



Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02795

Stephen George Joyce as a 4 inch gun number HMAS *Murchison*, Korea 1951-1952, interviewed by Lieutenant Commander Tony Hughes RANR

Recorded

at: Canberra, ACT

on: 1 August 2002

by: Lenny Preston, AWM Staff

Description

Stephen Joyce talks about: being posted to RAN frigate HMAS *Murchison* after finishing basic training; living conditions aboard the *Murchison*; training en route to Korean waters; other duties of an ordinary seaman; the watch system; his and his family's thoughts on his going to war; *Murchison's* lack of preparedness for cold weather warfare; an experienced gun crew; operations in the Han Estuary; the *Murchison's* replenishment cycle; enemy action against the *Murchison*; loading 4-inch shells; a near tragedy; the mechanics of gun-loading; the hazards of navigating in the Han Estuary; casualties aboard the *Murchison*; some near misses; *Murchison* not being built for operations in extreme weather but this affecting neither morale nor operational efficiency; the ship's senior officers; awards; the burial at sea of South Korean fishermen, killed in a collision with the *Murchison*; relations with other ships and the personnel of other navies; being treated aboard the HMS *Belfast* for a tooth ulcer; recreation, including cockroach races; two influential seamen; being ashore in Japan, in particular with his brother; inter-ship and inter-service sport; health in general; Cyclone Ruth aboard the *Murchison*; ice in winter, and a visit to the USN Base at Sasebo.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, March 2003

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Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. ‘world war two’ (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to ‘second world war’ (the official conflict term).

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Identification: This is an interview with Stephen Joyce; it is conducted by Lieutenant Commander Sam Hughes, Royal Australian Navy Reserve, on 1 August 2002 at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered are the experiences of Ordinary Seaman Joyce as gun crew on board *HMAS Murchison* in Korea between July 1951 and February 1952.

Stephen George Joyce was born in Victoria Park, Western Australia, on 27/12/1932. He was educated at Kent Street High School in Western Australia and saw service in both Korea and Malaya.

Welcome, Stephen, to the War Memorial. Nice for you to take the time to come to visit us.

Thank you very much.

Let's start by talking about your service background and experience, as well as training, while you were preparing for the Korean War experience. What age were you when you first went into operational service, when you went to Korea?

I was eighteen.

You'd come from Flinders Naval Depot to join?

Flinders Naval Depot - the first draft was *HMAS Murchison*. There were ten ordinary seamen, but the captain thought that was an overload of ordinary seamen to take to war, so five of us were drafted to the *Culgoa*. But somewhere along the line, when *Murchison* sailed up the east coast, *Culgoa* had to put the five ordinary seamen back on *Murchison*, so she still went to Korea with a complement of ten ordinary seamen. That was a bit of luck, I think.

Was there enough accommodation for the whole ten?

Oh yes. I think frigates were 205 full complement, and I think *Murchison* carried 192 - I think that was the full number.

Do you remember which mess deck you slept in?

No. I remember the mess - it was a forward mess - of course, in those days it was all hammock - all we had was a tin locker. So summer you had your summer gear, winter gear was packed in your seabag in the storeroom, and you lived out of your tin locker - which was a seat locker actually - a bit hard sometimes because that was your mess as well. You wanted something out of your locker, and there was someone sitting on top, well, you had to ask would you mind getting up. Some of the crusty old 23 badge men, they would tell you to go and get lost till he finished his meal.

You lived, you slept and you ate all of that same mess deck?

That's right.

In later ships, of course, they provided cafeterias for the ship's company, but in those days it was what was known as 'broadside messing'.

'Broadside messing', yes.

I can recall that expression. Very uncomfortable, people really don't understand how rudimentary it was living in those sorts of conditions. As a young sailor you didn't know much better ...

You didn't know better.

Great adventure.

On the way north to Korea the ship would be preparing itself for its operational role.

Yes.

As a gun crew, you did your hands-on training on the way up?

Hands-on training, yes - practice, practice, practice. We were very fortunate. I think we had a good Gunnery Officer Smith, and we just trained, we did aerial shoots as well with drogues - planes would come out with the drogue. I don't know if this is a little bit premature, but I think the practice paid off because on the second day that we came under attack in the Han estuary, X Gun, as we turned on the anchor - I was A Mounting - and X Gun, as the stern came round they knocked out forty-two rounds a minute. Now, that's only ever been exceeded by the *Amethyst* up the Yangtze River - the *HMS Amethyst* - by forty-three rounds. So on Murchison, I think they had twenty-one rounds a gun, forty-two rounds a minute, hitting onto a target. I would have loved to have been able to see it, but we were closed up on A Mounting. So yes, practice, practice, practice all the way up to Korea.

That's an exceptional rate of fire. In fact, I seem to recall that modern 5 inch 54 Gun, which was on our DGs, its automatic rate of fire was about twenty rounds a minute. So that's excellent.

We'll talk about Frank Smith a bit later on, if you don't mind, and the Han experience. Apart from being in the gun crew, what was your part of ship on board?

Lookout, getting up hours on the helm, learning how to steer the ship, and washing down shipping rust, painting. Ordinary seamen got all those good jobs. Oh, yes, just learn to become a sailor.

Yes, that's a sailor's job. Watch keeping system; were you in three, four watches?

Three watches.

Throughout Korea, or did you go into defence watches of two watches?

No ... had to close up for four hours on gun crew ... yeah, close up four hours. No, only ever remember going to two watches in port - yeah, port and starboard.

Did you practice action stations at all, as was common in the Second World War? Or was your operation, it didn't really matter if you did that because you were going to

specific operation targets?

Targets?

Yeah. That's when you were concentrated, closing up, of course, when you were up the river?

Up the river, yeah. Other times we'd just be called to action stations. I think we got it down to about three minutes; we could have one in the spout and be ready to fire. Yes, they taught us well.

