Australian War Memorial

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TRANSCRIPT
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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02780

Ray Willmot, as a radar plotter HMAS Sydney, Korea 1951-1952, interviewed by Lieutenant Commander Tony Hughes RANR

Recorded
at: Canberra, ACT
on: 21 June 2002
by: Lenny Preston, AWM Staff

Description

Ray Willmot talks about: joining the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in 1948 and his early training; his service prior to joining the *Sydney*, including HMAS *Shoalhaven* and *Culgoa*; his duties as a radar plotter aboard the *Sydney;* giving bearings to aircraft; the radars aboard the *Sydney*; working up the *Sydney* for operations; the extra work in preparing the ship for an Admiral's inspection; Commander V.A. Smith, the executive officer; manning the ship in a state of readiness; the start of the Korean War; landing and take-off operations; a later incident aboard the HMAS *Melbourne;* family concerns about his serving in the RAN; a discussion on the Morse code; refuelling and replenishment at sea; operating in the ship at night; smoking on board; being a member of the radar party being preferable to many other assignments; cold weather clothing; sleeping arrangements; messing, ablutions and laundering; riding out Typhoon Ruth at sea; a memorable day's operations including spotting for the USN *New Jersey's* 16-inch guns; other memorable incidents, including the rescue of MacMillan and Hancox by an American helicopter crew, operating from the *Sydney*; ; the effects of fatalities on the ship's crew; the damage to returning aircraft; good morale aboard the *Sydney*; Christmas Eve 1951 ashore and Christmas Day aboard the *Sydney;* crew members that impressed him; recreation and crossing the equator ceremonies.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, February 2003

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Identification: This is an interview with Ray Willmot; it is conducted by Lieutenant Commander Tony Hughes, the Royal Australian Navy Reserve, on Friday 21 June 2002, at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered are Ray's experiences as a radar plotter on board *HMAS Sydney* in Korean waters between October 1951 and January 1952.

The date and place of birth were 30 July 1929 in Hobart, and the last educational institution prior to military service was Smithton High School in 1943.

No, Smithton State.

Smithton State High School in 1943.

Ray, this interview is very much your story and we would like you to tell it as you experienced it on board the *Sydney*, in Korean waters, as a radar plotter. Can you give us some little background before going to the war in *Sydney* - you general service background and experiences, as well as training in preparation for that campaign?

Certainly, Tony.

I joined the Royal Australian Navy in Hobart, Tasmania, on 1 September 1948; I was nineteen years of age. My recruit seaman training, of ten months, was done at Flinders Training Depot in Victoria - HMAS *Cerberus* - and also on board the cruiser HMAS *Australia*, and I had a small cruise on HMAS *Latrobe*. I was twenty-two years of age when I went into the operational area of Korea; I'd also done a specialised course in radar plotting - this was in 1950 at HMAS *Watson* in Watsons Bay in Sydney. That course was for about five months when I qualified as an RP3. That was the background as far as the training was concerned.

What was the *Latrobe*, as a matter of interest?

Latrobe was a small corvette that used to take the recruits out for boat work and helmsman's duties, and things like that. I was very fortunate, she actually went down to Tassie, on the trip that I was on, and cruised right along the north-west coast and went into Devonport, which is only about seven miles from where I lived. So I got the weekend off on leave.

Did the family visit the boat, and all that sort of thing?

Yeah.

Was she like the *Culgoa*, the *Latrobe*?

No, the *Culgoa* was a frigate, so she was a bit smaller than that.

Minesweeper type of thing?

Yeah.

What other RAN vessels did you serve on prior to Korea?

Well, just prior to Korea I was on the *Culgoa*, that was my first seagoing ship. That was under

Lieutenant Commander Jerram - that's J-E-R-R-A-M - he was quite a good skipper - in July 1949 that was. In August we set sail for Japan and I served as a part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan where we remained in those Japanese waters until about ... oh, until relieved by HMAS *Shoalhaven* in February 1950, and we got back into Sydney about March of that year.

So you were there in the lead-up, as the activity was hotting up?

Yeah.

Were you conscious of it on *Culgoa*?

Well, yes, we were. It was quite interesting, we were doing patrols on the east coast of Korea, and there was an embargo on ships going into that area - this is as far as I know - because we came across a tanker and we arrested it, and escorted it back to Sasebo Harbour because it had dead crew on board - it was a couple of people who had been killed - and it was carrying arms. I guess we were the last ship there because the *Shoalhaven* was the first ship that got into the Korean War, which was a little bit interesting for us.

Were you a radar plotter at that stage?

No, I was an able seaman - no ordinary seaman.

So you didn't get categorised until you came back from your first sea trip?

No. I came back to Sydney, and then I went to *Watson*, did the course, and then I was fortunate enough to go back to the *Culgoa*, so I had two turns on the *Culgoa*. I was sort of an old salt by then and done my able seaman's training. On that trip we showed the flag around New Guinea and the islands north of Australia.

I think it was on that trip that we transported some Japanese prisoners of war to Manus Island. Manus Island had a large Japanese prisoner of war camp there and indeed, that's where they dispatched a few of them by hanging.

Was it HMAS *Tarangau* in those days, in Manus?

Oh ...

There was a depot there?

Yeah. I think you might be right, I just forget what it was called now. But we went to places like [Geso] and Honiara – that's in the Solomon Islands – Rabaul, Manus Island, Dreger Harbour, Samarai, Port Moresby, Vila, and Noumea. I remember one of the places I went to – and I think it might have been Dreger Harbour – went ashore there, and I was so impressed by the countryside. The trees had been cut off as though it was a scythe that had gone right through it and, of course, this was the war, this is what happened during the war with the army chaps. It really came home to me then that she was really on in them days.

Tarangau is now part of the PNG Defence Force.

Is it?

Yes - on Manus, of course.

How long were you on the *Sydney* before you deployed north?

I joined the *Sydney* ... the date escapes me ... on 17 July 1951. That was under Captain Davies, and we went up there in September - or we were up there in September.

Captain Harries, I think.

Oh, Harries - what did I say?

Davies.

Oh, sorry.

Harries.

Captain Harries. So I was on there about two months.

So you are working up off Jervis Bay, I suppose, in those days, with the aircraft? Or indeed, did you go further north to Harvey Bay even?

To the best of my knowledge I think we just took the aircraft on board at Harvey Bay and done a small work-up there. Most of the work-up, of course, was done after we left Manus.

In the China Sea, on the way north.

Yes ... I don't know whether it was quite that far. My role on the *Sydney* was in the operational crew manning positions in the operations room, aircraft direction room, and the radar display room. Now, this work would include detecting and reporting ships, or aircraft, appearing on radar screens, giving their bearings and ranges, plotting this information, in the case of aircraft, on a large perspex board or screen, in the aircraft direction room. In the case of ships we used to report to the operations room where ships were plotted on a table using 'chinagraph' pencils. I also had the job of communicating with pilots. Once the aircraft were launched from the ship they came under the control of the aircraft direction room. We were logging conversations between ship and aircraft, obtaining flight information, fuel state, where they were going, what jobs they were doing, whether it was combat air patrol, reconnaissance, photography, army support, bombardment, bombing targets or convoy work. All this had to go onto a big screen so that the aircraft direction officer knew exactly what everybody was doing.

It's interesting, my particular action station was plotting aircraft movement on a screen at the emergency bridge position, which was right on top of the island. You had around, as the lookouts, we had officers there - I don't really know why that was always the emergency bridge because the bridge underneath had more cover - it was out in the open.

Up in the open air?

Yeah. But I found it interesting up there because you got to see the aircraft taking off and

landing, and stuff like that.

