Mustangs there, that kept them busy for a couple of days. Then I went across to Korea. When I got there we also had to go down and do a funeral at United Nations facility [inaudible] at Pusan - very cold day. One thing we did notice was that right next to the Australian graves was the Turks. One of the chaps asked the British war graves fellow, 'What was that all about?' and they said, 'By special request from the Turkish people they buried them next to the Australians'. We thought that was rather good.

I didn't know that.

We all took photographs.

Do you have photographs from this period?

Yeah, I've got one of the assembly part at home, I've got a small one. And from there I went back to Iwakuni and because I'd been gunner trained I didn't go back to Korea at all, I went down to 30 Transport in those days with four Dakotas, and we used to run back and forwards all around the place, or whatever Dakotas do in those sort of wars - round the mountains. We got so critical for our maintenance spare parts that they called for a volunteer - that was me in the end. I used to go out on the first aircraft of a morning; the other aircraft would do their runs, and if they had any problems they'd radio to me, aircraft to aircraft, and we'd go and find them, and I'd hop out. My aircraft would leave me and I'd stay there as long as (required) to fix up the trouble. We got it serviceable and we came home again - some very long days.

Well, there's obviously quite a bit of movement you had within Korea, so perhaps we'd better work through this sequentially just to get the sequence as clear as possible. The postings you did to City of Melbourne Squadron and Richmond, I think you mentioned,

these were just short-term training postings?

Well, no, they were actual A-grade postings - well, the one to 86 Wing wasn't, that was because I was going to Changi, but 21 Squadron was an A-grade posting. Of course, the Korean War had been going and they were just short of people.

So about when in 1950 would you have received notice that you were going to Korea?

...

You mentioned you were under posting to Changi, or thought you were going to Changi.

Yes.

So at what point, and how did it come about, that you were told you were going to Korea?

Well, I was indentured to 21 Squadron and I was told, 'You are being posted to Changi', and that was about July, I think - late July or early August - and I went to 86 Wing and did the training on Dakotas there for a while. We went on the parade one morning and they said, 'The WOD (Warrant Officer, Discipline) wants all you fellows, so all you fellows are going to Changi', so we all went up there and they called out our names - 'You on the right, you on the left', and I was on the right. We stood there when everybody else had gone and we said, 'Where are we going?' - he said, 'You are going to Iwakuni' - and we said, 'Where the hell it that?' - and he said, 'You know there is a war on in Korea' - we said, 'Oh, yeah'. That's how it started.

This would have been in July, do you think, or might have been a bit later?

A bit later, I think, because I never got to Japan until the first week of October, I think. We got up there and did our ten, fifteen, minutes looking at the aircraft and saying, 'What the hell is it anyway?' - it was the fans - then they gave us an hour's tuition on the Derwent engine, and that was it, and then we went across.

So how long were you in Japan? You mention you got this brief introductory training; did it last a day, or were you there a day?

We were just in the hangar; in between servicing aircraft they took us aside and a fellow by the name of O'Shea - a flight sergeant who had been in England with the aircraft - and he gave us a run-down on the engine, and then we went back to where we were working. Then - oh, must have been a couple of days later - I got told I was working down on Dakotas. I went down there and I stayed there for quite a long time, flying backwards and forwards with them, or whatever - did a Rescue Eight in Taegu, which wasn't very nice.

Sorry, what did you call it?

A Rescue Eight, in Taegu. We went down there, and we were unfortunate in one way. They were all southern Americans there, rebel flags flying everywhere - of course, we said the wrong words to them - not very nice.

What happened? - please elaborate.

Well, this jeep pulled up in front of us and they said, 'What the hell are you guys doing here?' - 'We are bloody well fixing aircraft; what's it to you?' - and he says, 'I'm Lieutenant (inaudible)', and he says, 'Oh, you are Australians' - and he's got a big Confederate flag on his jeep, and he's got one on his shoulder, the guards with him had the same thing. We looked around the place and said, 'When do we get a feed?' - he said, 'I don't know' - we went off. We found what looked like a messing tent, we went there and everybody is wearing a little flag from the Confederate States. One fellow said, 'Don't treat those black bastards any good or you'll come to no good.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' He said, 'We like you.'

Anyway, we went to the meal queue here, we got back to our own aircraft and we made our camp underneath the aircraft, and we never went back there again. They were strange sort of people for us to mix with. We got out of there in a couple of days and went back to Iwakuni and carried on. One day - Carl Leopold was the senior engineer officer - he came down one day and says, 'How long have you been here, Baker?' - I said, 'Oh, I don't know, a long time.' - he said, 'Oh, good.' A week later I get called up to him and he says, 'Pack you bag, get your rifle and tin hat, you are off to Kimpo.' And I did, I landed at Kimpo.

When would this have been, can you think? If you'd got to Iwakuni early in October ...

Well, it would be almost a year later anyway - I'd have to have a look at my logbook - when I was with (inaudible) they gave me a logbook. I think they were a bit frightened of having ground staff bloke flying over Korea, so they gave me a logbook.

So how long actually were you away from Australia?

Fifteen months.

So you actually arrived in October '51?

Yeah.

Okay, that's important.

In October '52 - November, December - I was full time with 77 Squadron.

So you had twelve months based at Iwakuni servicing what?

Mainly Dakotas.

And your unit then was?

33 Transport Flight. It changed its name while we were away to 36 Squadron, I think, they formed up - they brought more aircraft up after me.

So the whole of your time was at Iwakuni, except for these short-term detachments. You mentioned this Rescue Eight to ...

Taegu.

... Taegu. What was a Rescue Eight, would you explain?

Well, one of us - I think it was a cracked cylinder in one of the engines and we had to do an engine change. We had to roll another engine into the Dakota and get it over there, and manhandle it on the ground, and then search around for some Americans to get an A-frame, which they did, so we could do our change.

So this is basically a repair in situ.

Yeah, just a routine engine change, but it was out in the scrub without accommodation - it was just there.

Did you do that very often?

No, that aircraft had good engines. Well, once I got caught out there one day - one aircraft wouldn't start so they dropped me off there.

Where? Are you talking about Taegu?

No, I think it was Suwon or somewhere - I'm not too sure where it was - just on the fighter base there - might have been Suwon - it's a long time ago. In the end I felt it was the starter motor wasn't meshing with the rest of the engine, the gears, so I got a piece of wire and put up into the starter motor, hooked it onto a little pulley, put it down; and when I gave the pilot the thumbs up to start the engine to get it turning, and while he was turning it I just pulled on the wire and it made the starter motor mesh, and away they went.

