



Verbatim transcript of an interview with

## JAMES WESLEY COCKMAN

Interviewer: **Sue Omodei**  
Date of Interview: **14/03/1995**  
Reference Number: **E0084**  
Duration: **00:34:54**  
Transcriber: **Lisa Iles**  
Date: **1/09/2015**  
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**SO:** An interview with James Wesley Cockman recorded on 14 March 1995 at his home in Yanchep by Sue Omodei for the Australia Remembers project.

**SO:** Can you tell me your full name and date of birth?

**JC:** James Wesley Cockman 26 October 1922.

**SO:** And where were you born?

**JC:** West Perth, Nurse Bevan's Nursing Home.

**SO:** What were your parents' names?

**JC:** Elsie Olive Cockman, Wesley James Cockman.

**SO:** And you had some brothers and sisters?

**JC:** Yes, six brothers, one sister.

**SO:** And were you the oldest or the youngest?

**JC:** The eldest. I lost one sister and I lost one brother. Six survived, one sister survived.

**SO:** And where did you live when you were growing up?

**JC:** Shaw Road, Wanneroo.

**SO:** How long did you live there for in Shaw Road?

**JC:** Up to I was about 15. I went around wherever I worked I lived but that just meant home to come back to when I did come home.

**SO:** Now onto the war. Did you realise that there was going to be a war about to begin? Was there was sort of talk around Wanneroo that it was getting close?

**JC:** Oh yes, as soon as the Germans came into it we knew, we had a fair idea you know, it wouldn't be long before the Japs did come in, we always had that feeling back there that, you know, they were going to come into it.

**SO:** And so you decided to enlist did you?

**JC:** Yeah, to get away from work in the gardens.

**SO:** And how old were you?

**JC:** 19.

**SO:** And to enlist what did you do, you had to go into Perth?

**JC:** Yeah, down to Karrakatta that was it. For a medical and then you swear the oath on the bible and you're in. It's easy to get in but it's very hard to get out.

**SO:** Where did you do your training?

**JC:** Burke Street Barracks at Fremantle. It was a permanent army barracks.

**SO:** What were you in?

**JC:** Coastal Artillery.

**SO:** Can you tell me something about your training or anything?

**JC:** Oh no, we had only just started to do our squad drill and then the Japs come into the war and they just cancelled the training going east and put us all on. Darwin, here we come. That's where we went. I only had six weeks' training and that was only, you know, squad drill, nothing to do about fighting wars.

**SO:** So before you actually enlisted, you were working in a market garden.

**JC:** Market garden at Yanchep.

**SO:** What would happen when you left to go into the army? Did they have to get extra people to take over your work?

**JC:** Yeah, I think one of my other uncles went up there. Oh no, my younger brother Bill he took over when I left. 'Cause I could have got out of going into the army if I wanted but I wanted to get away from the gardens.

**SO:** So you thought you were going to see a bit of excitement?

**JC:** Yeah.

**SO:** Can you tell me about the trip to Darwin?

**JC:** Oh yes, we got there from Petersborough they had a lot of big flat-topped trucks, they had the army motor vehicles. So they had all of them on and we just got up into the back of the trucks on the train and that was our carriages to get us there. We were supposed to be in Alice Springs on Christmas Day and we only got as far as Oodnadatta. We arrived there late as some of the trucks had nearly fallen off the train or something. So we had Christmas dinner there in Oodnadatta. A little tin of apricots between three and half a tin of baked beans.

**SO:** Would have been good.

**JC:** We got in and out of Springs on Boxing Day 'cause they had all of Christmas dinner what was supposed to be for us, they still kept it, cold though, so we feasted up on Boxing Day for Christmas Day. Then after that the following day they drove the trucks from there through to Laramie. Then when we got to Laramie, it wasn't all that long to go from Alice to Laramie; they put us on the old train to get into Darwin. Old cattle trucks with tarpaulins over the top and when we got up the next morning it had been raining, 'cause that time of the year it was monsoonal time of year, I got up and looked over the road and everyone looked black. Everyone was black as all the coal used to come back from these old steam engines 'cause landing on the tarp and all the water was just dripping through the tarp, there was all inky black oily looking sons, everyone was covered in it. That was an old train; we would say you could walk beside it.

