

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Name: Uncle Rob Bryant

Date: 27 December 2013

Place: Stewart Island

Interviewer: Fabri Blacklock

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **FB:** This is an interview with Uncle Rob Bryant on Stewart Island in Nambucca Heads on the 27th of December 2013. So, Uncle, can you tell me your full name and when and where you were born and who your mob is, please?

RB: Giinagay. My full name is Clive Joseph Robin Bryant, born in Bellingen in 1947. I'm of the Bryant/Waddy family clan of the Gumbaynggirr people of the Nambucca Valley, New South Wales North Coast, Australia. Brought up here on this island – not on the island but the swimming hole was just here, I was a caddy on this golf course but we lived on the flat at Bellwood. And in 1959/60 my mother took myself and my younger sister to Sydney for better education and employment

opportunities. When I got to Sydney my first school in Sydney was at St Vincent's Redfern and it was run by the Patrician Brothers then. Of course when I got to Sydney we didn't know where to go. The first place was at 285 Rose Street Darlington and a non-Aboriginal person came over to Golden Grove as it was then, church, and picked me up and showed me how to go to school over at St Vincent's in Redfern.

2.18 And so that's how I then became acquainted with Sydney - I didn't know. Walk along Abercrombie Street, Lawson Street, then up to Redfern Street to the school. The school at that time to me was one of international children; I saw it as a holding school where people were there to attend school as per the Education Department. There was Chinese, Lebanese, Maltese, myself Aboriginal, so it was a multinational type of school. The following year I then attended St Joseph's Christian Brothers in Newtown. And so I did my Intermediate Certificate, I did first year, second year and third year in Newtown. Fourth and fifth year I won an Aboriginal scholarship and I attended St John's College in Woodlawn as a student [in '64 and '65]. And eventually in '66 I repeated the Leaving Certificate in St Benedict's in Broadway and then in '67 I joined the Royal Australian Air Force.

4.20 And we got on the train at Central, travelled to Melbourne and from Melbourne across to Adelaide and from Adelaide over to RAAF Base Edinburgh which was the recruit training unit. After the recruit training was completed my Mum came over - my sister and her husband brought her over. She was there for my graduation from RTU, Recruit Training Unit, in June/July of '67. She's proud of her son being a member of the armed services. So then from RAAF Base Edinburgh I was then posted to RAAF Base Wagga which was the training unit, technical training unit, and eventually I did airframe, I was an airframe mechanic. And as an airframe mechanic then I was posted to 5 Squadron at RAAF Base Fairbairn in Canberra.

6.00 And so I was working then on Iroquois helicopters at 5 Squadron. 5 Squadron was the training squadron, really, for those who were being posted to Vietnam. And eventually then I had to do my conversion fitters and I went back to Wagga and I did my conversion fitters and again then was posted back to 5 Squadron in Canberra and in April '70 I was posted then to 9 Squadron Vung Tau in Vietnam. And so tour of duty was twelve months and that was in Vung Tau. Whilst in Vung Tau there was another Aboriginal airframe fitter - he was with 35 Squadron - there was also another Aboriginal - he was a gunner with 9 Squadron - so all in all there were three Aboriginals that were members of the Royal Australian Air Force in Vung Tau when I was there.

FB: Can you remember their names, who they were?

RB: Kye [?] George was with 35 Squadron and Billy Patton [?] was the 9 Squadron gunner. So, yes, it was unique, I suppose, three sort of thing, but there was lots of Aboriginal soldiers - when I was in Nui Dat for a week and you see different ones and that.

8.20 And eventually I came home then in April '71, I came home via RAAF Base Richmond. So with RAAF Base Richmond I hitchhiked in to Windsor to the railway station, I caught the – it was a diesel operating then, right, diesel [train] – that operated from Richmond to Blacktown. I got to Blacktown, changed at Blacktown and got on the red rattler and got off at Redfern Station. My address when I joined the Royal Australian Air Force was 115 Garden Street, Alexandria and that was also my base, main base when I was posted to Vietnam. So when I came back then I got off at Redfern Station, I walked down to Mum's at 115 Garden Street. So Redfern Station is significant for me in that I came back via RAAF Base Richmond and then by train into Redfern. Mum was very happy to see me and she's also very proud of my ribbons on my uniform and it was a great relief for her, right, that her son had returned home in one piece.