As a member of the Australian Defence Force - the Royal Australian Navy - you were simply expected to pack your bag and proceed to duty in Korean waters. What did you know or think of the conflict so soon after the Second World War? Did you have any lingering memories - I know you were a young man - of the Second World War? Did you say, 'Oh, here we go again, we are off to another show'?

Well, I came from Broome originally. My father worked there and we were there from '38 to '46, so we were there during the bombing of Broome. I knew war. We used to play shooting down the Japanese 'Betsys' when they came over.

I left Perth on 27 June and the Korean War broke out on the 25th. It didn't have much of an impact on me, except my brother and family saw me off at Perth Railway Station. And brother Bill, he'd already been in the navy two years; he said, 'Well, mate, you look like you'll be going to war'. It started to sink in then, so yes, we did go to war, my brother and I.

Which ship did your brother serve on?

He served on HMAS *Tobruk*, same time - he escorted *Sydney* up. But yes, I started to have thoughts about it when my brother said, 'You'll be going to war.'

Was that an adventure for you?

It was, a big adventure, oh, God, yes, a very gung ho type thing. I didn't expect to get a draft straight to a ship going up there. I lost £5 actually because most recruit classes went to Australia. So I said, 'Yes, I'll bet you £5 we go to Australia', but we didn't, we went straight to *Murchison*.

So you lost £5.

I lost £5.

On your way north - clearly, before you left, you had some understanding - as much as you could get out of the newspapers - of what was going on - and as a young man you probably didn't delve into that too seriously - what about the education on the way to deployment? Was the ship's company appraised, advised, of the situation in Korea by the Commanding Officer or one of his officer?

I can't really answer that, Sam, I think I was just too busy learning to become a sailor. I'm pretty sure that we would have had - 'Clear lower deck. This is what is going on. This has happened in Korea, the North's finally got into Pusan', and all that sort of thing. I just can't remember that

actual talks that we would have got, but I'm sure we would have got them.

It is interesting, fifty years later they are still at each other's necks, aren't they?

Yes.

In Vietnam it's solved itself, the communist block of the Soviets and the Chinese have become quite reasonably friendly, but the Koreans are still at it. It makes you wonder; fifty years they've been going on.

But they are in that unique position that they didn't have an end-of-war, it's only a cease-fire. They tell me now that they can still hear the North digging more tunnels.

Well, it's only recently that there was a naval engagement where a ship was sunk.

That's right, yes, a month ago.

I know you are out in the bush before you joined the navy, and your dad had passed away, but what about the rest of your family, how did they feel about you going off to war?

Well, as I say, I left on 27 June, I did six months at Flinders, returned home in December for my first leave, and my mother had gone from an auburn-haired lady to - and what, possibly two sons joining the navy - but by that time my mother was ... oh, she was heading towards sixty so I suppose, you know ... My sister was very proud, she'd married an ex-army chap from the Second World War. I think just to know that dad served in France during the First World War, and coming home wounded and all this sort of thing, mum could visualise her two sons being in the war and something happening to us. So I guess that's what turned mum's hair white. But she still lived on to be a grand lady of ninety-two.

Really? - excellent. As a father, I should imagine I would be most concerned if my children had to go to war. I can understand how people would feel.

How did you feel that the navy was prepared for Korea? I know you are just a young ordinary seaman, but did you have a feeling for that at all?

Murchison wasn't prepared for Korea; *Murchison* was built in Queensland, along with the other frigates - Bay Class frigates - designed mainly for Pacific duties in the tropics and around Australia. She wasn't designed in any way for cold-weather fighting. When we arrived up there, in the end of summer - actually the beginning of summer - June - and then, when winter hit us, we had no winter gear whatsoever. We had to shoot down to Hong Kong and get some duffle coats, and fleecy-lined jerkins, and things like that. When we closed up on action stations - of course, we only had our anti-flash gear because our mountings were open, not a turret - and we just froze. Mother, in her wisdom, very quickly knitted balaclavas. But we'd close up there in the winter time and you'd breath out, the anti-flash gear froze, and your balaclava froze across your mouth with ice.

No, *Murchison* wasn't prepared that way, but I think, having the senior crew, and also having on board we were lucky that we had changeover RN sailors that had served during the war in the RN and then signed on in the RAN, we had excellent teachers. One of our desk men, Jock

Chalmers, a leading seaman, he assisted the first lieutenant in the radar con for targeting and that, he was exceptional. So we were lucky that way, that we did have ... I'd say sixty per cent of the crew were men who'd signed up after the Second World War.

No, we weren't prepared as far as weather went, but I think, as far as the crew went, we were pretty lucky there.

What was it like living in the mess decks in those conditions? Was that warm, or cold?

Oh, well, yeah. You can imagine the condensation that would be running down the walls. I don't know about new ships today - modern ships today - but all the bulkheads and that were done in cork, sprayed cork, and then painted over. But all the condensation just used to - how we didn't get TB, I don't know.

I don't know if it was discomfort, you just accepted these things. I'm one of those practical sort of guys, I suppose; what is dished out to me I take, I don't whinge that much.

With the ice forming on the upper deck, did you have to hose it down with water - hot water - or something?

No, no, we didn't do that. But I'd seen the superstructure contract so much that the paint just came off like in plastic sheets, it just peeled off and left the bare metal. We had to, for the guns, the electricians cut down the casings and made heaters, and that used to go into the breach and keep the grease soluble, I suppose, so that as soon as we were called to action stations we ejected the heaters and we were ready. Of course, when you put a couple of rounds through she warms up.

Yeah, so the cold was something, something very bad.

You had to live with it.

Yeah. But if we are still on the cold part of it ...

Yeah.

We were lucky, as I say, with these 'RN-ers'. They taught us that when we were on shore leave you bought brown paper, and you used to wrap the brown paper round your body, then put your - of course, the singlets in those days, they were like a thermal type thing - then pull your singlet down over that, then your jumper over that, and then you used to cut the brown paper in strips and wrap it round your legs, and the brown paper would act as an insulation against the cold. But it still left your big nose sticking out. Yeah, that helped us quite a bit.

