

Australians at War Film Archive

Robert Gibbes (Bobby) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2007.

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- 05:23 **Okay, Bobby, we're going to start off by taking you back to that period before the start of the war,**
- 05:30 **and if you could just tell me about where you grew up.**
- Right.
- Where did you grow up?**
- Well I'm still growing up actually. Well I was born at Young in 1916 and my father had a property there but then he sold that and bought another place in near Teralga near Goulburn called Leewood, and he left, we left there at about,
- 06:00 when I was about eight or nine mainly because of lack of schooling and at least that's what my old man told me whether that was true or not I don't know, or whether he'd just gone broke in the meantime. However then we went to Manly, live in Manly, and I went to the Manly Public School for a while then I went to All Saint's College at Bathurst, then the Depression hit in 1930 and, my father
- 06:30 couldn't afford to keep me there, so I went back to Manly High School and from there to Manly Presbyterian Grammar. At the end of my school days, I became a jackeroo, out at Cobar, near Cobar at a place called Trowel Creek. Much to my family's disgust, because my mother wanted me to be a doctor or a dentist and that wasn't in my line at all. Then I, from there I was jackarooing out near
- 07:00 Burren Junction, and I joined a drover working as a drover's shepherd with a mob of sheep from Tilby Gate down to Burren Junction, then across to Nyngan. Then I decided the war was getting a bit close so I came down to learn, start to learn to fly. I had done four hours before the air force, war broke out and then I managed to get into the air force
- 07:30 beginning of January in 1940.
- Okay, before we get onto the war, let me just go back a little bit into, your past. I mean what did your mother think of you at that stage when you went off to be a jackeroo?**

My mother was absolutely disgusted with me and she was very, very cranky but I was very glad to get away, out in the bush, away from her because she, she, her aspirations were for me to become a successful

08:00 doctor and failing that a dentist and I didn't want either of these things and I'm glad I didn't.

What attracted you to the bush?

Well my family were country people, my grandfather owned Yarralumla [an old pastoral property in Canberra where Government House, the official residence of the Australian Governor-General, is now situated] at one stage, before he sold it to the Campbells. They eventually finished paying, he sold it on terms and they eventually finished paying for it in 1912 I've now since learnt. Then,

08:30 my grandfather on mother's side had a property at Orange, out of Orange called Tremane, and I stayed there at all my school holidays and I used to work for my uncle doing pitching hay and things of that nature earning a few bob and, that's, I was always attracted to the bush, and that was to be my life, I wanted to become, preferably a station owner and in any case I thought

09:00 from jackarooing I'd become an, a overseer, or probably a station manager, and the war of course came along and wrecked all of that.

Did you have a love of the country?

I still have got a love of the bush and there's nothing I like better than being way away from everyone, I'm not antisocial but I sort of love being out in the bush. I used to like training my sheep dogs and handling sheep and stock

09:30 generally.

When you were growing up, what had you heard about the first war?

Well when I, when I was a young boy living at Leewood, out near Goulburn, two of our old station hands came back, Charlie and Bill Chalker, they had been - probably took quite a while before they got back from overseas but when they joined my father again,

10:00 I used to listen to their stories. They used to talk about the, the horrors of war, the mud and the lice and the rats and things and all the dead bodies, and I used to listen to this and with absolute horror and they're, they were two very lovable people, they, as a kid I loved both them and my great regret on leaving Leewood and going to the city was that I left these two dear old friends, they were wonderful

10:30 people, probably a bit rough in many ways, but they were real, real Australians.

What impact did those stories have on you though?

Well the impact it had mainly when the war came, being only, I was five feet four and a quarter at that stage, I think I've gone a bit less now, I don't know what's caused that and I was too short for the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. They had a minimum height of five feet eight

11:00 and that, I was only five four and a quarter or something so it's no good me even thinking about the army, I also didn't like walking much and there, so I thought well I'll put my name down for the navy to start with and also for the air force. Fairburn had a scheme called the Fairburn Training Scheme planned for that stage and I wrote to Fairburn in Canberra and

11:30 he never got the letter, because he was killed in an aircraft crash at about that time I think, however my letter evidently got me into the air force at an early stage when other people were trying to get in.

At that stage of your of your life when you were a young man before the war, where were your loyalties?

Well, my loyalties were, I think always my

12:00 ancestors, I had all come from England, I had a great regard for the British and I still have and so I was right on the side of the Brits with whatever they did whether it was right or wrong and I think they made a few mistakes in the World War I, you know the landing at Gallipoli and so on that was rather horrible mistake for them to

12:30 make, their motives were the right motives though and it was very unfortunate that the Anzacs were landed in the wrong spot down there, it caused a lot of unnecessary casualties.

I'm just trying to get at whether at that stage of your life whether you felt you were a son of the Empire, a son of Australia, or son of New South Wales...

I think I was very much an Australian, probably a fairly

13:00 rough one at that juncture too, but I, I was very proud of being an Australian and still am.

So where does that fit in with your loyalty to England?

Well I felt England's at war and obviously Australia will help because we have always helped and probably always will so I felt the least I can do is join up, and I tried to straight away,

13:30 but, obviously I just explained I couldn't get into the army or and I don't know if the navy want me I haven't heard from them since.

Still haven't heard?

They might, I might hear later, as long as they make me an admiral. I'd hate to be a just an ordinary seaman now.

What was your family life like, before the war?

Why

14:00 the family life was pretty good until of course the Depression and everyone was struck down with, my father had bought when he sold the property out in near Goulburn he had bought a lot of properties and borrowed money on each one of them and of course they brought in the moratorium where people didn't have to pay any rent and that didn't help my old man at all so we had a very lean time for a period. We were really struggling for food and everything

14:30 else at that juncture. I think we were one of just many thousands of people in the same boat.

What kind of society was Australia there, were there distinct class divisions?

Well, I think out in the country people were a bit conscious of class. I know people if they owned a shop or something they were known to be in trade and they were a bit below the par.

15:00 The old grazier thought he was well above that. That thank goodness is all gone now. Now I had a couple of great mates called Leahys in Orange, they owned a shop, Leahys, oh a big store and but they were in trade, and you know my family doesn't like me being a, one of their great buddies but I still remained one of their great buddies. And they were two nice people.

So where

15:30 **did you fit in the pecking order there?**

Well, I don't, don't know but I befriended them or they befriended me and I used to go to one or two parties at their places and I really didn't drink in those days, I might have a light beer and that's about all, a small beer, we didn't have light in those days, and that was about it, but I got on very well with these people. And my grandparents who had owned the property Tremane

16:00 out of Orange, they, I don't think they were too enthusiastic, but they didn't try and stop me but I don't think they were madly enthusiastic about my choice of friends.

What about politics in Australia in those days, did you have any political beliefs of your own?

No, I didn't, I was, I think probably I was always on the Liberal side if that could be if that applied in those days.

16:30 Except when Jack Lang [Premier of NSW] was in and sort of things were going a bit bad. My family joined me to the New Guard [right wing political organization], and I as, I didn't know what the New Guard was, but evidently [Francis Edward] De Groot [leader of the New Guard] cut the ribbon when the [Harbour] bridge was open, and that's the first I knew, I'm a member of the New Guard, I did, I didn't know what it all meant. I, well I didn't care very much either.

But it was, the New Guard was very

17:00 **anti-Communist.**

Very anti-Communist but also very anti-Jack Lang, I think 'cause I think they are... old J.T. Lang wasn't the most popular one with them.

And what do you think, how did that affect your values as you went on through life, was that some of the sort of ideals you were fighting for?

I think probably yes.

17:30 I, oh, I don't know, I, when the war was over, I was approached to become a member of the Labor party by a fairly senior Labor man, and I said to him, "Look I don't care, I'm, you know, I'm my family would all vote the other way. I would be ostracised if I joined your mob." And I think I would've been too.

18:00 **At that stage, once again before the war, apart from the stories that you got from the men on your father's property, how was war portrayed to you, did you go to the movies or do you remember seeing newsreels?**

Well, just before the war, when the Spain was invaded, by, they had the big blue there, I saw a line up of Messerschmitt 109Es [fighter aircraft of the German Air Force]

18:30 I suppose they were, and I was most impressed to see these sleek looking aeroplanes in a newsreel. And when the war came and I only had Wirraways, I wondered how we'd cope against them. Their aircraft like that, I was very conscious of the fact that I had seen what the Germans had. And I think I was always a bit nervous of them, but I wanted to,

19:00 felt like having a go at them anyway.

What did you know about developments around the world at that stage, say in the late 30s did you have much access to world news?

No not a great deal except for the newspapers. I don't think I was terribly interested in the radio news, but, used to read the newspapers occasionally, but I don't think I was all that interested.

19:30 **So you didn't know what was happening with the rise of National Socialism in Germany or Hitler's progress across Europe?**

No, before that when [Italian leader Benito] Mussolini was developing the Italians, I saw some quite good newsreels of all he was doing and I was very impressed with Mussolini at that juncture. I thought, he's doing a lot of good, and then he invaded oh,

20:00 where? Haile Selassie's country.

Ethiopia.

Ah, yeah that's it.

I'll ask you again, so tell me about you seeing these newsreels. Just repeat that story.

Well, I used to look at the newsreels of the war in Spain and I saw the Messerschmitts lined up and I realised

20:30 they were a very sleek aeroplane. Then I saw some shots of Italy and Mussolini what he was doing for the Italian people and I was most impressed, it seemed as if he was doing a hell of good job and then he invaded Abyssinia.

Close, Ethiopia. No, that's right, Abyssinia was right.

21:00 **Okay, well I'd better get you to tell the story again.**

I was very impressed with what Mussolini was doing with Italy until he invaded Abyssinia, and fighting Haile Selassie and I thought, well that's not a very decent thing for a country as big as Italy to do, with this native type country. And I, my

21:30 opinion of the Mussolini and his team went right down from then on. Hitler, I didn't know much about Hitler, but I, I didn't like what he was doing, I thought being anti-Communist was a good thing but I didn't know about fascism.

What were your ambitions for your own life before the war broke out?

Before the war broke out I think I, my ambition was to go on the land become

22:00 a grazier, and that is why I went jackarooing. I thought I'd become a, at least I could become a, I had no money, but I could become a probably, an overseer and later a station manager and with a lot of luck probably own my own property some day. In retrospect now, I'm jolly glad I didn't become a grazier, because they're having a pretty lean time.

So, at what stage did you

22:30 **enlist? Can you remember where you were when the war broke out?**

When the war actually broke out I was in Manly. I had come down, I had taken a temporary job and I was starting to learn to fly. I had done four hours dual in half hour lessons out at Mascot. Mascot at that stage was just a big grass paddock and I was

23:00 learning to fly with Kingsford Smith Aviation and, sorry, no, Airflight, and I was flying an Aeronca, a simple little aeroplane and after four hours I was about due to go solo, but, I caught a terrific cold, and by the time I had recovered from my cold, of course war had broken out and I joined the air force and let King George pay for the rest of my

23:30 training. I don't think he minded.

So, at that stage had the Empire Air Training Scheme started?

No, I went in on the second last air cadets' course. The Empire Training Scheme had not started; it started pretty soon after that before we'd finished the course. My training, yes the Empire Training Scheme had actually started.

24:00 In a big way.

So what were your first duties after war broke out?

Well, after learning to fly I did elementary flying training at Mascot, as I said a big grass paddock in those days, very little infrastructure there, one or two hangers and that's all, and a tower. Then when, I was posted to Richmond

- 24:30 on Wirraways [two seat monoplanes]. Now we were the first course to ever go onto Wirraways, and the instructors hadn't flown Wirraways either and they were just about as nervous of them as we were, and the newspapers got some story and they all predicted we'd have a few casualties. But we sort of seemed to survive. After Richmond, I was posted down to, to Point Cook and put on Ansons [general reconnaissance bomber aircraft] and that really
- 25:00 upset me, because I had decided I wanted to become a fighter pilot, I had an uncle killed in World War One, Fred Gibbes, flying fighters, and I thought, 'Well if I have to fight I'd like to be in fighters, I don't want to have a crew with me and be responsible for other people's lives.' When I went onto Ansons, that was quite horrible, so I flew an Anson down to Point Cook, flew them as if I would, they were fighters. But I
- 25:30 used to do probably impossible things with them, trying to impress people that I was misplaced as bomber pilot. One day I found another Anson and I thought, 'Well, I'll have a go at it.' and I after a lot of manoeuvring I eventually got it on its tail. I flew up alongside and think and see who I would have to buy me a beer in the mess that night, and there was a guy with a big black moustache and you could see it bristling and
- 26:00 it was one of the instructors, and when we landed back, we landed back in formation and I got out of the aeroplane and he came racing over to me and I got a month confined to barracks and every afternoon I had to go under the wings, the wings of the dirty old greasy Ansons cleaning their bellies and cold, freezing, cold hands and Point Cook could be very, very cold
- 26:30 in the winter, so I paid for that in a big way. Later of course I, when the course ended, I was, then made a pilot officer and I went to the adjutant [staff officer] and I said, "Look, please post me to a fighter squadron, 'cause if I, I don't want to go to training, I don't want to be flying Fairy Battles towing drogues [targets] round, I don't want to be an instructor, I want to be a fighter pilot." And I didn't think I had a chance,
- 27:00 but I was posted to 23 Squadron up in Brisbane on Wirraways, so I had achieved what I wanted.

How did you get the name Gibbes Maru?

Well, one day we had a scheme, we're trying to teach the young pilots to keep their eyes open, because it would be essential in wartime to see enemy aeroplanes at an early stage. And thank goodness I always could.

- 27:30 However one day I saw a lone Wirraway flying around and I thought, 'Well I'll jump him and then he can buy me a beer if he doesn't see me.' So I got up sun, dived on him at great speed and when I considered I had shot him down I flew up alongside him to get his registration, to see who it was, who had to buy me a beer. And he had one look at me and then did a wing over and went diving down
- 28:00 madly and I watched him going and I'm thinking, 'What's wrong with him?' And when I eventually finished my exercises and landed back, there was a great panic on the station, this trainee pilot because I realised it wasn't one of my mob, the 23 Squad, had reported he'd been attacked by a little Japanese pilot who had flown up beside him and had leered evilly at him. And
- 28:30 the pupil was put off course actually, he was considered not suitable. However but next, next morning when I went out to my aeroplane, I found a little flag on it called Gibbes Maru, and I was the little Japanese who had leered evilly. That name stuck to me for quite a long time, some of the old 23 Squad of people still call me Gibbes Maru when they see me.

29:00 What state was the Australian Air Force in at that stage? I mean how prepared were we as a fighting force?

Well, at that juncture we had nothing in the way of fighters, we had Hawker Demons, of course they were biplanes, terribly old fashioned. Wirraways were our first line fighter, but we also had some Hudsons [general reconnaissance bomber aircraft with five crew], some Lockheed Hudsons and they were

- 29:31 pretty good aeroplanes, we're doing air reconnaissance with them out over the sea, photographing all shipping and I trying to get more hours up, I used to go out as a second dickie [pilot] on the Hudsons. And we would go out four and five hours at a time and any ship we saw we'd fly low over them and photograph it.