Did you do much operational flying? You mentioned it was a routine for you to go up on the first mission of a morning and they basically checked to see that all the aircraft were operating properly. Was that every morning?

Oh, no, I did eighty something hours actually flying over Korea in the logbook. One (inaudible) - of course, a bit of a typhoon and we couldn't get back, the wind was too strong and we ended up at Hanida, the Tokyo Airport, we just managed to get in there. We were all ready to start throwing stuff overboard when I got back.

You've got to lighten the load.

Yeah - and we were running out of fuel, and there were no parachutes around so we just hoped the pilot did the right thing. We ended up at Hanida Airport anyway, that was the major airport in Tokyo at the time.

What sort of missions were these - just resupply missions or were some of them air medical?

Oh, we did medevacs, took tours over. I remember one time we loaded the whole aircraft up with napalm rocket heads - the empty part of it - because apparently the Chinese had put on a bit of a bash and [being Meteors with the British] and the rest of the air force is over there with Americans - either get stuff made in Japan or get it from England. They ran out of everything - that was a bit of a rush, a whole aircraft stacked there with rocket heads - had to unload them and go back again for another one.

Did see one thing I always remembered - King's Own Scottish Borderers was a British unit - we landed at Seoul Airport, it was that day, and we saw stretchers and ambulances around. When I asked what was going on they said, 'These young blokes have just been knocked about a bit by the Chinese.' I had a look at them and the buggers weren't old enough to shave. So I was talking to one of them and they are getting three and nine pence a day, or something, and they are all being called up and conscripted. Took me a while to get over that.

We put some of our blokes on board - Pam Shultz was the sister on board there - she treated them like a little mother, she was real great with the troops - oh, she was magnificent. Each time we medevaced them the nurses were great, you'd think they were their own kids, they were very good. But I always remember that, the King's Own Scottish Borderers - little kids - they were getting twelve bob a day and they were getting three or something.

> Can you think of what sort of proportion of missions you would have been doing of the different types?

Well, we did whatever came along. Sometimes we used to drop stuff off for the Commonwealth Division, sometimes we dropped it off for the Embassy people down (inaudible) - the boffins, or the generals, of somebody hanging out. Then we did a leave run for the battalion - Australian battalion - we used to try and get them backwards and forwards a lot, when they came on leave.

> What I'm getting to though, was there some sort of schedule, or roster, that you were running to - were there so many evacuation flights done a week?

Oh, no.

> It was all *ad hoc*, as need be?

As need be. We'd get a program, say, at four o'clock in the afternoon to put on the board for the aircraft the next day - we'd chalk them up - and they would put on what they were, and then they'd rub them off and put something else on. It depended on how the war was going or what was on.

> How many aircraft were you having to service and maintain so that you could meet these commitments?

We started with four in the air all the time, and then we got two from Changi, that was six. We just kept on flying. As a matter of fact, we had one Dakota which was the only aircraft in that part of the world flying one day - the weather was too bad for the Americans to do it - I think Doc Murdoch was the CO, he said, 'Oh, we'll (inaudible)'. They flew over and did whatever it was - I don't know what it was.

> Was it a policy to try and keep a certain number of those six flying any day?

We tried to keep a hundred per cent serviceability - which you couldn't do. One time we broke the record doing an engine change - two hours forty, or something. The aircraft, as it taxied in, we were all over it, took the engine out, and we took the engine out of another aircraft to put in it because the other airframe was out of hours anyway for big inspection. We got a pat on the back from - oh, 'Handlebars' Hennick, I think was the group captain at Iwakuni at the time, said

he'd never seen one done so fast in his life - we did good work on that.

How would you characterise the ground staff at Iwakuni there - a pretty good team?

Well, yes, we were because most of the people up there had been in the air force for a few years - three, four years - and they were very good at their job, and the maintenance squadron had a fixture of six days working week - some days were long days, but they tried to get Sunday off. The other, 30 Transport, where I was, we were on a seven-day thing because they always wanted something in Korea or taken over and brought back. So what we used to try and do is try and stand half the fellows down on Sunday, and they could go to church and open their bottles of beer and have a bit of a party, whatever.

That was your only time off?

Yes.

Seven days, seven days, seven days, but the only time you got off was about half day Sunday?

After six months, I think, I'd been there, I got a week's leave, and I went to [Kowana] for that.

Sorry, where's that?

That's just about eighty miles north of Tokyo - a nice big palatial hotel, two golf courses, good room service, beer was sixpence a bottle, or something.

Was this a service hostel type thing?

No, it was a big Japanese tourist hotel from pre-war which the British Government took over as part of the 'we won the war - this is ours'.

The Occupation Force?

Yeah - it belonged to BCOF - I think we all belonged to BCOF - we didn't know whether we were with K Force, or BCOF, we just went, it was just a job.

So what were conditions like at Iwakuni? I mean, it was an established base that had been used by the Occupation Force for a number of years before the war.

Well, the kamikaze pilots did their last training there, I believe, and they had a little garden - we used to bow down every time we went past - the Americans (inaudible) and we used to go down there, we had to walk past this little garden and we used to always nod as we went past - 'G'day, how are you?', something like that - you know, typical Australian.

Knockers.

Yeah, knockers, yeah. It had a swimming pool, a little bit of a gymnasium which nobody ever used, I don't think, because we were always too tired - we were running all day with the air force anyway. The messing was good, meals were excellent. We had a garden.

Who's catering though - were the Americans or the Australians?

No, there was a farm there which had been started by the BCOF people, but they got a new medical officer and he had it closed down - there were tomatoes and lettuces, or things.

They were bought locally, were they ...

Yeah.

... rather than grown?

They had been there for years; since the war ended the original BCOF people had employed Japanese to run the gardens - they were very good gardens. Air conditioning in the rooms, heaters in the rooms, big ropes outside your window so that if the building started to shake you could grab on the rope and slide down to the ground, all those exciting things.

This is in case there was an earthquake?

Yeah - the building used to rock a bit.

How often did that happen?

Oh, you'd get a tremor every now and again, but a couple of times you had bigger ones and had to sit out in the cold for a few hours - nobody cared.

This is a regular thing?

In Japan they didn't take any notice of it, but we did.

Okay.