Coming from the tropics, I'd never seen snow. Actually, I was fourteen when I found out that ice wasn't only man-made, I didn't know that, I was very naive. I can't think which officer it was now, but we closed up the forecandle and a couple of the other ODs and I thought, oh, here's a go, so we made snowballs. We threw them up onto the bridge. We didn't get much reaction from the bridge until we'd done our work party up there and we were coming back down the sides. Well, the bridge hit us with every snowball they could manufacture. There were fun times.

Actually, I did a little bit of time at Whale Island, the gunners' school in England, and they used to tell stories of the open-mount guns when they were training at Whale Island. They'd have guys with buckets of water, throwing them over the gun crews - 'Get used to being wet, boys!'

Being a warship in a foreign region it's sometimes quite difficult to get your mail and keep the ship full of stores, including ammunition and food. How was that arrangement with the *Murchison*? How did you get your food and stores?

Well, we used to do three weeks at sea, or three weeks patrol, and most of that was two weeks up the Han estuary. We were very shallow draft and all the frigates - there was the Canadian frigates and New Zealand frigates, British and the Australian - we were allocated so much time up this Han estuary. You have got to remember, the Han flowed from Seoul, the capital of South Korea, into this big estuary. On the northern bank of the Han estuary is North Korea, the southern bank was South Korea. So they used us, the frigates, to get up this estuary for bombardment because it meant that guns were fifty, sixty miles closer to enemy country - and when the first peace talks started at Kaesong, *Murchison*, we ringed Kaesong on the hour - I think it was four rounds on the hour - just to remind the Chinese and the North Koreans that they were in distance of our guns.

So we'd go up the Han estuary and we'd anchor at a place called The Fork, and then all the different channels which our ship, and the *Morecambe Bay*, and a couple of the other frigates from other countries, had charted, we'd go up these different channels, get closer, do our shoot, and then come back to this Fork where we all anchored. So we'd do, say, two weeks up there, then come back to Kure or Sasebo, which was the American port - Kure was the Australian harbour - in Japan, and we'd refuel, re-ammo, restock, [take] some R&R, and then up the west coast. See, I never got to the east coast, we did the west coast all the time and would bombard as we went up if there was any thing that we could see, and then straight into the Han again.

As it's well documented, Sam, we became known, at the end of the conflict, as the 'Baron of the Han' because we spent the longest time up there. The Admiral of the *Belfast*, the British cruiser, Scott Moncrieff, he gave us the title 'Baron of the Han' because of our time up there. We spent the longest time of any of the frigates up the Han River.

It's a wonderful expression, 'Baron of Han'. I've actually got here some copies of the signals which Scott Moncrieff sent as you'd depart. I'll read them to you later just to remind you of them.

Well, let's talk about the Han. It was a major part of the Korean War, certainly the naval participation in the Korean War from the small ships point of view. What was your feelings there? Were you scared at all whilst there?

Scared. See, the motor cutter would go out with a sounding party on it, and they would have to get fairly close in sometimes. Well, then the North Korean soldiers, they'd take a shot at them. So then our Bofors - we had five single-barrelled Bofors on board - so our Bofors then would be called in and throw a couple of rounds into them. We were lucky on one occasion, we captured one. He threw his hands up in the air so our motor cutter went in, picked him up, and brought him out on board. But he was only a young - I can't remember now if he was Korean or Chinese - but he was such a young kid, like myself, you know. He just didn't want any more part in it; I think he did it to get attention to himself.

Even when we were anchored in different places - when we first went up we couldn't find the safe anchorages of The Fork, to my knowledge - and we anchored. In the outgoing tide there you could only work the starboard side because they'd take pot shots at you. So then, when the tide turned on your anchor, you'd work the port side. But you made sure you were always behind the superstructure, or the funnel, or something like that. It was only occasionally though that you'd hear this ping, the round being fired at you.

It's a wonder they didn't bring in some heavy armament there - you were all anchored there, sitting targets.

It's got us puzzled - it's got us puzzled. Even when they hit us - they fired armour-piercing [shells] at us instead of DA (direct action) - if they'd fired direct action - of course, one of the rounds went right through the side of the ship at the quarterdeck, through the outer wall of the boiler room, hit a couple of pipes in the boiler room, and then came a bit out the other side. Well, that was about 300 yards range, so if they'd used DA they would have - *Murchison* would still be out there. They put seven holes along our waterline, they just used the wrong rounds, for our luck.

So the damage control party were busy?

Busy, yeah. I didn't actually see them - I've got photos of the wooden plug - you know the big wooden plug? - that they put over the side and they bashed them into the holes, to get us back to Kure, back to Japan.

Were there good facilities in Kure for doing this?

Excellent dry dock there, yeah. That was one of the major ports of the Japanese during the war.

HMAS *Commonwealth* was there?

It was.

At Kure?

It was originally HMS *Commonwealth*, then, when the Korean War started they turned it over to the Australian, made her *HMAS*, as you say.

We'll talk about your runs ashore a bit later, if you care to.

Let's stay on the Han. You mention that the purpose was to take the guns up the river and show your presence. Did you work - coordinated work - with the army or the air force up there?

Only for spotting. But then again, I think that the planes - I think we might have used *Sydney*, I'm not sure - HMAS *Sydney*'s planes - for doing some spotting. As I say, as a loading number you are pretty well kept in the dark a little bit, all you are there for is to make sure that there is a round in the breach at all times. There would have been, I guess, coordinates being sent back all the time.

What is the weight of a 4 inch shell?

4 inch shell. Now, I'd forgotten, so as soon as David invited me down here I wrote to the Historical Society at Garden Island and I got a nice letter back. It depends on the round that you are using - 47 to 50 pounds if you are using HE, which is the heaviest round. So 50 pounds, yes.

A heavy thing to lift about.

When you think we fired over 6,000 rounds and I must have loaded 1,000 of my own.

That's a lot of rounds, 6,000.