Was Australia prepared for war, was the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] prepared for war?

The RAAF were totally unprepared for war and we had

- 30:00 nothing to fight with in the way of aeroplanes. The Wirraway was our first front line fighter, it had two little 303 machine guns and a one on the back with a rear gunner. We had nothing. One of the pilots up

in the islands did actually shoot a Zero [Japanese fighter aircraft] down with a Wirraway, but he looked up and saw the thing right in front of him, so he pulled the tit [squeezed the trigger] and shot it down, and that's the only one ever, the only victory

30:30 a Wirraway ever had I think, or ever would have.

Tape 2

00:52 **Bobby, at that stage at the outbreak of war, was there a threat to**

01:00 **Australia?**

No, not that we, I knew, no threat, we hadn't taken the Japanese into account at that stage.

What, what were your feelings at the time, what, what did you feel about any, any future of direction of the war?

Well I really felt that we had an almost impossible battle ahead of us, because,

01:30 having seen the earlier stuff on Spain, I knew it wasn't going to be a pushover at all, and then Hitler of course started moving very quickly. The 'phoney war' [refers to the beginning of the war when not much seemed to be happening] was of course something we all sat back and wondered what it was all about, it seemed rather a silly war, and of course then Hitler when he started moving, he really kept moving and it seemed, it looked impossible,

02:00 impossible sort of deal to stop him. He had you know sort the, seeing the newsreels of some of the stuff was quite frightening.

You were frightened? How frightened were you?

I was nervous. I was obviously very nervous, but anyone sensible would be nervous, about wondering about your chances of survival. But at that juncture

02:30 the thought of flying appealed to me terrifically, but I knew I was going to be frightened, but I thought, 'Well, can I overcome it?' 'cause you don't know what's in your own body. I've never had to face up to anything other than horses that might buck a bit, that's, that's frightened a bit before I got on, and I was once charged by a mad cow and when I was in

03:00 the yard and I saw it coming in time and I leapt over a fence and it hit the fence with a huge bang and broke its neck and I had a look at the cow and it was dead, so I didn't have to worry about it any more, except then I had to cart it out of the yard and feed it to the dogs.

What about the role of the air, the RAAF at that stage? I mean what did people feel was the role of the RAAF immediately at the start of the

03:30 **war?**

Well, I think that we, we thought that the RAAF, was to help the Brits all we possibly could, but I think that's as far as we thought. I thought to be a European show, you know it didn't occur to me of course that there was any danger from anywhere else than from Europe, from Germany and the Italians.

What about the decision,

04:00 **made or agreed to by Prime Minister Menzies to virtually hand over the air force to the Empire Air Training Scheme and into the European theatre, to integrate into it, into the RAF [Royal Air Force] effectively?**

Well, I think, it seemed like a very sensible idea and of course in England there had been very limited with areas where they could train people, they had to find other areas

04:30 where they could have a supply of pilots coming forward all the time. It would be impossible in England to train the number they would need. Germany already, and Italy, they already had their, their, their numbers.

What about the fact that it, it, for a while they left Australia fairly defenceless?

Well, we were defenceless anyway. What the ones that went

05:00 over wouldn't have made any difference if we'd been, stayed at home. At one stage, I had, I had when I was CO [Commanding Officer] of 3 Squadron, I had a deputation from my people wanting to come home after the Japs came in and it was quite serious. Menzies not Menzies, Dick Casey [Lord Richard Casey, Australian Minister to the United States] came to the squadron and he talked to the boys and he said, "Well look,

05:30 3 Squadron, you people are doing a wonderful job over here and if you go home and we've got no

aeroplanes, well, what the heck, what are you going to do?" And that seemed to be a fairly real story and he said, "Well, let's beat the Germans over here, beat the Axis over here and by then we will be able to deal with the Japanese. But by going home now you're receiving nothing." And he was right, but it took a bit of swallowing, some of the boys were even sent white feathers [sign of cowardice]

06:00 which was pretty, spiteful and nasty thing to do. People in a battle zone.

How did they respond to that? How did they react to getting those white feathers?

Well, how would anyone react? We all felt we were doing all, a very good job over there and leathering the old Germans and Italians. And we'd have liked to be home, we were worried about

06:30 people at home, but what could we do? Casey put it up in a very sensible way to us and he, he knew how we felt and said, "Well, this is the way it is if you get home, what are you going to do?"

Was there any pressure at the time from members of your own family?

No, my own, my own family they were very inclined, obviously they didn't want it to be

07:00 in it in the first place, but they, they wore it, they didn't try and get me to come home. I could have come home long before I did. I was, I had done a tour, I did two years straight in combat which is one long tour and normally the hours you'd do, probably a hundred hours and I did four hundred and seventy or something, I could have come home.

07:30 But I, I felt well, why come home if you know, if I'm, if I get home, I have to learn all, to learn to fight against the Japanese. With the Italians and Germans, I had their measure I knew how I could handle them. So I thought it was better for me to stay where I am, and probably as a, an experienced leader, I was a much greater help to my own

08:00 squadron by being there than coming home anyway.

OK, Well let's just go back to you finally being posted from Australia to the Middle East, how did that come about?

I was in 23 Squadron. I was orderly officer one night and I was taking the signals. They were all in code of course, I had a decoder. And I suddenly saw Gibbes posted

08:30 through, to Williamtown as adjutant to help form 450 Squadron and I was having , I considered myself fully trained, I had done a fair bit of flying, about four hundred odd hours, I thought, 'Well, that's plenty.' So I was delighted about that and so I arrived down at Williamtown and start the intake. I

09:00 was, the adjutant, the commanding officer was a guy who was an ANSD [?] man, really he was a flight lieutenant, and I was a flying officer only, so we had to have people from so many different musters, so many fitters 2E, for how many fitters 2A [classifications]. And we gradually fed them in and we sort of assessed them and they became part of the 450 Squadron and I went overseas with them ultimately.

09:30 How much did you know about where you were going at that stage?

We didn't have a clue. When we embarked on the [RMS] Queen Elizabeth we were supposed to have great secrecy and we all went down, as we went on the train from Newcastle, as we went along the railway stations, under railway bridges, people were lining the bridges waving to us and so,

10:00 they knew we where we were going, they knew we were off, but when we got, we didn't know which ship we were going on or where we were going. And when we got on the Queen Elizabeth, we joined a convoy of other ships, we still didn't know where we were going, the obviously went into Trincomalee and then across to the Canal, but until we got there we had no idea where we, where, we on the way to Europe or anywhere else.

So where did you end up?

10:30 Ended up on the, in Egypt on the Canal [Suez]. From there we disembarked the squadron. It was obvious we weren't going to get any aeroplanes for quite a while. They had Tomahawks [single seat fighter and ground attack aircraft] on the wharves, being, assembling them. But it was a squadron without aeroplanes and so I managed to, I went to Cairo and talked my way into getting into 3 Squadron which had been in operations; it had already done a good job. They had about

11:00 thirty odd enemy aircraft confirmed at that juncture, so I joined 3 Squadron.

What were you flying there?

Well they had been flying Lysanders [Western Lysander - a light bomber], they had been flying Gauntlets [single seat, day and night fighter aircraft], Gladiators [single seat, multi-gun fighter aircraft] and they still had, and then on Hurricanes [single seat fighter aircraft] but that were just re-equipping with Tomahawks up in Palestine, as it was known in those days. So we, we

11:30 convert, I converted on to Tomahawks right from the word go.

Now it was, there was some interesting stories there about the training on Tomahawks and,

tell me about that.

Well, the Tomahawk days. When we got the Tomahawks, the boys had been flying Hurricanes mainly and the Hurricane's a very forgiving aeroplane, you could be fairly rude to a Hurricane and it wouldn't bite you. But the Tomahawk, it was a different kettle of fish and it would turn around and bite

12:00 very smartly. And the boys damaged something like twenty-four Tomahawks learning to fly them at Lierdam and I was one of the new boys so I wasn't given the chance of going on a Tomahawk for quite a while, they let me fly an old Gauntlet for a while but when I, the time came for me to go on, I had only ever quite critical of these pilots for ruining these beautiful aeroplanes. And when the time came for me to go up they all,

12:30 they all watched and I heard later some of them said, "We hope that little bastard prangs." but fortunately I didn't.

So tell my about your first operation in support of 7th Division.

My first operation was very nearly my last operation. When we went into Syria, the Germans were going through, and they were using Syria as a

13:00 stopping off point to probably take over the Middle East. And so we had to invade Syria, and to stop them and, they didn't because the, they, I had done about three or four hours in Tomahawks at that juncture, when the time came I, we knew the operation was on, the army were going in on the coast and we were to hit Riak in the early hours of the morning.

13:30 And I must say I was as nervous as a cat, I was wondering how I would take this operational business and I don't think I slept a wink that night, I was sort of worrying, frightened about the next day and, until I got in the aeroplane and then I found my nerves easing up. I saw the Dead Sea as we flew past on the way up there and then we came to the aerodrome and we went into Eschalon [?] and dived down one after the other strafing the aircraft on the

14:00 ground I got under, through ignorance and stupidity got under an aircraft flown by a chap called ... I've lost his name at the moment ,well anyway I got under another aeroplane right on the deck and he was shooting and I was going through the empty shell cases they used to come out from the wings. He's shooting at something on the

14:30 far side of the aerodrome and I happened to be right underneath him and as he came down lower and lower I was, if I had tried to turn on the side, my wing would have clipped him and he would've had it and I would've had it. And eventually I was almost right on the deck going across the aerodrome as he was shooting like mad and as he pulled up I got away then. Later I discovered that he'd been

15:00 shooting at a shed full of high explosives. If he had hit it, if he had been, if he'd really blown it we would have both gone, but if he'd come any lower he would have gone, we both would have gone anyway and that was a horrible first operation.

Just tell me what happened at the start? How did you, what happened to you, you got...

Well I was forced, I happened to get underneath this aeroplane, Jock Parrin was

15:30 the man's name, I've now remembered. Jock Parrin was a flying officer. I happened to get right underneath his aeroplane and obviously two aeroplanes flying together, if you put, there's no way, I was trying to skid out from underneath and you know eventually I got away with it. After extreme fear like that there, you can react in a funny way. I saw an

16:00 old Arab on a camel and I lined up on him. I very nearly pulled the trigger, just the reaction and I thank God I didn't, I would've never have, I would have lived with it and never would have got over it, but I woke up to, sort of, after extreme fear is an extreme anger and that's a funny reaction but it's always happened to me that way.

What were you like as a pilot, what did you discover about yourself at that stage?

16:30 Well I think I was a fairly normal pilot, not as good as a lot of them but I could fly an aeroplane. I had very good eyes, I could always see aeroplanes, enemy aeroplanes before anyone else, not only in the squadron but in the wing, which was a wonderful asset because it's the aeroplane you don't see that gets you. So I think I was just an average pilot, but a lousy shot,

17:00 I was a terrible shot. Air to ground yes I was, I considered myself a very good shot, but air to air, no good.

There's something about fighter pilots, they have a quite a different personality from anyone else in, in the forces, they're quite wilful, single minded individuals aren't they?

I suppose they are. I think we, we, you have

17:30 to be fast thinking, you have to be fast reacting, your reactions have to be very fast, whereas a bomber pilot he's much more calculating, has to be more calculating, because he has a crew to think of flying with him, whereas the fighter pilot, he's on his own, if he makes a mistake it's his bad luck.

What was the role played by the RAAF in Syria?

The RAF or the RAAF?

18:00 **RAAF, sorry.**

The RAAF, we had 3 Squadron which was probably the top squadron in the whole of the North African show, we had the highest score anyway. And we had 450 Squadron, 451 Squadron, the 450 was another fighter squadron the 451 was an army co-op and then we had bomber squadrons too, two or three bomber squadrons as well. So we did, I think quite an essential job.

18:30 So much so that when the 9th Divvy [Division] were there, we felt we owned the 9th Divvy and they felt they owned 3 Squadron and when after the war, I actually lead the 9th Divvy at one stage, 303 Squadron which was quite an honour for me because the 9th Division people, I watched them fighting and they were terrific.

Just for those who don't understand the role of air support,

19:00 **what in simple terms, what was the role of the RAAF in supporting the army in Syria?**

Well the main role was escorting bombers, to bomb the enemy air, enemy troops. Warding off enemy fighters which were trying to get at the bombers, and incidentally in the whole of the desert war, we never, 3 Squadron never lost

19:30 a bomber to enemy fighters. We lost quite a few of our people defending the bombers, but we never lost a single bomber to fighters. Once the bombers get hit with flack and go in, and when, the flack would be after the going for the bomber force and if we were close escort, I used to edge away from the bombers because that's where the flack was.

What about the navy's role in,

20:00 **in that campaign, was there support from the navy?**

Oh, the navy did a terrific job, escorting convoys. Especially with Tobruk, the run into Tobruk was quite a deadly run for the navy because they had subs and so on there. The enemy bombers from Italy tried to get at them all the way. So the navy did a might job in the, in the, in,

20:30 in the Mediterranean. They had the submarines to contend with. One day, pretty lousy weather, we were out to give fighter cover to a fleet, of a convoy going through to stop any enemy bombers and we were fairly well ahead, I wasn't quite sure where we were because the conditions were absolutely atrocious, the waves were huge

21:00 under us, all breaking. And it was raining like blazes and we came across a single submarine. I knew it had to be an enemy one because it was in, we had known there's no subs in that area. I went in to strafe, and I've never seen a boat go down as fast as it did, with, I got, I don't think I would have done any damage except for a few armour piercing bullets mightn't have made it any better. And I got a shot at it and

21:30 one of my number two got a shot at it, the other people with me didn't. So I didn't know where we were and I didn't quite know where the convoy was at that juncture. I circled up above and let them get my position, I tell them there's an enemy submarine that just dived at that position, which later the navy thanked me for, they were very grateful for the information.

In Syria, were you encountering the French Air Force?

In Syria we were up against the

22:00 Vichy French [French regime of 1940-1944], they were normal French Air Force, but they had to come on the Vichy side and they were quite brave people, we got quite a few of them of course. I think we shot down twenty three aeroplanes in Syria, before the show fell. I think I got one Divitene [?] I shot at a couple and shot at some JU88's [Junkers JU88, German all purpose aircraft] which were over the fleet

22:30 one day out of Haifa. We could have got the whole of the, all the 88s, except the navy put up such a barrage that we had to go around and some of them got away. But we got about three or four of them.

Now moving across to the desert campaign and to Tobruk, what was 3 Squadron's role there?

Well, we were doing patrols

23:00 over the wire, we couldn't get as far as Tobruk because we didn't have the range to do that if we copped a fight, we wouldn't be able to get back so we couldn't, we weren't of much help to Tobruk boys for quite long time until the army advanced and then we were able to help them a bit, but basically, by escorting bombers, bombing

23:30 around the perimeter of Tobruk and so on stopping enemy forces. I don't know if I've made myself very clear there but...

No, no, no that's fine, but I'm just wondering how it, how it felt when you were looking down

on Tobruk and knowing what was going on down there.

