World War II Remembrance Oral History Project

'Reliving the Memories'

Frank McGovern

Interview Transcript

Interview of Frank McGovern by Frank Heimans

On 5 July 2019 at North Randwick, NSW

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Oral history interview with Mr Frank McGovern, conducted by Frank Heimans. Today is 5 July 2019 and this interview is conducted at North Randwick, New South Wales.

Frank, could you tell me where and when you were born?

0:21 I was born in Paddington on 1 October 1919.

That means you're going to be 100 on 1st October.

0:35 That's right.

That's a milestone.

0:38 If I make it.

I think you will, probably. Tell me a bit about your family?

0:46 Mum was born in the Mudgee area. A small place called Lue. The father in Darlinghurst at that time, in the 1880s I think it was.

How many kids were in your family?

1:13 In my family? Five: two girls, three boys.

What occupation did your father have?

1:22 My father, he was what they termed a ganger on the railways and tramways.

How would you consider your family? Were they fairly average people?

1:37 Oh, yes. Dad played cricket. He was quite a good cricketer. Mum didn't have much education. She was one of four girls, she being the eldest. She had to leave school when she was probably 12 or 13 and, being in the country, had to look after her younger sisters and do some work around the farm.

Did any of your family, like your father, have any wartime experience?

2:17 No. He went to join up, I believe, in the First World War, but he was rejected on account of, at that time, flat feet, and also the job he was doing on the railways and tramways.

What's the origin of your family? Where did they come from originally before they even got to Australia?

2:47 Dad was born here - Australia. His parents were born and emigrated from Ireland. Mum, as far as I know, her parents were Scotch. I'm not too sure.

They must have come out in the 1800s then.

3:15 1800s, yes.

You grew up in the Eastern Suburbs. You were born in Paddington. Where did you live at that time? Was it also Paddington?

3:20 In Paddington, yeah.

Which street? Do you remember?

3:24 Yeah, Taylor Street. It ran from Caledonia Street down to Sutherland Street. Not many houses in the street.

Was it a little terrace house? Or what kind of a house?

3:40 A rented terrace.

Where did you go to school?

3:45 A convent in Edgecliff. Monte Oliveto, by the Sisters of Charity. Some of them weren't very charitable at times. They used the cane a little bit. Then, from there, to the Christian Brothers at St Joseph's in Edgecliff.

Was that a high school, St Joseph's?

4:15 No. It was primary and secondary school, yeah.

How far did you go with your education?

4:21 From there, I went to the Marist Brothers at Darlinghurst and got the Intermediate Certificate.

Which was the average that people used to go to in those days, wasn't it?

4:35 Oh, yes. That was it. Had to get out and earn some money. Things were pretty tough. It was the Depression era.

What do you remember about that time?

4:50 As a kid? Pretty rough. For the first week, that'd be fortnightly pay. So for the first week it was quite good. Food on the table. Baked dinner Sunday. But the next, the following week, you'd scratch around a bit, and Sunday lunch or dinner would be probably bread and dripping.

Were there plenty of fresh vegetables that you used to eat and that sort of thing?

5:32 As kids, lunchtime, after the bread and dripping, the shop would be open, the [foodrun ?], and we'd go up to the fruit shop, see the Italian fruiter. Joe Masilo, his name. During the week it would be Joe, but when we wanted speck, as we called the bruised fruit, it'd be, "Mr Masilo, have you got any specks, Mr Masilo?" He knew us. "Oh, here you are. Now, get going." So we'd get a piece of fruit, maybe a pear or

apple, and eat that, or go to the greengrocer, as we called them. At that time, they'd have broken biscuits in, say, an Arnott's tin with the rosella on it, stacked up in the racks. "Any broken biscuits, Mister?" He got to know us too, and he'd put them in a paper bag and say, "Here. Get going." That's how it was.

Did you eat meat and that sort of thing?

6:57 Not at that time, but we did have a baked dinner and that on the first week. Second week, very scarce.

Tough times.

7:10 They were tough.

A lot of people out of work in those days?

7:11 Oh, yes, yes.

Did you play any sport at school?

7:18 Yeah. No professional, but we'd have a game of cricket, throw the football around over at Moore Park. That'd keep us going. What they called the Colour Competition. Nothing spectacular.

After the Depression, of course, war broke out in 1939. What do you remember about that?