Yeah. We had to change barrels while we were there. You get to balance them. As I say, I was Number 1 loading number, and you'd, more or less, throw it to pass it to you. You'd just cradle it in your arms, and you had a padded canvas mitten there, and as soon as the breach emptied you just stepped in, pushed this round - you cradled it all the time - pushed the round in. The electronic closing, the breach would come up and knock your hand out, you stepped back, take the next round, and stand by.

I have an interesting experience here that happened to me. We weren't up the Han at the time, we were only doing the shoot on some trucks and enemy troop movement. I stepped in - the gun fired and I stepped in to load, and left gun hadn't fired - there would have been a misfire. I saw that there was no hole for me to put my round, and I looked up and there is the captain of the gun and he's ready to palm off manually - they had a lever, they just hit that and it fired it - and I was directly behind the breach. I had the presence of mind, I threw myself back, cradling my round. Number 2 they fired - Stephen Dodd fired - Number 2 stepped over me, and he took over Number 1 position because I went to jelly and I couldn't carry on.

So anyway, the captain called off the shoot and I requested to see guns and the captain be taken off the mounting because I was just a wreck, come close to death - well, and the crew. If I'd stayed there and he palmed off, it would have blown the whole thing off. Any rate, I think the captain said to Jones, 'What do you reckon?' and he said, 'He's going back on.' Best thing he ever did. So they sent me down to do the dummy run - I don't think we even had a target, but they made me go back. Yeah, from then on I became a good loading number again.

That's interesting. I did a little time near guns - I stayed in communication though - noisy things - but I can recall being inside turrets, firing them, it seemed to be a dangerous place to be. The mechanics of the breach opening and closing, and the possibility of getting your hand caught and cut off and things; has that ever happened?

No, not really - see, you are talking about five-point-something?

No, go back to the old 4.7 - 4.5, I guess.

Well, they were fixed round - they were a fixed round too. No, there is no problem with them. As I say - punches we used to call it - you punch the round into the breach and then the breach closes upwards, so that knocks your hand out - unless you want to tickle your fingers, well then, that's idiotic. Your fist is there and the breach comes up and knocks your hand out, and everything is quite ...

But that was just one little episode I thought I'd better throw in because it happened to me.

Did you eye-ball the enemy much? You were very close to the shoreline, weren't you - hundreds of yards?

Yeah, well, because of the channel position the closest we were at one stage was 200 yards, and then we went out - I think it was 600 yards was the most we could go, any further we were on the mud flat. So when you think, 600 yards - 500 metres - it's close - because *Murchison* was 307 feet long, so there's 100 yards, and when you think there's 100 yards of target, and you've only got six more of those there. It was all brought back to me last April when I went back to Korea with the Australian Government - we went down to the Han River Estuary lookout. It came back to me then how close we were to the shore.

Another thing too, when you are closed up, you haven't got really time to look - there's not much sightseeing to do. The only time that we did was when we turned, the skipper dropped anchor and we turned with the tide, and with the aid of the props, and we were unable to bear, we were unable to shoot, we had a quick look then at what was going on. Yeah, it's pretty scary when you think how close we were.

Did *Murchison* ever run aground?

Going in, the first attempt in. I think it was very significant that we just hit the sand and then we came ... I did know how long it took us, I think it was three days to go thirty miles, or something, to find our way into this estuary. I think we just touched and backed straight off again because we wouldn't have been doing much speed at all.

It's incredibly adventurous and dangerous to go up a channel like that, not knowing the depth. And more importantly, if you came under heavy fire, not being able to escape quickly. That must have been a worrying aspect, certainly for the captain.

Well, yes; and I've read since - of course, you had the leadsmen out, either side of the bridge - and in the heat of the moment they were forgotten. Here you are, you've got an exposed man out there on the port side, still sounding away, and there must have been ping! ping! ping! going all the way around him. Then the skipper realised and closed him down and just relied on the charts that we'd already charted the channel from.

But we had a marvellous navigator - do you know Captain Jim Martin?

No.

Kelly, sorry - Kelly, lives here in Rivett.

No, I don't know him.

He took over and he was our navigator, yeah, Jim Kelly.

They didn't have echo sounders in those days?

Yes, we had an echo sounder.

So the leadsman was a backup.

A backup, yes. That was the beauty about using frigates. The USA tried to send theirs up, but their sonar was fixed, and ours could come up and down, and our echo sounders were close by to our sonar gear. But they tell me that - I don't know how many - one or two of the Americans knocked their gear off because it was so shallow water. When you think the Han River had a rise and fall of twenty-eight feet - it was very similar to where I came from in Broome, we were thirty-two. So at some stage you were in very deep water - and what tricked a lot of them was that they thought they were in deep water, but then, when the tide went out and they tried to get over the same area, they were on mudflats. The mudflats from this lookout overlooking the Han River Estuary ... but they would have changed in the fifty years at any rate, river flats change all the time.

What was the draft of *Murchison*?

I think it was twelve feet.

It's very interesting. I was amused to look at your history. One instance, with your gunnery officer, Frank Smith, commissioned gunner, having a go at an ox cart. Can you recall that? Was that a gun that did that?

It was a last shoot or something - I can't remember much about it - I have read the account, but I can't remember much about the actual ... all I know is what ... he was dead sure he was going to get it and the skipper allowed him three shots. He missed it and then he called it off.

He had several goes at it and it says here that when the fellow with his ox cart, which was used to carry ammunition and food, he reappeared again and he was heard to say, 'I'll get the bastards this time.' The captain said, 'No guns, you've wasted enough bloody ammunition, let him go. Get him next time.'

You took some casualties up there during those engagements on the 28 and 30 September 1951 - one serious casualty.

One very serious. The first fellow that got hit - I think he was a signalman. Even today, when we have our reunions and we talk about it, they still don't know how he got hit, he was such a skinny rake of a fellow.