Well no, when we could get over Tobruk, it looked like a huge rabbit warren with all the burrowing that's gone on around it. I think that the Tobruk boys were

24:00 always pleased when they saw our aeroplanes instead of the enemy aeroplanes and one day we had a bit of a combat and I was flashed a Macchi 200 [fighter aircraft used by the Italian Air Force]. Oh I forget now it might have been 250 and he went in just near Tobruk and the Tobruk boys confirmed him for me which I was very pleased about, because I didn't see him go in but they did.

How did you feel about the lot of those rats [affectionate name for Australian troops in Tobruk] down there?

24:30 Well I had a brother in law amongst them plus a lot of friends. We felt quite desperate for them, we were very proud of the effort, the way they were holding off the enemy. There, there was no way they were going to let Tobruk be taken. After of course the RAF pulled out when it, the

25:00 Germans did get in and take Tobruk ultimately, but they didn't have 9th Division there to help them to stop them.

Now what about the story when you shot down an Italian and reclaimed the joystick, where did that happen and could you tell us that story?

That happened near the waters of Tunisia.

25:30 We'd just been ground strafing an aerodrome. Well people call it ground strafing I always call it strafing, I don't know, and there an aerodrome and as we pulled up, one of my pilots, Evany, was hit and he just rolled back and went back in, which was quite a, you know, a horrible thing to watch. I was yelling at him to get out but he must have been dead.

26:00 Then out of the blue we suddenly ran into a flight of three sort of were, three or four 79s escorted by a fleet of Macchi 202s which were Italian fighters which were bloody good fighters. And we had quite a combat. We couldn't get at the Savoias [Italian bomber aircraft], the Macchis defend wonderfully well. I've got onto

26:30 a 202's tail which was shooting at one of my squadron people Andy Taylor. And I drove it off his tail and last seen it seemed to head towards the coast it looked a bit sick, but I didn't know if I'd hit or not, I thought I might have. Later after combat we lost a couple

27:00 of people shot down by the Macchi 202s and I think we got two or three of them. That one I got was confirmed later when I got back, I didn't even claim it because I had forgotten in combat. Sometimes after a combat your mind would go absolutely blank, you couldn't quite remember, it was extreme fear I suppose. You couldn't remember what had happened, but afterwards, things come back to you. And

27:30 later I remembered shooting at this aircraft but that's all. But Andy Taylor who was being shot at he remembered, he remembered very well, so he told me he watched it go down, going down towards the coast, it looked as if it was going in. Later it was confirmed as having gone in and the army people confirmed that it gone down in front of them. So when we drove forward, I went back by car, drove a car up in the convoy

28:00 and I went looking for this aeroplane, and I found it where I thought it would be. It had done a heavy landing and broken up pretty much on landing and in fairly good territory. And there was quite a lot of blood in the cockpit but there was no one buried near it, so obviously I had damaged the pilot quite badly. I'd wounded him, but he wasn't very near by, so he obviously

28:30 was alive when he survived that long. I took the joystick out, I don't think I even bothered cleaning it and it looked pretty gory, but I realised what had happened. It had armour-plated seats under the backside which we were always a bit jealous about, we thought we should have them too. But it had a panel of armour proof, armour plating behind the seat,

29:00 but the armour plating was back about three inches, four inches and about level, but a bullet from underneath could come straight through and I had put an explosive round of point 5 through and it had hit this poor Italian character in the back and he died I heard later, when I took after the war, I took the joystick back and noted to the Italian Air Force

29:30 and they were pleased to get it and their, the character was named Savoia who was given the equivalent of the VC [Victoria Cross] for his actions and they deserved it they did an almighty job and he died three months later. When I presented the joystick down at Brindisi, probably there were about a thousand Italians around and the Italian Air Force had treated Jeannie and I,

30:00 my wife and I, like, had given us VIP [very important persons] treatment. They looked after us, drove us down in the staff car to Brindisi, for the reception, while I handed over the joystick, and I felt pretty uneasy, I thought these people should hate me because I've killed their very famous man but instead of that ...

30:30 they started cheering me. Oh, I'm stupid. It affected me terribly. But war's a funny thing. People can be

so bloody forgiving and so I was terribly upset about it and still am when I think about it. Normally you don't think about someone you've killed, because it's not important, it's not, but this

31:00 became very personal. I had killed a bloke and I knew who he was, I had a photograph of him and so on. It shouldn't happen, it's... normally when you shoot someone down, it's the aeroplane you've shot down, you don't think too much about the poor pilot inside who's probably going in with the aeroplane. It's later, even later you don't weigh that much, because you didn't know him, he was out to kill you if he could have, so that's, you know,

31:30 war. But when you suddenly find the name of the pilot and a photograph of him and so on, that's very upsetting. It still is. Can we get on to something more...

Did you ever contact his family Bobby?

No, I didn't. They wanted me to see his sister, but I couldn't do it.

32:00 The same as when I came back from overseas, there was a lot of people whose boys, families who had been killed with my squadron who I, many times watched actually watched them die, they wanted to see me, but I couldn't face up to that either. I think you have a reaction and that's you know at the time of course I think you haven't got back to normality.

32:30 So anyway more pleasant subjects please.

Tape 3

00:44 **The other campaign that you were very involved in was El Alamein, what was the role there?**

Well, we were based near an aerodrome called Ann Maria

01:00 just out of Alexandria, so we're in a good position to give fighter cover to the bomber boys going over the Alamein area. We did quite a lot of fighter work over there. The Germans were quite anxious to have a look too, so we had a few combats in the area. One of my friends died only

01:30 three or four days ago, Tommy Wood. Three of us, I was leading a squadron one day and we were vectored onto an enemy formation and we were attacked by two or three 109s [Messerschmidts] as we went in and they managed to cut off the bulk of my squadron. And they were sort of back sort of mixing it, but we were escorting another squadron - a low cover, we were drop cover, they were below us. So we had

02:00 to stay over them, so just the three of us went on. We ran into a flight of thirty plus 109s and Macchi 202s escorting a lot of Stukas [dive bomber aircraft] underneath. Now these other squadron got stuck into the Stukas and they played hell with the Stukas, but we got stuck in, well they, the thirty plus enemy aeroplanes got stuck into the three of us and we had a hell of a battle. And one of the chaps, Tommy Woods who was...

02:30 he had an oil smeared windscreen and he wasn't able to see too well, so he survived by sheer luck, and unfortunately he died only the other day. But we had a most horrific combat, and the thing was there were so many enemy aeroplanes trying to get at us they were all getting in each other's way and I think I got one of them but that's about all we got confirmed out of it, but

03:00 the three of us survived which is quite amazing and the boys down below, of course they didn't have any problem from the 109s because they were too busy trying to clean us up.

What about combat with the German fighters, what were they like as combat pilots?

Well the German pilots in the beginning were all highly experienced. Later, the quality fell off a bit as we managed to

03:30 kill them off. But one combat we had, we had twenty seven aces [highly successful pilots] against us we discovered later, after the war we've discovered this and I wonder we didn't fare that well that day. But the German fighter pilots were good. If they stayed in and tried to dog fight us they were gone because we could out turn them but they were had better aeroplanes, they had a better

04:00 ceiling, they had a ceiling of thirty thousand odd feet we had a ceiling, a useful ceiling up to about sixteen or eighteen thousand feet and they went off badly after that. We could out turn them we could out dive them, but they could out climb us and they were faster, and had a better ceiling so they were always above us. They used pick and zoom attack, so come down at a great speed, go through our formations, shooting and then we'd get a fleeting shot at them only. And it was

04:30 quite amazing, but we actually got two enemy aeroplanes for every one we lost in the final round up, and considering they had very much better aeroplanes, we, you know, I think we did pretty well. I put in one or two in my combat reports, 'Please give me 109s.'

How do you account for those successes?

Well, I think we worked as a team. We stuck together as a team, and fought as a team.

- 05:00 And this business of running away on your own it was not good practice. One of the permanent officers who came over to take over from me he was a very brave but very stupid because he wouldn't listen to anyone. And last seen he was chasing a mob of 109s on his own and all I can think of is he must have caught them because we never saw him again. But this is why we did well I think, we stayed together and fought together.
- 05:30 And our tactics were better, well they had to be better, but the 109s I think they - we had certain ones. We had a lone character called 'Marseilles' used to come over, he shot down a few of ours but one day he claimed something like eight or nine of our fighter force in North Africa. And we didn't lose any that day, so I don't know what his score really was. But I think he undoubtedly, I watched him shoot down two or three
- 06:00 of my people, undoubtedly he was good but to this day I think he put a bit of a swiftie over. I was talking to one of the commanding officers of a JU87 [other name of Stuka dive bomber aircraft] after the war. He came and stayed with me actually and I was having a chat to him and I said, "Well you know, some of these scores they sounded amazing." He said, "But Bobby, we had to help the morale of the people at
- 06:30 home." And I think there was a lot some of those top scoring people didn't get quite as many as they'd claimed, thank goodness.

What about the Australians, were they exaggerating?

Well no, I don't think we could exaggerate. Unfortunately our system of scoring was pretty tough. Unless you had someone witness an aeroplane go in, you couldn't witness on your own. You could but you wouldn't be believed.

- 07:00 We didn't have camera guns, in England of course they had camera guns so they'd have a record of what they had shot at and what the results were. The Spitfires [single seat fighter aircraft] had camera guns, but Kitty Hawks [single seat fighter and ground attack aircraft] we never did have camera guns so unless someone saw what was, happened, you didn't one confirmed. Maybe the army used to confirm quite a few for us at times, if we happened to be in their area.

Tell me about the longest combat that you were engaged in at that stage.

I don't even like to think about

- 07:30 it. Two squadrons went out on a sweep over the forward areas and we saw three 109s coming towards us above us and they turned. They turned anticlockwise round us and so this leader of our gaggle [group of aircraft], Peter Jeffrey, started following them around. And after a while they
- 08:00 were joined by a lot more 109s up on top and we ultimately got into what they called a defensive circle, because one aircraft following the other. If someone attacked you, the one behind should be able to get a shot at it. The theory was wonderful but it didn't work. And, we were pretty well over German aerodromes, we were very, very close to the German aerodromes where the 109s had come from and there was a stack of
- 08:30 the jolly things and there were two of our squadron, two squadrons of Kitty Hawks, Tomahawks in those days. And it was a horrible business; it went on and on and on. We were gradually forced down lower and lower, we were over enemy territory. So the guns were shooting up at us and the 109s were coming down on us and we had a very miserable time, it was terrifying. And after one hour and five minutes of combat
- 09:00 I thought we'd got lost, we'd forgotten, we didn't know who the CO was any more, who was leading. So I sort of could see that they were thinning a bit, so I broke away and waggled my wings hoping the mob would follow me, I wanted to get home before I ran out of petrol. And not a soul followed so I got back in great terror and joined and next time I waggled my wings the mob followed me almost as one, and we didn't
- 09:30 see another 109 then. We landed at a forward aerodrome which we had only just captured and all of us were out of petrol, we were almost completely petrol and it was coming on dark. And we were lucky to get away with it. Six of our people missing out of the twelve, we lost three in the morning, all killed in the afternoon, three of them, two of them were taken prisoner, one walked home. And we had about three killed in the afternoon so we had a busy day.
- 10:00 If you're only working with eighteen aircraft, eighteen pilots working a little squadron formations of twelve, it was pretty disastrous. My morale of course, I didn't have any after that. I didn't think I could go on. I'd had about an hour and a half of actual combat during that one day, and you know my morale was
- 10:30 bedrock and I used to go back to the operations tent and pretend I wanted to join the next flight, have another crack at them, but underneath I didn't want to do that at all, it was just show. And luckily the next one or two flights I went on we didn't have any real combat, so my morale gradually returned and I was right again. But oh, I nearly turned it in, and it would have been a great shame, I would never have

got over it, if I

11:00 had of course.

Tell me about this, I mean it's an interesting thing about honour among pilots even from opposing sides, and you've had very interesting experiences since the war but there's a story about you coming across a grave of an Australian pilot who had been buried by the Italians, is that right? Can you tell me about that?

Well that's the result of this combat

11:30 we had for one hour and five minutes. I went out after we'd captured that territory. I went out in the staff car to have a look, I knew just where the combat had taken place. And I took photographs of my old friend Lindsay Knowles' aircraft which just hit the deck, and he collided with another 109 and they both went down, two

12:00 wings fluttered down, one from each aeroplane from the middle and they went down each side and both was killed. And then I found a pilot, Eric Lane's aircraft, the remains of his aircraft and there it was, his grave. He had been buried by the Italians who were obviously religious people. They had gone to a lot of trouble, they had put the propeller

12:30 from his aeroplane, they had buried one blade leaving the other two blades sticking up like a big V and they had made a little wooden cross and written on it, 'Mr Sam Lees Laughton'. He was a pilot's officer actually, Lees Laughton, and the date he was killed. And the grave was made of a lot of stones they had collected and they had a little cross in the middle of it and it was quite wonderful of them to have done this.

13:00 And Sammy Lee is still there. I heard after the war, I went back to Alamein, the 50th anniversary, and I went to the war cemetery there, where a lot of my friends were there. But they never did find Sammy Lees' grave and you know, it was, he probably, it's probably still where it was where I saw it last and I think that's where it should be too, that's where he died.

13:30 **That's a lovely story. You got shot down yourself on a couple of occasions.**

Oh, I was good at it. I got shot down the first time by a rear gunner from JU88, the German bombers. They were flying in diamond, what we called diamond formation, just a triangle, and I was shooting at the gentleman in the rear of the diamond.

14:00 And some nasty gunner in one of the other 88s set my engines on fire and it wasn't very good. I had long thought of how I'd get out, so I in this case because some of the boys had tried to get out but their parachutes had caught over the back of the canopy and they were spreadeagled and couldn't get free, and one of them

14:30 survived at the last minute by getting his foot under the joystick and pulling it back and he went in flat. He survived it. I was frightened that might happen to me so I rolled on my back thinking this was the way to get out and I had wound the trim forward so when I released the joystick I was shot out like a bullet. Of course I hadn't allowed for the aerial, I got tangled up in the aerial, I hit the tail plane or it hit me, I still have a mark on my knee when I hit the tail plane,

15:00 tail fin, and I got wrapped up in this blasted aerial. And on my way down, I eventually got the aerial away from me, pulled my ripcord, and the parachute opened. And then I heard, I watched my aeroplane going down, burning fiercely on the way and I saw it hit and then I suddenly heard the roar of an aeroplane. Now one of my pilots, Dudley Park, had been shot out of his parachute in a previous

15:30 dogfight shortly before this and I thought, 'My God, they're coming after me.' And so I was climbing up on the shrouds trying to make myself a difficult target and then suddenly the noise built up to a crescendo and suddenly there was an almighty woof, I had actually watched this, it took the noise probably a second or two to get to me and that was a second or two of real terror.

How did you survive that?

Well

16:00 I had been taught how to fold parachutes when I was at Richmond, I think I could still fold a parachute. But no-one ever told us how to jump, how to land. I knew we should land facing downwind, that's about all I knew, but no-one said you should land with your knees together and legs relaxed and no-one had told me that, so I landed with legs apart, landed crosswind and broke my ankle.

