



World War II Remembrance Oral History Project

## 'Reliving the Memories'

### John Wright

Interview Transcript (Revised)

Interview of John Wright by Frank Heimans  
on 14 March 2019 at Bondi Junction NSW.

Disc No: WWI1:FH1 (1 disc)

Duration of Interview: 64 mins. 31 secs. Restrictions on use: None.



*Introduction: This will be an oral history interview with Mr John Wright conducted by Frank Heimans. Today is 14 March 2019 and this interview is conducted at Bondi Junction, NSW. This will be for the World War II oral history project for Woollahra Council.*

*Okay, John, could you tell me where and when you were born?*

0:29      Rose Bay.

*And when was that?*

0:31      In Sydney. On 9 January 1923.

*And what sort of a family was it that you were born into? How would you describe your parents?*

0:43      I was very fortunate and had two parents, both with an English background. They started a business in Rose Bay.

*What kind of business?*

0:55      Builders' supplies.

*They had a shop, did they?*

1:04      Yeah. In Hamilton Street, Rose Bay.

*And this is before you were born?*

1:02      1919.

*What would life have been like in 1919? You were born in 1923?*

1:13      Yeah. Horses and carts.

*Can you describe what the streets looked like and what the transport was?*

1:21      Well, a lot of them were earth streets. Everything was delivered by horse and cart: the bread, the milk, the food. Most transport, public transport, was by a private enterprise, Pope's Buses, that ran from the cemetery to Bondi Junction - it cost you a halfpenny.

*Must have been an amazing time. It's so different from now, isn't it?*

1:48      Everything was physical. People worked physical. There was no machinery. There was nothing. It was a physical operation and people were happy. They had plenty of work, plenty of food, and had families. It was a family-based village, Rose Bay.

*That's very desirable today.*

2:13 Oh, it's all fictitious, of course.

2:17 The original house that we lived in was the first registered owner-occupied house. That was, it was built by my father with all his friends and mates and business associates of a weekend. It was built in Gilbert Street. The street wasn't completed and there was no asphalt or anything like that. We had electricity. The electric pole was right outside our front door and we had telephones, which were shared telephones; ours was three rings, the woman next door was one, and the woman down into Robert Street was two. So, as kids, when the phone rang, we picked it up. So we knew what everyone was doing in the streets. There was no automatic phones. That was part of the entertainment we got through as kids.

*How many were there in your family?*

3:26 I had two sisters: Beatrice and Mary.

*So you grew up in Rose Bay?*

3:33 Went to school in Rose Bay, grew up in Rose Bay, and worked in Rose Bay all my life.

*Can you describe your parents to me? What sort of people were they?*

3:44 Just, oh, reasonable height, reasonable strength, and workers. All educated. My mother was educated to a certain standard - high school. My father did everything by correspondence.

*That's pretty amazing.*

4:06 Correct. Well, he had a desire to do something.

*Did your father have any wartime experiences? Did he join up for the First World War?*

4:17 No, he didn't. He'd been in the islands working for Burns Philp as a manager. He knew what was on in the islands with the German occupation and he more or less watched it very, very closely what was going on, and he knew a lot about it because he'd lived there for a couple of years. Came back riddled with malaria, so he had to be very careful what he did. The biggest effect was World War II, of course, that affected us as a family.

*So soon after World War I too, really.*

5:08 Well, it was. We never even took a breath.

*Did your father ever tell you any stories about World War I, what he did there?*

5:18 No. They couldn't understand it, why, and we're still asking the questions.

*Why it happened?*

5:27 Why. We're still asking that question, why, and we still can't live in peace.

*So your father never joined up for the war, the First World War?*

5:40 Oh, no, no, no.

*Would he have been too old, would he, or what?*

5:42 The First World War?

*Yes. The First World War.*

5:40 Oh, no. He was too young, basically, and too riddled with malaria. They couldn't run the risk with him.

*Oh, I see. Your father?*

5:52 Yeah.

*When was he born? What year? Do you know?*

5:56 Oh, I wouldn't remember.

*It would have been around the turn of the century, wouldn't it?*

6:02 He was born in England.

*Do you have an extended family, aunts and uncles and others you remember?*

6:17 Not at that time. No.

*So what was it like growing up in Rose Bay in the 1920s?*

6:26 Well, no one had anything. We were lucky if we had - we had food, that's all, but very seldom was there work. We were entering into the Depression and things were grim. Really grim.

*What would you be able to have during the Depression? You were still able to eat, weren't you?*

6:47 Well, you know, whoever had the football, you would play it in the street, or whoever had the cricket bat and ball, you shared it. Everything was shared. Everything.