See, I think Korea was one of the first where splinter rounds were used. The psychological effect of war, as it is turned into now, is not so much as to kill, it's to wound and take up manpower to look after that wounded. So that means that the manpower is not fighting, it's not a fighting unit any more. They fired a lot of those at us, even in the larger rounds of 20 millimetre and that, because one of our Bofors got hit and all the hydraulic lines were just cut through by these splinter rounds, whereas if it had just been a fixed round it would have just made a hole and that was it. Our whaler, that was just riddled with pieces of steel. I've heard conflicting reports: I've heard five and I've heard seven were wounded on board. We were lucky in that we didn't have any killed.

Two incidents, which I've noted here, was one chap that joined up with me from Western Australia, Gordon Robins, he was on X Gun. He bent over to pick up another 4 inch round, and a bullet creased his tin hat. Now, if Gordon had been standing upright it would have either been

in the chest or the abdomen, so he was a very lucky man. And another chap standing there with this 4 inch round, cradled in his arms, waiting to poke it in, and a rifle bullet hit the casing and opened it up - he must have had a bruised belly afterwards, I'm sure - and all the cordite started to spill out onto the deck. So in his panic, in his fright, whatever - I think I would have done the same - straight over the side.

What, the shell or him?

I might have followed it too! But yeah, so he threw it straight over the side. They've often thought it would have been - he didn't know that it couldn't explode - it would have been a good souvenir for the ship to have kept. What happened to Gordon's tin helmet, I don't know, but he was a very lucky man, having his helmet creased like that. That was just two incidents of near misses.

You saw lots of enemy casualties, bodies and things, floating down the river.

Yes.

Off-putting for you?

Off-putting, knowing that it was a couple of days before that your guns would have done that to the men. It could have been an army patrol, like one of the United Nations army patrols, that had killed these people and they'd fallen in the river. But yes, to see bodies floating down, for the first time, it's a bit nerve-racking.

It's a reminder to you that that could be me tomorrow, sort of thing.

Yes.

It's not a nice experience for a young man to put up with or to see. With the casualties, how did that affect the ship's company? Did you take on wounded? Did that make you more concerned, or more cautious, or did you just plod on with the job?

Made them more gung ho. On the first day - of course, we were only doing a routine run up this channel - I think we had - we had an officer from some other ship on board, who it was I can't remember now. I thought it might have been Admiral Dwyer, but I don't think so.

When we got hit we dropped anchor, turned around, and came back out again. The skipper would only do this so that we would use the tide to turn, so we had to pick an outgoing tide. So we went up the estuary, dropped anchor, turned with the tide, and then came back down. There was a cry went out through the gun crews, let's go back and have another go at them. As always our skipper showed his wisdom and said, 'No, we'll wait.' Well, then, two days later we had to go back up again, that was when we took the New Zealand ship - it starts with a 'T' - was going to relieve us - we were due to come home.

Taupo? Something like that, was it?

We had him on board so that's how we got in so close for the second lot that they hit us with. But they were cunning little devils because the first time we went up - it was fairly open ground, they used old buildings and that to conceal their guns, but then the second time - they knew that

we were going again because they'd build hay ricks. They had a tank covered in bales of hay and they had their mortars in there, so they knew we were coming.

I think you've probably answered this already, but the circumstances of that environment, what circumstance put the most strain on the ship's company - enemy activity or weather, patrolling commitments?

Weather; the weather would have been the biggest whinge that went through because the ship just wasn't designed for winter - summer, it was hot in Korea too - but we just weren't used to it. No matter what you did - we tried to keep warm, but you just couldn't.

Did it affect the operational efficiency of the vessel?

No, I don't think so, no. Morale was too good on that ship, they were a great bunch of fellows.

It's a great joy to recall good ship's company and good crew, happy times on the ships - clearly the *Murchison* was. How did the *Murchison*, with such good morale, perform as a fighting unit - it's capability? Was discipline good?

Oh, yes, yes. I'm pretty sure that both gun crews did close up in three minutes. The Bofors crew was the same because they had three. They had their gunner, then they would have had two loading numbers, one to drop their rounds in and one to pass up. As I say, we had five Bofors, then you had your other parties to close up as well. No, I didn't hear any ... I don't remember recalling any whinges of 'Let's get out of here - we shouldn't be here fighting for their cause', and all that sort of thing, none whatsoever.

What was your view of your commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Dollard? Did you find him to be an excellent captain?

Excellent captain, yes. It was him - well, Jim Kelly too, our navigator - but he was a skipper that got us out of that last day up there because he was so calm, so calm under fire. But then, he was a Second World War man, but I think this was his first command - I'm not sure of that, I wouldn't put that on record - he was a two-and-a-half when we went and he picked up his third ring up there, which is justly so. Has a good man, a fair man, I've got a lot of respect for Commodore Dollard.

Were any awards given to members of the ship's company?

The captain and the navigator, I think they picked up the DSO for their steadfast ... Well, we picked up the Gloucester Cup.

Fleet Efficiency Award?

Yeah - for steadfastness under fire and superb seamanship, or something along those lines. I've been trying to get a copy of that certificate, but I keep running up against a brick wall somewhere. I don't know where I could get it from.

Well, it's awarded by the Fleet Commander.

RN though.

The Gloucester Cup is Royal Australian Navy.

Sorry, sorry, no, it must have been the Duke of Edinburgh Cup - no, he wasn't in - that must have been the Gloucester Cup.

Well, it's been a long time.

A long time, yeah.

It links with our Royal Navy heritage. We might be able to pull something up on the internet, or something.

Back to awards. Any of the ship's company - it was only the captain and navigator - was mentioned in dispatches?

No.

There seemed to be not many awards in the Korean conflict.

No.

How do you feel about that now? Do you think there should have been more?

I definitely think that the chief bosun's mate should have got an award of some kind because it's well recorded that when we turned on the anchor and X Mounting knocked out this rate of fire, he is reported to have been standing on a ready-use locker, exposed to every element, chanting them in. Now, of course, he was quarterdeck party, and you've got a man standing up there - 'Go, go, go' type of thing - so you think he would have got some sort of record.