16:30 And I was there writhing in agony, I didn't know whether I was in enemy territory or not and eventually, you know sort of there in great pain and suddenly a weapons carrier came up with a lot of nondescript looking people and I thought they were Germans. And 'cause as I say I didn't know where I was which was north, east or west so I put my hands up and surrendered. And one of

17:00 them said, "Get up chum." And so a Pommy [English] bastard, so I said, "And don't call me chum!" just so my dignity's placated, they didn't know I was a squadron leader. However they were good fellows, they accepted it, took me into the first aid post they put on a temporary splint on my left ankle which had badly broken and

17:30 fibula broken and eventually I got to hospital and that was the first one.

And there was another time too wasn't there?

Yes, unfortunately there was another time. I got shot up another, badly another time and I couldn't get my wheels down, they shot my hydraulics away. And I thought if they had any beer at the mess that'd be the place to be, so I crashed landed the aeroplane right alongside the mess.

18:00 And got in a hell of a row, this is when I was a flying officer, got into a hell of a row from the CEO [Chief Equipment Officer]. But there was no beer in the mess anyhow it turned out, so I messed up. The other time when I was really shot down, it was towards the end of the show in Africa, we're escorting wobble [?] bombers and do you want to know all about it. We're escorting bombers, American bombers, then we had to form up

18:30 at low altitude to keep below the radar, as you see under five hundred feet. And we had to go across, we're going to raid a place called Bur de Fen [?] and we formed up with the American squadron at low altitude and they all formed up very nicely and away we all went, sitting down low. Now I was the leader of the whole thing. The fighter leader was in charge of the bombers too, he could turn them back if he wanted, if it became necessary.

19:00 And hoping to have the element of surprise, flying over the water at low altitude coming in over the land and then we'd climb so we could bomb the aerodrome, Bur de Fen[?]. Two 109s flew over when we were halfway across the bay and there and as there was no, they obviously had seen us, so reconnaissance aircraft I then gave the instructions to climb, so we all climbed like mad. By the time we got over the coast the whole Luftwaffe [German Air Force]

19:30 was there waiting for us, and this is where we had all these aces that we discovered later. Anyway, one we went over the coast with the stack of 109s picking at us. We had some Spitfires as top cover and they were so damned high, they didn't see a thing. They didn't come into it at all, but the 109s were coming down like rockets onto us trying to go through the top squadrons who were, we had three squadrons above us

20:00 other than the Spitfires who were way up and they were coming through at high speeds and trying to get the bombers, we were trying to, we were obviously keeping them off the bombers. One of my pilots was shot down before we got to the aerodrome, and after we were climbing up to perform, to catch up on the way home, the show was all over, I looked down, one of my pilots was down below being shot up by three 109s.

20:30 So I called up the squadron, the squadron above us was supposed to be the attack squadron, I was supposed to stay right alongside the bombers. I called for them to go down and help him, someone to go down and no-one went, and so I gave it a couple of calls and it was quite serious so I disobeyed all instructions, they were on they're on their way home anyway, so I dived down to try and help, I got there too late, just as I got there,

21:00 there were three 109s taking, I hit the lead 109, I think I got him. In the meantime I watched my buddy go in and burn furiously and so I then started climbing up to try to catch the formation with the remaining two 109s chasing me. We had learnt how to avoid 109 attack from astern by skidding slightly, by skinning your aeroplane slightly so it wouldn't be apparent to the guy shooting at you, but the bullets would go to one side.

21:30 And then you wait to see the black coming out his wings because it would show his guns were firing and then you'd take a violent evasive action from that juncture. And I had done this two or three times and I was catching up to the formation above and suddenly someone up above screamed, "Look out down below!" and I had lost sight of one of the 109s. I was watching an attack come in but I'd lost the other one. So I panicked and you shouldn't do that

22:00 And I turned, did a three sixty degree turn, I went right through his cone of fire and got a cannon in the motor which didn't seem to help much and so I went down. I was fairly high by then so I went, I put in a vertical dive, I knew I'd had it, went straight down, built up a speed of over three hundred miles an hour. The two 109s turned and came after me so when I didn't want to have my control shot away,

22:30 I thought, 'If they hit my elevators I go straight in without controls.' so I pushed it onto the deck. I was still doing three hundred when I last looked at the air speed and it's all fairly flat country with just a bit of salt bush around. So I probably bounced for four or five miles before I came to a rest and immediately I came to a rest I clambered out onto the wing and the two 109s came in and I thought, 'Oh God they're going to strafe me!' They didn't, they waved, they went

23:00 past at low altitude and one of them either waved or saluted and they were decent people, they probably knew I'd be picked up anyway. Anyway I got home from that one.

Whereabouts was that?

Oh, oh before Bengazi I forget the actual name of the air strip of Bur de Fen[?]. I had a few nasty moments getting back of course. Back through enemy lines. We were one hundred and seventy miles behind

23:30 the enemy, behind our lines, but I knew the army were going to attack that day and I was praying like blazes they were successful. And they were, so I only walked about, I suppose about seventy about fifty miles in a straight line, but wandering around of course I probably walked a fair bit more. And I was just getting over having had a broken leg, a broken ankle and fracture

24:00 and I was unconsciously trying to help my left leg. My right leg was the crook [injured] one when I got in, which just shows I must have been favouring it.

You said you didn't have gun cameras at the time, but yet there was some pretty remarkable footage taken from time to time by combat cameramen including Damien Parer [Australian war cameraman and correspondent]. Do you remember him?

I remember Damien well; he used to always stay in our mess when he came.

24:30 And he'd go with the bomber boys if we were escorting, he was pretty fussy, being an Australian, about having Australians looking after him. One day, well I only heard this after the war, from Bill Hudson who was a cameraman with the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], at one stage, Bill was flying a bomber the Blenheim [Bristol Blenheim] and we were giving close escort. Now I happened to be on the left side of Bill,

25:00 as the 109s were attacking and I was evidently being a, probably putting on a bit of an act see, 'cause I went past, I was flying outside his aeroplane I couldn't remember it at all, but he assured me this happened, I was doing this to him. And so Bill suddenly looked back and he saw his gunner standing up behind him, he said, "Hey what are you doing, get back in the turret, the 109s are attacking!" And he said, "I can't, Damien Parer's there,

25:30 he wants to get some action shots!" This was Damien Parer's form. Bill said, "Well, get him out of it immediately!" I heard that story after the war. Bill's still alive, living out near Palm Beach, somewhere.

So after El Alamein, the 9th Division had gone, had been withdrawn.

Well, they were the one's who broke through though, they made the whole thing possible

26:00 **Yes, they did, but after that had happened they were withdrawn the navy had gone, so really it was effectively the RAAF was the only one still around, what happened to [German Field Marshal] Rommel at that stage?**

Well, we gradually beat him and they gradually came back. Now and again they'd stop and fight again. They stopped at the Mareth Line, what they called the Mareth Line; there was a lane of mountains just behind and he stopped there.

26:30 And it looked as if it would be very hard to get past him there, and this is where I had a, I had a false landing there. That's, which is quite an unusual one but I can tell you if you want to know if I'm not being too, it doesn't reflect too well on me. We used to carry two, two fifty pound bombs on our wings

27:00 but they were fitted with nose rod, nose rods an eighteen inch nose rod, which meant they'd explode before they hit the ground and burst outwards rather than just dig a big hole. The theory was they would kill more people that way. This was the nose rod, and we were lined up at an aerodrome just near the Mareth Line. Normally we had big square aerodrome series, have twelve aircraft taking off in a line abreast and twelve aircraft

27:30 coming in the other way when the dust had settled and so on. But this time we were on runways and we could only take off three at a time. I was lined up on the end of the runway and the squadron had taken off just before me and one of the pilots had an engine failure so he turned back. And as he came downwind, probably about half a mile out from the aerodrome, he dropped his two bombs with the nose rods and he was blown right out of the air and it was a horrible, blasted

28:00 sight of course and so I opened the taps to take off and I had one each side of me and as I got just airborne I suddenly thought, 'My God, my motor's running rough!' and I realised I was in trouble, so I tried to wave my two, I didn't want to break radio silence because you didn't want the enemy to know you're on the way. So I was trying to wave them away to get rid of them because if I had

28:30 I would have been able to turn back and, and drop my bomb at a reasonable height, but by the time I got rid of them I was right over wing headquarters and I thought, 'Well, if I drop my bomb now, I mightn't be too popular with the old Brits and the army boys.' So there was deep wadi [dry riverbed] ahead, quite a deep wide wadi and I thought, 'Now if

29:00 I drop my bombs over the wadi and turn hard right down the wadi, the bombs will go that way, I'll be going this way, and I have a chance of survival.' And as it happened I turned around, the bombs didn't go off, they were never found, they must have landed flat and skipped, and that low. Anyway I went down the wadi and ahead of me there was a road with traffic, army traffic going backwards and forwards, there was a lot of telegraph wires over the top of it,

29:30 and I was running out of airspeed very rapidly and I thought if I tried to go over the wires I'll stall, if I go under the wires, I'll hit a truck. So all I could do is go through the wires and I landed in this wadi

with huge ruddy rocks, quite big ones coming through my aeroplane, the belly was torn to pieces, the wings were torn to pieces, the wings were hitting underneath some of the rocks and tossing them up and I was watching them. And eventually I came to a halt and petrol flowing everywhere.

30:00 And I couldn't get out of it fast enough, I thought it would you know go up in flames and as I start to run, a Tommy [English soldier] on the side saying, "Stay there chum, you're in a fucking minefield!" And I won't tell you what I said about the mine field, but I started taking very much bigger steps terrified, but luckily I got away with it. I got back to the squadron, tried to get hold of another aeroplane, at least I put on a pretence

30:30 of trying but I was so blasted terrified, I was pleased when there was not another aeroplane, so I couldn't catch up with the squadron.

Thanks Bob we'll just take a break there, thank you, what a great story, talk about out of the frying pan into the fire.

I was in trouble that day

That's fantastic, I can't believe you're actually here with us today.

Yes I was a bit lucky.

Tape 4

00:48 **Bobby, the story you were just telling us about when you crash landed in the minefield, what happened to the aircraft after that?**

Oh I never did find out, the aircraft would have been a write-off,

01:00 it wouldn't have been worth rebuilding.

And there was another story about you landing to rescue someone, tell us about that.

Yes, that's another one of my misdemeanours. We were operating from an aerodrome called Marble Arch in Tripletania[?] and

01:30 the army wanted to know what action, what was happening behind the lines at a certain little aerodrome called Hun, it's now known as Hon, H-O-N but it was H-U-N in those days. It was a hundred and eighty miles inland from where Marble Arch, where we took off, so I took a little team of six people out to carry out a reconnaissance of this aerodrome. We put a

02:00 few bombs just in case, we, sorry. We put on our long range tanks because instead of just going a hundred and eighty miles there and back I wanted to get back into the desert to see if there was anything else behind. When we got over in sight of Hon Aerodrome, which was quite a big square aerodrome with trees and things around it.

02:30 And there were a lot of aeroplanes parked round the perimeters, and as we were had a complete element of surprise I couldn't resist it I thought, 'Well let's go and have a go, do something about this.' so I went in and we strafed, we went through and burnt several aeroplanes. One aircraft I shot at was a Savoia 79. It must have been full of ammunition because it blew up.

03:00 And as I went through the blast, huge blast, my tail plane lifted up and with the stick hard back I was going straight towards the ground until I came out I thought my tail'd been blasted off, but that, I survived that, that was okay. So then we had the complete element of surprise, not a shot had been fired, so I came back and we did a second run through. Now normally you would only do it the once, because more than that it could be dangerous,

03:30 but this time I took a chance and went through the second time. This second time we had a few shots fired at us, but nothing much. But I had a new flight commander there, who had been sent over to take over the squadron from me, a permanent officer, he didn't know the danger, and he turned and to go around again, so I called up, and I said "For goodness sake don't do that, stay away come and join up." But he went in and two of my,

04:00 three of my other pilots followed him and it was inevitable, one of them was shot down and the other one was hit in the ear and he went in flaming. He tried to land it instead of pulling up and bailing out and he rolled the aircraft up, of course he was killed. And one of them went down, a chap called Bailey, fairly near the aerodrome, so I

04:30 thought, 'Well you know, we haven't been very nice to these people, they won't treat him very well.' So I called up and asked what the terrain was like so I could probably pick him up, he said, "No, no don't, don't." he said, "It's impossible down here, there's no chance of you landing." But I found another spot about a couple of miles away. Quite a good spot and I landed, I was a bit wary about landing because

- 05:00 I had holes through the top of my main plant where I'd gone through this bomb blast, and I thought if one of them had hit a tyre I'd be in great trouble. So I touched down very gingerly if I'd realised I had a tyre flat, I would have taken off straight away without coming to a halt, in other words while I could, however everything was alright and I landed and I taxied in as far as I could to get towards him and from a devious route and then I, when I
- 05:30 couldn't go any further I stopped the motor, got out and I had a long range tank on which was still half full of petrol so I knew I'd have a very hard job getting off because there wasn't much room. So I dropped the tank and I pulled it aside and in those days I'm much stronger than I am now but even then it was a terrific effort pulling this half full tank of petrol to one side, putting it out of the way.
- 06:00 I waited, I was very, probably the best part of an hour and I was just saying out on my radio to all the people circling overhead to say anything in sight coming out towards me to shoot it up, but I thought they'd come out from the aerodrome, I was also expecting them to probably shoot at me, but evidently the guns were in a position where they could fire ground to air but not along the ground and probably they couldn't get
- 06:30 a line on me, so luckily there was no shots. However I was in a state of terror thinking, 'What the hell have I done this for?' And waited and eventually he got to me and he was panting and hot as blazes of course and so I threw my parachute out, he got in and I sat on his lap and I only had a very short area to take off, I've forgotten the, I forget the distance now, I think only three or four hundred yards, which wasn't enough, I knew that.
- 07:00 So I revved my motor up to full blast on standing on brakes, put little bit of flap down which made me get up a bit earlier, and I took off, away we went. We hadn't reached flying speed when we came to a wadi ahead. We've flown into the air, and we hit the other side of the wadi with a hell of a thump and one of my wheels, with all the dust I saw one of the wheels bowling back
- 07:30 behind me, my port wheel. And I thought, 'My God there's another wadi up ahead!' and we looked like hitting it, and I thought, 'If we hit that we're in, we're in trouble.' so I dropped my right wheel, and I didn't have a left one and thinking, 'Well that might take the bounce.' but I was very lucky we cleared by matter of inches I suppose and flew on. Now next thing of course I was worried about was whether, we'd been there for a long while, whether the enemy would have aeroplanes there
- 08:00 to greet us on the way home, and I thought, 'Well, it won't be much fun if we have to go through a dogfight with this bloke sitting under my backside.' So when I got to the aerodrome, we hadn't been picked up luckily, when I got near the aerodrome, I called up the... firstly, I couldn't talk to this guy because the noise was terrific, with a huge Alison motor in front so I wrote on the map, 'I would like to try a one wheel landing if this is okay with you.' and so he read it
- 08:30 and nodded agreement and so I called wing and I said "I'm coming in crosswind please have an ambulance standing by in case anything goes wrong." Well I was very fortunate, I'd probably try this a hundred other times and never get away with it, but I landed on the one wheel, the wind on the port side and as I lost speed, I deliberately kicked on a little bit of rudder to swing it to the port
- 09:00 so the weight for the aeroplane was thrown out all the way and I almost came to a complete stop before I came to a rest and we got out. The aeroplane was flying again three weeks later, I had saved the aeroplane and we needed them desperately. They patched up the few holes in the wings and so on, and that was all that was about. Harry Broad, the AOC [officer commanding] Harry Broadhurst put me up for a major gong [medal] at that stage, but they down graded it to the DSO [Distinguished Service Order].
- 10:00 **Wadis are just a, sort of like a water place full of stones?**
- You know, like a dry creek, riverbed but it probably, they vary a bit, some of them were two or three miles across, and some of them only half a mile and the one I banged in was about half a mile across I suppose but it was quite a deep one. So I probably gained two or three hundred feet by flying over it and dropping my bombs and letting them go that way and I went down the wadi,
- 10:30 with a dead motor I might say.
- You'd been in combat now at this stage of the war, you know, a number, many, many times, but how do you counter tension, what do you do about controlling tension to keep you going?**
- Well that's a very difficult one. I found that there were two or three times during the two year tour, when I found it very hard to keep going. My main
- 11:00 thing was in daylight it's fine, but at night when you're trying to sleep, there were times I'd wake up, you know, right out of my stretcher on the floor and you know, getting away from some horrible condition of air combat. And I got to the stage where I wasn't game to go, I was deliberately trying to stay awake so I wouldn't have these horrifying dreams, in reality, it wasn't nearly as bad as my dreams.
- 11:30 But they were things I found hard but then I'd get over that and I'd be able to keep going. There was always a certain amount of strain, keep going but I got to the stage where I knew that whereas I could have come home I had done more than an adequate tour, but they posted over from Australia two or three people to command and frankly they weren't good enough. One of them