We went to build a Bailey bridge across the river after one typhoon came - and they came down - volunteers - starting, B for Baker - I was the first off the list. So we went out and there was an army warrant officer and four of his engineers, and they gave us a couple of dozen American sailors which we used because they didn't know what to do. We put a Bailey bridge across in over fourteen hours to connect the two parts of Iwakuni to where we were. The mayor was so happy he gave us a small case of apples. But the Americans never stopped complaining - 'I'm a sailor, I don't have to do this'. Anyway, the warrant officer said, 'Oh, piss off.' I think he used a bit stronger language than that too, you know. One or two of them started to wrestle.

The base where we were on was also a naval base because their aircraft used to land on the water there, and they used to climb up the slipway and service them. We serviced a couple of them that had come back and crashed there because they were always shot up - they'd been right along the North Korean coast, they had a bit of a stoush with somebody. I think (inaudible) one day were there, the whole aircraft just sank with the whole crew on board.

What, off Iwakuni you mean, coming in to Iwakuni?

Yeah, right into Iwakuni, the base where we ...

But the aircraft sank before it could actually be ...

Put down, yeah.

They lost eight?

Yeah, eight of them - eight Americans on it.

Did you see all this?

We saw it when it came in, you could see that it was bad - a couple of fellows got on a pushbike and went and had a look - they went into the water and they sent a little boat out, and they reckon they were all dead.

Did you have much to do with the Americans as a rule?

No, we didn't - well, we did with one fellow we had there, he was called 'Whitie', he was in their stores, and he loved Australians, so we looked after him. We gave him Australian beer and ever time we had a bit of a feed-up we used to invite him up, and when we were short of a starter motor or a set of spark plugs we'd tell him and they would suddenly appear in our hangar.

I remember one day we just ran out of spark plugs - four inch spark plugs for the engine. He came up and he said, 'What's wrong?' - old 'Hose Nose' [Sumner] was another fellow, he was a corporal - he said, 'I'll bloody well have those spark plugs' - because we used to service them ourselves - we'd already cleaned them once and they couldn't really be done again for safety's sake. He said, 'Oh' - he went off on his pushbike and the next thing we know he comes up and he says, 'Hey, buddy - spark plugs.'

Obviously a useful man to cultivate.

Well, we had to give him the old ones to take back, he covered up, yeah.

That's tremendous.

He was so good that when he was going home we all chipped in and bought him a nice Japanese-made cigarette case - he was a smoker - 'To Whitie from those Australian bastards' - and sent him home. And when he got home - a kid brought it up - got a card from America to 'All you bastards in 30 Transport, Royal Australian Air Force'. So we got on with part of the Americans that way.

But you basically had nothing to do with them, there was no reason to interact?

No - they were down the one end, we were at the other.

Was it at Iwakuni that you were made up from LAC to corporal?

Oh, no, that was at Kimpo.

So this was the pattern of things you were doing at Iwakuni, up until October '52?

Yes.

At what stage did you learn that you were going to go to 77 Squadron?

The day before - and all you do it fill your kit bag up and draw a rifle, tin hat, and they give you a pair of boots and a couple of pairs of socks.

So that was your kitting out?

Yeah, well, we got a bit more later on. I ended up with - some of our clothing, the Australian Government didn't know anything about it. My pile cap, I bought it from a Korean soldier; one of the shirts I had was US Marine; my windproof pants and long johns were British; and later on we got a parka and that was British. But the smock I used to wear, I think, was (from an) American Air Force bloke from 4th Fighter Wing, I think it was. They we were all different; some fellows had forage caps on, some had slouch hats on, some had peak caps on, some used to use an old pair of socks for mittens, and that sort of thing. When your clothing wore out you got none. My socks had no toes and heels in them.

The Koreans were supposed to do the washing for us, which wasn't very good anyway. In our tent we had a 500 pound bomb tail fin and we used to put an American helmet on that. We'd get a daily water ration, we'd pour it into that helmet and we'd wash with that because it was going on morning, and the last fellow in had that water to wash his socks in - and you'd hang your socks up because (inaudible) for clothes to dry, and then we'd go straight after work. On 'Able Stand-by' you had to be there at four o'clock in the morning, strap the pilots in, and the pilots would have four aircraft sitting there just in case anything happened before dawn, two with rockets and two with cannons.

You are talking about Kimpo now?

Kimpo.

The clothing though, was this because the standard of clothing issued by the RAAF or Australia was unsuitable for the conditions, or there just wasn't enough of it?

Well, when I arrived up there with one blue uniform and the rest was summer gear because I was posted to Changi originally. They gave you what they could, but Australia never had any sort of winter gear. I ended up writing home to my father and he sent me one of my brothers' leather jackets, and I left that to the next bloke behind me in the tent at Kimpo, I left it to him. Even though we had clothing, and it was getting more organised when I was leaving - (inaudible) stores because I got into trouble there.

What's the story?

When I came back I was supposed to be coming back on leave. When I got back off leave they said, 'You won't be coming back to Kimpo' - I said, 'Okay' - so I had to hand my gear in. And I went down the next morning to queue at this 'L Group' they call the clothing store, put these boots up on the counter, and then the socks, and some stuff, and this equipment officer came in and said, 'What are you doing there?' I said, 'This is the stuff I just ...' - he said, 'You can't hand this in; look at these socks! Take them back to your barracks and darn them up.' I said, 'There is nothing to darn them with.' He said, 'These clothes are all dirty, don't you wash them.' I said,

'Why don't you get off your arse and go and have a look over there, everything is frozen over there.' Anyway, he said, 'You'll be in trouble.' Anyway, the squadron leader came out of his office, he'd been over there and he knew what it was like. He said, 'Just put him through.'

> So there was no understanding, in some areas - in Iwakuni - of just what the conditions were like in Korea?

No - well, we had the (inaudible) land there one day, and there's Chick Magarry and myself said, 'Who the bloody hell it this fellow over there?' -there's a fellow walking up and down in front of the aircraft, nice green parka on, nice green pants, nice looking shoes, good hat - so we walked over - and he was so clean - this was all we could say, 'Isn't he clean'. Anyway, we found out he was the WOD of the base squadron over there - there was no establishment for them where we were. He came over - oh, he'd won a medal, I suppose - he came over and he walked up and down - there's a pistol and all on, the whole thing, he had the whole rigmarole.

The clothing was getting to Iwakuni alright, and they were fitting fellows up after us, I suppose - the fellows who came home must have been better outfitted.