*With neighbours and friends?*

7:01 Well, no one had a car or anything and all us kids were together, so it was self-entertainment. We had no money to go anywhere, or support to go anywhere. Your mother and father had to work from daylight 'til dark just to feed us.

*Obviously they did very well, because you survived.*

7:26 Well, you know, it was good stock.

*So they're good English stock?*

7:35 Workers. Worked for Vickers in Sheffield.

*That's the steel-making town?*

7:38 Yes. Yes.

*What do you remember about your mother? What sort of a person was she?*

7:44 Well, she was the strength. She could do anything. When Dad was sick with malaria and so on, she even drove the trucks in those days, but she could adapt to anything. Anything. She was vitally interested, of course, because they were in it together. You had to work together in those days.

*Was she kind to you?*

8:20 Well, the three of us went to war and left her with Dad and the dog. You have to have a broad imagination of what type of woman she was. She stood by all of us.

*So you said you had two sisters, right?*

8:36 Yes.

*They also went to the war?*

8:38 That's right. The eldest sister was the first radar operator over in Western Australia, at Pearce. The other sister was a trained nurse at the Children's Hospital in Camperdown, and lived in, and Mum and Dad lived by themselves with the dog.

*They must have missed you during those war years.*

8:59 Well, you could imagine it. The whole family was split to pieces. We all went to war.

*Not an unusual story, I imagine.*

9:09 It was standard practice. Standard practice.

*All your neighbours did the same?*

9:17 Oh, yeah. Had no alternative. It was survival. But you knew what was going on. You didn't have to buy *The Herald* to find out what was going on. The neighbours, they all had an opinion and they told you. No secrets. There was no secrets at all. The shared phone - anything domestically, we knew all about it at any rate, so we weren't confused about anything.

*What were your pastimes as a child? What sort of games or activities did you involve yourself in?*

10:00 Played cricket in the street and football in the street. Kicked the can in the street. That was it.

*No through-traffic either?*

10:14 No one had any cars and the street was a dead end in those days, and it was a dirt street so it took a long time before anyone woke up to what was happening. The street was completed with the overflow from the reservoir that was built in Portland Street. They filled the valley up with that and continued Gilbert Street right through to Dover Road and that completed the street.

*What kind of games did you play with other kids in the street?*

10:56 Football. Cricket. Kicked the can. Hidings. All those sort of things, which was normal kids' - normal children...

*Did you have any influential family members that might have had an effect on you when you were growing up? Maybe important uncles or aunts, or whatever?*

11:21 We had a few of them, yeah. They were part of the family, of course. But communications - you had to travel and get there and they'd come, and so on. My grandparents on my mother's side were quite prominent people in the community and we used to visit them, but it was with public transport, as best we could, or they'd come and pick us up, as kids. They lived at Ashfield at that particular time and we used to go over there. There were all family do's over there, of course, which we all thoroughly enjoyed and it kept us all together, the families.

12:14 There wasn't any breaks. No one had any volume of money or possessions. It wasn't even mentioned, really. You didn't talk about it. You were raising a family and going to work. That was the basis of our society.

*With a war every 20 years or so.*

12:41 That's right. But, as we got to high school, we were part of the Eastern Suburbs Musical Society that put on plays in - I think Station Street was there - and we as kids, and Dad, played the piano and we were all part of that, growing up -

I'd have been about 10 or 12, I suppose, or 14 - which was a lot of fun, but that was just a social entertainment. We sang and did plays like *The Belle of New York* and *Going Up* and *Florodora*, and all those plays, but as kids in the chorus.

*Were they school plays?*

13:33 No. Eastern Suburbs Musical Society.

*What sort of chores did you have at home?*

13:39 Well, we were part of the family and I did everything. We were taught to cook and we were taught to play the piano in whatever spare time we had. Everything was shared. It didn't matter what it was, you shared it. Mum could sing, Dad could play the piano, and we all sang. It was simple. It was growing up.

*You were born in 1923?*

14:07 Yes.

*When you were seven or eight, the Depression hit Australia?*

14:15 That's right.

*What do you remember about the Depression years?*

14:20 Everything.

*Like what?*

14:23 It reduced a person's personality and dignity. People, you know, they were begging in the streets. You couldn't get a job.

*Your parents never suffered though, did they?*

14:39 No. They worked. They'd started a business and they had no bloody alternative but to work.

*That was the best cure for it.*

14:50 And managed to survive. It was a miracle to survive.

*At school though, what were the signs of the Depression amongst your fellow students? Did they not have enough to eat, or what was...*

15:07 Well, everybody shared everything. Everything was shared. It didn't matter where you were or what you were doing or who you were, you shared it. That's how we survived. But it's gone. It's history. We recorded it and so forth and so on, but it established a standard of living and a standard of people; the dignity

of people and the resources of people. It brought it all out. And the enthusiasm of people. We didn't sit and whinge. We did something.