- 12:00 seemed to be rather lacking in morale and the next one was too brave. He was the one who chased the 109s off and must have caught them, but so I felt obliged really to stay as long as I could because I was able to, I think, save lives, and made it possible to train new people coming in. Because we went through a few.
- 12:30 I mean the danger part of combat, air combat was your first two or three operations, they were the most dangerous ones. So I used to try and get the new guys tucked in behind me or somewhere right in the middle so that they would be less likely to be bounced. Anyone trailing badly and instead of staying in a fluid formation if they dropped back too far they were liable to be picked up by an attacking aircraft.
- 13:00 And unfortunately we didn't, we had V- HF [very high frequency] radios, which were high frequency radios and not VHF, very high frequency so the radios gave a lot of trouble. We had to have trailing aerials and most of the time when you're... a great deal of time when you see some, an attack coming in and I always saw the attacks coming in, you'd try and warn people. If you weren't in position to get back to save them, you'd try and warn them by radio and often you, they wouldn't hear, or else
- 13:30 they'd bend forward to adjust their radios so that they could hear and they'd get clobbered.

What responsibility did you feel for the boys under your command?

I think very total. I do think, you know I... with a lot of experience I had that I was in a position where I could impart quite a lot of knowledge to them and I was able to help them a bit I think.

- 14:00 **What about the personal responsibility, how about the personal responsibility of sending boys into battle?**

The worst time I had was after being shot down, breaking my ankle, I was put in hospital out in Gaza at 6th AGH [Australian General Hospital] and they gave me a walking iron and I found I was immobile. Now I had taken my staff car up with me, I had a driver who drove me up the road

- 14:30 to Palestine. And so I went and I complained to the commanding officer, Colonel Money, he was the chief doctor there, I said, "I'd like a posting Sir." And he said, "Why, aren't you happy here?" I said "No, I want to go the 1st AGH, a British hospital in Jerusalem." Oh, he was very offended. He said, "Well I'll send an ambulance."
- 15:00 I said, "There's no need Sir, I have my staff car here, my driver will take me up." Of course the moment I got in the car, I went into Gaza. I sent a signal to the 1st AGH in Jerusalem where I was supposed to be going, 'Please delete posting Squadron Leader Gibbes, now proceeding Hiriopolos for medical board, that's Hiriopolos Cairo.' Of course I had no intention. Got back to Cairo.
- 15:30 I had a friend who was the boss of Anglo-Egyptian motors, I don't know I think he was probably could have been partly English anyway, but he was a nice guy and I got him to make a walking iron for me. I had an iron on the bottom of my plaster and I had another fitting made that I could then sit on the floor of an aeroplane and work the rudder, the brakes, the rudders wouldn't worry me but my toes. I couldn't
- 16:00 wave my left foot because of the ankles in plaster but by moving my backside backwards and forwards I was able to put on brakes so I got one of my pilots, Gordon White, to give me a check out in a Harvard [training aircraft] to make sure I could handle the brakes as I thought I could and that was successful so got a Kitty Hawk and flew it back to the desert. And when I got there
- 16:30 the squadron had been taken over by a one of our pilots, a flight lieutenant, Nicky Bow, who had been made an acting squadron leader and he was, you know, a fantastic fighter pilot. And I went to wing and saw a chap, Marshal Tommy Elmhirst [RAF Air Marshal Sir Thomas Elmhirst] and I said, "Well Sir, I want to be in it but I obviously can't fly, can I have a job with wing somewhere?" And he said, "Yes." he would fix that up for me.
- 17:00 That day, Nicky had led a squadron the squadron out, because I obviously wasn't able to and when I got back to the mess, Nicky was missing, he'd been shot down and captured. Clive Mayus, who was an Australian, a wing commander at that stage tried to put, he said, "Well okay, you've got to take over the squadron again." And I said, "Not on your nelly, I can't take over the squadron, I'd like to be with the squadron in some capacity but not as
- 17:30 commanding officer because I can't fly." He said, "Alright." They call me Gibby. "Alright Gibby, I'll put a Pommy [Englishman] in." I said, "Goodness you can't do that, it's an all Australian squadron!" He said, "Well what are you going to do?" I said, "Well I'll take over." And it was the unhappiest time I've ever had because sending people out to fly and operate, dangerous operations and not being able to be in it myself I found that as completely devastating and it's the unhappiest
- 18:00 time I had in the whole time of 3 Squadron. Ultimately of course I cheated and when I got the plaster off, I was supposed to go to Cairo for a medical board so I put it over our doctor Tim Stone. I disappeared for two or three days and went into Alex [Alexandria] and had a few grogs [drinks] and I came back and I said, "Look I've been," and I. And he said, "Where's your clearance?" I said, "They're posting it to you Tim." Of course I hadn't been near.

18:30 So I couldn't fly because I had a fairly stiff ankle and the squadron doctor Tim Stone had not cleared me to fly so I used to park, get one of the boys to park an aircraft near my tent and he'd be on the trip flight, but he'd come and sit in the tent and I'd sneak into the aeroplane and fly it. So I was flying illegally for a while but no one woke up to it, and you know, that way I was happier.

19:00 **How did you feel when your boys were lost or were killed in action?**

Oh, well it was always very upsetting. You're doing a combat you know some of them are fairly nasty ones, you'd look down and see a little piles, little smoke columns coming up and then you could see how many aircraft had gone in. Some of them of course would be enemy and some would be our own people. And when you'd land back, you'd wait

19:30 and count the aeroplanes as they came back to see who was missing and someone probably come back ten minutes later and you probably given them up for dead and you'd have a great feeling of relief when he'd land in. We never had in our mess; we never had special seats for anyone, because you found if someone was missing there wasn't a vacant place because we used to move round in the mess. Our messes were big tents

20:00 we called EPIPs, Indian pattern, English Pattern Indian Personnel tents, and we had two of these big tents joined together. We had benches for our seats and fold up tables, so that was one thing we tried to do. So that people wouldn't dwell on them. Now there was an interesting thing about the chap I went down to rescue, I'd got there too late when as far as I was concerned he had

20:30 been killed. Jeannie and I were walking down Collins Street in Melbourne and I saw a character coming towards me, in uniform and I said, "God no, it can't be." He recognised me, he came over, I said you know, "What the hell, how are you, I thought you were dead, I'd been

21:00 feeling sorry for you." He said, "Well, my parachute opened just as I hit the ground," and he said, "I landed." He thinks the blast of the aeroplane hitting probably helped open his parachute." He said, "I was captured almost immediately, taken prisoner, flown across to Italy," he said, "Then they must have known you were missing that day, the German intelligence was much better than I had realised, they said, "Your CO, Bobby Gibbes is missing too,

21:30 we've got him." And they must have known I was shot down and anyway so he said, and they said, he said, they interrogated him, he said, he told me everything he really shot his mouth off and so Les said, "Oh well, if it's good enough for the CO." So he told, he wouldn't have known much as just one of the pilots of course but so he said, "I told them everything." "And then later I heard you'd got back," he said, "I felt terribly guilty about it."

22:00 But Les, Jeannie and I went in the Hotel Australia in Collins Street and got boozed [drunk]; we thought it good as celebration as was, a happy deal.

Did you write to the parentsof your boys who were missing or who had been killed?

I used to write personal letters every time. At one stage I had a big

22:30 blue with an Australian correspondent there called Kenneth Slessor [Australian war journalist and poet], I suppose I can mention the names. He used to write terrific things about, I was his pin up boy, he used to write terrific things about me without knowing, having met me even. He had me taking off from a minefield and the thing, he had me taking, one of my pilots landed on a minefield and got away with it, so that the minefield was deloused and I went and we put

23:00 petrol in his aeroplane and I flew it back. But Kenneth Slessor said I flew off this minefield, he didn't say it had been deloused there were no mines left, and it made me look like a ruddy fool, so I was cranky and another pilot was shot down and I wrote to the parents saying, I think he has every... a chap Finlayson, I think has every chance of survival, I think he was okay but he probably will be taken prisoner. And Kenneth Slessor evidently said to some of the drunks in one of the bars and he wrote an article which implied

23:30 that he went in with this kite [plane] and we knew he hadn't. I knew he hadn't but I thought he would be taken prisoner and he was, but this gave you know a jolt, this was an Australian newspaper, you know what would the parents had think having got a letter from me saying I think he's going to be okay. Thank God he was okay, it turned out but um, so I wrote a very stiff letter, I must say I was prompted by my adjutant a bit.

24:00 So we wrote to Tedder [?]. I said, "Please remove this man from the Western Desert because his article smell of the tap room." that, because he never came to the desert he used to get his information from around the bars in Cairo and Alex. And I shouldn't defame him because he used to write wonderful articles about me, but after that, then he was going, Slessor was going to sue me. But this was just before the battle of El Alamein.

24:30 So I climbed down, I sent a letter of apology and there was no court case against me, I didn't want to be in a court case while the battle of El Alamein was on. I never did meet Slessor. After the war I thought in a way I should have made the peace with him but I never did, never got around to it.

You were writing home regularly to your mother as well, what were you telling her at that

stage?

Well, mainly trying to write in a

25:00 cheerful sort of a way, recently only the other day I read one of my old letters I dug out and I realised that I had told her that I hated being over there in the desert. That I had never know fear as great as the terror I had at times experienced and that's about the only thing I have ever written, normally I'd try to avoid that. I must have been in a pretty depressed state at the time and

25:30 I've still got that letter. I had forgotten all that. Most of my letters as my sisters and so on I guess they were, had a ball, if a nice little comment with two or three 109s everything went well, we got one of them and so on, we had great fun and we wouldn't because you'd sitting there chewing your teeth of course.

How do you think your mother felt when she received that letter?

26:00 Well, I think before I went overseas, we had a neighbour sitting on, on the house just opposite. He was an old country man who was a friend of ours and a chap, Nesbit Smith, and I went to see him before I went, I said, "Look I'm going to, if anything happens to me, I'd like you to break the news to my family, don't want a letter going straight to my mother or father."

26:30 Which was very unfair of me really because when I was shot down at Bur de Fen[?] that time, there was, they sent a signal, 'Squadron Leader Gibbes missing believed killed', and a letter, my mother would have got that, but Nesbit Smith went and broke the news to her and you know did it as a friend. I imagine she was a bit upset.

27:00 **Just, in terms of the kind of strain that you were under over there, how I mean at what point do men crack under those circumstances, presumably there's a point where everyone will crack eventually.**

Well some of, yes someone, some of them cracked early. There were one or two, one permanent guy they sent over to take over from me, he didn't

27:30 last at all. He didn't try. He paraded to me one day and told me that the Australian Government spent a lot of money on his training and if he was killed he'd be quite a big loss. So I gave him, we were just outside Alexandria at the time, I gave him ten minutes, no half an hour to get off the station, or otherwise I would do him and you know I was so angry. In other words he inferred that if we were killed it didn't matter but if he was killed

28:00 it was a disaster. I got rid of him, he was permanent officer, so I couldn't do much so he was posted to another squadron, he again proved his worth as useless. But this was, anyway.

How would you handle that say if one of the young chaps lost his nerve, how do you handle that?

Well, you'd put them up for what they call 'lack of moral fibre'.

28:30 And unfortunately there were times when the guy wasn't so much lacking in moral fibre but you'd want to get rid of him because he was a... he'd had it. But in the early stages, after they'd been there for a while and their morale would go, generally the doctor, the squadron doctor would pick it before you would. But if you saw in the mess someone sitting on their own writing letters or reading

29:00 without joining in, in the bar if we happened to have any grog, that was a sign you'd look for and after a while, well we had one pilot and I'll mention his name too, a chap, a very wonderful man called Lou Spence. Lou was one of my flight commanders and all the guts in the world. Lou started sitting in the corner and not joining in,

29:30 joining us in drinks and there was something going on because you know he was a very courageous man. And I said to Tim Stone, "Tim, go and have a yarn to him and see what his problem is." So we went over with Tim, Tim being a doctor, he was very discreet about it all said, "Now Lou what is the problem?" And Lou said, "Well," he said, "My wife's about to have a baby.

30:00 And I feel if I'm killed now." He said, "I don't mind if I get killed," he said, "But if I get killed at this juncture it might be a disaster for her." So I said, "Okay, well right Lou, you go back to base, you're going to training camp back at base away out of action and you can help train the new boys for a while." So Lou went back, came back, bang-on his daughter Penny had been born she became a radio announcer afterwards, by the way

30:30 Penny, I always felt responsible for her birth. But Lou carried on and in his old ways in other words, he was a top level fighter pilot after the war, when Korea happened he went up to Korea and unfortunately he was killed up in Korea. But they were the sort of things you had to cope with. Fortunately we had this base camp where I could send Lou where he wouldn't lose face 'till his baby was born.

00:56 **Bobby you were talking before about this business**

01:00 **of people lacking moral fibre, I mean how close to the edge did you get in this? I mean ...**

Well only once really badly and that's after I had this two combats in one day, a total of an hour and a half. That was the worst I ever had, but after that I used to, I, every now and again and I had two or three times when I found it very hard to keep going. But I

01:30 had to force myself and ultimately I got to the stage where I thought no German pilot could ever shoot me down. And I got shot down. But I felt, the guy who shot me down was the guy on top who screamed, "Look out down below!" He was the one.