> How many people would be in the operations room during the normal course of a watch?

I'd say twelve to fifteen - it's such a long time ago now, it's difficult for me to sort of go to each position, but it was quite a beehive of activity. We had two positions for interception work. If you sent out a combat air patrol, their duty was to help protect the ship, and to identify aircraft coming back to the ship to make sure that they were ours. Whilst they used to squawk a certain signal, this was read on an A-type radar screen - it was pretty difficult to alway pick that up, and if we weren't sure the officer would send the combat air patrol out to make sure who they were. Of course, we would be in communication with our fellows coming back, and we had a fair idea where they were coming back from, but, of course, with the ship moving through the sea, positions changed a little bit, and sometimes even the pilots used to wonder where we were.

They would call us up at times and get a direction. There was a channel that they could transmit on; I think the apparatus was called an FV-5. It was pretty primitive, but very effective in as much as when he transmitted, a beam went out to the aircraft and, of course, we would then run the cursor around, read off the other bearing, and give him a course to steer. But we didn't know how far he was, you couldn't tell just where on the beam he was, but once the beam swung over the other way, you knew he was above you.

> Actually, I remember it was FH-5.

FH-5.

> I think it was still on board when I was on board.

Was it?

> Yeah. It was an aerial forward, near one of the starboard sponsons forward of the bridge. I think it stuck up from there - yeah, FH-5.

I remember talking to a air-traffic control officer at Launceston Airport one day, and we were talking about aircraft. I asked him did he have radar into Launceston; he said, 'Oh, no, nothing like that.' And I said, 'Have you got ...' - well, I called it an FV-5, but you say it's an FH-5, and you are probably right - he said, 'No, nothing like that, no luxuries like that.' I smiled to myself, I didn't say much more.

> Did you maintain communications with your aircraft out on missions continuously, or was there a break, did you hand over coordination to somebody else?

No. You got a break when you changed watch, but otherwise you were in communication with the aircraft, you didn't say a lot to them, you'd just get a radio check occasionally just to make sure that they were okay. Of course, I think those days they weren't all that too pleased to communicate too much, they tried to maintain radio silence as much as they could.

> Testing memory; do you recall the radars that you had on board the ship at the time?

Yes. We had 974, I think that was a small-distance surface; we had 293, that could be used for

aircraft and surface because the aerial elevated; and dear old faithful 960. How's that?

That's excellent.

Is that pretty right?

Excellent.

Yeah, 960. That was an interesting radar because some days you would do real well. I remember being on the west coast of Korea one day, and we were actually reporting aircraft from another aircraft carrier that was operating on the east side of Korea. Now, that distance was close on 200 miles, I think, which was pretty good. But I guess that was just the climatic conditions.

Conducting.

Yeah. Being communicating officer you could know a little bit there, would you?

Done the course. I actually was involved with electronic warfare as well, as part of my duties, so I got to know all that.

When you arrived in Korean waters what was your reaction to the operational environment, including climatic adjustments? It was a new ball game, you were in a war zone; how did you feel about that?

...

Did you have a sense of danger, for instance?

What question was that?

Four.

Four, sorry, just lost me for a minute.

Well, my early days on board, when there was no flying on, of course, we were employed working part of ship, and until I joined the radar party I was assigned to the forecastle division. I did normal ship's maintenance and watch keeping duties, such as lookout, helmsman, emergency boat crew, mess man, cafeteria, and things like that.

On arrival at Yokosuka – this was 19 September – we worked hard for six days getting the ship ready for the Admiral's inspection because on arrival at Kure, which was going to be another seven days or so, we were expecting the Commander-in-Chief of the Far East Station, Vice Admiral Russell, to do an inspection of the ship. So that meant a lot of work and we got a bit cheesed off in the end because we had the *Glory* tied up alongside us and, quite frankly, she looked as though she'd been in a brothel. It was rusty and dirty, inside and out. The Admiral had done an inspection there and didn't say a word, but, of course, we had to be shipshape and Bristol fashion. So I wondered why we were doing an inspection like that, and getting the ship so clean, when we were more interested in going into a fighting situation.

So the background leading up to it, we were a little bit cheesed off - and when I say 'we', I think

that took in everybody because you, being in the navy, would realise just how much work an admiral's inspection goes into. And having worked up on the ship, on the way up from Manus Island, doing action stations and emergency drills, man overboard.

Incidentally, we did have a guy fall overboard on the way up and he was picked up. We also had an aircraft ditch; he had engine trouble and ditched alongside the ship, and so we picked him up. So just prior to the show we just couldn't understand why we had to do all this extra work before going into an operational area.

What did the Admiral say about the ship? Was he impressed?

Oh, yes, he really was. And, of course, our taskmaster was our commander, the Chief Executive Officer was V A T Smith, and boy! If you wasn't working, or you wasn't doing the right thing, and looked over your shoulder, you can guarantee 'Vat' would be there, he was that type of chap - but a great officer.

Decorated offer, I think he won the George Medal, or Cross, or something like that, in the Second World War.

Yeah, well, he later went on to be Vice Admiral, or Admiral, or something like that.

Oh, yes, he was the Chief of Navy before he retired, yes.

Of course, looking back on those days, we thought we were pretty hard done by, but, you know, he had to do what he done to get the crew to the state that it was.

I remember one day there, doing exercising action stations on the way up, and we had to do it three times one morning because we were so slow getting to our closed-up position. But one of the problems we had there was, you'd be on watch, and you had to wait till you was relieved before you could go to your action station. And on an aircraft carrier, when you are in first-degree damage control, you've got these big hatches, for going up and down, which were closed, and they had a tiny little hatch inside them with everybody wanting to go up and those coming down. It created a terrific situation. But any rate, we must have, after the third time, he must have thought that was fair enough.

They were problems that we had. I can never understand why we just didn't remain where we were, and the people that were supposed to come to us could have taken our position, but it wasn't that way.

No, you always had your allocated action station, and leaving ship's station, it was all there on the 'watching stations', it was called, wasn't it?

Yeah. Well, they had ship's standing orders, and also they had orders within each small branch, I suppose.

Did you go to action stations very much, or would (you be) more on a second sort of a degree of readiness most of the time?

Well, at the operational area we always closed up at action stations at dawn and dusk. That was fairly routine because if it was thought that if attack was going to happen, that was the time that

the ship was probably more vulnerable or that it was more likely to happen. So yes, most mornings were pretty cold.

> That certainly was the traditional time, including in the Second World War, they used to certainly do it that way. Interestingly we didn't do that; in later years we'd man the ship differently by having two watches basically, and you were always on a state of readiness, but no in action stations. You fought the ship with the watch on basically.

That would probably make a lot of sense.

> Yeah, it was an effective use of manpower, I think.

> How well did you feel you were briefed, and members of the ship's company, on the tactical and political situation in Korea? Did you feel that you had an understanding of why you were there - did it matter?

Well, the first news of anything happening to Korea, as far as I can remember, came to us in Australia through reading the morning newspapers, and the headlines were something like 'Civil War in Korea' had commenced. And, of course, we were worried about whether the Americans would get involved to help the South Koreans, or whether the Russians would get involved with the North Koreans and thus start a World War III. I think most of us thought that this was the start of a communist push for world dominance and believed they just had to be stopped, for the sake of democracy and for the sake of peace.

I don't think any of us had to pack our bags and go as we had a chaplain on board, if I remember, and conscientious objectors were excused, provided that you could prove that you were a conscientious objector. And so, I guess, all on board were volunteers.