*I guess you had to be very resourceful in those years.*

15:54 You had to be. You had to be. You collected bottles. You did everything to get a few bob. Dragged them up to McArthur's bottle yard in a billycart, in Bondi Junction. It's history. They know this.

*How much would you get per bottle?*

16:15 Oh, if you got a bottle-load, you might've got a shilling.

*A shilling? As much as that?*

16:21 For a bottle-load. You might have had 50 or 60 bottles.

*So everybody did that, did they?*

16:30 Well, we did it.

*Does your family have any connection with the armed forces? I mean, did any member serve in the war?*

16:41 In the second war?

*Well, even the first?*

16:45 No. Not that I know of.

*What about the second?*

16:49 Yeah. I had an uncle who was the Australian aide-de-camp to Lord Louis Mountbatten in the Burma Campaign, Ken Pilcher.

*What was his name?*

17:08 Ken Pilcher.

*Aide-de-camp?*

17:13 Yeah. He was a captain.

*Was your family religious?*

17:19 Oh, I wouldn't say so.

*Not churchgoers?*

17:23 Oh, we were forced, as kids, to go to church, but as soon as you woke up to what was on, you didn't go. I gave that away about 10, I think I was.

*What religion did they have though?*

17:36 Church of England.

*Were you happy as a child, would you say?*

17:41 Of course I was. It was fun. We didn't know anything different. The food was on the table and you could run and jump and play and go to school, and so forth. It was easy.

*So what are your best recollections of childhood?*

18:01 Pleasure. I learnt to play cricket. I learnt to swim. I learnt to play tennis. I learnt to play football. I enjoyed music. The rest you can have.

*How was school?*

18:16 Good.

*Can you describe the school you went to?*

18:20 Rose Bay School. We all went to Rose Bay School.

*That's the primary school?*

18:28 Yes. It's still there, Rose Bay. Fantastic. Happy days.

*Teachers were good, were they?*

18:38 It was fun. It was fun. The headmaster's George [Hutcheson]. Wonderful person, but he was a mad fisherman and if the fish were on at Rose Bay - George used to teach English at Rose Bay School, but if the fish were on, he always had a few prawns and we all went down fishing. That was the English lesson.

*Did you used to catch a fair bit, or what?*

19:07 Oh, yeah. Fantastic. But they were happy days. Unconfused days. We weren't stood over. Nothing. It was play. In the meantime, we learnt the ABC and so forth, and we developed friendships and mates and so on that lasted for basically all our lives, until wars broke it up.

*How was the standard of education? Or couldn't you tell, as a child?*

19:40 I never sat for exams at all. Never worried about it. There were five subjects. That's all.

*What were they?*

19:53 Just English, maths, geography and history. We weren't confused.

*The best recollections of childhood you have were that you were happy and that you played a lot of sport. What were some of your worst recollections of childhood?*

20:11 I remember having my tonsils out on a kitchen table. Dr Bruce Burge, who was the doctor at Bondi Junction, was a returned soldier from the First World War. Fantastic man. He used to knock on the door and he'd come in and one of us would have the measles or something. He'd say, "Put them all in the one bedroom and let's get it over, in bulk." That was it. We all had the measles together. We all had the croup coughs together. Everything was together. On the Saturday morning, with a nurse, we had the tonsils out on the kitchen table - and we lived. Everyone who looks down my throat says, "Who took your tonsils out?" No troubles.

*No. You're a very fit 95-year-old.*

21:09 Ninety-six.

*Ninety-six-year-old.*

21:13 But we worked.

*What is your birthday? Which day were you born?*

21:18 9th January 1923.

*So you're going to have another birthday in January. You'll be 97.*

21:30 That's right.

Oscar Wilde said, 'One must be very selective of one's parents.' That's the secret. They can go on with all this tripe. You get a good pair of parents, you'll survive. No matter what the doctors do to you, you will survive, but you've got to get a good start.

*It sounds like you weren't very well-off, I mean, you didn't have a lot, but did you consider your family as poor?*

21:59 We worked. We were workers. We all worked. I worked. School holidays, I worked at the store. Loved it. From the day I turned 10, I knew my future and my future was the store in Rose Bay, and I spent 60 years there. I didn't have to go to school or universities to find out. I knew it. Loved every minute of it.

*So what did the store actually sell?*

22:27 Builders' supplies, we were. Then we went into the hardware industry.

*Was that good at the time? I mean, you could make some money then?*

22:39 Oh yeah, and spend it.