10.24 Of course I was posted from Vietnam, from 9 Squadron I was posted to 36 Squadron which was the A-model Hercs so I went from the little choppers to the big Hercs and so I was out at Richmond then until I finished my six years' enlistment which was in April '73. So when I got out of the air force then processing jobs and eventually I went to Benelong's Haven which is a rehabilitation centre then, right, was for the Aboriginal people who had a drinking problem and I [have remained sober ever since]. Many things happened but eventually with the homecoming – I think it was in '82 – I went down and attended the homecoming for all Vietnam vets. That's when I feel that I was welcome. My family always supported me and the Aboriginal community's always supported me as a returned serviceman but it just made it more things when we marched through the city of Sydney, right, on your native territory.

12.21 And I met a lot of my old mates and that back there again – they was all glad to see you. So anyway it came about, you know, you get on with life and I went back to school, I went back to do a Bachelor of Business at Ku-ring-gai College and in '88 I saw the Student Association at Ku-ring-gai College for them to have an Aboriginal fashion parade. And so eventually the fashion parade was held which broke down lots of barriers in '88 in regards to how Aboriginal people were being portrayed on TV. So the Student Association then asked

me, they said “We’re going to ask you to do something again in ‘89” and eventually in ‘89 then I invited a dance company over there – not invited but made arrangements for them to perform at Ku-ring-gai College and when they came over for their preliminaries I asked them about their dance and they said “Oh, we want to have a professional dance company that reflects the Indigenous cultures of Australia”.

14.26 I said “I like that too”. So eventually back then they said “We’ve got a [meeting] coming up” where their studio was. And see, the Mercure Hotel in Central that’s where their studio was in Lee Street there. And there was a pole in the middle – they had to dance around it. So eventually I went to [the] meeting and then of course I got on the board of what was then the Bangarra Dance Theatre Australia Limited - that was in ‘89, I was a founding director there. And when I graduated from Ku-ring-gai [UTS] I got a job at the Australia Council, the Aboriginal Arts Unit and of course it was the place where I learnt grants and the performing arts and visual arts. But eventually Bangarra wasn’t going nowhere so I resigned and then came on as the founding General Manager in November ‘90 it was. So I was the founding General Manager ‘90 to ‘94.

16.00 And when Bangarra then got their grant from the Performing Arts Board of a million dollars for over three years I said “My time with Bangarra was completed” then, right, because we got recognition, broke through the ceiling and we were getting funding from mainstream Performing Arts Board rather than Aboriginal Arts. And, of course, Bangarra’s gone on and well-known international dance company. Eventually, I had a small little business and then I got crook and now in receipt of a DVA pension but I was still interested in the economic development that goes to Aboriginal issues and I eventually came home then, came back to Nambucca Heads in 2000 and 2002 I purchased land on land that was part of my Mum’s land which I own freehold now, it’s in my name.

18.03 2006 I was invited to go down for the Coloured Diggers’ March in Redfern and so I attended the inaugural one in [2007] where we marched from The Block to the church – there was a church where we marched to. But we assembled at The Block and to me that was significant for me because Redfern Station was my homecoming right when I came back home, part of my homecoming. And I’ve attended all the Coloured Diggers’ March in Sydney since; I march in the city with RAAF Vietnam and then I catch the train or a bus back to Redfern and I march then with the Coloured Diggers’ March. The Coloured Diggers’ March is very important in that Aboriginal people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are given the opportunity to

participate in ANZAC celebrations, ANZAC Day celebrations, on their terms and, of course, they all march with the veterans up front, they all march behind and they're all representing, right, their uncles and aunties and fathers and that, right?