I remember that the ship was delayed in its sailing - and I don't know whether this ever came out or not because someone had taken to cutting essential electrical wires on board the ship and we thought that this was a communist plot to stop the ship from sailing, and things like that. And, of course, I guess it was thought that some of the dockyard personnel might have done this, but I don't think anything was really proved.

I don't really think we were very well briefed at all on the political side of it. In fact, one would seem to have been briefed more on venereal diseases than anything else, going up into Japan and those places. Most information about it came to us via the mess-deck grapevine, that was through the gossip, but nothing official was put to us on the tactical or political situation in Korea at the time.

Of course, I'm trying to remember back fifty years, which makes it a little difficult. The Executive Officer issued his daily orders, but these normally consisted of the dress of the day, work routine, sailing orders. We were told not to discuss our operations anyhow.

> Was the Royal Australian Navy well prepared for its role in Korea, do you think?

...

> It was a period of time when the navy seemed to be running down immediately after the Second World War. How well do you think the navy was prepared for taking on this

task?

Tony, I don't know, I don't know that I'm qualified to be able to speak on behalf of other ships, or authority, but as far as the *Sydney* is concerned an enormous effort was made, by all concerned, with bringing the ship's crew up to a state of high war readiness - and I think I've said what we'd done after Manus to do that. It's a difficult question for me. Certainly the *Sydney* was, I think, by the time we got to the operational area we were well and truly ready for it.

It was a real baptism for the Fleet Air Arm, wasn't it? It was a new element of the Royal Australian Navy, and the first combat experience for most of the pilots - there were some from the Second World War, of course.

Yes.

Well, for the whole ship's company in many ways, certainly for the newer people.

Yes, that's true.

And they acquitted themselves very well. History tells us that they had a wonderful record during their time in Korean waters.

Yes, well, they worked and earned it. I can remember the early days when they were preparing themselves, these pilots - and coming around to land Sea Furys and Firefly aircraft, which were piston-driven aircraft. They had these large engines right in the nose of the aircraft, and these pilots were just skimming off the deck. At times you'd watch them coming around, and they seemed to be even below the flight deck, so that's how low some of them were. They would come round, and they could see the aircraft carrier to a point, but then there'd come a point where they had to straighten up, and they just couldn't see the ship.

We had a bat man, they called him - he was the flight-deck officer - and these were very courageous, and very experienced, and lovely people. I used to watch them for hours, directing these aircraft on board, putting the bats up if he is too high, lowering them if he was too low, and showing him his wing attitude, and getting them on board. It was a mammoth task, and these pilots relied solely on these fellows.

The Sea Fury itself was a very difficult aircraft in as much as if you've lost your revs, the nose drops so very quickly. Boy! when they cut, they dropped.

Was the barrier rigged as a matter of course?

Yes.

Or was it only for emergencies?

No, no. Because the aircraft carrier had no angled deck - that came later with the *Melbourne* - because you came straight in, other aircraft would park the other side, in the bows of the ship, which meant that you had to have barriers there in case an aircraft missed the arrester wire - and from memory I think there were six of those. And indeed, if you caught the last one I think you would hit the first barrier, except that if the chap working the lever - the hydraulic lever - if he was quick enough he could get the first one down, he would miss.

I've got some photographs I've brought with me which shows some of these fellows tangled up in the wire barrier, but that was the reason why the barrier was there, (it) was simply to stop them from going into other aircraft because they would land at about minute intervals, and you just had time to unhook the arrester hook and taxi forward, they'd put the barrier down, and you'd go forward, and bang, up would go the barrier and the other fellow would be almost on the deck. So it was a pretty quick operation.

Dangerous stuff, wasn't it, on those flight decks?

Oh, absolutely - absolutely. The danger on that ship, well, it was always paramount, and we were always reminded of it - fuelling this high-octane petrol into these aircraft. But the crew themselves, I really admire the flight-deck crew. The noise that used to go on, and when they were taxiing these aircraft, you would get a handler either side of the wheels with chocks. They were walking underneath these aircraft with the engines roaring. How on earth there weren't more accidents, I'll never know.

On landing - always a dangerous part of the aircraft's operations - did you have many occasions when they came back with ammunition still not expended and in a dangerous situation which had potential for letting off on landing?

Yeah, well, occasionally we had the situation where they'd come back with unfired projectiles, and they didn't know quite what situation they would be in upon landing. Of course, they would land and these would come lose and shoot along the runway and, thankfully, drop over the side. Again, a miracle nothing happened. They were usually the last to land and we used to try and clear all the other aircraft, as fast as we could, off the deck, that were parked on the bow. But yeah, they were hair-raising things.

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I've always had a great deal of admiration for the Royal Australian Navy pilots because of the size of those decks they had to land on.

Yeah, well, later on, when the jets came - and I know we are only talking about the *Sydney* - but when the jets came and the angled deck came, and the mirror landing device, the whole thing changed so dramatically - of course, their engines weren't in the front of the plane - that was quite safe. And if they missed the wire they'd hit the booster and take off again, that was different.

I was on board the *HMAS Melbourne* as a young lad and I saw a Sea Venom miss - it actually collected the wire and the procedure was to put on revs in case they come unattached. He did that, then it came unattached, but he was taking revs off. So he went over the angled deck and into the water. The pilot ejected, but we never found the observer at all. It was quite a shock - I was only twenty-one - seeing this pilot spiralling through the air.

Those things are sad to see, they really are.

How did your family cope with your absence? Did they have an understanding of the role of the RAN in Korea?

I'd watched four older brothers serve in World War II and, of course, I vowed that I too would enter the services when I was old enough. I'd served in the Air Training Corps during the war and reached the rank of sergeant.

My parents, having had four sons serve overseas and return safely, of course, they tried to talk me out of joining the services. They pointed out things to me that I wasn't aware of, and they said that if I'm not happy at home, or if I'm not happy in my employment, then they would find other jobs for me and things like that. At any rate, the decision I'd taken had nothing to do with these matters as I was quite happy in both my work and home life.

I received regular letters from my mother whilst in Korea, and periodically I received letters from the rest of my family. Looking back now I remember that the Commonwealth Government issued to wives and mothers of Australians serving overseas during World War II a silver brooch with a crown at the top. It had laurel leaves joined around in the circumference, a map of Australia imprinted in the centre, and inscribed 'To the Women of Australian'. Onto a bar, attached to the broach, a gold star was put, one for each serving member of a family. My mother had four stars on her brooch which was worn with a great deal of pride, and indeed, I brought that particular badge with me today to show you.

I realised later that I must have caused my mother a lot of suffering and anxiety right from when I first wanted to start to join the navy, and indeed, whilst I was in it. But at any rate, I got their support and she never, ever went on about it any more and supported me all the time. I didn't think too much about going to war.

Mail, of course, was important to all of us. One thing about serving on an aircraft carrier is that if you know the mail is around you can always launch a Firefly to go and get your mail and bring it back on board - and, of course, they used to do that. Our escorts didn't mind because we used to get their mail too.

So yeah, that was sad when I think about it, but, of course, you don't dwell on these things. I don't know whether I'd have gone into the services if I'd fully appreciated what my mother and father had gone through, having four sons away.

> They all came home?

Yeah, they call came home - I've got one still alive.

> I notice that you were a telegraphist before you joined the navy. Did you ever think of going in as a communicator?

Not really. I'd only just got to that. I was in the Postmaster General's Department in the early days, delivering telegraph messages and working the night shift on the telephone exchange, and we learnt morse code. When I was postman I used to deliver the letters in Latrobe, and I'd see a sign and I'd dit-dit-dah-dah-dah-dit-dit, and all this sort of thing. That's how I learnt the morse code, but as you'd know, that's all gone now.