The only other one was the same man again. We got rammed by a South Korean fishing boat - they had a crew of five on it - it hit us on the starboard side, just before the bridge - it sank, being wooden. We pulled three out of the water and it was the [buffer] that went in after them, in his pyjamas. Anyway, we got three of them back on board and then two passed away from hypothermia. There is a tragic story attached to that, and yet humorous.

We buried them at sea. The sail-maker, he was given a good tot of rum, as he sewed them up in the canvas, and the only weights that he had to tie to their feet were practice hedgehog. Now, I don't know if you remember the hedgehog, they were filled with sand. But Jack - I think it must have been at the end of the bottle - he tied the hedgehog rope and allowed about six feet before he tied it to the ankle of the first fellow to go over the side.

Well, they brought up a mess table and put liquid soap on it. The skipper was there - they would have cleared lower deck - the captain of the fishing boat was standing there and said some prayers. Well, then, when they tipped the mess table up the hedgehog went over the side, took up the slack, pulled this body up, and he walked the plank. Well, as I say, it was tragic, but we couldn't help but see the funny side of it. Oh, the skipper, I thought he was going to give us all a month. So any rate, Jacked fixed the second one up, he tied the hedgehog straight to the ankle.

Did you burst out laughing?

Burst out laughing, of course we did - the looks that we got! You can see the funny side of it.

Of course. How do you reckon the *Murchison* performed in comparison with the other allied units? Did you have good relationships with the other Commonwealth navy units?

Oh, yes, especially the Canadian destroyer, the *Cayuga* - we had a very close - three encounters, I think, with her.

The big thing up there, if there was a downed pilot, especially if he was American or Canadian, a downed pilot in the water, the first ship in to pick him up got a £5 tin, or £25 tin, of ice cream, a big cylinder of it. We never had ice cream. We were lucky, we picked up one, but *Cayuga* would nearly always be in our presence and she'd pick up the same signal. So here's *Murchison* ploughing towards this downed pilot at 19 knots, flat-chat, *Cayuga* would come past at 32 knots. We'd be going astern, wouldn't we, in reverse?

The Commonwealth sailors - I think it was because of the proximity was so close to the end of the Second World War - but the Americans took a dislike to the Royal Navy. They didn't mind the Canadians; Australians though, they couldn't distinguish the uniforms, whether we were RN or RAN. After a couple of months, at any rate, we finished up, we had RAN flashes on our shoulders, which we didn't have before. So you'd go ashore for a run and there would be a couple of little Pommies being picked on by the Yanks. Well, then we'd just step in and say, 'Right, you are picking on them, you are picking on us.' We had some good donnybrooks there.

Yeah, we had a good relationship between the ... especially the Kiwis too. The Kiwis are brothers in arms, aren't they?

You didn't operate with the Americans?

No, no, they didn't get up the Han, no.

I had a run - I wish I'd done a lot of recording while it was fresh in my mind, but your memory dims - I developed an ulcer on one of my teeth - abscess actually. It didn't go too well closed up in the middle of winter with anti-flash freezing over your mouth. So I reported to sick bay and the doc said, 'No, I'm not going to touch that', so they sent me down by an American destroyer to the *Belfast* - I think I travelled two nights. I was met in the middle of the night by this big redcap - big Marine - up the gangplank and wave goodbye to the American cutter. He took me straight up to the dentist - straight in, they were waiting for me. Dentist took one look - he told me after he put three needles in - I only saw the first one coming - fainted, came to with tooth gone and all washed out - the same Marine standing there - down the gangplank, into another cutter, and then I was on an RN destroyer back to *Murchison*. Well, that took three days to get back there. I had my first taste of rum issue on that one.

As I say, memory dims, I wish I'd kept a record of these two ships that took me down and the one that brought me back.

Talking about rum issues, did you have beer issues on board *Murchison*?

No. The only time we got beer was at Christmas time in Hong Kong.

Was that because you were in a war zone, or because navy didn't have beer issues in those days?

Yeah, we didn't have any.

I certainly enjoyed having my two cans of beer a day when I was at sea. But they were very strict, certainly after the tragedy of the *Voyager*, they changed the rules a little bit. They certainly had beer issues, but it's not whilst in an operational area or working in close company with other ships.

What did you do for recreation on board, whilst you were in an operational area and you weren't closed up?

Tombola. Another good pastime we had was ... *Murchison*, she was a clean ship, but we had quite a few cockroaches on her; she was known for having cockroaches. We used to have port and starboard cockroaches, painted red and green, and we'd have races - we had cockroach races. The interesting thing was that if a cockroach trespassed into enemy territory, oh, it was snaffled quick smart, boxed, and a ransom of a cake of soap to get him back. So that was a bit of recreation stuff we had.

Oh, no, by the time you'd dhobied your clothes - of course, I only had mother and sister to write to - I didn't know my wife at the time - I didn't even have time to get a girlfriend. By the time you dhoby your clothes and you do your ironing, and that sort of stuff - and read - being, more or less, helped along with some of the senior sailors, as far as arithmetic and that goes. We passed the time away pretty good.

Any movies?

No, no movies.

Talking of senior sailors, or your elders, was there any member, or members, of the ship's company who had the most influence on you in your time there and in your future naval career?

Two leading seamen, one was this Jock Chalmers, ex-RN fellow. Jock was a marvellous man as far as explaining things to you. Another chap - I hope to meet him in September - he was another leading seaman by the name of Len Meakins. Now, Len lives up at Toowoomba and he hadn't been able to come to any of the *Murchison* reunions before, but he's coming to this one at Ballina we are having. We are hosting the four Bay Class Frigates Reunion, the first one we've ever done - they were the four 'Bays' that served in Korea. So yes, I am hoping to ... Len was a teacher type man as well, you know.