What about the business of killing and having to kill, how did that affect you?

Well, I think

02:00 it's either be killed or kill. And I think it doesn't worry you too much even now it doesn't worry me too much when I think of the odd people I might have damaged. But this is war. I think if you dwell on it too much... One of the old pilots from the squadron after my time he evidently had become upset with what he did

02:30 during the war killing people, he was very upset nowadays, almost psycho about it but to me it's never affected me that way.

In an aircraft I suppose you are at quite an advantage, maybe there's a sense of not being kind of connected with those people on the ground.

Well, that's right, it's very impersonal, and very impersonal, and the more people you can knock over the better really that's what you're

03:00 there for.

Did you ever think about them and who they might be as individuals?

No, not really, not really, you thought, no that was... I don't think you thought too deeply about it at all, you were there to do a job and that was it. Kill or be killed. After the war I found I had developed a great

03:30 hatred for Germans, and not so much Italians, I felt they at least they had religion which I forgave the Italians. But the Germans I was still hostile about. And I hadn't got over it and I went to Germany trying to buy aircraft, bits and pieces of aircraft for my old, I had some J 52 . And when I went in I went to Hamburg just after

04:00 the war well, three or four years after the war and Hamburg was still pretty well damaged. And you know, sort of had no regard at all for the Germans. And I couldn't get a bed in Hamburg, everything was closed there, there was no accommodation at all this would be, that's a, so I went to a little village out of town. And I was driving a little three wheeled Vespa type thing, Italian

04:30 vehicle, and I went to this little village out of town and I went to a little pub there and the barman, the owner spoke English and I was having a few drinks there and I said it was just a thought I said, "Look, are there any ex-Luftwaffe people around?" "Oh yes, quite a few." I said, "You know I could be interested in meeting some of them." And so he sent the word out and next thing well there was a team of

05:00 people and we were all drinking like mad and I suddenly realised they were just like we were, they were just the same people. And I might say too, I think I had German ancestry if you go back far enough. So what? But at the time I, you know I got over my hatred almost on the spot and I suddenly realised what the hell were we fighting these people for? What are they fighting us for?

05:30 **Going back to the desert, what was it like fighting in the desert, did you, as a country boy in Australia, is there something about the desert that appealed to you?**

Well the climate was very constant. The dust and the dust storms were horrific. And flying aircraft because being very, very hot on the ground and if you where aircraft were parked on the ground if you

06:00 touched them with your bare hands you'd almost get burnt they're so hot. You'd get in the cockpit; you'd be sweating like blazes. So we used to wear Sidcar flying suits to start with. But after a while we gave that up because they were too heavy and hot because we'd start to fly then in blue overalls, Emma's blue overalls and one of the RAF pilots, Clive Cavanaugh shot down and he got out his aeroplane

06:30 and he ran and they, 109s came and strafed him on the ground and missed him so he realised that his blue overalls were making him very conspicuous so he took them off, laid them flat on the ground and got the blazes away from it. The aircraft came in and shot his overalls to pieces, so they were the things you had to contend with. And I never shot at anything in the air, any parachute in the air, but I would

07:00 have after our friend Dudley Park was shot out of his parachute, I would have willingly done it. But I was never quite sure if it might just be one of our, so, because we'd get several parachutes going down, it could have been one of ours, one of my own squadron, one of the Germans we didn't know.

Did you find the desert an attractive place, a beautiful place, was there something awe inspiring about the place?

There's a certain fascination about the desert, the

07:30 distance you could see, the beautiful clear air at night, it was crystal clear you could see all of the stars at night. When I was walking home for instance I had the moon that was the only thing I could gauge, I didn't have a compass to guide to make sure I was walking south, I'd get the moon behind me and plod on. But, no there's something about the desert, it has somewhat a sort of an appeal. I was talking to one of my old squadron, not squadron, fighter mates the other day

08:00 called Teddy Sly and he was a Spitfire pilot and I said, "Teddy, I'd quite like to go back to have a look at North Africa." I went back for the battle of El Alamein, its 60th anniversary but I'd like to go back and go back through some of the areas. He says, "So would I." And I said, "Well why don't we do it, Teddy and we'll leave our wives." And there was two wives with us and it's, "Like hell, we'll come with you." So I don't know, thinking about it I don't think I'd like it. But it would be quite

08:30 fascinating to see it. I went back at one stage to try and find the Macchi 202 I had shot down. We landed in Tunis and hired a car and drove down to the border and this was before [Libyan leader] Gadaffi came to the fore, and there was a border thing there and I didn't have permission to go through so I talked to these people and in my best broken French and a bit of English and so on I told them might I had an aeroplane

09:00 that I'd shot down I'd like to go and see if it's still there. And so they let me go. So Jeannie and I drove through without passes and when I got through I suddenly thought, 'Well God, this was a silly thing to do, they mightn't let us get back!' And I went to try and find out where the aircraft was but I couldn't find it and on the way back I was very relieved when they let us go out again, I wouldn't have done that again. But I flew a Ju52 [transport and bomber aircraft] an old Junker over the area

09:30 some years after the war and I knew where the aircraft was and I flew over it and there was just a sand dune with a tail plane sticking out so it was still there. I think if we'd gone out by road it would have been interesting to see it, but we didn't make it.

What about your thoughts of Australia at this stage, you'd been away for some time there were, Australia was under threat, what thoughts did you have about Australia?

Well, with the Japanese of course we were frantically worried about it and

10:00 we weren't told that much we didn't know a great deal about the bombing of Darwin, we knew it had been bombed. When we heard about the Japanese submarines coming into the harbour, we, I felt this was rather good because our wharfies [wharf labourers] were not sending stuff over to us, they were jacking up [protesting] even in wartime, and I said, "Well this could jolt people make them sit back and think about." So I was quite happy that they'd

10:30 got the Japanese sub, but I was quite happy to think that, that, probably the person in the street will now be alerted there's a war on and people living in Sydney were going bush because of the three Japanese submarines.

At this stage, you went to England for a while and you, there was a bust commissioned and so you, in a sense you kind of achieved heroic status.

11:00 Well, I think I did quite well but I think I can thank my fellow pilots and the ground crew and the people who looked after the aeroplanes because the pilot was only part of the machine and you know the machine was made of a lot of cogs. People who did the maintenance, you had the people who serviced the guns others who loaded your guns, your ammunition others who put the bombs on, engine

11:30 people, radio people, a parachute, people who'd fold your parachute and you know I'm alive today because my parachute opened. You know they're people, they, they are the ones, but when I got to England, I really posted myself to England. Our boss there in the desert, our liaison officer was Sub Wing Commander Bill Duncan and Bill was a good bloke he'd been in the air force before the war and between the wars. So I

12:00 went and saw Bill I said, "Bill," or sir, I think I called him sir then, I was only a squadron leader I said, "I'd like to go to England do a staff course." He said, "You wouldn't do a staff course." He said, "You wouldn't do a staff course." I said, "Well that's why I want to go to England to do a staff course." He said, "Well I won't post you there." And then I said, "Well you won't give my movement order to go to England?" He said, "No, you make out your own movement orders." I said, "Will you sign it Sir?" He said, "Well ..." So I made out a movement order but he wouldn't give me any priority

12:30 so I had priority three which was the lowest rank priority and to get to England I got to Tobruk and I was there for two or three days and then I went onto somewhere else and I eventually got across to England. Went to see Wrigley at Kodak House, he was out boss over there Master Wrigley and Wrigley

immediately said, "Gibbes, I want you to have a bust made by a young Australian girl called Barbara Tribe."

13:00 And I said, "Oh Sir." And he said, "Well yes, this is an order Gibbes." So I went to see Barbara Tribe, now I wanted to chase all the young fillies around. I had been away from women for a couple of years in the desert because no women in the desert and I was going to try and do some good for myself and so I had to sit for hours each day with a flying helmet on and harness on while

13:30 Barbara Tribe messed around with big things of white clay modelling Gibbes' dial [face] and after a while I said to Barbara, "Well look, this is a bit boring couldn't I have a beer or two?" So the pub nearby, so she gave me a big glass jug so I took that in and he'd fill it and I'd drink, she used to drink one or two with me I might add, but I'd end up being half tipsy by the time I finished the ... so

14:00 it wasn't all that bad, that's why. And of course the bust, when the time came for the bust was finished, Barbara said, "Well the air force won't have it, won't spend the money to have it cast in bronze, would you do it?" And I said, "Oh, no." And then I thought I was going back into operations. I had arranged to do a conversion onto Blenheims and then onto Mosquitoes [long-range, high altitude fighter-bomber aircraft] and I thought, 'Well if I'm killed', I thought, 'You know this could be rather nice for my family to have.' so I said "Okay,

14:30 how much is it going to cost?" And she said, I thought she said thirty two pounds sterling but I've since discovered only the other day it was thirty five pounds sterling I paid. So I gave it to her, she said, "When it's finished." she said, "Can I exhibit it over here in some show?" I said, "Yes, but then hand it to the Bank of New South Wales in Berkeley Square." There in Berkeley Square in those days and I saw the manager there and I said, "If I am killed this bust will be coming to you, if I'm killed I'd like

15:00 to post, to send it back to my mother after the war." Well the tragedy was I wasn't killed and I came back and I had my bust given to my mother and of course she seemed to think it was alright but then after she had died, it became my property again and it is a source of embarrassment. I used to hide it under the bed, put it in cupboards and so on and eventually I got a brainwave, and I saw

15:30 one of my old schoolmates who had been and then the master of my old school All Saints College at Bathurst I said, "I'd like to give it to the school, do you think they'd like to have it?". He said, "Yes." So that's where it is now, that's the story of the bust.

So, then you ended up back in Australia right? You take some home leave...

I was given leave. I think I could have stayed on leave until the end of the war, but,

16:00 you know, I was a bit impatient, I wanted to get back into action. They tried to post me then to a radar unit out near Bankstown, under a hill. And I went and had a look there and they, but there were a lot of nice little poppies [girls] there and I thought, 'Well this will be alright.' but by then I was married and I thought, oh. And so then they posted me to Mildura. Sorry, I wasn't married at that juncture, they posted me to Mildura.

16:30 I became chief instructor, chief flying instructor and then chief instructor and then CO for a short time of the OTU [Operational Training Unit] then I was posted to 80 Wing at Darwin flying Spitfires, ace I was wing leader and then was posted to the islands as wing leader.

Just before that, when you got back to Australia, did you notice any change in the population in people's attitudes from when you left?

Not a great deal.

17:00 I was still in uniform. I don't think people even looked twice at you to see whether you had decorations or not, I don't think anyone cared much. Well, probably too many of us were wondering around with all sorts of gongs on.

Did anyone have any idea what you'd been through, did people talk to you?

I wouldn't think so, none at all.

Why was that?

People I don't think so, unless they'd been in it themselves they wouldn't know.

17:30 They wouldn't know the stress you'd been in. People who lost sons and so on would ring me and write to me wanting to meet me. And I found it not; I couldn't face up to it.

When you came back to Australia the big difference was that there were many American troops stationed in Australia, what was the attitude to the Americans at the time?

Well,

19:00 during the desert days I had very little regard for the Americans. Until I got to England and then I watched them, their armadas going over every day and watched the badly depleted armadas coming back. The first time I really took my hat off to the Americans, I realised what guts they had. They were doing daylight raids when the RAF had had to give away daylight raids, they were only doing night

raids.

19:30 But when I got back I think there was, I wasn't mad keen on seeing them welling off some of our girls. And some of the AIF [Australian Imperial Force- the army] guys used to get quite cranky about it.

What was it about those Americans?

Well they, the Yanks they had the um, much better pay than we had and they were able to do things that we couldn't do. So,

20:00 in their messes and so on they had ice cream and stuff like that and you know we never got around to anything like that in our messes during war years. In fact having lived in the desert for a couple of years, our messes were just a dirty dusty old sandy floor and dust in the food, flies galore, you'd have to brush the flies away before you ate something. And you know we lived like that for a couple of years and that's...

20:30 We thought the Americans were getting it a bit easy in Sydney, and elsewhere, but maybe they weren't. I came back on an American ship from Los Angeles to Brisbane and it was a dry ship and which I didn't appreciate very much. I would have liked to have had a bottle of booze with me, but I had, I shared a cabin with a major and an army major.

21:00 He said, "My son's learning to fly Kitty Hawks in America, what are they like?" And I said, "Oh, they're a beautiful aeroplane, very, very safe aeroplanes." We landed in Brisbane and he was handed a telegram to say his son had been killed in training. So that was a bit upsetting but he was a good bloke, the father was a very nice bloke but I felt very sad for him you know his son didn't even get into operations.

When you were posted to Darwin, what was the mood

21:30 **like there given that it really was at the sharp end?**

I think, I was with 80 Wing; I was the wing leader of 80 Wing. Clive Caldwell, was the CEO and Clive and I were great antagonists almost in the desert because we were both a bit jealous of each other with our squadrons. Now I had a better squadron than Clive had but he had the better score than I had, so there was a certain amount of antipathy between us but

22:00 friendly, in a friendly way. But the mood in, there was a lot of bombed out buildings there. I had vowed that I'd never, I wouldn't get married 'til the war ended. And then I met a nice little Red Cross hospital visitor called Jean Inse. Three weeks later we were married, fifty five years later we're still married,

22:30 bloody amazing. However, the mood there, there were a lot of bombed out buildings, the church we were married in a little Anglican church had one wall missing, it been had a bomb land alongside it, but the mood was pretty, pretty reasonable.

Morale?

Morale was good.

23:00 From there from Darwin of course I went up to the islands and that was not a very happy period for me. Because we had these beautiful Spitfires and I knew before we went that we'd have no air action because the Japanese Air Force had more or less ceased from being of any use.

23:30 And I realised we'd be doing ground bashing only and I thought, 'Well, to make a Spitfire more manoeuvrable I had...' we had bat wings on our Spitfires, they were built for high altitude fighting. I clipped the wings; I cut the wing tips off my aeroplane which made it very much faster on the rolling plane. Air Board heard about this and I was made to put, they said, "That's a very dangerous practice Gibbes, put the wing tips back."

24:00 They didn't know that in England this is what they were doing all the time with the Spitfires to make them more manoeuvrable in the rolling plane. I also realised that we'd be doing ground attack and if we could you know, carry rockets, it would be rather useful. So I acquired some rocket racks and put under my Spitfire. Before I could even fire any rockets Air Board

24:30 heard about it, again some character dobbed me in. The next thing I was ordered to take the rocket racks off my Spitfire, and they would have been pretty good up in the islands, but as it was, all we had were guns and a few bombs.