> Pretty well gone, yes. Some foreign countries are still using it, but though officially it's gone. The navy still teaches it.

Do they?

> As a backup, certainly via signalling they still teach it.

It's interesting too, I think the planes these days still use it because I have a scanner at home and I listen, just as a matter of interest, I tune in to all the airwaves, and sea waves, and things like that, around my area in Tassie, and they often say 'Receive Golf' or 'Receive Hotel', and I assume that means morse code.

> Yes, well, the non-directional beacons - one of their homing devices - they still transmit in morse code, a three-letter, or single-letter, whatever it is - normally three-letter, I think - identification, so the pilots know what that sounds like. They need to know this to navigate using the non-directional beacons. Yes, they still send out morse code.

That's interesting because I think it's now not an official communication, is it, by services standard?

> No. Certainly the merchant marine have done away with it altogether - officially - but I know China is still using it and, I think, even Russia is still using it.

That's all I can think about my family and their reaction.

> It is a sad time to leave your family. Were you married at the time?

No. I didn't marry till 1956, after I'd come back from England.

> I went away to go to Vietnam for seven months. My wife and two children stood on North Head of Sydney and waved goodbye, and I flashed the signal lamp at them, tear in the eye. It was sad, it was very sad.
>
> Getting back to the war, the logistic arrangements, at sea all the time, and lots of fuel and ammunition to transfer. Did you do under-way replenishment with the supply ships, or did you go into harbour? How did you get all your fuel and stores, and ammunition?

Well, the refuelling was usually done from a fleet tanker, and the one I remember up there the most was the *Wave Premier*. She also carried out the mail. The interesting thing I found about refuelling at sea up there - and the seamanship of the various captains was fantastic in as much as they just didn't do it in a straight line, they done a zigzag course; this was in case there were submarines in the area. They would go so many minutes at one course, and then they would alter the course for so many minutes on another one. If you were alongside, taking on fuel and high-octane fuel, it's a pretty hairy and scary operation.

Occasionally there was some near misses. I remember once that we had to break off because the *Wave Chief* came right in underneath one of our sponsons, and that's pretty close.

We also used to exchange personnel from there, like people coming on draft, people who had to go off because of other reasons. That was quite interesting to watch too.

You mentioned earlier about my initial reactions to the operational environment. I wondered if I could just go back to that for a little bit.

Certainly.

I think perhaps the first time I really felt anything of an operations environment was when they darkened ship. Now, on an aircraft carrier and you darken ship, they put these deep, black, heavy cloth things at the entrances to anything - any hatches, or anything that's going into the main deck. Honest to goodness, you'd go into one of those to go out - you'd be in the light and you'd go out into this dark area, and then pitch black dark, but your eyes would never get accustomed to it and you were always hitting some part of your body on something. Indeed, even in this darkened mass of cloth, if somebody was coming in it would frighten the Christ out of you because you were groping, and you'd grope somebody like, you know. There were just funny little things like that. It was certainly difficult coming from a full light in the mess deck areas and then getting outside.

Did you, apart from your operational duties, was (inaudible) the forecastle, did you say? Did you get involved with RAS (replacement at sea) replenishments, as a part of the ship ...

No, I didn't.

... or did you stay cosy in the ops room?

Well, once I was fortunate enough to become a member of the radar party; it was a different ball game. I was in charge of the maintenance of the radar display room, and that was comparatively easy work - it was just cleaning. The only thing I didn't like about the radar display room was the amount of cigarettes that used to be smoked in there. Whilst we were in Korea I think from the Lord Nuffield Foundation, or whatever it is in England, they used to send down free cigarettes. You'd get thousands of these cigarettes on board and if you didn't smoke, you certainly soon did. Of course, everybody smoked all these cigarettes, they seemed to smoke more in the radar display room than anywhere else, watching the radar blip going around all the time. You are supposed to only do four hours on it and then get relieved - sometimes it went further.

I was quite thankful to get designated into the radar area because the seamanship on forecastle and other parts of the ship, on an aircraft carrier, for a seaman, is damned hard work, really is. Coming alongside, the size of the hawsers and the springs, boy oh boy! You'd get the captain yelling out, 'Hold on to that forward spring', and this bloody thing would be pinging, absolutely pinging, and you'd be petrified behind it. I don't now whether you'd ever handled that situation or not, but oh, God, that was terrifying. You'd hold it, and then it would just give that four inches, but the bang it made - it made a terrific noise. Yes, I was pleased to get rid of all that.

They went later to nylon ropes, and nylon used to stretch and stretch, and then just give without much notice. That was very dangerous, it would come back and whip people's heads off.

There was an expression when I joined the navy, it was, 'Not me, chief, I'm radar'.

Oh, yes, well, this is true. Of course, radar fellows were seamen too and, of course, the poor old chiefs and petty officers would be asking you to do something in cleaning part of a ship, or something like that, and you'd say, 'Sorry, I'm radar, and I've got to go on watch'. And, of course,

these were seamen petty officers and chiefs and they didn't know any difference any rate, I don't think. But yeah, I guess that's where that saying comes from. And, of course, we were enclosed in some parts in air conditioned compartments whereas you wouldn't be in others. And the poor old gunners out on the guns, I felt so sorry for them. They used to have duffle coats, and thing like that, to wear, but they had to run their guns every now and then or they'd seize up because of the cold.

I remember walking past a gun emplacement there on the sponsons one day, and this guy was smoking a cigarette. And of course, in darkened ships, smoking a cigarette is a pretty serious thing to do. But he had an empty can, and he'd put a hole in this can, and he was smoking the cigarette with the lighted part inside the can - ingenious idea, I would never have thought of it.

Did you smoke?

No, I didn't, but I did when I got up there because ...

Everybody else did.

Well, it was the thing to do, I think. I can never understand the rationale of that now because we all know that cigarettes affect your nervous system, and things like that, and yet them days the thinking was the cigarettes calmed you, and things like that. So yeah, that was probably a boo-boo by somebody somewhere.

Yeah, well, that was common, it certainly was when I went to sea, it was still common.

You mentioned that the gun crews had duffle coats. Was there any additional outfit, extra kit, issued to the ship's company, or just those exposed to the elements?

Mainly it was those exposed to the elements. We were issued with what is called arctic underwear, and this was a long woollen garment. I used to call them 'John L Sullivans' because, if I remember, the fighter, John L Sullivan, he was a fighter, and he used to fight in these big long things, so we used to call them 'JLs'. Otherwise, normally, we would be clothed in ... we'd have to buy our clothing from the stores department. I think my mother sent me some gloves, but I can't think of anything else that we got. The flight-deck crew had warm clothing, but with the cold and the rain and that, these poor devils used to come back soaked, and wet, and shivering - goodness me. I personally don't think it was adequate for what they were doing.

We had a ship that we designed to carry 1,343 crew, but we had 1,427, give or take a few, and this gave us really cramped and freezing sort of conditions. We were in temperatures, I can remember -8° to -10° which was pretty bad. And in them days we slept in hammocks - I think they gave us an extra blanket - but even in a hammock you couldn't get this blanket right around your body - you had a small, thin mattress in the hammock - and my bones were always cold, I just couldn't get warm in these hammocks.

Unlike coming up in the tropics, we used to go up and sleep on the forecastle. They had facilities up there for us to sling our hammocks, and that was beautiful up there, we got a nice breeze and that sort of thing. But sleeping in the operational area was pretty bad. If you couldn't pitch your hammock, you just slept around on cushions on the floor, or on the table, wherever you could, which didn't please everybody because nobody wanted to go to bed at the same time. But after a while they soon did because they got so damned tired.