7:49 Well, I joined, with a mate of mine, the Navy Reservists in '38, I think it was, just to get a few dollars just to bolster your pocket money. Also, we'd go down of a Saturday to Rushcutters Bay to the depot, get the whaler out on the harbour, or a skiff, and also maybe gunnering and all that. It was quite interesting. It was good. A few shillings if we went there regularly of a night-time and Saturday morning. Might get a couple of bob, as we said, each month.

8:58 As you said, war broke out in '39. I remember it very well.

How did you first hear about it? Was it the announcement by Mr Menzies on the radio?

9:13 I was on duty. We were mobilised, the Reserve, along with the permanent navy, in which the brother was. He was in permanent navy as an engine room artificer. He was two years older than I was. The duty I was on was on was a sentry on the munitions depot at Newington. One Sunday night, I was on the eight-to-twelve watch, and the CO came around and told us about it. Nine-thirty, I think it was, at night. Called me over, issued me with live ammunition, put one in the spout, the rest in the magazine. He said, "Prime Minister Menzies on the nine o'clock news announced that

Australia had joined with Britain in war against Germany." He said, "Be on your toes. This is fair dinkum this time."

10:38 I rang my employer, the chief accountant, the following morning. I said, "I've been called up by the navy." At that time, they had the Abyssinian shemozzle going on with Mussolini the previous year, and he said, "Oh, we'll see you back in a couple of weeks." Those two weeks became six and a half years before I went back.

Was it the case of, because you happened to be in the reserves of the navy, you automatically joined the navy then? You automatically became a sailor?

11:26 Oh, yes. See, with the reserves, naval reservists, same with the permanent, when you joined the Naval Reserve, you also signed - not like the army or air force - to serve overseas if something broke out, which it did. I was immediately on a war footing.

Did you get any training for the navy when the war broke out? Did they send you to some place for training?

12:05 No, we were immediately on duty, and then we did quite a bit of training at the Reserve, but also, I was a [detailer]??? , along with a lot of the others, other chaps, on the armed merchant cruiser, *Westralia*, as a seaman gunner.

The *Westralia?*

12:32 Westralia. That was taken over. Also, the *Kanimbla* and the *Manoora*. Three interstate merchant ships, and they were converted to merchant cruisers.

Let's look at life before you joined the navy, or before you went out on the ship. What was life like in the eastern suburbs at that time?

13:05 Oh, it was just normal. Within hours of the war broke out, of course, I went home that night from being called up and told Mum. Vince, my elder brother, was already on board *HMAS Perth*. He was deployed. The ship was deployed, I think, over to the West Indies at that time, so he was on duty immediately. So was I, for that matter. As the war had broken out, I was on duty straightaway.

What was your duty, or what were your duties on the ship?

13:56 I was on board, as I say; seaman gunner on the *Westralia*.

Which means that you had to operate the canons, or what?

14:07 Yes. We had 6-inch guns on there, on the armed merchant cruiser. We had seven 6-inch guns. Pretty antique, they were, from the First World War.

Your brother, what was his name?

14:22 Vince. Vincent.

So what was he doing? Similar work?

14:28 No. He was an engine room artificer on board *Perth*. That was his first ship and only ship. He was on it for the two years that it was in operation.

You joined the Perth *in 1939?*

14:48 No. I was on the *Westralia* for about 18 months. We were on patrol duties, convoy, what have you, mainly over in the Indian Ocean: Bombay, Colombo, down at Mauritius, taking ships around Africa, up to Asia, and then returned, after 12 months' overseas operation, to Australia, and then I joined *Perth* when it returned from the Mediterranean. So I was on the same ship as my brother.

Where did the Perth *go after that?*

15:36 We were deployed on convoy work in the Pacific. We took the first batch of militia up to Port Moresby in December '41, I think it was. Then went on patrol duties in the Pacific. We were out on convoy duty with the *Westralia* and the New Zealand cruiser, *Leander*, and we got orders to go down to Melbourne; leave the convoy and go down there. I think that was a Sunday night. I'm not sure.

16:27 Anyway, from there, orders to go around to Fremantle and then up north to take a convoy of three ships up to Java. We were then ordered back to Fremantle. Things were a little bit chaotic at that time with the Japs coming down through Malaya, and again we were ordered up north, and that was rescinded again, and we returned. But the third time, we left the convoy there in Fremantle, the ships, and we went independently up to Java. That would be February '42. Early February.

Had the Japanese reached Java yet at that time?

17:22 No. Singapore had fallen. Java was the next one.