**SO:** Went that slow?

**JC:** Yeah, often we would get sick and tired of sitting in them and we would get out and we would just walk alongside the old choo choo choo.

**SO:** What about when you got to Darwin, where did you actually camp in Darwin?

**JC:** We went from there; we got into in the preaps, we went out to Fanny Bay for a start, on the anti-aircraft site there. We finished putting that up, then some of us went to other batteries and we finished up going to a battery called Berrimah, there used to be a big hospital out near where it is was. So out to Berrimah, we stopped there for nearly over 2½ years all on the one little site and then we shifted south and there were all these rumours

about you're next, you're next, the other battery was quarantined, we thought it was never going to end. But we seen it all through from when they first raided Darwin til they finished there. It was a long time, nearly three years sticking around. In your own country it was no different, if you were stuck there miles away, no, no there was no excuse for us, "we got no one, we got no one else to train to go up there and take over". We said well we weren't bloody trained when we come here. It didn't work.

**SO:** So when your time was up in Darwin, where did you go after that?

**JC:** We came back to Perth and after that had 32 days leave and that's all they reckon they could afford to let us have at the time. And they said we've got a nice quiet place you can go and relax. They sent us to of all places Corunna Downs for a start, just out of. So the first place we went to was Corunna Downs, a big bomber strip there, just out of Port Hedland, not Port Hedland, out of Marble Bar. Was only there for a little while then they shifted us from there up to Noonkanbah, we only stopped there about four or five months and then we picked up the guns and we brought them all back to Bushmead out of Midland.

**SO:** When you were on leave after you come from Darwin, where did you spend your leave?

**JC:** In Perth, anywhere I get to. Well that was where I first met the wife, so I spent most of the time in Perth.

**SO:** Actually not in the Wanneroo area, or...

**JC:** No she comes from Bassendean. I knew her sister before. She used to work in Wanneroo, we were just good friends, nothing serious or that. When I came back I said I'd go out there and of course her other sister was there and it was no secret, didn't want the other one. So from there it went on.

**SO:** What was happening to the market garden that you used to work in, while you were in the war, were they growing crops?

**JC:** Yeah, they were still there. I think they kept the garden going in there at Yanchep right up till the war finished and then after that they went down towards Wanneroo, Clarkson's Avenue an area there.

**SO:** Can you tell me about coming back down to Perth from Noonkanbah?

**JC:** It was sort of a bit famous because we had to make our own way down, find all our own waterholes and I think on the whole trip down we only found about two water holes you could call it, fit to drink, you know you could drink some of the water there and you'd go to have a bloody pee and you'd have fish hooks coming out of there. Oh it was shocking stuff.

**SO:** It took you quite a while to get back to Perth?

**JC:** Oh yes, I can't remember off-hand there, but I know it was quite a few days. It was nineteen hundred, nearly 2,000 miles we had to travel. I can't remember off-hand; all we knew was we were heading back to Perth and that was all we cared about.

**SO:** And then you had leave? When you got back to Perth?

**JC:** Yep, then leave, then we went from then had a bit more leave then we were disbanded then. We went everywhere then, everyone had to go through Kurranga or one of those big jungle training camps and that was when we all finished going through I think. So we were all hanging around in Kurranga in Queensland right up to the end of the war had finished. It wasn't all that long after that 'cause when was it. Oh no, it was after I went to Kurranga. I sort of got ahead of myself, that's right after I come back from Kurranga to get married and

after we got married I was heading off back up there and that's right I got to Victoria then and that's when VE Day, Victory in Europe, then I was on my way back to Kurranga.