*What sort of dreams and ambitions did you have when you were young? What did you want to do?*

22:48 All I wanted to do was work. I learnt everything at the store: how to fix a motor car; we had our own transport section and everything. We had mechanics and storemen. Everything. I was included in everything.

*This is at the store?*

23:09 Yes. Rose Bay.

*They serviced motor vehicles?*

23:13 Yes. We had our own motor vehicles and our own mechanics. Everything.

*What was the name of the store?*

23:19 Eastern Suburbs Lime and Cement Store, Rose Bay.

*What sort of a student do you think you were at school?*

23:29 Me? No.

*No?*

23:30 No.

*No good?*

23:32 No. Sport, music, and that was it - and art. They were the three subjects.

*Were you good at art?*

23:47 No. It was a good break, though.

*After you left Rose Bay Public School at the age of around 12, you went to Scots College?*

24:01 I spent a year at Woollahra Public School, which was a pre-schooler sort of thing, and from there I went to Scots.

*You were about 12 then?*

24:14 I'd have been about 12, I suppose. I was about 13 when I got to Scots, yes.

*And how did that suit you, Scots College?*

24:23 Loved it. Sport. Music. Art. Cricket. That was it.

*All your favourite subjects.*

24:38 Well, they were subjects that included people.

*And the teachers at Scots College, what were they like?*

24:45 Fantastic. No pretence.

*Were they strict?*

24:51 Oh, yes, but you knew the rules.

*So your favourite subjects were what? Still art and...*

25:01 Well, I think the favourite subject would have been sports. The second would have been music. The third would have been arts.

*Did you have close friend at Scots College?*

25:18 Yeah. I've still got them. I've only got one left.

*Really? Is that John...*

25:26 John Ryrie. He was a year after me at school. All my mates went to the war. We all got - you know, here, there and everywhere.

*How would a typical day have been at Scots College when you were going there?*

25:47 We went in at 9.00 and got out at 3.30.

*And in between?*

25:51 You had lunch.

25:58 You're going back to 1930, you know. There was no pretence in those days. The hall was a tin shed. Run by the Presbyterian Church. You knew the rules and you had to obey the rules. That's it.

*What do you think would have been the best thing that you'd picked up at Scots College?*

26:26 Discipline.

*Was it strict?*

26:35 No. It was fair.

*What sort of punishment would there be if you broke the rules?*

26:43 Well, they just kept you in. That's all. I think I was kept in once. But I knew the rules and I was happy with them, and enjoyed it, and I had mates.

*None of those mates are alive today, I guess, are they?*

27:01 Oh, no. Well, you know, they'd run out of time.

*Sure. What are some of your favourite stories from your time at Scots College?*

27:15 Sport. Music. Art.

*Did your parents have any ambitions for you, what you wanted to become?*

27:26 Not really. I suppose all parents are ambitious for kids, aren't they?

*But your parents never told you what to do or what kind of a...*

27:37 They were interested in what I did, always. Right up until the day they died they were. They were parents. They understood being parents, their responsibilities, and their responsibility was to teach, as well as look after us, because they created us and they accepted that responsibility.

*How would your classmates remember you, do you think, if they were still around?*

28:16 I was a student.

*Good sportsman?*

28:24 Oh well, yeah, I suppose so. Everything, no matter what it was, was shared. Everything was shared, which is a thing we've forgotten about. We've allowed money to take over. We've lost the privilege of sharing everything: our enthusiasms, our attitudes, our pretence. Everything. Now everything is greed. "What do you want?" "How much?" It's crazy.

*Did you hear Menzies's announcement that the war had broken out between Germany and Australia?*

29:02 Yeah.

*On the radio?*

29:03 Yeah.

*What was your reaction?*

29:06 Never had any reaction at all, but I knew I'd get lumbered.

*So you joined up when?*

29:17 Well, see, I was lucky more than anyone because I left Scots and served an apprenticeship, and we built Bradfield Park for the Air Force at Lindfield. I worked in the kitchen up there, building it. We built it. The day we finished that job, that freed me from a selected enterprise to join up, because otherwise I was in a protected industry and couldn't get out of it, but as soon as that job finished, I said, "Right. I'm out." I knew what to do because I'd spoken to all the Air Force blokes and I joined the Air Force. I had three-and-a-half years in the Air Force.

*Was it an exciting time for you, to join the Air Force? How old were you then? Twenty?*

30:20     Around about 19, I think. Nineteen or 20. I think it was about 19.

*What were your expectations for your...*

34:35     I had no idea what was on. A sense of adventure, I suppose. Everybody was doing it. I'd hate to be left out. All my mates had gone. All the kids next door had gone.

*So this is about 1942, is it?*

31:01     Yes.

*So the war in the Pacific is on by then?*

35:04     Yeah.