Do you remember what mess you were in?

I think it was M1.

An outboard one?

No, M1, I think - it had M1, 2, 3 and 4 were the seamen's deck, and we used to go forward of our mess - there were the cable lockers, there was a narrow passageway, and the cable lockers were on either side. And, of course, whenever you dropped anchor, or weighed anchor, you got that noise - and our 'heads', or toilets, were just forward of that. I think that's how it was.

That would have been more like Charlie, M would be down the back.

Oh, would it? Yeah, well, I've forgotten their numbers and names.

Yeah, I know, it's hard to remember.

Well, you are probably right because if you think about damage control, damage control was always A, B, C, D, right through, wasn't it? - and when they exercised damage control they would say, 'Fire, fire, fire', somewhere, and that's how you knew where to go. Yeah, I'd forgotten that.

And your A through to Z, and then 0 down in ascending orders of numbers for decks, and then descending order - oh, yeah, minus order going above deck. The flight deck was 0 Deck, and the bridge was probably 03 Deck.

I remember the bathroom was one more deck down from where my mess was, and that was normally a shambles. Because it was below waterline it was always ... they had an inefficient blasted pump there, and it was always breaking down. Of course, once it broke down you used to race down, like I don't know what, to get your shower in before it all flooded.

Well, you'll be pleased to hear that the same bathroom aboard the *HMAS Melbourne* did the same.

Did it?

4 Charlie bathroom.

Oh, it was shocking, absolutely shocking.

Was the laundry working on *Sydney*? Did you put your clothing in the laundry?

No, I didn't personally, we were pretty primitive in doing our laundering, but at the same time, it was effective. I had a kerosene bucket and what they called a pogo stick. This was a device with a handle on it, like a broom handle, with a funnel at the bottom of it, and this funnel had holes in the side. To agitate your washing you just pushed it up and down in amongst your washing, and that was pretty effective. But it used to be funny to watch all these fellows down in the bathroom with their bucket and pogo sticks, all in the nuddy, doing this work - oh, God! - even scrubbing hammocks down on the floor, no clothes on, what a sight!

And, of course, the showers had no curtains, or anything like that, they were quite open. This was one of the things I found very difficult when I first went into the navy. I remember the first time I undressed and had to go and have a shower in front of all these guys. God! that was a task - that was a task - but after a few years I'm afraid you got used to it. The only thing you was making sure of is you didn't drop the soap. That's a good old saying, isn't it?

> I can imagine you having done your washing - and your bucket, and your pogo stick - trying to get it dry in those conditions. You'd hang it up in the forecastle, I suppose, would you?

Yeah, that's true. I remember - gosh, I remember this as though it was yesterday - I'd taken my washing up onto the forecastle, and I took it out of the bucket. Before I could actually hang it on the line, it had frozen absolutely hard, stiff as a board, as the saying is. That's just how cold it was in Korea. You couldn't believe that. I often wondered how on earth it got dried when it was frozen - and it was quite warm, you could see the steam off the washing before you hung it up - but it used to dry.

> People don't quite understand just how primitive conditions could be on a warship of that period, even until recently it was a tough life at sea as a sailor.

Yeah. Even getting your meals; to queue up for a meal on board the *Sydney* in Korea, it was not only cold and miserable, but it would take you hours - three quarters of an hour to come through all the various compartments to get your meal. I think, in the early days, we had plates, which was okay, but then I think after we got up there they changed all these to plates - or trays they were - and you got different portions of your food in those different tin trays. And the tin trays would be cold, and you'd get your custard in amongst your gravy, and food was not in the right compartment - and oh, you know. They were just small things, I suppose.

> But they are the important things though, aren't they, like your life at sea? Little things can make it more comfortable for you, like having a plate, and a bowl for your desert.

Yeah.

> You should have gained rapid promotion then to become a leading hand, then you could join the join the leading-hands queue and get in earlier.

Well, again, we used to pull this 'I'm sorry, I'm radar'. We had early watchmen to dinner, I think, about quarter past eleven, and those queues weren't quite so big, so a lot of us used to sneak into those and get away with it. But, of course, if you was caught you was put on commander's report and you paid the penalty because, in many cases, you had to carry your ID card with you, and stuff like that. They had a patrolman on board, or regulating staff, and these were police - naval police. They were a little bit savage, I thought, on the *Sydney*; I know the discipline was fairly strict.

As I mentioned earlier, our Chief Exec, 'Vat' Smith, he always had a good crew lined up for commander's report, and we always had a good muster of men under punishment. I often used to think they used to do this to keep the numbers there to get the work finished in the day, at the end of the day. When others had knocked off they always had the backup of the men under punishment to do it. I might be a little bit wrong there, but I don't know that it would be too far

from the truth.

I used to disguise myself as the (inaudible).

Did you? I found up there, coming from Tassie and them places, to sail through seas that had blocks of ice and that in it. And the sea, you'd hit a spray; getting along the ship would plough into a wave, and the spray would come along and it would just freeze on the ship's side. We never see that at all down here in Australia. It was something to see; it was beautiful in some respect, but very cold.

It would make you aware of the potential of going for a swim and the desirability of making sure you stayed away from the guardrails.

Well, you know, quite a few of us had missed the odd shower or two because it was so cold, particularly if the bathroom was out of order. You said, 'Oh, I've been on watch in the radar area, it's been fairly clean' - you haven't been scrubbing the ship's side, or the bulkheads, and things like that, and you would just go without it, it just wasn't worth the trouble.

It is good for your skin tone.

Yeah.

Talking of weather, tropical Typhoon Ruth, was it?

Yeah.

How was that? How did you feel about that? How did the ship handle it?

Well, that was an interesting exercise. We'd just come off patrol and we'd arrived at Sasebo Harbour in Japan. We were refuelling and rearming, and things like that. Any rate, this had been in progress for a while, and we got a signal from the Commander-in-Chief - Scott Moncrieff, I think his name was, an English gentleman. It was policy them days that if you were in harbour that larger ships went to sea as a safety precaution in case they broke moorings and crashed into each other.

So any rate, we were ordered out to sea - this was on 14 October 1951 - which meant that we had a lot of ammunition on board that hadn't been stowed, so that was quickly put back onto the [lighters] - we had drums of oil, and that had to be stored, and other stuff that had to be quickly got away, so it was all put away safely - some of the stuff just had to be lashed where it was - and we were ordered out to sea.

We'd only just cleared the heads of Sasebo Harbour when we ran into the storm. We encountered gale force winds and it was quite impossible to even stand upright on the deck. I'd been in a typhoon at sea near the north island of Japan when I was on the *Culgoa*, and I thought I had some idea of what to expect; but boy oh boy! this was a lot different to that.

As the night progressed and the weather became worse the ship pounded through the waves and shuddered. I can remember going into some of those waves and the actual vibration from the ship, it really shuddered. I don't know how to describe it, but I was thankful that it was a rivet-made ship, by the English, rather than being welded together by the Yanks - I remember that

going through my mind. We'd lost a sixteen foot motorboat over (the side) that just disappeared, a fork-lift truck had disappeared, and a thirty-six foot cutter was just smashed to smithereens. But it was the noise that got to you, the creaking of the ship, the banging of halyards, it was quite terrifying.