As I told DVA last year, when he invited me to go to Korea, I came from the bush - and you've got to remember, you are back in the '40s, the late '40s - I didn't have much sense on hygiene, or any of this. The navy taught me all this, the navy sailors - senior sailors - taught me all of this - how to eat my food properly, and how to look after my body properly.

So yes, those two men, those two leading seamen, would have been the most influence in my

(career).

Remember them after fifty years, that's remarkable.

Oh, yes.

Short-term memory goes, but the long-term ...

I've still got it actually, the night I left on the train from Perth, my brother, he gave me a note out of his book, and it reads this way: 'Self love is not half as vile as self neglect'. I don't know who wrote it, but my brother did that night, and it was a thing I practiced from then.

It's a wise saying, isn't it?

I think so, especially too, when you are in close proximity, especially in the services, especially on a ship when, as you say, you are cooped up in a mess with so many men - it gets a big pongy sometimes!

Visits to Japan - Kure, Sasebo - runs ashore - what did you do for runs ashore?

Oh, sightseeing for a start, just to think, here you are, you are in Japan. Like, Japan was our enemy in the Second World War and to think that you are walking the streets. The first stop we used to make was the sword shop in Kure. To change the pound on board they would give us 800 yen, and if you went to the sword shop, which was illegal, you used to get 1,000 to 1,200 - it would depend on the day - so you went to the sword shop, didn't you?

Then you just went round the shops. I remember doing one trip up to Hiroshima, we got a bus up to there, which was terrific to see, to think of the devastation of what one bomb could do. The poor beggars that were in the street with no legs, and begging for alms, it's very telling on you. I can still see the faces - the scars, the burns on their faces.

So yeah, we went to Hiroshima. I never got to Tokyo - some of the other fellows got the train up to Tokyo - I never got up to Tokyo. Because I am a rural fellow, I used to like the countryside, get out and have a look at how they dressed in their traditional dress. Of course, in the cities and towns and that they were westernised - it didn't take them long to get westernised. Yeah, so I'd get myself a rickshaw and head out into the bush, have a look at how their houses were built, and things like that. And then, you came back and had a few beers, and have a meal. There was always a friendly smiling girl to while away the rest of the night.

If you want an account of one run ashore ... It was very interesting, after we got hit my brother - he was a leading seaman on HMAS *Tobruk* - and the 'Jimmy' called me up and he said, 'I've got a signal here from *Tobruk*, from the first lieutenant there, it's from your brother. He is requesting that you be transferred to *Tobruk*.' Well, I stood on my digs, I said, 'No way!' I wasn't going to leave 'Murt'.

So we went back to Kure and we tied up alongside - *Tobruk* was that side of the wharf and then we tied up here. So brother Bill come across and he said, 'Right, it's my shout, I'll take you ashore tonight.' So I thought, well, this is alright, he's paying - and he must have had a bit more ashore time than me because he knew his way around a bit. He said, 'We are not going to stop in town, we are going up into the hill country. I've got friendly with a mammasan up there and

she's got a very clean house. We'll go up there.'

So we went up there, had a couple of bottles of [Kirin] beer, the Japanese beer, and we were going well, and then a couple of plum wines, and then we had a meal. So then we were just relaxing and next thing, mammasan comes in and she's screaming - 'MP come! MP come!' - and brother Bill said, 'Well, the MPs don't come up here' - she's screaming out, 'MP come'. So we grabbed our clothes and we got out the back. We looked down and we could see Kure, and we could see the ships. He said, 'Right, we'll go the road - we're gone, we'll go straight across country.'

Well, we went across country - in whites - through two open sewers - they are like a canal in Japan, it's all open. Well, we went through two of those. We hit the side of the town, we tried to get a rickshaw to take us - 'No, no, no' - we were on the nose. So anyway, we walked back to the base there.

Just inside the gate used to be hot baths - the girls were there - so we headed straight in there, peeled off our clothes, gave them to the girls. We sat in the bath for an hour, had another couple of bottles of Kirin - they came, ready, washed ironed, pressed. We went back on board looking like matadors. So that was one run ashore I had with brother Bill.

Is your brother still alive?

Yes. He lives in Melbourne - we don't see much of each other, which is unfortunate.

What about sport? Would there be rivalry amongst the ships?

Yes. There was tennis, cricket, and rugby. I never played rugby, but I used to like cricket. Of course, we had inter-service [games] too, once you got back there, so that was good - with the army. We didn't see much of the 'RAAF-ies', they were out at Hiro, I think, so it was mainly other ships and the army we played cricket and tennis [with]. Actually, that's where I learnt to hit a tennis ball, up there. A few of the other fellows went for rugby, well, they'd learnt rugby at school; I hadn't.

Being a Western Australian from Broome you wouldn't have seen much rugby.

How was the health of the ship's company, generally speaking, particularly after runs ashore in Japan?

Ah ... oh, that's a hard one, Sam. I don't recall much sick bay time - a few of the guys picked up VD on shore, but apart from that I don't ever remember broken arms or anything from a fight - a few smashed noses and black eyes and that. Yes, I did three days' hospital time, I got done over by two Yanks, they gave me a good old kicking. I had just bruised ribs and that. I'd saved, and saved, and saved to buy myself my first pair of Packard shoes, and the buggers pinched them. That was at Sasebo - that was down at Sasebo - of course, that was the American (base). That's about all there would have been. There were a few injuries from fights.

I notice that your brother's ship actually had a fairly high venereal disease rate after each port visit.

Who did?

Tobruk.

Did it? Oh.

I've done some reading on it recently, but I haven't got the same figures for the *Murchison*, so you are forgiven.

Next time I see him ...

Any particular recollections of interest? Anything that you want to discuss and talk about which we haven't covered, from your notes or from your memory?

We are covering pretty good on what I've got here.

Do you recall Cyclone Ruth?

Yes.

Where were you?

We were coming back from Hong Kong. Actually, I was only talking about it on the weekend. We'd just had our Korean War Veterans' Day, which the Government proclaimed last year. We'd been up at Taree RSL, they gave us a couple of days up there.