**SO:** So where were you then, in Victoria?

**JC:** Victoria then, on the way back to an overnight stop in Victoria. That is when the war finished in Europe and it wasn't all that long after that that the Japs chucked it in.

**SO:** What was the feeling when everyone heard that the war was ending?

**JC:** You've never seen anything like it. People just were absolutely crazy.

**SO:** Were there celebrations in the streets?

**JC:** Oh I don't know.

**SO:** Were you actually still in the army barracks then?

**JC:** No, we were just in what were called transit camps, you know we used to go to them and half the time they would give you leave to get you out of the camp. That's all. Had to find a bed to sleep.

**SO:** So then you went up back up to...

**JC:** We went back to Kurranga then and finished my training there and then we went into a big reinforcement depot then and just waited on, you know. Your had your other gear, hand it in and go and draw it again done that six times, the seventh time, they said right you're going to Singapore, that was it.

**SO:** So it was on one of your leaves back to Perth that you got married?

**JC:** Yes when I was in Kurranga, cos they found out that I had too much leave and then go over to the Islands and get knocked off instead of all that leave owing to me that was the idea. Just have the leave and enjoy life in case you didn't come back and get out of it.

**SO:** Did you get married in Wanneroo?

**JC:** No, Perth. At some church there in the Terrace. A Baptist church I think.

**SO:** Your wife, where did she live when you left?

**JC:** She'd have stopped at her mother's place and then she went out to my mother's place. I would say she was still working for quite a while after we married. Her and my mother got on very well together 'cause my mother had only the one daughter and she was just something out of the bag for my mother to have a second daughter. They got on very well together.

**SO:** What was your wife's name?

**JC:** Flora.

**SO:** And maiden name?

**JC:** Her maiden name, Atkins.

**SO:** Where was she working while you were in the war?

**JC:** At Georgettes, furriers. They used to be in a little shop at the corner of Hay Street and Piccadilly Arcade. Where they made fur coats and she was a furrier.

**SO:** Then when you got shipped out to Singapore, can you tell me about the trip on the way?

**JC:** Oh yes, it was a terrible trip. We had all about 600-700 man losses, you know the army nurses and all that. 'Cause everyone got bloody food poisoning on the boat and it wasn't bad for men but oh those poor bloody nurses. Bloody rushed down to the toilets they used to have on the boat. There used to be this great big long running trough and you just sat down. You know, it was two trips I had on that old Duntroon and both trips everyone got food poisoning.

**SO:** So that was your trip to Singapore and your trip home was it?

**JC:** Oh no, one where we came back from Darwin, when we were taken back across to Nullarbor in a train they reckon they'd give us a treat, they put us on a boat so we had a boat trip from Adelaide to Fremantle. So that was the old Duntroon. I said oh no, not this boat again.

**SO:** How long did it take you to get to Singapore in the war?

**JC:** I can't exactly remember that 'cause we went from Sydney to Darwin, to all places we had to go back to again was Darwin for a while and then a short time we left from there we left Darwin and we sort of went back again. It was strange altogether you know? The Japs had been pushed back that far and life had got back to normal again I think in Darwin.