*You didn't get sent to Europe at all?*

31:09     No.

*Tell me about the process of joining the Air Force.*

31:16     We just went down to Martin Place, I think it was, and we filled in a form, and within seven days we were given the information to have a toothbrush under the clock at Central Railway Station, and that was it.

*Toothbrush? To show your teeth, or what?*

31:37     Yeah, because they'd supply you with everything else. We went into camp, and that was the start of it; went down to Tocumwal and that was the start. It started from there. Only had about five weeks down there and came back to Mount Druitt, and from Mount Druitt we formed up what was known then as 11-RSU, which was the Repair and Salvage Unit for the Royal Australian Air Force. There was only ever two of them formed: 11 and 22. They were a combined unit of some 350, and everyone in it was basically a tradesperson. So, we repaired and salvaged aircraft. Single-engine aircraft.

*Tiger Moths and that sort of thing?*

32:32     No. We didn't have any of them. They were training planes. We went away, we were servicing Vultee Vengeance, which is the American dive bomber, and then we finished up servicing Kittyhawks. But we went from Mount Druitt up to Coominya in Queensland, and established up there for about five weeks and sorted everything out and got a commander, a bloke called Squadron Leader

Taylor, who was an engineer. We then went on the Liberty boats to Lae, and then up to the Markham Valley to Nadzab, and we were there for about four months. We were attached there to the First American Air Force, and re-established everything there. The Air Force built a strip up there. We serviced planes there, and then did from there to Numfor and Morotai and up to Tarakan, servicing single-engine aircraft for the Royal Australian Air Force, which we were in, of course.

33:53 No one had ever heard of sunburn cream or skin cancers or anything like that. I spent three years in a pair of shorts and a pair of boots. Nothing else. It was hot in the tropics. I was red-headed. I've never had skin cancer.

*You were one of the lucky ones.*

34:19 Well, no one had ever heard of skin cancer up until about 25 years ago.

*So you were repairing engines?*

34:33 Aircraft.

*Were those aircraft that took part in battles and so on?*

34:39 They were all fighter planes. They'd go out and come in, and we were always at the end of the strip. As soon as they came in, we looked at them and if they had holes in them, was it worth repairing or dumping them?

*The people were still alive, of course, who were flying them, but the aircraft were full of holes, were they?*

35:05 Well, you know, you're up in the air and everyone is firing shots at you, so something is going to hit, and you worked out whether it was worthwhile - whether you pop-riveted the aluminium or timber, wherever there was timber frames in it, and made up your mind. If you repaired them, righto; the next day they were out and away they went again. Otherwise, you'd drag them in and go and get a new one. There was no messing about. The waste was astronomical. You worked against time, all the time.

*What's the worst case of a plane coming in that was very shot up?*

35:53 Oh, every now and again you'd get one that had missed out, but nine times out of ten they'd come in with holes in or something blown off the back of it or something; the landing gear and so on. Some of them had tyre troubles and undercarriage troubles, and so forth. But, you know, it was the survival of the fittest.

*Did you see any people injured in those planes?*

36:22 Yes. Of course you did. When we went to Tarakan and Morotai, the navy had got stuck into those places before we went in.

*This is the Australian Navy?*

36:37 Yeah. Tarakan, which we went into, which was an island up in Borneo, the navy cleared it and there was nothing when we went in.

*The Japanese, were they pretty well ineffective after that?*

37:09 Well, there wasn't any of them left.

*You think they were all killed?*

37:16 Well, what was there was knocked off. The rest escaped to get away from the place. It was the survival of the fittest. You know, you survived it, that's all, but otherwise we were more or less like a protected industry because we always followed somebody else in. We'd go in. We'd waited until somebody else went in because you had to set everything up for aircraft.

*Were there plenty of spare parts that you had?*

37:48 Very few. You milked one plane to make another plane, and so forth, because there was a lot of that goes on. Even today, a lot of it goes on. See, they were American planes so we had plenty of supplies and so forth and so on because there was boatloads of them coming in, but if they'd have been English planes, we would have been in trouble because the supply line was too long. But, otherwise, we survived it all.

*What's the worst thing you ever saw in the war?*

38:29 I hated every bit of it. I think it was the fact that with the Americans and ourselves - see, we had so much of everything. We weren't as cunning, but we had all the gear and all the equipment.

*And the Japanese? Were they well-supplied?*

39:03 Well, look at the lengths of the line of their supplies to try and keep the place alive. See, it was all right once they got there and there was sufficient food or palm trees or anything, with water to live on, they were all right, but their supply lines were too long. That's what got them into trouble. That's what I think. We had the gear. There's no doubt about that. Volume.