I remember when I did get to my hammock, about one o'clock in the morning. I was laying there and it was just as though somebody was at the end of my hammock, pulling it up and down, ready to wake me up, and this was quite violently done. That means that - nobody was touching it - and it means how much that ship was moving. The captain done a marvellous job, I thought, trying to keep the boat up - or the ship - a sailor saying 'a boat', goodness me! - keeping the ship with weigh-on, heading up into the waves. They tried to avoid going directly into it because the nose of an aircraft carrier is flat, and it's just like running into a brick wall, so it was sort of over on the side and then up. He just kept enough way on - about three to four knots, I think it was - just to steady the ship where it was.

The big problem we had, of course, was the roll. Some of the rolls were recorded, I think, as much as thirty-five degrees, and they tell me that at forty degrees you don't come up again, it just keeps going around. I'm not real sure about that maximum degree, but I know it was thirty-five degrees, it was doing that - he couldn't get abeam (to the waves) or he was in trouble - and this went on all night, it was terrifying.

***

Next morning things had eased and I have some photographs with me today that you can see that we'd lost one aircraft; there was three or four that had had their wheels bent up underneath it - or retracted, I suppose, would be the word; we had fuel tanks that erupted from the planes, which created a tremendous fire hazard. I know one of the sponsons, where the aircraft had gone over the side, it had ruptured one of its tanks, and the fuel was in the sponson. We were worried it was going to get into the air conditioning ducts, and things like that.

During the night we had four or five fire calls. You'd hear over the piping system, 'Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire in X-ray Charlie Two', or whatever it was. That was quite frightening because they weren't exercises, they were real fires, and to be carrying so much high octane on board, with these aircraft on the deck, and in the hangar, oh, it was a nightmarish period of time. Thank goodness it only lasted, I guess, a full day, and we went back into harbour after that.

But the ironic thing about it - you'll laugh about this - you've probably read about it in the history books at any rate - but the Japanese Imperial Navy and the Americans considered Sasebo Harbour a safe gale-force harbour because the territory around Sasebo Harbour has got 2,000 foot hills right around it. The cables securing the buoys in the harbour were extra strength, and so we could have really sat it out in harbour in comparative comfort, just because the routine was, by the British, to do such and such. So, Tony, that's ...

That would have been a topic of conversation for some time after, I should imagine.

Yeah, well, we had the chief petty officer's mess was inoperable. We had water in our cafeteria deck, about eighteen inches deep, which was very dangerous. When we were rolling it just took everything with it, you had no hope of walking through it - and I think the only meal we got during that period of time was a sausage in between two pieces of bread, but I don't think too many was worried about food.

That is always something to try and avoid, if you can, but in this case the lesson learnt was that it was safer to stay in harbour probably.

Yeah, this is true. I know the winds exceeded 130 kilometres per hour and that was when the wind indicator dial busted; so it must have been in excess of that. I remember that.

One thing about being in the radar plotting area, you seemed to know a lot more, or could glean a lot more information about where you was, and what you was doing, and what the ship was doing, because we had all these dials in our aircraft direction room and the operations room.

Well, it's the nerve centre of the ship really.

So these aircraft were engaged constantly with enemy forces. Does any one engagement stand out in your mind?

Yes, there are a couple there that I found interesting and, of course, I guess, the one that we were most proud of, was the day that we - I think it was during our first patrol - was the day that we had eighty-nine sorties flown off the aircraft carrier in one day, which was a record for a light fleet carrier in the Korean War. We were pretty proud about that. At the time we were engaged in bombing and strafing of Changyan and [Tonghow] villages, and we were also spotting for the battleship *New Jersey* who was firing 16 inch guns. If you've never seen a battleship firing 16 inch guns, that was a sight to behold, it really was, as far as a sailor was concerned.

These names, Changyan and [Tonghow] villages, didn't really mean a lot to us. We knew that's where the enemy were and we was only interested in getting them out of those villages, if they were friendly territory in South Korea, the better. We weren't happy about bombing South Korea at any time, but, of course, if the enemy was there it had to be done.

I particularly remember this episode because I was communicating with one of the flights that had left the aircraft carrier, and I remember the excitement of the pilots' voices when they'd come across all these enemy soldiers - there was about 1,000 of them in the Kojo area. Our fellows really got excited about going in strafing and doing this sort of work. I think they thought it was really worthwhile. Being the first patrol, up until then, it was just routine sort of stuff, but this was the real battle.

The Sea Furys, of course, strafed both the enemy and their stores, and casualties on that one was estimated at about 200. The ship was recognised by a congratulatory signal from the Chief of Navy Staff and from the Commander-in-Chief for our effort on that day. So we were pretty proud about that.

Another time that I remember was in October. We'd flown forty-seven sorties and thirteen of these were in the rescue of a USAAF Boeing B-29 crew which was down in the sea north of [Tinanpu]. They had a 'Dumbo' flying boat that had picked up four of the crew, but there was still crew missing, and one of our Sea Furys spotted a guy out on his own and remained with him until they came and picked him up. I thought that was ... something that I remember.

That was lucky, wasn't it?

Yeah. Well, I was on watch and you remember those little things.

We had occasions when we flew support missions for the British Commonwealth Division and one of these divisions was the 3rd Royal Australian Regiment. That was of particular interest to us because they were Aussies, they were army - navy and army always got on well together, and we just felt, gosh, it's good to be able to help out own in the combat area. So that was one I remembered.

A sad one I remember was when Sub-Lieutenant McMillan, he'd been flying late one afternoon on 26 October - oh, no, I've got the wrong chap here, I think. him and his observer crash landed in the heart of enemy territory near Sariwon after being hit by flak. Why I remember this one was that our own helicopter - we were about 120 kilometres from where he was - and our own helicopter went and picked him up. But because he was behind enemy lines he and his observer held the enemy off them with their Owen machine guns until our helicopter got there. And when the helicopter got there the observer on the helicopter, he shot two of the enemy who'd crept quite close to those guys, and we got them back on board. Again, a wonderful bit of flying by these chaps.

They were Americans, weren't they, the helicopter crew?

Yeah. The pilot was, I'm not quite sure about the observer - probably would have been, I just forget now.

There were several casualties - fatal casualties - during the time on deployment. How did that affect the morale of the ship's company? How did it affect your morale?

Yeah, well, it certainly did, whenever a fatality or an emergency arose through downed aircraft. I think it brought home to us all the realities of the war and the casualties from attacks could happen at any time, either away from the ship or at the ship. But, of course, this made us all more determined in our efforts to do good and we forgot our aches and pains, and just wanted to get on with our job and do a good job. The discomforts that we had to put up with was nothing to what was being put up with by the army guys that was fighting the enemy.

I remember Sub-Lieutenant Sinclair, that was the guy, his death, I think, upset us a lot because he'd been shot up and he was bailing out of his aircraft, and the tail of the aircraft hit him and killed him. It was just pure bad luck that that happened. Our helicopter went and picked his body up and brought it on board. I'm fairly sure he was buried at sea. We had contingencies in place to do burials at sea from the quarterdeck. This was a very moving experience for us, extremely so.

Yes, losing one of your shipmates.

Yeah. We had two other pilots, I think, that was killed. Lieutenant K Clarkson, he was killed on 5 November, he failed to pull out of a dive during an attack on enemy transport; and Sub-Lieutenant Ronald Coleman, he was flying CAP (combat air patrol) duties in a Sea Fury, and he just flew into a cloud sort of thing and just disappeared. And even to this day nobody has a clue what happened; we searched the area and found nothing.

But yes, it was a moving experience for us all where our own were concerned.

Yes, the overall casualty number during the Korean War, of all three services, was quite

high.