**SO:** Were you in Darwin during the bombing?

**JC:** Yeah.

**SO:** Can you tell me something about that?

**JC:** Oh not much, all I know about that is that we missed the grand finale of it all. We got a few machine guns – only old Lewis machine guns, one well that I was on, never on the big things. Yeah, I got a stint on the oil tanks. On the morning they blew them up I was relieved that morning. Relieved by Barky Hudson. I said see you in a months' time, he said oh I don't know, I just got that feeling. I said what feeling? He said I'm think we're going to cop it. I said they have been trying that for months and can't hit us. Him and Ronnie Crane were nearly burnt to death. And they pulled through, they had a nice big army corp, they used to call them the Burns Boys and they nursed them all the way through down on Adelaide River, hospital south of Darwin there, he told me he just had that feeling and his feeling was right. I was lucky, he was unlucky you know. He took over my gun you see, it could have been me. We only used to do a month up there then we were relieved. He was probably sitting there on top of bloody oil tanks with lousy little Lewis machine guns to protect yourself with. When they first raided Darwin that was when we never even fired the big guns it was all just try and learn from the word scratch. But the worst part of it all was the next day they had a bloody, next couple or three days we were picked out, so many of us, on detail. What's the detail? You'll find out when we get into the town. We got into the town and our Detail wants us to go all along the beaches there and pick up all the bits and pieces of bodies and just bury and leave them, what a sight there it was. Didn't go down too good. It hardened you to bloody death.

**SO:** You were saying before about while you were on the ship going to Singapore, you got the news of the surrender. Was that when you first heard?

**JC:** Yeah, yeah.

**SO:** Can you tell me about that?

**JC:** Oh right, the first thing you do is about surrender night is that you can open your port holes in the night, let some air in there. They would use funnel things trying to get air 'cause we were all down in these holes three bunks high you know. You can imagine that, four or five hundred men and just one big body odour, especially with sea sickness and vomiting. One poor chap in the bunk above me, I looked at him when I went up for breakfast and I said you're laying pretty still and he said oh yeah, he was crook and he was still, the poor beggar he died. What do you call it when they swallow their own vomit?

**SO:** So how long were you in Singapore for?

**JC:** About four or five months. I broke my wrist and then they sent me home. Our job had nearly finished. But I always remember about Singapore was Changi Jail stationed out there and we had just sort of our got our boys back from being prisoners. I had a cousin over there that was taken prisoner of war in the Second Corp Machine Gunners and they used to come down from Bangkok and I thought I would just go into the hospital and just see him and I went in there and asked the Sister to see him. I said I'm looking for a Kenneth I don't know if he goes under the rank of gunner or private, he's in the Second Corp Machine Gunners. She said there's about six Kings down that side there, you can go and check them out. The second one I came too was my cousin. A million to one chance that all these years. He went away in the war, I was just a kid I wasn't old enough. He just couldn't believe it. It was just like if he'd come in back to Wanneroo 'cause he had enlisted originally his parents had come from Tuart Hill. He was working in the mine there and the second blighter I'd come too and seen was him, the one chance, after all those years.

**SO:** Did you come back to Wanneroo when you left Singapore?

**JC:** Yes, I came back to Perth; I was in the convalescent camp at Point Walter until my arm got right. I think I got discharged around about that Christmas then. Would have been '45. Then I thought alright, that's it, they wanted me to sign on for another six years or so, good god mate I've had five. So then the thing was to try and get a job somewhere. They promised you the world but then when you got back nothing. The first job I got, I got a job working on the Wanneroo Roads Board it was called then, built them roads, cracking stones, well that didn't appeal to me too much, 'til this job came up through my grandfather to go out and work for this family and help develop was they call Mindarie now. Yeah we put up 53 mile of fencing on that property in the seven years we were there. There were 18 windmills and bores, tanks and troughs and done everything for them.

**SO:** Did you actually live in Wanneroo when you came back after the war?

**JC:** Yeah, I lived out in Mindarie. The wife still preferred Mindarie. That name thing we were talking about the Marina, but it's always been Mindarie to us 'cause we named it Mindarie. I think about the area where we lived, it was what they call Clarksons Heights or Sleepy Hollow or some other strange name. There were three houses we had built in there. I lived in one, my brother lived in another one 'cause he run the piggery part of the farm up there and the other house belonged to the Clarksons.

**SO:** Did you notice much difference in actually in the Wanneroo area when you came back here after war?

**JC:** No, just the same. The only development that was going to go ahead is when the property what we was on in Mindarie. There were still a few dairies, a few gardens, everyone was still quite happy and content, still the same families. None of them had run away or anything like that. Nothing could ever happen there.