> You mean, the stuff was getting to Iwakuni, but it wasn't getting forward to Kimpo?

Well, I don't know - the aircrew had theirs, they got first priority, which is right, they had it first. We didn't have a clothing store or anything over there (inaudible) - I even had to steal some scarfs one day from the engineer officer when he wasn't looking. What you had, that was it. It was going to be a three-month tour is what they were, and go back for a rest in ... you'd come back ... well, I was going to go home as it turned out. Yeah, clothing was pretty crook - boots were worn out - and we were still wearing ordinary leather boots in the snow, you know - and the socks had no heels or toes in. The shirts, which, I think, was the Marines, they were starting to wear a bit thin from being knocked about.

> So what were the physical conditions like for that three months you were in Kimpo - was it all snow?

Oh, no, no, it was just getting colder and the snows came in November. We had a bad incident there where this poor young engineering officer was posted there, brand-new, and he came along there one day - we were working on an aircraft. He said, 'Don't worry about those four for tomorrow morning' - the ailerons on the main planes, on the canopy, engine intakes, on the empennage, we used to put big covers over those so that when the ice formed on them you used to take them off so that the aircraft could move the controls. So we said, 'Okay', so we left them. Of course, the next morning we get up there and everything is frozen. He didn't know what to do so we said, 'Oh, I don't know, just cancel them.' He said, 'I can't cancel them, Kinnimont will go crook' - Kinnimont was the CO - and I think we had to get sixteen aircraft at that time, in fours.

Anyway, they got some water out of the hut - they had some fire bucket or something - he threw that on it to try and loosen the ice; of course, it froze straight away. I think the rest of the fellows were up sweeping the snow off the other ones with the covers on.

Then he got the bright idea to get one of the other serviceable aircraft parked in front of it to try and blow the ice off, and all it would bloody well do was pick up the crap on the landing (strip) and put it into the intake of the engines - that's phhht!

Worse. What sort of preparation did you get? - you'd been working on Dakotas up to that point.

Yeah.

So was it a problem to suddenly have been pushed forward to Kimpo and told to start doing the engine fitting on Meteors?

When you work on aircraft - an aircraft is an aircraft, it takes oil or air, and whatever in the gearbox, you know what it means - and keep the canopy clean, instruct the pilot, those things we did on Mustangs or whatever so you learnt very quickly.

So the drill was the same, it didn't really matter what type.

Yeah, it wouldn't matter.

I understand now what you said a few minutes ago. Before we started you mentioned that you'd been made up to corporal there, but you didn't tell anybody, you didn't post the stripes up because there was nowhere you could get them.

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

For the simple reason there was no clothing store. The only way you could have got them was to call them forward from Iwakuni, presumably.

Yeah.

So about what point through your three months at Kimpo were you told you were corporal?

Happened on 1 December.

So it would have been a couple of weeks before you came home?

Yeah.

What sort of - we are talking about the weather conditions there - what sort of conditions did that mean for the ground crew? Were you servicing aircraft out in the open?

Oh, well, that's what the air force has, that big paddock.

There was no hangar that you could operate in?

Well, we had a makeshift hangar which we'd get half the aircraft in, and then pull these big waterproof curtains across. If you were oiling the engine, or whatever you were doing, it was out of the snow or the wind and the rest was sitting outside. Of course, the wind outside made it rock all the time and it was bloody difficult to work on because the wind hitting the tailplane and the airframe would jump up and down, and you'd swear and go on.

But at least you weren't trying to do fine mechanical work out in the snow and the ice?

No, no. When it would get too cold - we had the fuselage of an American aircraft laying there, we sort of got it - yeah, we got it - and what we did, we'd break one end off and we also got, from somewhere, a stove, and the electricians wired up the battery cables to it and we used to hop in there when there was a break on - there were no seats, only bits of board - we would sit there and read our mail, or something.

This is basically the crew room - the rest room?

Yeah, well, that was it, yeah. We got in there, it wasn't too bad, but unfortunately they had an election in America and General Eisenhower was the new president and he said he was going to come to Korea. So whoever was in charge of the whole Kimpo base said, 'Clean up.' We woke up one morning and there's a big tractor taking our gear away and we all nearly cried.

I can imagine - so they cleaned it up - it was obviously regarded as a bit of an eyesore, or something like that.

Yeah.

What was the pace of operations at Kimpo while you were there ...

Fast.

... operationally?

Every day. When Eisenhower arrived we got seventy-eight sorties up in one day - there were sixty aircraft, the same number of people in a small squadron - 'Congo' Kinnimont came down in the tent area that night supported by two of his pilots. They said, 'Bloody good show, chaps, bloody good show, good on you', and he collapsed and they carried him back to his bed - he'd been celebrating with, I think it was Colonel [Thing] from the Fourth Squadron - they had a bit of a party to celebrate it, that was nice.

So there was a recognition of the work that the ground crew was putting in to keep the squadron going?

Yeah - well, there was a young pilot, Randy Green - we didn't know this at the time, but he was officer in charge of the recreation of the airmen - with whom we had a sort of interesting match.

Yes.

Well, one of those tents, and in it there was a little bar, with every booze, and sometime they showed movies. This particular day the commander had brought over some Aussie beer so we all got a bottle of beer - there was myself, Chick Magarry, [Nip Ringlander] - oh, was it Curly Evans or somebody else? - went to work back - of course, it was dark and everything. We said, 'Gee, the bloody beer', so Curly said, 'Don't worry about it, I've got the fellows down there. When they get the beer, grab ours and put it amongst the empty bottles.' So when we come down of a night-time there was no-one to serve us so we just had to fill empty bottles - yeah, that's okay.

So we knock off - oh, I don't know what time it was - and we were walking across the airfield -

'Halt! - halt! - halt!' - we said, 'Oh, stick it up your arse' - 'Oh,' he said, 'Australians' - we said, 'Yeah' - he said, 'Who are you?' - we said, 'Ned Kelly, Ben Hall ...' - he said, 'Well, what's the next fellow over there - Aussie?' - I said, 'Righto'. This bloke comes along - 'Hold or I'll shoot' - so we stop, you know. He comes and says, 'Oh, how are you going?' - we had a chat - and he said, 'You have been working late?' - I said, 'Yeah' - he said, 'Oh, okay, see you later'.