19.56 So to me it is an opportune time for the Aboriginal people to participate and celebrate their connection with ANZAC Day on that day and it's on their terms. And so that's why to me I go down there one, for my homecoming within Redfern Station, part of my homecoming, and the other one is to support and also provide that for the younger people, right, to let them know, right, that Aboriginal people served in different conflicts what Australia had. I came back home here, I attend functions up here. I attended the Bowraville War Memorial opening. They heard that there was a Gumbaynggirr returned serviceman, Vietnam returned serviceman, so they asked me to attend the official opening of the Vietnam section. So I was just attending there as a Vietnam veteran but they asked me to officially open it which was just fantastic, where they were acknowledging a Gumbaynggirr returned serviceman. I've also spoken [at] a Vietnam Veterans' Day in Nambucca Heads and also at Macksville.

21.53 And it was in the Nambucca Heads one that I saw the iconic photograph of Vietnam and I said "Oh, I'd better read this up". Anyway, the photograph was taken during Operation Ulmarra, 28th of August 1967. I said "Wow, look at this". I said "Ulmarra's in Gumbaynggirr country", this iconic photograph. And so I had through the Australian War Memorial, right, permission to have that photograph put onto canvas and to be hung up in a café that's Aboriginal owned up in Ulmarra and it says "JTD Merchandise and Wide River Café salutes Operation Ulmarra" and so that was part of Ulmarra, Gumbaynggirr country, being involved. The business side, as I said I'm a firm believer in Aboriginal economic development, Aboriginal participation in the economic development of Australia, and so I had my small business called JTD Merchandise and it's about promotional products. And at this stage I've got my JTD online store which is mainly selling products on line but it's mainly decorated coffee mugs at this stage and the decorated coffee mugs are printed in Brisbane.

24.03 So I support Australian manufacturers, right, by having the mugs – the blank mugs are imported from China because you can't get anything better pricewise, you can't do them in Australia but the printing is done up there. And so this is where I support Australian manufacturers in that they're at a factory up in Brisbane, that young people employed there, so it's supporting wherever I can, right. But eventually businesswise you've got to look at many opportunities. We've got to be

innovative as to how we participate and that innovation and participation also includes the Pacific Highway upgrade and if we don't push no one's going to push it for us. We've got to open the doors and we've got to put our weight against the door to open because they ain't going to open it up, right; you've got to be knocking on their door. So at this stage I'm looking also then at how Aboriginal-owned small businesses can participate in the Pacific Highway upgrade, especially in Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung countries.

25.48 Yes, so that's ongoing. In regards to Sydney and I went to Sydney; you know, it was Abercrombie Street and Lawson Street and Redfern Street. Gum leaves in my ears I had, right, but I've come to love Sydney very much but there was also a time for me to come home and when I came home, right, I knew everything but in all the time that I was there, right, I always came back home here, right. We took our Gumbaynggirr culture to Sydney, we shared it down there with other Gumbaynggirr people, right, who came and stayed with us in Rose Street Darlington and then who came and stayed with us at 115 Garden Street Alexandria. People came down here on different reasons, family reasons, medical reasons and that, right. If they was out west they came back in and they had a cup of tea before they got on the North Coast Mail to [go] back home that night, right. So Mum took the Gumbaynggirr language and culture with her down there, right, and we came back home here and we knew where we were from, right, who we are. But eventually I then came back home and as I said I've purchased land, right, on the Pacific Highway, at 26 Pacific Highway Nambucca Heads [Bellwood].

27.48 Sydney broadened my whole look on life and I see myself as being blessed in giving me the opportunity to being in Sydney in those '60s and being brought up, yes, just being brought up in Sydney at that time. Then also my six years in the air force, my six years in the air force, right, was, you know, you're part of a team, you knew your mates there, you know you could rely on them when chips were down and there was a camaraderie, right. And in the air force I was known as Joe, right. A couple of people saw me down at Darling Harbour and they said "Oh, there's Rob" and they say "We don't know Joe Bryant, we only know Rob Bryant" but eventually that's how it is now, right. When I attend functions and that in regards to Defence and that it's Joe Bryant. So that's the thing. In the Aboriginal community it's Rob Bryant, they all know me and when I go and vote it's Clive.

FB: So you've got three names?

RB: I've got three names.

FB: So what inspired you to join the RAAF?