39:36 To me, it's not normal. It's not a normal instinct, and I found it very difficult to accept and see what we were doing and what was being done to us. I found it very difficult.

*Why?*

39:54 Well, I couldn't see the purpose of it.

*War has a purpose. You've got to stop the other...*

40:01 Yeah, but they never tell you that. That's the purpose, and it still is. It's crazy. To think with education, we're still in it. We've been permanently at war since about 600 or 700 years. We're at it now still in the Middle East. They're very hard things to learn. When you look back, we did a job. We were asked to do a job. We did it to the very best of our ability. We came back, luckily. Knocked about, but we got over that. Our main object and how we won the war...

41:00 All I wanted to do was get back to work, get married, have a couple of kids, build a house, and go to work. Gee, you didn't want much. You did it all yourself. Nobody else did it.

41:12 We got discharged. I got a suit; a coupon to go and get a suit from Anthony Hordern's or Gowings, which I did do; two pair of trousers. I wore it once. I got a rash all over me. Even the moths wouldn't eat it. I hung it in the cupboard for about 20 years and I then threw it away, and that was it. No one said that I was mentally - I knew I was a bit strange in attitudes, but most of us were troppo; we'd be locked up for three-and-a-half years. They opened the door, gave you a bit of paper, and that was it. Now - look what goes on now. But we survived it. We survived it because of work. We had a job to do and we went and did it.

*Did other members of your family join up in the war effort as well?*

42:18 Well, the whole family. Two sisters - one was in the Air Force and one was a nurse.

*What were they doing in the Air Force?*

42:29 Radar operator. She was an original radar operator that went to Pearce in Western Australia.

*And the other?*

42 :40 Was a nurse at the Children's Hospital in Sydney.

*During the war?*

42:42 Yeah. Lived in. So Mum and Dad were by themselves.

*Was that tough for them?*

42:51 Of course it was. You didn't know who was going to get killed next.

*So what sort of things would your father tell you of those days?*

43:03 I was 19 or 20. I knew everything, didn't I? No different to anybody else in those days. All you wanted to do was have a go at it.

*You were three-and-a-half years in the war?*

43:17 Yeah.

*What were the highlights for you in those three-and-a-half years?*

43:24 Getting out. I couldn't get out of there quick enough.

*Do you remember your day of discharge?*

43:32 Yep. Too right. Yeah. Vividly. My parents thought I'd come back a little bit tireder than normal, and there was no bloody way I was normal coming back into a domestic household. But I tried and they tried. I know I was a big worry to them because I was completely different to when I went away.

*How different were you?*

44:06 Well, I'd never been away from home, basically. I'd only been at a school camp for two weeks and that's the only time I'd ever been away from home. I'd been away three-and-a-half years, living in a tent with three men who were all married. See, we were all together. It was a very rare unit in the Air Force, that we all stayed together. You got posted everywhere else. But we didn't. We stayed, because we were all professional-trained people and had a job to do.

*What's the hardest thing you ever had to do in the air force?*

44:50 Not really. I complained at times, but I only complained to myself. It's no good complaining to anybody else. But it was the routine. There was a sense of adventure very early on, but reality came after a few weeks; you realised what you'd got yourself into, but I just did a job and did it as best I possibly could. That's all. There was no pretence about it or anything else. I had no ambitions about doing anything, except in accepting what I had to do.

*What do you recall about the training period that you spent at - Tocumwal, was it?*

45:42 Yes. Oh, it was only learning the basic rules of discipline. That's all. Because we were trained, but in our trades or professions, whatever we did. It was only getting us used to the discipline of the institution that we found ourselves in.

That's all. But it was a country town. You couldn't get into any mischief there. There was nothing to get out for.

*You spent only six weeks at training, did you?*

46:17     Yeah.

*That wasn't very long.*

46:21     No, but there was disciplines. You had to learn the whole routine and so forth and so on. The main thing was getting all the inspections: our teeth, our physical attitudes, and so forth and so on. That was all part of the training. We had all our teeth fixed and bloody medical things all fixed up, if we had them, and so on, so that when we went away we were in reasonable condition. That was the main object of it, plus the discipline.

*You also spent six weeks at Deniliquin?*

47:05     I think it was Tocumwal, where their bases was. Gee, it's a bloody long time ago, you know?

*Did you go to Deniliquin at all?*

47:21     I think it was Deniliquin. Yeah. Because they had a hospital there. But it's all there in bloody writing there.

*After Deniliquin, you went into Borneo, was it?*

47:43     No. We went to Mount Druitt. We were there in Mount Druitt, which was getting ready, all assembled, and getting all the gear together. From there, we went to Coominya in Queensland. We were there - oh, probably three weeks. From there, we went onto a Liberty boat that took us to Lae in New Guinea, on a Liberty boat. From there, we went up to the Markham Valley, up to Nadzab, and we were there. That became our base camp, to start, and we worked up there. There was a strip there and they were bringing planes back and we were looking at them. Then we went from there to Numfor and Morotai, Tarakan.