We went down there to our recreation tent, as they called it, and it's all dark - we are fooling round with these empty bottles trying to find one with the cap on. And the fellow says, 'Stick 'em up', and we turned around and it's the guard there, Australian guard. 'What do you mean, stick 'em up?' Are you joking?' - he said, 'I am fair dinkum, you are not supposed to be here.' And we said, 'What do you mean, we are not supposed to be here?' He said, 'It's out of bounds, don't you notice it's got to be out of bounds and it's closed up?' I think Curly said, 'Oh, get out of it' - and he said, 'I'll shoot you' - and he said, 'I'll stick this blasted rifle up your arse if you do it.' Anyway, he 'click, click', put one up the spout so we went to bed.

Wasn't he mean though - it was out of bounds?

Well, recreation ... I didn't get there very often, but it was allowed to be open until ten o'clock or something.

***

I see, there was a closing time imposed on it?

We only got there because we were still on the flight line.

Was this a problem? You mentioned when you were back at Iwakuni that you were working seven days a week, and it struck me then there obviously wasn't a lot of time for recreation or other sort of activities.

No, no.

It would have even been worse, presumably, at Kimpo.

Oh, Kimpo was bloody terrible.

Would you like to describe what that entailed?

Oh, well, meals were ... you didn't get three meals a day, that was for sure - I think somebody did - I know a fellow on the flight where I worked anyway - were lucky if you got two meals a day because you see the aircraft off, and by the time you tidied up some of them were coming back again because they might have been doing a forty minute sortie, or something, so you would still be there. When you did get off you had to walk a fair way and get on this big endless queue of Americans, and go through with your tray, and a slap of that.

So you were being catered for by the Americans at that point?

Yeah.

What sort of meals would you have got? Would you have got breakfast and an evening

meal?

Sometimes we got what they called 'midnight chow' because you were still working at midnight - they used to have the mess at midnight - so you'd get a 'midnight chow' - powdered egg, whatever was going, or you'd get what we called 'shit on a shingle' - even the Yanks didn't eat it. You'd get over there and you'd get in the queue with everyone else, and they would say, 'Shit on the shingles is on' - so we'd say, 'Oh, God, here we go.' It was a little round - I don't know what it was, it wasn't actually bread, and it was hard, and it looked as though they'd tried to toast it, or heat it, or something. And they had a little black thing about two and a half inches long; I don't know if it was supposed to be a sausage, or what it was. But anyway, the Yanks used to call it 'shit on a shingle' and it tasted like it too.

So you weren't impressed by the American catering?

No. The only good meal I got there was at Thanksgiving - what do they call it? - in November. They brought out some cans of turkey and we all got a turkey - turkey and some, I suppose, cranberry sauce, or something, on it, and mashed potatoes, or something. It was pretty good, it was alright.

What sort of hours would you have been working? I mean, you are talking about working midnight shifts, and this sort of thing, on the flight line.

We just worked.

But was there regular hours for you guys?

No. The aircraft had to be on able stand-by at least an hour before sunrise, get it ready, and the poor old pilots would have to sit there, freezing to death - because they couldn't move - and you'd be standing by the battery cart - at least you could move around a bit. And then you'd see the rest of the aircraft off, mostly about sixteen at a time. You'd get them off and by the time you'd tidied up - you might want to get a cup of tea or something - you might get a cup of tea and they would all be coming back in again. They had to be rearmed, refuelled, and that went on day in and day out, until it got dark, and then they stopped, and then you got to fix up the unserviceable things of the day.

So how many hours of sleep a day would you get getting?

Oh ... see, sometimes you could get six hours - it would depend on the trade you are in. Instrument people didn't have the manual work, they could check the instrument out and they could change an instrument, or whatever it was. We had to get tankers up and refuel, and climb in the aircraft, and drain fuel, and all that sort of thing, we'd do that. You are just there, just work.

I think I get the point you are making here. The instrument fitters really didn't have a job of work unless one of the instruments went bung, whereas your work was really pretty well constant because it was essential to the aircraft, whether or not there was a problem.

Well, when I got back to Australia my clothes used to fall off - my trousers used to fall off me.

You'd lost so much weight?

So much weight.

How much? What weight were you when you went there?

Well, I must have been getting close to ten stone; I was well under nine stone and my father reckoned I slept for nearly twenty hours when I got home. I suppose that was right.

You finished your tour at Kimpo in December?

Yeah.

Was that effectively the end of your tour in Korea?

Yeah, that was it.

So what happened? Would you like to describe the process of getting home? If you left Kimpo, roughly when would that have been in December?

Just before Jacky Lee got sucked into the engine - poor old Jacky, he was an instrument bloke, he got sucked in. Nick Holland was ready to run this aircraft up because they had a fuel-flow malfunction, so Jacky Lee had to get underneath to recelebrate it. When you get out of the aircraft you either go right out the back, away from everything, or you go right to the side, out of the road, so you don't get burnt severely. He must have been thinking I was standing on the starboard side, Nick Holland was pressing the tits, and all of a sudden I saw this fellow come that way, and before I could say anything he was sucked in.

What happened?

Took his eyes and that out - I mean, we got him out and laid him down. This poor young engineer mustn't have known what to do - he said, 'What will I do? What will I do?' - so Curly was going to punch him.

He was panicking a bit?

Yeah.

Well, what was done?

Well, somebody got on to the Americans, the Americans come and took him away and never saw him again. I've often wondered ever since, over the years when it comes up, what happened to Jacky Lee - nobody knows. He just got sucked in. Anyway, I was told I was going home.

You were told at about that time?

No, after - that was just before I went home. When I was told I was going home I got a message to go down to the adjutants place - a little 'donga' down there - hut, part of it - and he wasn't there so old Don [Gaiter] was there with the clerk, cum jack-of-all-trades - like 'Radar' in ...

Yes.

And he said, 'Oh, righto, Baker, you are going on leave? - [Cabana] for seven days.' He said, 'I think you might be going home.' I said, 'Oh, yeah, righto.'

Anyway, I get to Japan with big holes in my socks, and all that business, and I front to the orderly room, and the adjutant says, 'Why aren't you wearing your ribbons?' I said, 'What ribbons?' He said, 'You are supposed to have them.' And he phones up the L Group and they say they haven't got any, he said, 'All your staff have got them.' So he went back to his office and there was the clerk out there - and that WOD I was telling you about.

Yes.