**SO:** The market garden where you used to work was still there producing?

**JC:** No, no that has been gotten back. They only had it leased off the National Park in there until it had gone further down towards Wanneroo and another property there. I don't know exactly when. This wasn't long after the war that he must have, the lease, must have finished on there. Yeah, I thought I might have got a job back in the National Park when I came back from the war and that, they had promised me that a job, but after I went in no they said you don't want to go back to the gardens. They sent me crying with no money see.

**SO:** When you were working for the roads board, were you making roads were you?

**JC:** Yeah.

**SO:** Which areas were you doing there?

**JC:** Mostly we only used to make what they used to call little strip roads. Just like the wheel tracks. You used to box it out then you filled it up with stone. That was how they were building the roads in Wanneroo then.

**SO:** Just out of stone was it?

**JC:** Yeah. Instead of building a whole road we had wheel road, what we used to call box it out, used to be about that wide. All done by shovels and then put the stones, pull it down then put the little stone in, and get rid of the box. It was a good natter; it got us through the day more for a good natter.

**SO:** How long did you work on there for?

**JC:** Not too long! Two or three months I think it was. I saw it as a job; it was better pay than army which wasn't all that much in those days. I think it was about 4 pounds, 6 and 8 pence a week. Yeah, when this job came up in Mindarie I thought that was it 'cause the Clarksons said well. We didn't have a house on it, so the wife lived down south with my mum. We couldn't buy material so we figured out we could buy houses up in Yalgoo where the all the mining had stopped there and we could buy a house so we went up there and we bought two or three houses up there and we dismantled them all and got a bloke to bring them all down and rebuild them down on Mindarie. So I got me house in quick. It was only tin, you know, tin roof, tin walls and everything was tin. Even the lining inside was tin but I don't know whether you've ever seen it, but there is pressed tin. You know they used to press the you know, like wallpaper pressed in the tin.

**SO:** What did you have on the floor of the house?

**JC:** We had floorboards. So when we pulled the houses down in Yalgoo we just got the soil and went through it, we just cut through the floor and we just lifted them all up like a big duckboard and when we put them back we just slipped them back under the bearers and that was it. So it was actually quick. Although they were pretty cheap, we only got them for 70 pounds each.

**SO:** Gosh that was alright wasn't it?

**JC:** I think it cost 30 pound to have them brought down and about another 30 pound to have them built. So you got a good house built for about 130 pounds.

**SO:** Did you have any other family members in the war?

**JC:** No. No, they stopped on the land. I was the only one wanting to get off the land.

**SO:** Were they all farming in the Wanneroo area?



**JC:** Oh no, most of them would have been going to school. My brother Bill, he was 17, there are two years between us, then my sister, well she would have been 15, and all the other brothers would have been still going to school. 'Cause when I joined up, I joined up on the 30 of November, there's only four days after my birthday and my youngest brother was born on 10 November. So in other words, mum had one son going away to war and one was just born.

**SO:** And you were 19 then were you?

**JC:** Yeah, 19.

**SO:** Did you have any other friends in Wanneroo that joined up at the same time?

**JC:** No, I can't even remember any. I don't know. So there is very few that I know 'cause the other two Gibbs boys they had joined up but they were in the Second Corp Machine Guns but they got killed when the prisoner of war boat they were on went down on their way from Singapore to Japan. The ship was torpedoed, they went down with it. The other one was Barney Facey, well Barney got killed in Singapore. That's all I know. Oh Jack Hastings he was a navy man and he went right through the war; he actually got killed in a motor car accident. And that's about the only ones I know from Wanneroo. 'Cause I mean others could have joined up but I can't think of any you know. Although most of them that were here in Wanneroo at the time they were sort of all working in what they call essential, like dairies or gardens and practically they wouldn't take them from there. But I was going to join the permanent army and that was it!

**End of recording**

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