There were, I think, 339 killed in the Korean War. I was very fortunate; just on eighteen months ago - April - what's this year? - 2002 - in 2001 I returned to Korea and I visited the graves in Pusan. That was very, very moving. It was nice to see Korea, I'd never set foot on the place. We'd been there fighting the place, and to be able to go there and meet the people, and talk with other Korean soldiers, and our own soldiers and airmen who'd fought actually in on the land, was a tremendous experience for me.

I suppose you are barracking for the South Korean soccer side.

Er ... well, I was interested to find that the Italians got beat. They weren't very happy in Melbourne evidently.

The Italian Soccer Club ... the South Korean goal scorer plays so exacting because he played so well for his country.

Yeah, a bit rough.

We've talked about the operation, the weather environment, and what strains that put on the ship and the ship's company. What about areas like the threat itself, the fear of submarine attack, or air attack? I know it didn't eventually happen - or never happened rather - but the threat was always there, wasn't it? It must have been a real concern for you.

I guess we trained for any situation. I remember the Sea Furys, one of its main roles, of course, was to do anti-submarine patrols, but the pilots found this extremely boring work because they'd go out for hours and hours and do this work and find nothing. I guess it was a job that had to be done and so they done it. Yeah, there was stress and difficulties in everything.

I think the thing people forget is that an aircraft carrier is so much different to other ships. It's a floating airfield and so many crews doing so many different things. As far as I know, bearing in mind that I'm only an able seaman, we took precautions at all times against any kind of attack, and as I said, the less likely would have been a submarine. I think we were all so tired, generally, that you just got on and done what you could. Stress was always there, but it just affected people in different ways, I think. Some people wanted to do more work, some people wanted to just lie around and sleep.

I think history records that the Chinese actually had suggested to the Russians that they might care to get involved, particularly with their submarine force. They never did, they declined the offer, but certainly the Chinese were there with their aircraft activity.

Yeah, well, that was our biggest worry, and we know this now as fact. The Russians were supplying aircrew to fly MiGs. Now, our piston-driven aircraft weren't quite in the same category as the other MiGs and that, but it was interesting. I heard that one of the other English carriers had shot down a couple of MiGs which was hailed as big victory for the piston-engined aircraft - don't know how they done it, but I read somewhere where this actually happened. I don't think our pilots worried too much about that, they had what they had and they done the best they could with what they had. The crew worked their guts out to maintain aircraft and keep them flying.

You'd see these aircraft land with great holes in them. See, they had small arms fire - they were so low they had small arms (fire) holes in them, and they had other holes. Gosh, I don't know how they patched them up because I wasn't in that part of the services. It was just like putting a bandaid on them and away they'd go again. I suppose it was a little bit more than that, but they kept them flying.

> I suppose the basic airframe was in good shape.
>
> You've already indicated that you had great teamwork, and you had a mission, you had a purpose to get on and do the best you could. Was the overall morale of the ship's company good, high-level?

I think so. I guess you had your moments when things were tough. As I said, it was the little things that used to upset us more than anything, and trying to do that extra part of ship that we considered could have waited until we got out of the operational area, or something like that. But I think the performance of the *Sydney* as a fighting unit probably can best be judged by the various messages we got from people at the end of our tour. One of those was from the Admiral commanding the US 7th Fleet, which is on record as praising our work in setting records, and getting aircraft in the air in all kinds of weather, and listing achievements, and acknowledging his great respect for what we done. That speaks volumes, I think.

I also found out too that our captain was also known as 'Typhoon' Harries. I've no idea where the nickname came from. As I said earlier, he certainly acquitted himself well in saving aircraft, and the ship for that matter, in Typhoon Ruth. I've already mentioned our Executive Officer who, in naval terms, is usually called a 'Jimmy'. He was the hard taskmaster, his orders were carried out without question.

I know we were proud - very proud - to be on that ship, but I think that came afterwards. When you analyse everything, as I said before, 'Vat' was a hard man, but why was he a hard man? Would we have performed like we did if he wasn't a hard man? - and I don't think we would have done. A lot of us were - well, I was twenty-two and there was a lot younger than me. I see that age group today and how they view discipline, and I don't know whether we were much the same. I think we were probably better disciplined than what they are today because of the morality that we believed in and (was) instilled in us by our parents - bearing in mind that I am seventy-three years of age. I know this has nothing to do with my term in Korea, but I've been amongst youth a lot since then in the Rotary movement, and I have found some very fine and upcoming young people, so I know there's a majority of them that are fantastic people.

> I'm pleased to be able to tell you, through the course of my Naval Reserve activity, I meet a lot of the current navy kids, and they are really well educated, nice young people - different in many ways to our era because of their higher education.

I think that's probably the difference, Tony, in there too. As I say, I only got to state school level and I regretted that very much so, particularly after I'd left the navy. I went into hospital administration and I had to do it the hard way, I had to learn and study myself. But I was able to do it and I done it, but yeah, I did regret that part of my life.

> But you took the opportunities which came to you in later life, which is good, you progressed, you took the opportunities and you've had a wonderful life. I've read this

story and it's just wonderful. You look so well for seventy-three years of age.

The Sydney's unit on the west coast of Korea, your escorts, the other ships you operated with, were mainly Commonwealth ships - the New Zealanders, the Canadians, and the British. Did you ever get involved with the Americans yourselves?

Yes, we had Americans there, and Dutch. The communications between the lot were good.

And competition, any sense of competition - 'We can do better than them' sort of thing?

No, I don't know that there were. There was a tremendous amount of pride. I guess there would have been, but you see ... I really don't know too much about the other ships except from the *Sydney*, so I find that a difficult one to answer. If we were in the same port together we always enjoyed meeting with them and having a few beers, and things like that, but as far as in the operational area, they were there to look after us and they did it, they went onto station.

We had some narrow misses with one or two of them in changing stations there at times. In flying conditions you used to always have to fly into wind, and we would change station, and if you've got a convoy of four destroyers, they've got to change positions, and sometimes the skippers thought they could cut across our bows. Boy oh boy, some of them were close. It struck me, when I heard about the *Melbourne* problem with the *Voyager*, and it flashed back to them days on the *Sydney*, and it was no different. We had some very narrow squeaks with captains misjudging the distance and taking up station. That was one of the roles in the operations rooms; we would often be asked by the officers of the watch for a course to steer to take up station on such and such, and what speed to do, and when they would be there. That was an interesting thing.

The relative velocity problem.

Yeah.

Actually, they introduced on board *Melbourne* a procedure - not straight after the war, probably after the *Frank E. Evans*, the American destroyer - they introduced what's called a 'clear range' procedure - not quite the right name - but you weren't allowed past, within 2,000 yards ahead of the carrier, without first getting permission to pass. That was the measure to hopefully save any more of those things. Of course, we don't have a carrier now so it doesn't really matter.

The *Sydney*'s maximum speed was about 23.5 knots, our service speed was about 20 knots, and our endurance was about 9,320 nautical miles. So she could go a fair time, we'd go about five days without refuelling in operational areas. And occasionally - just occasionally - we'd just top up a destroyer, or something like that.

You mentioned having a few drinks ashore in Japan. What was it like ashore in Japan? Was it a good place to run ashore, as we'd say in the navy?

Oh, yeah, it was alright except it was so cold. I remember one episode - and this goes back into Christmas Eve - this would have been - I think we was in Kure from 19 to 26 December 1951. Most of us went ashore and most of the time, I think, it was just to let off steam because of the work and the build-up within you in the operational area. We was there for Christmas Day, and

we decorated the mess decks, and we put bunting around, and we had printed menus, and we had a proper Christmas dinner, and the cooks really put it on, and we enjoyed that. And in keeping with tradition, the youngest sailor on board swapped uniforms with the ship's captain, and he was guest of the wardroom for the full day. Mind you, his uniform was a bit big, but apart from that ... and he done rounds of the ship and the captain followed in his uniform - oh, it wasn't his because he wouldn't have got into it, but he was dressed as a young sailor. We generally had a good time. I forget to this day who it was who received the honour of being the captain for the day.