He's got them on. So he called the WOD into his office and says, 'I want this airman here to have his ribbons.' He said, 'There are none.' He said, 'Give him yours.' Anyway, he took his off and gave them to me. He says, 'Righto, corporal, carry on to L Group and get your hooks.' I said, 'I don't think they've got any.' He said, 'Here's your movement order, sign this and sign that', and the aircraft, from Qantas - the next day or whatever it was.

So I got home and my clothes wouldn't fit me, so I went into the US Navy PX and I bought a pair of their KD (khaki drill) trousers - drill trousers - and a couple of shirts from them, and I dressed up in a navy officer's drab uniform.

So you didn't come home in air force kit ...

No.

... because it wouldn't fit? That was it.

That was it.

It sounds like a bit of a mix of uniforms.

Oh, it was. When I got there the Red Cross people were waiting there and this lady comes - she's got a tray of - I can remember it now - [De Resque] cigarettes. She said, 'Excuse me, sir, would you like a cigarette?' I said, 'Well, I don't smoke very much.' She said, 'How long have you been smoking?' I said, 'Oh, about a year.' She said, 'Oh, would you like these, sir?' I said, 'Thank you.' She said, 'You are not an officer, are you?' I said, 'No', and she turned her back and walked away, didn't give me a cigarette anyway.

Right, okay, you didn't qualify?

No - I had a nice shirt and pants on because all mine were too big.

You'd lost so much weight?

Yeah.

So you got back to Australia on a Qantas flight?

Yes.

Can in to Sydney?

Yes - up to Richmond then - train up to Richmond - and over in 'Sin City' they received me, a (inaudible) or an officer, people coming back from BCOF or Korea, or whatever you like to call it - or Malaya, or wherever - and you went in there. He says, 'Yeah, Baker, on the back of this thing it says you have seven days leave' - he said, 'Done that' - tore it up. He said, 'Well, (inaudible) overseas and I want you back here - doesn't mean a thing', so I lost seven days there. So I took ...

Hang on, you'd had seven days at the resort [Cabana]?

No, that was after six months, the second one was the (inaudible), I think - I was three months late getting it anyway because they credited me with it there, but when I got back to Australia they just ...

They just dismissed it?

Yeah.

Okay.

So I'd gone that last nine months without leave. I got posted to Fairbairn to a Beaufighter squadron - 30 Squadron.

So when did your family know you were back home? When did you get to see them? You said your dad said, when you got home, (that) you slept twenty hours.

Yeah, I went into the house - nobody home - so I waited until they came home.

How long was this after you got back to Sydney?

Oh, same night - in the morning.

You weren't accommodated out at Richmond?

Oh, no, I was just in there - they could have given me the same thing at Mascot, they could have given us the same bit of paper, but we had to go all the way up to there.

Were you given any sort of post or disembarkation leave when you came back?

No, I just took my rec leave which was on my card from previously - I had normal rec leave. Did that and I went to 30 Squadron. I was only there a short time and then I collapsed in Goulburn with double pneumonia. The doctor reckoned that I was just worn out, but I didn't know, for the first two days, that I was in hospital. I collapsed in the main street.

How long was this after you got back?

Oh, three or four weeks, I suppose.

So it was attributed to your Korean service, the fact that you had just been pushing it too hard?

Yeah. A fellow by the name of Dawson put me in a car and took me back to Canberra from Goulburn. I don't remember any of that - I woke up and I was in hospital. I enjoyed it because to build me up I had steak for lunch, steak for dinner. I had well-wishers out on the lawn in front of the sick bay there, and all the troops were coming up after work and I'd say, 'G'day fellows - another steak.'

How long were you in there?

Oh, I only spent about three weeks in hospital, and then I got back to work.

That's probably the break you should have got when you came back?

Yeah, probably. But I wasn't the only one, everyone was the same. The air force had just too many commitments, but not enough people, and that's the way it's always been - even Vietnam was the same - even at 35 Squadron we were doing well, but you never got your hundred per cent manning.

What did you make of your experience in Korea - what did you think of it?

Shithouse!

Okay.

There was just something that could have been better organised; I think the government just said, 'Right, we'll give them the army, navy and air force', and that was it. I suppose the army and the navy had the same problems.

I'm stunned to hear you say that because I could have understood that remark being made in 1950 when the war started, but you'd got there in 1951 ...

Yeah.

... and were there till the end of '52.

Yeah.

I mean, we'd been in Korea two and a half years by that point. You'd have thought there would have been ample time in that period to get it sorted out.

It was improving, but the main thing was we didn't have any catering, that was our biggest problem, and we didn't have the clothing we wanted when we wanted it. I mean, we borrowed, or sold slouch hats, for Jack or something.

That was a trade item?

Yeah, the slouch hat, we'd get a couple of shirts for that, or something, all those sort of things.

And that was the way you operated, basically trading off to get the stuff you needed?

I tried to explain this at the bar one night just before we came home. The people from the headquarters, of course, they'd never been over there, didn't know what it was like, and that was our problem. We had no engineering officer to report to us - Kinnimont - and Kinnimont thought we would because the aircraft were getting there all the time, the pilots were getting themselves killed, or whatever, and we were getting a good name. When you look at it, an old fuselage we used as a smoko room sort of thing, borrowing clothing, and eating 'shit on a shingle'.

What you also seem to be saying though, there weren't enough people in the squadron to do the work, or keep it going.

Yeah.

You were short-handed?

Well, we wouldn't have nowhere to put them, we only had so many tents, and you can only have so many people in the squadron at one time. If you would have brought somebody else over - well, if somebody went on leave and somebody arrived, coming through (inaudible) or something, they had to sleep in your sleeping bag, that sort of thing. You would have done better on an old farm, got a shed for them or something, and that's what it was, you looked after yourself. I made a boiler for doing our clothes in. I know I shouldn't have done it because we shouldn't have any fire in the tents.

There was a risk having a fire in your tent.

We lost two fellows up there.

I know about that incident.

I used to light it out the back of my tent and, more or less, with a four gallon drum of water, put some clothes in. They used to come and take it away on me all the time, in the end they told me to stop it. I said, 'We've all got clean clothes' - you get sick and tired of being dirty because when you come of the flight line all the shower system we had made, all the water would be used up, so you would go without a bath or anything. The next morning you'd have whatever water was in that tin - old American helmet - that was it. You'd get pretty dirty, but you don't notice because everyone smells the same.

We used to have a shot at some of the headquarters blokes at times because they always seemed to have clean clothes and everything; we didn't.