Talking about Ruth, I can remember it because I'd never seen waves like the waves ... well, when you think she wiped off so many planes off *Sydney*'s deck - we weren't far away from *Sydney* when Ruth was on. I spent a couple of days in a hammock bin, because you couldn't do anything; I spent a couple of days in a hammock bin with a bucket. I didn't eat, I just made love to this bucket. Yes, it was pretty hairy actually.

Also, I was under the impression that our boiler room had blown some steam tubes, but I was talking to an ERA (engine room artificer), 'Dutchie' Holland, and he said, 'No, I don't recall that', and I said, 'Well, I thought we did, and we had to be picked up by an American tug and towed for some distance.' He said, 'No, I don't think that's right.' But at a later interview with Commodore Dollard that may come to light, you may be able to ask him that.

As a young man you are in awe - A-W-E - of a lot of things when you are thrown into what we were in Korea, and you believed a lot of stories that you were told. They've stuck in your mind all these years and you think that they are fact, whereas in reality they are only something someone said and they weren't true at all. But I did get that strong impression, but yeah, I remember Ruth.

I notice on *Sydney* it was pretty scary. *Tobruk* wisely stayed in Kure, double bridled up to a buoy and rode it out quite nicely.

Tobruk?

Yes.

Oh, right.

Well, from my reading Kure was a well-protected harbour.

Oh, yes.

There were some ... the discussion was: Should *Sydney* have gone to sea or not? but the decision was made to go.

One thing I have here, on a lighter vein. Again, you asked me the duties of what we did. One of the odd ones, for an OD (ordinary seaman), was to empty the spew buckets from the bridge. I don't know about other ships, but on the frigate there, coming in from the outside, you had port and starboard lookout, then you had two telegraphists on the engine room thing, then you had a helmsman, then you had the officer of the watch, then one or two more bods. Well, there were buckets on the bridge. One of the duties there then, of the junior OD, was to empty those buckets. So you'd wait for two to be about three-quarters full, then you'd grab those, head down the ladder to throw them over the appropriate side - so you didn't get your own back. But most times I topped those buckets up going down. But once you get to AB (able bodied seaman) you don't have to do those sort of things.

You probably had to get some 'kai' [food] from the galley.

The old 'kai', oh, God, that stuff was thick. I don't know if it settled your stomach or made it worse actually.

I don't know if you've heard it from any of the others, but this winter up there was horrific. I'd never seen lumps of ice. I wasn't a movie person, I never went to movies much before I joined, and I just didn't realise that ice could come down a river like it did. And when you get lumps of ice as big as cars, talk about terrifying; then you hear one hit the side of the ship, that's when you think, now, God, are the rivets going to spring? That was a bit hairy for the first time, but then you got used to it and you used to go to sleep and hear this really 'thuddy' sound as it hit the side of the ship. You couldn't get away from it because you were at anchor. That was a bit hairy.

I should imagine you had visions of - if this ship sinks I'm in with that ice, I'm not going to last long.

I'm not going to last long at all, no, especially after we saw those two guys from the fishing boats.

Yeah, Sasebo, that's another story. We used to go there, they had a big PX (post exchange - US forces 'general store') club. We used to have to tie up to a buoy, and the Americans used to bring one of their Liberty type barges around and pick us up and take us in. We'd go to a huge big PX club, I'd never seen a store like it. We'd go up to the bar and we'd buy a case of beer; they'd front up and buy two bottles. We used to buy a case between us - three of us. We'd drink the case and then we'd go on shore leave.

I can still picture it. From the back of the PX into town was this big park land - Canberra is doing it now, Adelaide is doing it - with all these fairy lights in the trees. When you see cherry blossom in flower with all these trees, it's very impressive - very impressive. That was just to prime us, this case of beer, then we'd do our run ashore, visit the girls, and then we'd go back

down to the wharf.

We were in there a few times - I don't know which one it was, but over this huge store house the Americans had - and I've been told it's in many of their ports - 'Through these portals pass the best goddamn fighting men in the world' - they tell me it's at quite a few around the world. A couple of chaps, they decided they didn't like that so they crossed that out and wrote 'Bullshit' in big black letters.

So the next morning we slipped our moorings and we were just about to proceed out and all hell broke loose. There's patrol boats, and their horns are blaring, their lights are flashing. They cut *Murchison* off, turn around, back to your mooring, they come on board and they demanded to know who had done this 'foul deed'. Of course, the skipper had to clear the lower deck and put out the request; there wasn't a murmur. They kept us there for a couple more hours and then they let us go, but yeah ...

I can understand the sensitivities of the Americans being a bit upset.

I think that's about all I've got down here, Sam.

Oh, this Leading Seaman Jock Chalmers. As I say, he educated me in quite a few things. I'd been working on the upper deck in the winter, and my hands, they were just blue. So any rate, I went down to the bathroom and I was just about to put them under hot water and I got this smack across the back of my head, and it was Jock. He said, 'If you want a good case of frostbite, go ahead and do it, but I advise you not to.' He showed me how to warm up, he said, 'You put them down the front of your pants.'

As I say, Korea, and *Murchison*, was an education, and education in many ways.

Well, *Murchison* did the Royal Australian Navy proud in that time. It's probably fitting that I just close with signals from Rear Admiral Scott Moncrieff, on your departure from Korea.

The first one reads: 'I dislike the thought of continuing the war without *Murchison*, but I will have to accept it now as fact. You have been a tower of strength and your good name will always be associated with the infamous Han. No ship could have done better for fine seamanship and steadiness under fire you have proved yourself beyond reproach. Good luck in all your sailings and a happy homecoming to you all.'

And then: 'For your long tenacity of the Han, for mastery of all insidious and doubtful delights, and for insecurity of tenure, I think you should be created Baron Murchison of the Han, Lord Fork, and Viscount Spoons.'

Thanks very much, it has been a very enjoyable interview with you and all the very best in the future.

Thank you, Sam, thank you very much.

03/03