*What was the hardest place you've been to or the most difficult?*

48:37     *I'd say Tarakan was the worst. The roughest. The toughest.*

*Why?*

48:43     It was an oil island for the Dutch government and our neighbours stood off there for about two days and shelled it. It was more or less like an oil heap. There was stuff everywhere, because they blew all the tanks up and everything and there was stuff everywhere. There was hardly anyone there. Anyway, we had to

solve that out. But that was the hardest part. Most of us were pretty crook with malaria because we'd been around the islands before, and we were pretty crook with malaria, and I got sent home from there, riddled with malaria. I couldn't go any longer. I got sent home to Dubbo, to the hospital there. That was the toughest. That was all Australian: Australian Army, Australian Air Force, Australian Navy. Blamey was the leader. But anyway, it was a success. That's the main thing.

*Have you ever come into contact with Japanese soldiers?*

49:59 I've seen them as prisoners and dead. You couldn't talk to them or anything.

*Well, you couldn't speak the language.*

50:08 See, they wouldn't understand, and they were frightened. They'd been caught, and of course they physically and mentally wouldn't resist any resistance because they were terrified, and you couldn't talk to them. That was the worst place.

*You must have been pretty ill when you left Tarakan then.*

50:32 Yeah, but only malaria. Yeah, malaria was the problem. I've had about three or four goes since, but luckily, for about the last, say, 20 years I haven't had much. I've had one in the last 20 years. That's all. I had about four before that.

*What do you go through when you have malaria? What happens to you?*

50:58 Sweat. Heat. But they've learnt a lot with Atabrine and Quinine and all those sort of things now. The Yanks, they had to master it because those diseases were doing more damage than the Japanese, when I first got to New Guinea, because of scrub typhus and all those diseases. The last time I was in, it was only a matter of about seven days and I was out because of new medicines and new arrangements and they'd learnt a lot.

*So what do you think was the most important lesson in life that you picked up from having been in the Air Force?*

51:40 Patience.

*Can you elaborate a bit?*

51:47 Patience. When we were created, we got two ears and one mouth. They told us, didn't they? You've got to learn the lesson: you should hear twice as much as you say. You bloody soon picked that up in the Air Force, I can assure you.

*Tell me something about your post-war life now. When you came back.*

52:16 Got married. Built a house. Had two kids. Worked all my life.

*When you came back, you started in the shop again, did you?*

52:26 Yeah. I went straight back. I did a CRTS course through the department at Darlinghurst Tech and then got my journeyman's degree and first degree in building construction and I got that in six weeks, and then went back to the store and I've been there ever since, up until about 20 years ago.

*What's CRTS?*

53:00 CRTS - Commonwealth Training Scheme.

*Did you go and march on Anzac Day and so on?*

53:08 It's only in recent years I've accepted and do a few activities. I used to go to our unit returns, but they were a private thing, run by just a few of us that lived in Sydney. They've all died now, of course, it's all finished, but we had our own little reunions that we privately ran ourselves. It's only in the last 30 years I've been a member - I wasn't originally - joined the RSL, but then I gave it away and came up here to Bondi Junction, but I've been a member up there for about 25 years, which I enjoy, but I only go to the meetings.

*Are there still many members who were in the Second World War?*

53:57 No. Most of them are all gone. The Second World War - you've got to be 90 to be in it, so there's very few of them left now. But that's the same in RSL clubs at Rose Bay and Paddo and Bondi. Few and far between.

54:19 Of course, the Vietnam people and so forth, they're mentally different. What's happened them and the Agent Orange from Vietnam - you know, the department has got to look after them themselves. Very dangerous.

*When did you actually cease work full time?*

54:40 Never. I retired on the Friday. I started at the Powerhouse Museum on the Monday, and I'm still there. I was there last Monday, and yesterday, and tomorrow I'll be there.

*What do you do there?*

55:01 A volunteer guide. I was there yesterday and we had 600 kids under 15. I got allocated to a bus of 45 children from Bairnsdale in Victoria, 14 years of age. Good kids. But it's getting hard to do. I'll admit that it's hard to do, but it keeps you involved. It keeps you fit. They ask the questions. Keeps me up to date with what's going on and I enjoy every day.

*What do you think were your successes in life? How would you determine what they were?*

55:48 The kids. Two grandkids – one's in England and one's in America.

*And what about your children?*

56:00 Well, Laura is alive. I lost the youngest one at 57.