So there wasn't a lot of attention paid by the officers to make sure that the men's conditions ...

We didn't have any officers - we had this Randy Green - I told you we had to front him after our episode with the beer bottles. He said, 'The CO isn't very happy about it, I've got to punish you.' I said, 'Oh, yeah, righto.' He said, 'It's a serious thing, the war and everything' - read the whole act of service. The he said, 'Will you accept my punishment or the CO's?' I said, 'We'll take yours.' He said, 'I award you ten days on the dry' - 'Right' - because there is no booze anyway.

It wasn't really that much of a punishment.

No.

It was a slap on the wrist really.

Yeah. He ended up being a test pilot.

So this was a problem, the fact that there wasn't an officer there to actually ...

That's right, we didn't have anybody to speak for us. See, normally at a conference or a briefing there would be a debriefing, but no show there.

Something I did want to ask you about your time at Kimpo; were you seeing much evidence of battle damage on the aircraft that you were servicing?

Oh, yeah, some of them would come back with a few holes in them because we had to sort of repair them. We'd get the safety equipment bloke come out and get some dope and fabric and patch up the holes and we'd try and fly back to Iwakuni.

As engine fitters what sort of interaction did you have with the individual pilots? I mean, you are working on their aircraft.

Look, I had one fellow - as a matter of fact, 'Flying' Fox and 'Big' Baker on that side of the aircraft - Ray Fox, he was a sergeant pilot - (inaudible), long gone - yeah. You had to look after two aircraft mainly - we include the first day I strapped him in. I used to help the airmen, wipe his ... see, when you are putting the ammunition into his cannon, any moisture in it will freeze up there, so we got a rag and wiped his ammunition over, and you'd clean his canopy a bit more, and any mud on the floor or the seat, you'd get it out, and walk around - without his walk around - and have a little chat. If he was on stand-by you'd be standing right outside, both freezing together - oh, yeah, we had a great ... yeah - awful. Even old Bill Simmonds who has become an air vice marshal, he was a young boy up there at the time, and he was always - 'Yeah, thank you for that' - we got on well together, except for poor old Black Murray who's just worn out - he'd go out on sorties, you'd say, 'Yeah, right', strap him in, fix his flying suit up.

Some of them were a bit jaded, do you think?

Oh, yeah. Well, we had no pilots - we had RAF pilots as well.

I knew there was a contingent there working with ...

We lost one of them up there after a while too. The air force didn't have any one.

If these guys are flying these operations that you guys are servicing down on the ground, were you seeing the effects of strain on the pilots?

Oh, yeah, you could see them getting tired, yeah. See, some days they'd do four sorties in one day, that's a lot of strain on anybody, just getting up there and firing a few guns. It sounds alright in the movies, with John Wayne or something, but you could see them when they came back,

they were exhausted, they are covered in perspiration - you'd see it seeping through their suit.

Did you have to help them out of the cockpit?

Oh, you'd get hold of them right there, put their safety clip back in the 'bang' (ejection) seat - you'd stand-by till they got their leg in, sometimes you'd put their foot in the little hole where their boots go because they'd be fiddling around - oh, yeah, they were great people, a lot of senior NCOs - oh, they used to be P3s those days, they used to have a little laurel thing, little three stars in piles, then they made them sergeants.

That sort of camaraderie was pretty essential to keep the unit functioning.

Oh, yeah, it was your pilot, your aircraft, and this is our war together, you know.

Apart from how you characterised your general experience in Korea, what was your impression of 77 Squadron as a unit for the three months you were there? Did you think it was a pretty good unit?

Fully professional - fully professional, everything. I can only tell you about the flight lines, but I don't know what the other people did; but on the flight lines, if the aircrew wanted something, they got it. If it was an early start, late start - 'Could you do something to my aircraft?' or, 'The seat's not right', or something - we'd be there. It wouldn't matter if the sun went up and went down twice, we'd still be there, oh, yeah, it was great, we had a real good family.

Was there a contrast between what you saw in Korea and the air force back in Australia?

Oh, yeah.

I suppose you'd feel it, coming back with such a sudden connection of it.

Yeah.

What did you think of the air force back here in Australia? Do you think they knew what was going on up in Korea?

Oh, I don't think they did, no, no. Look, even when I went to Fairbairn down there, we were in little long huts, we had a couple of cooks, and the rest of us - I think this was 30 Squadron - the cooks didn't know where we had been, and half the blokes in 30 Squadron, where I was, only one other fellow had been up in Korea - I think Parker was acting CO, he was flying Dakotas up there, but he was a CO anyway so I didn't have much to do with him. They'd say, 'Oh, you are posted?' - 'Oh, yeah' - 'Back?' - 'Oh, yeah, righto' - it was like that.

So it was just one of the overseas postings?

Yeah - you are going to Changi, or you are going to Singapore, or whatever is on.

Do you think there was enough recognition of the role (played by) the guys who were in Korea, particularly the ground crew? Were there decorations made?

Not that I know of.

Was that something that you ...

I think one bloke got an MID (mentioned in dispatches), I'm not sure, I think he was an [Arnott] bloke. I don't think any of us got anything for doing the job, we were just doing our job.

Was there any comment about that amongst the guys?

No.

That was pretty much what you expected?

Yeah, do the job and get our twelve bob a day, or whatever it was, plus two and sixpence deferred pay.

Did you feel there was enough recompense for what was entailed in the posting there, in the money you were receiving?

I didn't worry, I was in the air force, that was it. If I only got ten bob a day I still would have went. I was unfortunate, the day I joined the air force I never meant to join the air force. I'd been working up in [Keyway] Valley with the Victorian Electricity Commission getting, oh, a pile of money.

Hang on. Before you actually went in to the air force, what sort of work were you doing?

Well, for two and a half years I was going an apprenticeship, and the war ended - no more manpower control. You couldn't get a job because everybody came home from the war and industry hadn't started up, so I rolled my swag and went to look for a job. I was getting eighteen shillings a week as an apprentice. He said, 'You haven't got your apprenticeship?' - 'Oh, bugger it' - so I went off and I went to a place called Weston - I got on the back of a train - I got a job in a coal mine. So I went into the coal mine for about three or four months with a horse, pulling coal out with the miners, in the skips. They went on strike so I caught the train out to Maitland and I ended up in Queensland, and I went out to Goondiwindi and I worked for a fellow called Bill [Gunu] - who became famous later on in the wool business - I worked on his property for a few months. I went to another one and worked a few months more there. Got enough money and went back to Sydney in the holidays. I met an old school chum, Charlie Barry. He said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm going out to Albury.' He said, 'What doing?' I went down to Albury and got a job with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria - came to Sydney with £10 notes. Oh, I went to Manly and did all the things young people do.