RB: My brother in law. My brother in law was a member of the Royal Australian Air Force – he was an engine fitter. I became an airframe fitter. He was based in Sale but also out at Richmond.

30.06 I don't know if they were courting then, right, my sister and that, right, but I went out to the RAAF Base, they took me out to RAAF Base Richmond, because we was on the opposite side, right, and just watching the planes coming in and taking off and that. And that was the thing, right? And then I went down to RAAF Base Sale and seen it down there. So that's how I became [interested in] the Royal Australian Air Force, through being introduced to it by my brother in law indirectly. So from there then I joined up and I enjoyed my six years in there so it's good. I think that's about it, I think. There's not much else to my service.

FB: So you were just talking about the Pacific Highway upgrade. Did you have any ideas about how the local communities here can participate economically in that upgrade?

RB: Well, I went to many meetings and they never mention how Aboriginal-owned small business can participate or how they construct that Pacific Highway upgrade, what they do.

32.00 They only come and consult us in regard to cultural heritage issues. So just in the last month or so I've just really put it. Because JTD Merchandise is a member of Supply Nation I was able to also go to a couple of meetings up in Brisbane and I was a procurement officer with Thiess, right, and Thiess has got the contract from Frederickton to Eungai upgrade. And then I met the one who's from Abigroup who's doing the Nambucca to Urunga upgrade but I mentioned to them as to how Aboriginals can participate, right. There are many opportunities but I said "We just want to give them the opportunities to talk to us" and said "Well, this is what we can do and this is what you can't do, this is what's available". So it's letting the contractors know what we've got to offer and I think that's the main thing, just letting them know that there is that. Regard to resources, I've got resources together so it's just getting them and just finding out from them where we can fit into the puzzle, whether it's fencing or whether it's landscaping.

34.03 And I just think landscaping and that, Land Council and that, right, just a lot of green teams and that, I just see them as they should be giving that opportunity to participate and how to get along, you know, how do they put in a tender for a certain section. I think this was the thing that they are still lacking. They are not out there promoting economic

development to the Aboriginal community yet they're all there promoting how do we get cultural and heritage issues resolved. They're not there promoting economic development or Aboriginal participation. Yes, they employ Aboriginal people but that's missing, right. And I say "Well and good, good on you" but when it comes to economic development for Aboriginal-owned small business participating it's a different kettle of fish. You then also provide by being employed, people employed through a local Aboriginal enterprise. So there's more to it than just for them to say "Yes, but Abigroup and Lend Lease and Leightons and all of that, they all employ Aboriginal people" and well and good, right, and they did that north of Coffs Harbour on that stretch up to Arrawarra but I don't think there was any Aboriginal small businesses employed which was, you know, you've got to get runs on the board.

36.08 And there's only one way you're going to get runs on the board is to say "Look, this is where we can help you" to get runs on the board. I mean to say they always say "We want a hand up, not a handout". We still need a hand up from the big companies; that's how we can participate. See, they've got all the skills – we don't have the skills, right. Yet at the same time there's also Aboriginal-owned companies in Western Australia who've got all the skills, got all the equipment and all the mining and that over there, right. The only infrastructure we've got over here – we haven't got mines on this highway, we've only got a highway and being on the coast that's our main thing at this stage, how do we participate, right. And it's putting those things to politicians that people know and letting the Lend Leases and the Leightons and that know that there are other ways that's lacking at this stage.

FB: Excellent. Thank you for that. Is there anything else you wanted to say?

RB: No, no, I think that's about it. And in regards to the photographs, right, now the Member for Sydney she had up on their website a photograph of me with the medals and that so if you go to her – what's her name?

38.03 **FB: Clover Moore?**

RB: No, no, not Clover Moore, the Member for Sydney, Deputy Opposition.

FB: Tanya Plibersek?

RB: Tanya Plibersek. If you go to her, say "Mr Bryant mentioned there was a photo", right, because I remember seeing it and I thought "I never, ever got me there". I see it there, I say "Oh, opportunity missed"

especially when she was Health. But the photograph she's got but also Lola Forester, she's got photographs of me.

FB: O.K, great.

Interview ends