This was a controversial period of the Pacific War in the sense that [General] MacArthur had determined that he was going to push on alone in the closing stages. I mean what were, what was

25:00 **the attitude of people like yourself to what was going on?**

Well, we were very unhappy about it, because we were carrying out operations which to us appeared to be of no significance whatsoever. The Americans had bypassed the areas we were operating in and the Japanese who were left weren't of

25:30 any danger to anyone other than low flying Spitfires who we were sent out to strafe and drop a few

bombs on them. In one month I was hit six times by ground fire, once with a forty millimetre rocket or shell that had hit my oil cooler, fortunately blew back instead of damaging the cooler. I got shrapnel through the side of my cockpit, stung like hell. I

26:00 put my hand down, well after I got over my fright, put my... and realised the aeroplane was still flying, put my hand down and couldn't find any blood so I thought, 'Well I won't get a Purple Heart [awarded to any member of an armed force who has been wounded or killed while serving with the United States Armed Services] from the Yanks for this.' But it was, we were endangering, we were losing pilots, we're endangering lives and we were achieving nothing. If we'd left the Japs there they would have starved in time and even if we couldn't go up with the Yanks and I

26:30 think MacArthur should have had us up there and I think it was pretty stupid really not to have had us up there and it was pretty stupid of Air Board trying to justify themselves by having up carrying out useless operations, they were useless operations.

Did you encounter any Japanese Air Force, any Zeros?

I never saw an aeroplane in the air in the month I was there. And there were none there, went over there aerodromes I

27:00 strafed all their aerodromes. You see now call it strafed instead of strafe, and as I say got hit so many times it wasn't funny. And we were losing pilots, killed doing this sort of work. When the war ended, instead of leaving the aeroplanes up there, I had the job in Melbourne in Air Board,

27:30 I was with the director of tactics and operational requirements and I was the fighter side, I had the fighters. And I was given the job of bringing the fighters back and I pleaded with them. I said, "Well for goodness sake why don't we leave the damn things there, the war's over?" But oh no, they insisted on them coming back. Two or three pilots were killed bringing them back, mainly because instead of coming back as arranged in together, they were getting into any

28:00 aircraft to shoot it out and come back, and some of the aircraft weren't very serviceable. And when they got the aeroplanes out they put them in Oakey in Queensland and melted them, so why lose lives doing something like that?

Why do you think they did it?

I haven't a clue in the world, I haven't got a single clue, it seems stupid planning. I wasn't too impressed with some of the senior Australian Air Force people but some of them were

28:30 mighty people. Dickie Williams was for instance a good bloke and some of them were excellent people. Dickie Williams at that stage had long since gone. Dickie Williams was back in the Department of Civil Aviation, the director, and I had a lot to do with him after the war. I even flew him round on a Northern one day and threw the controls across to him and Dickie sitting up alongside me you know had the wheel that was swinging across, and I said, "It's yours Sir." And Dickie said, "Oh I say

29:00 Gibbes you shouldn't be doing this, this is highly illegal you know." But he was a good bloke.

But he was shunted out of power at the ...

Oh yes.

Bobby how ... Bobby how did you hear about the end of the war?

I was in Melbourne and I had, I was doing a shiny pants [desk] job in Melbourne. I think, did I

29:30 mention I had been court martialled for the attempted sale of three bottles of alcohol or was it four, I forget now which I, you know I thought was rather fun at the time, but at my court martial, I wasn't taking it very seriously and I said. "But look, I've sold three or four bottles as well, why aren't they included?" Next thing of course Gibbes was reduced to flight lieutenant from wing commander. But the

30:00 old, God my mind's going I forget all the, Harry Cobby promoted me back to squadron leader not to wing commander, so I ended the war as a squadron leader but in peacetime became wing commander again which is rather useful, in brackets, 'retired'.

Tape 6

00:53 **Bobby, what kind of a shot were you?**

Well, air to ground I was a pretty good shot

01:00 but air to air, lousy. I think I proved it, in fact I was quite famous in the western desert for being the worst shot in the desert. I shot a hell of a lot of aeroplanes but I probably winged a few, damaged a few, but I got a few confirmed. The most disastrous thing one day was we were waiting to get our two hundredth victory and we were up

- 01:30 to one eighty, a hundred and ninety nine and one day we always had the Messerschmitts above us and one day I had acquired a new model Kitty Hawk, a Mark 3 Kitty Hawk which had a much bigger and more powerful motor than the rest of my squadron and instead of fighting the 109s above us, there were three 109s climbing up ahead of us and if I had waited for the squadron with, you know with the lower powered engines
- 02:00 I would have let them get away so I thought, 'If I go for the lead aircraft the number three back there can pull a lead on me and so I'll shoot down number two then I'll get number three, then I'll go for number one.' So I aimed a careful burst at number two keeping a weather eye out on number three and suddenly he starting emitting black smoke and started spinning down. I thought, 'Oh this is a... I haven't shot at him!' so I looked around to see who had
- 02:30 been shooting, shot at him and I was the only aeroplane in the sky in the area. So I thought, 'He's pulling some sort of a jolly trick on me.' So I kept an eye on him till he was, obviously he was no further danger to me, then I went after the other two, because they hadn't waited. When I got back to the squadron of course, we had a big celebration, having achieved the two hundredth victory and we invited
- 03:00 all the pilots from the other squadrons come round including some Yanks who we had 66th Squadron attached to our wing at that stage when they had just come into the war. And they were all coming congratulating me on my magnificent shooting because I had fired very, very few rounds. After I got a bit sloshed I thought, 'I can't keep this to myself any more, I might as well let them know what a terrible shot I am.' So I said, "Well look, I didn't aim at that one,
- 03:30 I aimed at the one ahead of it." Of course no-one would believe me they thought I was putting on an act but I wasn't, I had aimed at the one ahead. But obviously they were travelling very much faster than I had allowed for because it takes a bullet certain time to get from your guns to your target and if an aircraft's going across your line of sight, you have to aim fairly well ahead of it and get your bursts so where you think he's going to be and obviously they're
- 04:00 going very much faster. I forget what air speed I had allowed, but I thought they were climbing, but they must have been climbing at a, probably three hundred miles an hour, so the third bloke was terribly unlucky.

I guess it's hard for anybody who hasn't been involved in it to imagine what it must be like in combat like that, what is it like to be a fighter pilot in a dog fight can you give me a description of that?

Well I think you start when you hear the...

- 04:30 you see enemy aeroplanes coming in or you are about to approach them, you tense up a lot and you get a certain amount of, I suppose fear to be honest. I used to get damned frightened, but then things would happen, you get past being frightened and you become automatic and so much so after combat sometimes you couldn't remember what you'd done and the later you, bits
- 05:00 and pieces would come back of what had happened during the combat. The Macchi 202 I had shot down ,the one that I about the joystick I, until I was reminded of it I had forgotten shooting at him even and the guy, the guy I'd saved he remembered that. But combat's a funny thing, there's a great, not very much difference between cowardice and bravery and you know, I think
- 05:30 I wavered between the two I suppose, because underneath I was a coward but sometimes in combat you forgot how cowardly you were and you got stuck in and got a certain amount of thrill out of it, especially if you saw something go down or if you saw strikes and something it would be quite good then of course upsetting to see your friends going down which I saw many times. I saw
- 06:00 two of my friends die with head on attacks. It was 109s mind you. The thing was, they took a German pilot with them.

There's just so much machinery flying around it must be incredibly precarious.

Well to watch a dog fight from the air, ground everything looks to be moving very, very slowly but from the air everything is happening at breakneck speed and

- 06:30 you have to remain on the ball and you get past being frightened, you become automatic, your reactions are automatic and it's hard to describe and after combat even if you left some of your friends you've got a feeling of gladness you're still alive. And when you're sort of settled back on the ground you suddenly start thinking and then feeling sorry for the friends you've lost but there's a time
- 07:00 that you're just so glad to have survived yourself, but you become more of an animal I suppose. Later you revert and become human again.

How do you know what's going on around you?

I had good eyesight and I used to always, I used to watch most of it. There were times when I used to see some amazing things, this chap Alan Rawlings for instance in this dog fight that went on for one hour and five minutes.

- 07:30 We were all going around in great circles and Alan climbed up, kept climbing up and getting chased back and at one stage I saw him dive on the 109 and blew it to pieces. Now Alan's still alive, he's in South Australia now, he's not a well man any more but he was a magnificent fighter pilot and they're things you remember seeing. Then watching two aircraft collide the day in the dog fight of one hour and five minutes.
- 08:00 I was flying number two to Lindsay Knowles and I always believed that you still looked after yourself as well as looking after your leader. This 109 dived on him and he pulled his nose up in a head on attack and they both clipped wings, two wings floated down the middle and two aircraft went down and both killed and you know this happened so quickly, and another chap I saw
- 08:30 hit a 109 head on, both were killed and another one of my pilots had a lot of speed, dived from great height on a 109 and when he pulled his stick back, he overdid it and flipped, he went right past the 109 in a mad spin and I thought he'd had it but the 109 pilot was a bit slow on the uptake and let him, he didn't get him. But this bloke came back, he said
- 09:00 it gave him the greatest fright of his life when he suddenly did that. Now I think what he did, he pushed his stick forward he got into an inverted spin went around the 109 and... Another time I climbing up and the 109 there it's throttled back, so I throttled back. I was trying to get on its tail, he's trying to get on my tail and we're both going up towards a stall and I could see the
- 09:30 bloke looking very anxious at me and I was looking very anxious as well because the first one who broke away was liable to buy it and eventually I think the 109 gave it away, but, I can't remember what happened. I remember sitting there and I was just as frightened as he was, I could see he was frightened too, both looking at each other, probably ten, fifteen yards apart. I didn't get him, he didn't get me, so they're the things that happened.
- 10:00 **Tell me the story about the captured Messerschmitt, that you painted the swastika out.**
- We captured this Messerschmitt after the battle of El Alamein. I think the Germans were meant to repair it because there was another one alongside, unserviceable. The one we had which became known as Black 6 had a bullet hole through the propeller,
- 10:30 had lost its canopy, had some bullet holes in the tail plane. I think one of the American squadrons had probably hit it. The Germans were pulling out too fast, they didn't have time to repair it but we had time. My engineer officer had seen it, thought well this is an aircraft he could repair so he kept a little team with him, slept under the wing that
- 11:00 night so that no one else would get it. An army guy came back next morning and he said, "What are you doing with that aeroplane?" He said, "I'm taking it to the CO, it's going to be his aeroplane." And they said, "Well, no you can't have it." He said, "Well here are the tags off it." And he kept it, but had quite a fight with the army boys they really thought it was theirs. But they hadn't shot it down, no one had shot it down so it became my personal aeroplane. I painted
- 11:30 the squadron markings on it, roundels onto it of course, cut out the swastikas, put a roundel and CVV which I always flew with. And I flew it forward with a couple of my Kitty Hawk pilots flying alongside me just in case anyone thought I was, you know still an enemy aeroplane. Landed at a place called Machuber[?]. There were two or three aerodromes there and when I got into the airspace, there was a 109E, an early model flying
- 12:00 around, obviously a tame one. So I thought, 'I'll frighten the hell out of this gent.' So, a silly thing to do, so I dived on him. I must have frightened the hell out of him because I've never seen an aeroplane go down as fast as he went and the next thing he was on the ground and landed. And I didn't think too much about it, I went in and landed at another aerodrome. Later I made inquiries it had been this colonel flying in the 109, this tame 109.
- 12:30 I thought, 'Oh my goodness, I wonder if he'll come and have a go at me?' but he didn't.
- And what happened to that aircraft?**
- That aircraft, I wanted to send it back to Australia, that was when I thought, and then the Brits wanted it for evaluation purposes and so I flew it back to Cairo, but on the way down I flew past a few, the American
- 13:00 DC3s or Dakotas [transport aircraft] unarmed I might say. And got great pleasure flying alongside them letting them suddenly see a 109 sitting alongside them and watching the reaction. In looking at it now it was a stupid foolish thing to do and very, very mean to them because I must have frightened hell out of these poor characters and this happened two, three, or four times. When I landed at Anne Marie, our old aerodrome, because the
- 13:30 Yanks had had it by then because we were well up forward. I landed there for fuel and the Americans came over and they said, "What a rubbish aeroplane that is." Because it didn't have cigarette lighters or ashtrays or anything in it and so I thought I'll show these, they'd only come into the war very recently they didn't know what a good aeroplane they were, so on take off I thought, 'I'll show these characters.' So on take off I held it down, welled up a lot of speed, I pulled the stick back

- 14:00 to do a couple of upward rolls off the deck and of course my canopy came off, it hit the wing with a hell of a thud and knocked a hole in the wing and frightened hell out of me of course and I got dust in my eyes because I had been flying with a closed canopy and you know the dust from the floor came up. So instead of being an impressive take off it must have looked terrible, it confirmed to these Yanks that it was a terrible aeroplane. I landed at Cairo and handed it over to the Brits
- 14:30 and I was frankly rather pleased that I had handed over a damaged aeroplane because I hated them taking it from me. So they then flew it up to Palestine, found another canopy for it and put a flap on which I had knocked a huge hole in one flap and they repaired that and then they test flew it. As a result of the test flying, and this was the first 109G, the latest
- 15:00 model captured, they got quite a lot from, Rolls Royce Motors got quite a lot out of it, so I ceased, when I discovered this, I ceased feeling angry about it, I think well at least it's helped the war effort a bit them taking it. Then a friend of mine, who became a friend, Russ Sneddon rebuilt it with a team of people over eighteen years and meantime when it was ready to fly I saw it when it was being rebuilt and when it was ready to fly,
- 15:30 Jeannie and I were invited over given a trip over to London and back gratis [free of charge], to watch the roll out. Our two daughters, both happily married said, "We would like to come too." And I said, "Well if you would like to come, if you can get permission from your husbands." They both got permission and we went first class, they went peasant class but
- 16:00 they were upgraded to business class each way so they did quite well. That aeroplane was flown in air shows. In England it wasn't very popular but over in Europe people were very interested in it and eventually an air chief marshal flew it at an air show in England. I saw it on television, he came in too high, he was much too fast and he was too proud to go around
- 16:30 again, and he got, touched down halfway along the aerodrome and of course didn't stop, bounced across a road, ended on his back. The only unfortunate thing was that he wasn't hurt, I think if he broke his neck it would have been worthwhile for, so, Russ Sneddon is now rebuilding that aeroplane again. It will never fly again; it will become a static aircraft and somewhere in London, in England and which I think is sensible. I don't
- 17:00 think it should fly again it's the only one in captivity that saw service genuine service during the war.
- Bobby can you, tell us you also became the subject of a comic strip at one stage, you became a bit of a comic strip hero, how did that happen?**
- I haven't got a clue but I was highly embarrassed about it because the, I can't remember what was in it even but I know it depict me doing some,
- 17:30 it didn't even look like me thank goodness, but it was a silly thing. It had me taking off from minefields, doing all sorts of crazy things.
- Where was that published?**
- In one of the Australian papers and someone sent it over to me and of course straight away a coloured one.
- How did you feel about it?**
- Well that sort of thing used to embarrass me horribly.
- 18:00 I hated a lot of this stuff that came because it made, make you look like a lion shooter which I am of course, you know that I've just proved it. But you know that sort of thing was upsetting during the war, now I can laugh about it I think it was rather fun. But you know anyone taking off a minefield without the minefield being de loused would be you'd have to be around the bend, I am half way there but not fully yet.
- 18:30 **Can we just go back to the period of the Pacific war and the RAAF's role there I mean, to what extent did the RAAF kind of contribute to the defeat of the Japanese do you think?**
- Well they did a terrific job in Milne Bay around there, they turned the Japanese, that's where they turned the Japanese back for the first time.
- 19:00 But they're Yanks too and, and our Beaufighters [heavy fighter aircraft], old Black Jack Walker's wing, 60 Squadron I think it was, I forget the number of the squadron, they sank so many boats, they stopped the Japanese invasion at that point. It would have been hard and so the air force at that juncture did a mighty job and one of the Hemsworths, now there were four brothers
- 19:30 I knew them all, they were all flying people one of them Goth Hemsworth was out. He saw the Japanese fleet in a Hudson and he was made shadow of the Japanese fleet, and of course he never came back, they got him. But you know those sort of things happen in wartime, that's probably fair enough, he should have been awarded a VC [Victoria Cross] for it, for that action.