You were twenty-one when you joined the air force.

Yeah.

But you said you didn't actually mean to join the air force. How did it happen?

I was coming back from Manly and Charlie said, 'Look at that, look at that' - there's a big sign, 'The air force needs new recruits for the new Lincoln bomber'. He said, 'Yeah, righto, I'm going to be in this.'

So next day I go down to - oh, it's above the pub there in [Tatlo] hotel, or whatever it was, in Sydney - it was upstairs. So up he goes - 'I want to join the air force' - 'Yeah, righto' - and I went and sat down, and I said, 'Oh, bugger it', so I went down to George Street, they are all coming down there - he didn't come out so I went up looking for him. And I walked in, this fellow - probably a sergeant or something - and he said, 'Oh, yeah, he's been interviewed'. He said, 'What did you do?' - I told him - 'Oh,' he said, 'you like moving around?' - I said, 'Yeah' - he said, 'Gee, you'd go well in the air force' - I said, 'Oh ...' - I said, 'I'm going back to the bush, going back to Queensland, plenty of work up there', and he said, 'Look, you are just the bloke we want, I guarantee in six to twelve months we'd have you in Japan, you'd have a room girl to do your washing for you', and he rattled all this off. I said, 'Oh, yeah, as much as that?' and he said, 'Oh ...' I said, 'Where do I sign?'

So I signed; he said, 'You are under twenty-one, you've got to get your father to sign it', so I said, 'Okay'. So I went back the next day with the bit of paper, same signature, and ten days later I got a call-up and went into the air force - I was twenty-one and ten days old. That's how it happened.

But the reality was a little bit different to what he'd actually told you.

I could have told Charlie Barry after I saw him. I came off recruit training and I went down to see him - his mother, down in Young, out in the door. I said, 'What are you doing? Aren't you in the air force?' He said, 'No, I failed the medical.' So that's how it was - interesting life.

Yeah, absolutely. You've mentioned all the postings you'd had in your later career; do you have any regrets?

Oh, no, look, a place like Uranquinty was like a big family, and the people were training - some of them didn't do it very well, they got a bit silly because they were training cadets, all this business, but most of them were good people. You'd go out of your way to help them, especially when we changed from Wirraways - I took over in charge of the first Winjeel flight because everyone wanted to fly the Winjeels usually. We used to accommodate them and look after them - some of them ended up air vice marshals, it was one big happy family - we were isolated.

So really Korea may not have been the greatest part of your experience, but it was just an episode.

Yeah, just forget it.

You, at least, had experience in Vietnam as well to match with that.

Yeah.

A different experience, do you think, compared to how the air force performed (in Korea)?

Completely different - completely different.

Well, I mean, apart from the geography and climate, and things like that, do you think the air force performed better?

Oh, no, look, they were just as good - just as good - and nobody worried about [Time Life] or all

that sort of thing, but we had the opportunity of getting four days in Butterworth every few months - say, twice a year, or whatever it was, plus a week home or a week in Hong Kong, or something like that. We had our own catering, three beautiful meals every day - the catering people up there were magnificent in that hot weather, round these stoves all day cooking. We lived in huts, and I had a proper bed. I thought it was great.

> You didn't have a proper bed, it was a sleeping bag on a stretcher, presumably, in Korea?

That's all, yeah. When I left I left the stretcher, the sleeping bag, the American eating iron gear, and my leather jacket, and my pile cap, left it there for the next bloke. Whether he got it or not, I don't know, somebody else might have shared it as well. Vietnam was just as busy a place, and we got a few rockets every now and again, and they blew up our fuel dump, and all things like that - those silly things - and the feelings of the ground staff and aircrew was the same.

> There was never any time during your period in Korea where you felt physically in danger?

Well, yes.

> From enemy fire?

Yeah. There was, in November, the hooter goes - we had this hooter, that means evacuate. So the hooter goes - and I think we had twenty aircraft, counting the two sort of trainers - I think it was twenty at the time. We piled the aircrew into their little bags and they were off to Suwon or somewhere, and all the interceptor wing across the road - they are all Sabres - they all go off, (inaudible), they were off, Shooting Stars went off, and everyone's going off, and our electricians are getting along with an old tractor with all the battery carts hooked up, and he's off down the road somewhere. There are some of them standing there, and we were told to get our tin hats on and our rifles, so we got out, standing there - and nobody come near us.

Anyway, this sergeant, he came over, and he says, 'Haven't you blokes gone?' - we said, 'No, nobody has told us what to do' - he said, 'Well, in an emergency get fifty rounds of extra ammunition from the (inaudible) and we'll go to the wire.' I said, 'What do you mean, go to the wire?' He said, 'Well, that's the way they are coming, somebody has got to do something about it, nobody has told us to get out and (inaudible) for us.' The last American truck and everything had gone.

Anyway, a few minutes later all these boxcars came over the top and little fellows in little white handkerchiefs were popping out, all the paratroopers, came down in front of us, and we thought that was great. Then next day we learnt that it was a drill that the commanding general put on.

> So who were the paratroopers?

Oh, they were US regimental combat teams.

> But you weren't told that this was a training exercise?

No, nobody knew anything, the whole base - oh, I suppose the base commander did, but nobody else did - thousands of people heading south and we were standing there like shags on a rock.

That wouldn't have been very encouraging to know that if it had been for real you guys had basically been abandoned.

Well, old 'Hose Nose' and a few of the fellows told me, back in the early part when they were up over the Parallel, they got out on a Dakota that happened to pull in - had to pull in the refuel there - they pumped the fuel out of forty-four gallon drums - and they took them on. They'd been left behind when the Mustangs got out, and as they took off the Chinese were coming down the other end of the strip and these went over the top of them. Nobody thought about getting them out, they got the aircraft away - the Americans got out.

You are talking about the evacuation from Hamhung?

Hamhung, yeah.

Vic, I think we've covered a lot of ground there.

I didn't think I'd remember so much.

Right. I think we might conclude the interview here. Thank you, Vic, for giving us all your time and the interesting reflections on your service in Korea.

12/02