But with myself, some of my mates - and I've got a photograph of it with me - we had a special Christmas Eve party ashore where we hired a room at the back of a restaurant, and we proceeded to have a party of all parties. I remember during the day inviting some Aussie soldiers to join us, and that was great. Later though we were interrupted by a couple of off-duty redcaps - these were Pommy police - who wanted to join us. We were having none of this, of course, so politely told them it was a private party and we asked them to leave. This they refused to do so naturally we promptly threw them out.

Next day the owner of the restaurant fronted up at the ship and wanted compensation from us for the damage we'd done to his place. Mind you, we'd done no damage, but it seems that after we'd left the redcaps came back in force and the army guys, whom we'd left there, took them on and bright old fracas was carried out. Naturally, he didn't win his compensation case.

But some of the things that was peculiar to us in those days, young boys of ten and twelve coming up to you and asking you, 'Oh, would you like a pompom?' Now, I guess, 'pompom' meant intercourse, or something like that. They would say, 'Oh, my sister, she very clean, she very clean - oh, and she's only young, she's only thirteen.' Oh, shocking, isn't it?

It is a shock coming from Tassie, or anywhere in Australia, it's a whole new experience.

Well, I found that hard to come by. But, of course, some of their homes and that were made out of packing cases, and stuff like that, so I suppose they had to do it to exist.

I remember when I was in Japan, my first trip to Japan, which would have been over the Christmas '49-'50. I got out of a train in Tokyo, and as you walked out of the station it was like walking out of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne at the top peak hour. Everybody in the station stopped - there was only two of us - everybody stopped and made a passageway in the centre for us two to walk down - they turned towards us and bowed. Oh, look, it was the most unnerving feeling for me to do that. But we went up there with the *Sydney* and there was none of that, they learnt pretty quick. Yeah, it was a very humbling experience.

They are nice people the Japanese.

Yeah. I've met a lot of the Japanese students since them days, and yeah, they are nice people. But it's interesting, they all smile and say, 'Yes, yes', and they haven't a clue on what ...

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Just going back to the ship again; does any person or event stick out in your mind that you'd recognise as a brave act by somebody, or an outstanding service? I know you've spoken quite highly of the Executive Officer, which is a very difficult job in any ship,

the 'Jimmy'.

I think the people that impressed me were the chiefs and petty officers. They were guys, in many instances, who had been in the Second World War and they had just been there, done that, and they really looked out for the ordinary ratings - I thought they did anyhow.

I mentioned before, my admiration for the pilots. These guys were pretty good too ashore. They would join you, and have a beer with you, and joke, and they were all our age. They were really good fellows.

The other chap that I found [who] was rather inspirational, he was a quiet Chief Petty Officer - Fernandez, Eugene Fernandez, I think his name was. He was in charge of all us radar chaps, apart from those who used to service the sets. He was quiet, he didn't get flustered, he was always there. He was a good guy, I had a lot of admiration and respect for him. If you had a problem you could go to him - and I can never understand how he found the time to see you anyhow, but, of course, he was moving around with you in the various operations rooms, the radar display room, or the aircraft direction room, encouraging you - 'Is there anything you want?' - 'How's your pencils?' We used these 'chinagraph' pencils and they could draw on glass, and we'd stand behind them and we had to learn to write back to front, which was an art in itself. I don't know whether I could still do it or not. Yeah, he was a good guy and I was so thrilled to learn, in the honours list that came out, that he was actually mentioned in dispatches, which was a very pleasant surprise.

I think I've mentioned the other people who meant a lot to me, apart from those guys that I lived with. There was one guy who I was particularly friendly with who ended up marrying my wife's sister, so he turned out to be my brother-in-law. I used to take him down – he come out from Scotland – and I used to take him down to Tassie on leave with me. Yeah, he met a girl down there and that's what eventuated, and he's still living down there.

That's a nice story.

Jock Dempsey his name was.

Jock?

All Scotsmen were called 'Jock', weren't they? It's like 'Shiner' Wright - anybody called Wright was called 'Shiner'.

Bogey Night.

Yeah.

And 'Knocker' White.

Finally, just the last piece, is there any particular recollection of interest or sensitivity that you want to discuss which we haven't covered? - your free time.

I don't think ... free time ... winding down from activities. I don't think there was too much done. As I said earlier, generally we were tired and we tried to catch up with sleep. Occasionally the skipper would announce a make and mend - did you ever make and mend?

Oh, yes.

Which gave us a Wednesday afternoon free to do something, and normally that was taken up doing your dhobying [washing] or sleeping, as you know. We didn't have any beer issues, or beer rations, or anything like that; the *Sydney* was a strict dry ship. I think the first ship I was on where we got a ration was HMAS *Melbourne* when we was in England. So there was nothing like that.

We was encouraged to play volleyball in the forward lift well, that was a lot of fun. But then you had to fit in with aircraft movements and work in the hangar. We used to have movies in the after-lift well, outside the operational area. One of our aircraft would have gone over to one of the other Yankee aircraft carriers, picked up a few films, and brought them back, or they would come over with *Wave Chief*, or something like that.

I can remember sitting on the chairs underneath the lift well with the lift well up above us, and wondering what would happen if the damned thing started coming down. It would have been a scutter. I used to look to see where I would hide.

Escape route.

Escape route. But no, I can't think of anything on the wind-down side of it that was of any interest. We done the usual crossing-the-line ceremony that goes on in all ships. I can never understand why there is such a fracas these days with it, maybe they go a bit further than they did that day. I think I seen one on the TV recently where there was a few bare bums up in the air, but there was certainly nothing like that, or to that degree, in my day. They used to make a little bit of a swimming pool on the flight deck and they'd have the [bares] and put them in it, and you got a bit of a dunking. Perhaps they had a barber there with great big combs to comb your hair, and a few nasty atabrin tablets they'd put in your mouth, or something, and make you swallow. You got a nice certificate from it. Maybe it's got a bit out of hand. I hate to think what the Navy's like now with women on board, but it must work alright.

It must work alright. I'm not entirely in favour of that particular way the Navy's gone, but anyway.

I think it would be pretty difficult. I remember, on this recent trip I done to Korea, we pulled up in this bus, and they must have thought we was all eighty or ninety - well, I suppose we were all young seventies, late seventies - and they had all these ratings lined up to take our arm to get off the bus with. When my turn came a rating went to get my arm, and I spotted a young female sub-lieutenant over to the right-hand side of me, and I beckoned her; she took me arm. Well, do you think the fellows didn't get into me going up the gangplank. And indeed, they took a photograph of us up at the top of the gangplank, and that particular photograph is on the video that they made and gave us after the trip. It's nothing to do with this, but it's a little bit different.

That's interesting. Well, Ray, is there anything else you want to discuss?

No, I don't think so, Tony.

It was a most interesting two hours.

Has it gone two hours?

Yeah.

Goodness gracious me.

Very interesting time you had in the navy, time in Korea. As I said, you had a wonderful life after that as well. The navy prepared you well for your later life, I think, as it has done for so many people.

I think you are dead right there; my whole attitude and my whole life changed after that. Yeah, I couldn't agree more.

It's a good service.

That concludes the interview with Ray Willmot, radar plotter of HMAS *Sydney* in Korean waters during the Korean War. Thank you, Ray.

Thank you, Tony.

02/03