But I guess we didn't, we hadn't really built our, our

20:00 **air force up to, to the level where it could be a threat, a viable threat.**

Oh, yes it could have been because once we had, we had Spitfires and Mustangs [single-seat, long-range fighter aircraft], we were building Mustangs and they were a jolly good aeroplane too, in some ways they were better than the Spitfire because they had a much better range. And they were quite manoeuvrable and they carry good armament. Now towards the end of the war we, we, we would have been able to do a lot up in the islands. Clive Caldwell

20:30 actually flew up a couple of Spitfires up to the Philippines to try and talk MacArthur into letting the whole wing go there, because we knew we were being wasted where we were. We just, you know providing canon fodder for the duck shooters.

What were your feelings about the Japanese at that stage?

Well, I knew enough about them to loathe them.

21:00 And I don't think I'll ever become friends with any of them, even today I feel because they did such atrocious things. Now with the Germans and the Italians they did some nasty things but so did we. But with the Japanese they, Bill Newton for instance, I was on course with Bill Newton as a cadet. They cut his head off. You know that to me seemed unnecessary. They had him as

21:30 a prisoner and Bullwinkle, Sister [Vivian] Bullwinkle, she was one of the only nurses that survived, they gunned, made them go to the wall and gunned them down. She pretended to be dead, she was sister of a Bullwinkle I had in my squadron, I watched him get shot down too one day and he lived through it. I made the remark afterwards he deserved to get shot down because he wasn't

22:00 weaving, you know we used to weave backwards and forwards because if you fly straight ahead you've got the nose of the plane ahead of you and you can see, but you can't see underneath the wing so if you're rolling on your side and turning you can scan the whole expanse of sky around you, the whole war around you. So that's what we used to do, Kitty Hawks over there, it was necessary because we had such

22:30 lousy radio.

Was it, was things tough in Darwin when you were there, what was it like?

Well, we weren't fighting there. The war from the air force was over because the Spitfires had done a mighty job earlier; Spit Mark 5s had done a mighty job earlier. But there was no action at all; all we were doing were training. I as wing leader used to take the wing up and carry out some

23:00 mock attacks on them. I learnt something about flying while I was doing that. I climbed up to forty two thousand feet in a Spitfire one day. I had the wing underneath somewhere. I came rocketing down, I thought, 'I'll see if they can see me, see if they're really watching.' And I got to a certain stage about twenty five feet, they were probably at about ten or twelve thousand feet and I pulled the stick back and the nose just dropped went straight down

23:30 and I went straight through the wing, didn't hit anyone, but completely out of control. And I wanted to bail out but I was going too damn fast to bail out and I, pulled my throttle off but I was still going down vertically and eventually I got into a denser atmosphere I started to taking over and my controls took over again. So frightened [the] hell out of me, I had rips on my wings, came out with such

24:00 force. So I took my aeroplane I said, "There's something with this aeroplane." And I had, as wing leader I had two Spitfires, so I took the second one up and I went up to forty thousand feet and dived it again and about under thirty thousand feet I started to pull back the stick and the same thing happened. The nose went down this time, I didn't put trim on. I just stayed, pulled off power, stayed with it, just thinking, 'Well I've been a damn fool, I'm going to kill myself this time.' But eventually it came out.

24:30 And I went up to Darwin later with a friend of mine, Black Jack Walker, he was a very good test pilot, I spoke to Brian. He said, "Well look I've got an article here, I got it a couple of days ago, it's on compressibility." And I had never heard of compressibility, none of us had, so that's something I learnt that day.

After the war, when it was all over and you got back home,

25:00 **how did you feel you'd changed from the person who'd left to go to the war?**

Well, I think it made me, I think probably at the beginning of the war I was a bit naïve. I had been a bush boy basically and I think it made me become a man very quickly. I felt I could communicate with anyone of any rank, people like Tedder for instance [Lord Tedder, Marshal of the RAF]. I used to drop in and have, when he was in Cairo, used to drop in and have a yarn to him

25:30 without announcing myself. One day I went in there to see Tedder and I was a squadron leader, a wing commander stopped me and said, "Have you seen pilot officer so and so before coming to see me?" I said, "No, I thought I would go one rank above me and go to see the Air Chief Marshal." He said, "Well, Gibbes you should have gone..." And I did my lolly [lost my temper], so I went out and slammed his door and I went up to Tedder's office and I went in and said, "Sir, I think you're going to have

- 26:00 a phone call." And then Tedder, I could see him smiling away, he said, "Yes I had a phone call." He said, "What happened?" So I told him what happened. He said, "What are you going to do next time you come up Gibbo?" And I said, "I'm coming straight up to see you I'm not going through all these bloody silly formalities." He said, "That's the shot." He was a, you know a wonderful bloke and they were both wonderful people. Mary Coningham [Air Marshal Sir Arthur 'Mary' Coningham] was another one
- 26:30 in a similar sort of vein.
- What about, I'm thinking about when you got back, how did you feel about Australia and what you'd been through and what you'd fought for, did you your views about the country had they changed?**
- Ah, not, not really, no I don't think so. I applied for the interim air force and was accepted on the interim air force and then I suddenly looked around and I thought, 'Now why aren't I getting out like some of the other people?' And I thought, 'Well I had no trade you know, I knew a bit
- 27:00 about the land.' So I thought it over and I thought, 'Well, the only reason I'm not getting out is that I'm too damned frightened to get out into civil life.' And that really I was, and then I thought, 'No, you know, this is not good.' So I went in and saw little Joe Hewitt, was an air marshal, you know vice marshal. So I went in to see him and I said,
- 27:30 "I want to get out." He said, "But you've applied for an interim air force and been accepted." I said, "Yes Sir, but I've changed my mind I want to get out now." He said, "Well you can't go." And I said, "Well I'll go to Canberra Sir." And I went out banging his door and of course Joe never liked me after that but the next day I was out. So, Jeanie could type and do secretarial work so I decided, I wrote to a friend of mine who was a
- 28:00 stock and station agent in Coonamble, Clarrie Nash. And I said, "Clarrie could I have a job with you, I want to just brush up on the bush values and so on 'cause I decided I'll become a stock and station agent?" Johnny Jackson who was killed during the war at Darwin, in Port Moresby was in 3 Squadron, he was a stock and station agent and we used to discuss, he said after the war he wanted me to join him in his business
- 28:30 at St George in Queensland, but Johnny never came back, he was killed in Moresby, they named the airstrip after him. And this thing gave me the idea about becoming a stock and station agent so Clarrie Nash wrote back to me and said, "Yes, okay, love to have you." So we went up, I was working for no pay. Jeanie worked in his office and she was paid, so I was a kept man for a while but I was still in the air force, officially I hadn't been discharged, I was on extended leave. Then I started
- 29:00 a stock and station agency of my own at Coonamble, became an agent for Dalgetys. Had a little aeroplane which Arthur Butler had built, designed and built a delightful little two seater and I used to fly fat stock buyers around in it all over New South Wales and Southern Queensland with a sheep dog sitting on the petrol tank behind my seat and landing anywhere. Sending the dog around and to round up a few sheep the buyer
- 29:30 would tail a few and that got me back into flying. Then it got blown over in a windstorm and I decided having been a stock and station agent and driving cars around wasn't my form so I applied for a job flying in New Guinea and got it.
- When you got back from the war was there a period where you thought, what has all this been for?**
- No not really, I think I was so delighted as it was all over and
- 30:00 I had come through alive, I felt very sad for those of my friends who hadn't. I went down to Canberra two or three years ago and I went to the roll of honour [at the Australian War Memorial] and I saw all the names of my friends from 3 Squadron and I broke down and some lousy cameraman went and took a photo of me and published it, which upset me a bit, at the same time.
- 30:30 I still get a bit emotional as you can see. But normally life went on and going to New Guinea was the happiest thing I ever did because it gave me free rein. I started with one Austin [plane] and ended with my buying ten altogether, we pranged most of them. I had ten Norsemans [utility transport aircraft] at one stage, one of which I wrote off and after I sold out one of my
- 31:00 pilots flying for another company killed himself in one. I had three Ju52s one had belonged to Field Marshal Kesselring. I should have kept it. Flown it south when I sold the air company, it would have been worth a million now, millions. It was flown over to Sweden just after, just before Berlin fell, and you know it would be a wonderful aeroplane to have. It ended in Medang
- 31:30 as a melted down into an Ingliss or whatever you call them. You know if I'd had any brains of course I would have been worth a bob now, or two.

00:50 **Bobby I just wanted to ask you a question about the designs that were on the nose of the aircraft that you flew.**

01:00 **Can you tell me a little a bit about that, the one in the western desert?**

Which one?

Well, I'm not sure, there's one in the western desert, one in Darwin, one was, your mother was associated with it in some way.

Oh, the insignia on my aircraft. Well most of the boys have something on their aeroplanes, I didn't have anything for quite a while and then I got my idea, I thought an Australian sort of pushing the Germans back so I thought of a

01:30 kangaroo kicking a dachshund in the slats [arse] and I wrote back to my mother and I said, "Hey, would you do a drawing of this for me, showing a kangaroo giving a dachshund a kick in the backside?" And, so she did this drawing, the kangaroo wearing an Australian Air Force blue cap and the dachshund with a big bow in its back and the kangaroo giving it a kick. The theory, there was a rumour

02:00 around that the boxing kangaroo might have come from that original insignia. It became quite famous in the desert, people all knew it.

How come you asked your mother to do it, was she a, was she a...

She was an artist; she was a very good artist. She'd normally do portraits, so this was a bit out of her field, but she did it very well. And then of course I gave the original to the boys and we had, it's amazing the amount of people with ability you

02:30 have in a squadron who are probably misemployed in some ways. We had one or two very good artists, who, you know, they made a stencil for it and then they did the outline with the stencil and then they filled in everything and they, it looked pretty good. But when I left my aeroplane near this Bur de Fen [?] that time, I went flew back over it later and the Germans had

03:00 burnt it and the only thing left was the cowling with the insignia still there and I thought, 'Gee, I hope they hated it.'

What about the insignia on your plane in Darwin, was that something different, in Darwin?

No, I didn't have that at all I didn't have, I just had the, my score on the side and wing commander's pendant on the side of the aircraft. I had

03:30 BHG was one. Bobby Henry Gibbes I think was one, I can't remember, I had the two of them. One I burnt. So it wasn't around any more. On take off, I had the, just as I got airborne I had the motor chop, cut dead, and it was suspected later it could have been a bit more sabotage because I don't

04:00 think I was a very likeable sort of fellow. But we never proved that. I did a spilt S turn, some people would call a split-arse turn but I'm much more refined, and I managed to get back on the strip, but before I got onto the strip, I put my wheels down, I thought I was going to save the aeroplane and my own life I might say. And as I selected flaps down pure coincidence for this front cowl blew right off, almost right off it and it was a

04:30 twelve foot length of cowl held with two fasteners, it was up in the air and I was in a sea of flame. That's why I've got no eyebrows, they were burnt off, and that's why I'm married, because the Red Cross visitor who I had met on the air, air commodore's boat used to read to me, write my letters because my hands were both burnt and used to write my letters for me, I think to some of my girlfriends, but I can't remember that.

05:00 Anyway, the next thing I knew I sort of proposed and after having me on a string for about a week or two or three, she decided yes, well I'd have to do. So, we had quite a big marriage. The parson who came, we had cocktails made up in buckets.

05:30 The parson dropped his steak on the floor, picked it up, dusted it off and kept on eating, so he was well and truly blathered [drunk]. It was a very good party, and I had the CO's house, he was away, so then the bodesges [blokes] wouldn't go home, and the matron who was there, the hospital matron said, was trying to send them home saying, "Come boys, it's time to end you know, this is after all a honeymoon."

06:00 And Teddy Sly was saying, "But matron we haven't finished all the booze yet." My wedding cost five bob, five shillings. Two telegrams sent, one to my family cost two and six and one to Jean's family in Melbourne, two and six saying we're married. A very cheap honeymoon. And the boys in the mess

06:30 really fed us all, sent over beautiful food it was all the best they could possibly get. We lived like kings; they don't do it any more.

Bobby, just one final thing I wanted to ask you about, at El Alamein, that was of course a quite dramatic battle with all the artillery, what's your recollection of that from the sky?

Well, we were stationed near; we were doing patrols over it.

07:00 I was overhead before daylight that morning, and the whole area was alight with gunfire on both sides and I was very thankful that I was up above looking down not down amongst it. And you wonder how anyone could have possibly lived through it, it was fantastic, it was a sea of flame underneath and... Then of course the RAF went through in the bulge up in the north part

07:30 on the Mediterranean side. They broke through and then after that when the Germans were starting to run nicely the 9th Divvy [division] were pulled out and the boys were very cranky about it, they wanted to follow them right through, they were very upset about it.

What were you able to do from up, up on high in that situation?

Just make sure they know they weren't attacked by enemy aeroplanes. We had quite a lot of combats and then daytime of course at that time

08:00 we were bombing hell out of them we were escorting Mitchells [medium bomber aircraft] and Beauforts doing close escort. They were flying out in batches of eighteen aircraft and with fighters each side of them and fighters above.

What height were you flying at night time over the battle?

Oh, this time we weren't escorting of course I was just doing patrol. Of course

08:30 we'd fly without lights because you didn't want, so you'd have to keep in fairly close to each other in night to see where each one was, you could see their exhausts of course, that was helpful. But in daytime of course it was quite different we were escorting bombers most of the time and we had some pretty good scraps there too. In the Luftwaffe gradually weakened and it wasn't until Bur de Fen [?] that we saw a real show of force.

09:00 **But it was a pretty; the sight over El Alamein was pretty impressive?**

It was horrifying. You'd wonder how anyone could live through it. Really it was nice looking down and not being amongst it and no quite naturally you couldn't hear it but on the ground you could hear it even where we were you could hear the shells shell fire, the rumble.

09:30 **And it was constant?**

Constant, oh yes like a roar, and from the as I say from the air it was the whole area was alight gunfire.

Thanks Bobby, lovely, thank you very much, thanks everyone.

INTERVIEW ENDS