*And your wife?*

56:07 We had 65 years together. Never separated. Never.

*So you must have lost her in the last five or six years?*

56:18 Five years ago I lost her. You never get over it. Never. Ship without a rudder. Ship without a rudder. But still, this is what draws it.

*Do you think about her a lot?*

56:35 Oh, yeah. Everything I do. You never get over it. But still, I'm still independent. I still look after myself and do everything. It's getting harder, but I'll do it.

*It's amazing at your age that you can do all that.*

56:57 Age has got nothing to do with it. It's your enthusiasm to continue. You've got so many things: the Powerhouse Museum, we've got the community centre, transport section. I'm involved in it all the time, so I'm never lonely, and it's all just around the corner. Bondi Junction - you can have all the remarks. This is the most compatible place to live in the world, and I've lived around, but this is the most - within walking distance, I can have anything I want, from specialists medical to specialist dentists to specialist food. Anything. It's all here. It's within 10 minutes of here. If I want to go to golf, if I want to go to the theatre, if I want to go to see the football, it's all here. If I want to go for a surf, 10 minutes.

*What do you think of the Council here?*

58:01 Well, they've got a role to portray and they do it to the best of their ability. But, you know, once you get councils and governments and you get a politician, you never get anyone else but a politician so you've got to put up with it.

*Do you think Australia has too many levels of government?*

58:25 Oh, yeah. It's a joke. State government shouldn't be there at all. It's the costs. It is the costs.

*Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?*

58:47 Well, I'm alive. I'm optimistic. Of course. Give us a go. Get out of the road. Why not?

*What's most important for you now at this stage of your life?*

58:57 Only the kids.

*So how would you like to be remembered?*

59:12 Oh, never thought about it.

*Have a think now.*

59:16 Never, ever thought about it. Never even mentioned in my mind. That's for other people. Not me. Because I won't be here.

*But how would you like people to think about you? What do you want them to remember about you?*

59:37 It's like the insurance company says to me, "What's going to happen to your wife and kids if you get knocked over by the bus?" I won't know, will I? I won't have a clue because I'll be dead. Same thing. I won't know. That's for them to think, not for me. I'm not thinking about that at all. I don't think about that.

*Okay. I think we're coming to the end of our interview. Is there something else you want to discuss or put on record?*

60:10 No.

*Nothing else?*

60:14 No. I could go for days, but fair is fair.

60:18 Look, it'll continue on because I think I'm about the last of a generation that's left that is interested in history. I'm not interested in the next lot of history because I won't be here, but I'm vitally interested in my background, what affected me, why I did things, why I didn't do things, and so forth and so on. That is history. Luckily, I've never been confused by education. Never. Didn't have any. It was play. It wasn't education. I played. So there was nothing to confuse me. So I did, and was very fortunate, what I wanted to do. I've done it all my life. I'm not going to stop now.

*No. Don't stop.*

61:12 I'm not going to stop. This is a start, but if you're going to record history, that book that I showed you, that's personal to me and belongs to all the family.

All the family: kids, grandkids, great-grandkids. They all got one. And that's it. So that any questions that they have in the future, if I'm not here, they just go to the book. There it is. That's a responsibility I think we should all accept, because they are interested, and better educated than us, but haven't got the stability that we've got. All those children, they're international. That is, they will go anywhere where there's work.

62:06 So, that's the therapy. It's not pills. It's people. This is your industry. Without people, what are you going to do? Thank God we are all different. It'd be a shocker if we were all the same, wouldn't it?

*Thank you very much for your thoughts, to share them with us.*

62:29 Well, what you do with them and so forth and so on - but, the thing is, luckily, the next generation have become conscious of libraries. If you go around the library around the corner here, they're all young people, which is fantastic to see. The only trouble is, most of them are working these things. But there's a section of them that are getting the books, so there's some chance of basic understanding.

63:13 But please, don't specialise too much. You know, you've got a doctor, but they've subdivided medicine into about 27 different sections. Like, if I went to the heart doctor with one arm missing, he wouldn't even know. He's only interested in my heart. That's dangerous.

*Too specialised.*

63:37 It's the same in your industry. They're specialising too much and they're cutting the background of our start, stripping it bare, but it's still got to act as the principal. This is, you know, add-ons to what started with electricity and a light globe.

*Thank you so much, John, for this interview. I'm sure the Council will be very happy with it.*

64:05 Well, you know, you've got to start. You can continue, but you could go - oh, don't start me, for God's sake. I could go for days.

64:18 But I've been lucky. It's been a wonderful time; a most enjoyable time. Thank you, and thank you for your patience.

*Okay. Terrific. Thanks very much. That's the end of this file. Thank you again.*

64:31 END OF INTERVIEW