17:30 On 27 February there was an air raid on Batavia, which is now Jakarta. At that time, I think our sister ship *Hobart* was in Tanjung Priok, the Port of Batavia. It was to join us to go to Surabaya, and from there, out into the Java Sea to look for the Japanese convoy. It was being refuelled at the time, *Hobart*. That delayed it going, so it didn't go to the Java Sea/Surabaya with us.

18:33 We joined a convoy - a taskforce, I should say - consisting of five cruisers and nine destroyers. On paper, they were quite a force, but certain deficiencies. We hadn't trained as a fighting unit before, just hurriedly got together. A Dutch admiral in

charge of the taskforce. Naval strategy of the Dutch at that time was - well, they hadn't been in a war for 100 years or more. Communication difficulties between the four navies: American, Dutch, British, and ourselves. So, quite a deficiency amongst it.

19:43 Our skipper, Hec Waller, [unclear 19:47] on the destroyer *Stewart*. He was a good skipper. Terrific. Had a lot of confidence in him. He got the DSO and bar for his service in the Mediterranean. Extremely good. Capable.

20:09 The American cruiser, *Houston*, was with us. The English cruiser, *Exeter*, of Graf Spee fame - was in that when the Graf Spee was damaged down in the West Indies. Two Dutch cruisers: the [unclear 20:41] on one of them, the *De Ruyter* and the *Java, and* four-funnel US destroyers. World War 1 vintage, they were. Did a good job, though. Three British destroyers and two Dutch.

21:13 We met the Japs on 27 February, and it didn't go well with us. Two Dutch cruisers sunk. *Exeter* damaged and had to return to port, so we were down to the two cruisers, *Perth* and *Houston*. Dutch destroyer sunk - torpedoed. We did damage to the Jap fleet, and two British destroyers sunk. That all lasted eight hours and we were straddled by the Japanese heavy cruisers on at least six occasions, but due to the skill of our skipper manoeuvring the ship, we more or less zig-zagged our way through the shells falling around it.

22:26 It lasted until about two in the morning, that battle. The *Java*, as I say, that was sunk that night, the Dutch cruiser, as also the *De Ruyter*. Heavy loss of life. We then broke off the engagement. Headed towards Tanjong Priok with the *Houston*. These two cruisers were the only two capable - or came through that battle unscathed, more or less.

23:11 So we reached Tanjong Priok. That was in a mess. The Jap bombers had done the place over. Shore installations destroyed, ships sunk in the Harbour, oil wells had been on fire. It was in a mess. We were unable to get an ammunition to replace or replenish what we had expended in the eight-hour battle. Same as *Houston*. The oil well had been on fire. We had no, or very little, oil to replace what we'd expended. So things were not good.

24:10 That afternoon, there was an air raid on. We came through that okay, and then we were to sail that night through Sunda Strait, that separates Java and Sumatra, to go around to the southern port of Tjilatjap in Java. We were to sail that night, which we did, with the *Houston*, and the skipper spoke over the intercom to say that a report had come through that a Jap convoy was heading in an opposite direction to what we were taking and did not expect to have any trouble getting through the strait.

25:10 We arrived there, just to the entrance to the strait, about 11 o'clock that night and sighted a ship on our starboard side. The skipper said, "Challenge," which we did.

25:28 It had returned a strange light, greenish light and, as it swung around, we could see it was a Jap destroyer; the silhouette of a Jap destroyer. So we opened fire, and it started the Battle of Sunda Strait.

25:54 As we proceeded, the Japs were already there, landing. The Jap transports were anchored within the strait. Near Merak, I think the place was. They were disgorging their troops and we had run into the western invasion fleet of Java. At least five cruisers, and twice that number of destroyers. Ships everywhere. We were firing at that time independently, meaning not all guns at once. They were on different targets. Each turret was on a different target. There were that many of them. Of course, there was only one outcome of that.

26:58 The battle lasted about an hour, just over an hour. We'd run out of ammunition by this time because we couldn't get any in Tanjong Priok. The skipper decided to make a run through the strait. We'd just hit top speed, and the first torpedo struck on the starboard side, the for'ard engine room. Tremendous explosion. Knocked me off my feet, and a few others that were around me. Killed everybody in the for'ard engine room, including the engineer commander. Lifted the ship out of the water and settled back again. Then a huge fireball broke out. The heat went down the upper deck and it was like opening a furnace door, from the fire. Anyhow, it picked up speed again and then a second torpedo hit, again on the starboard side, further forward under the gun turrets - for'ard gun turret.

28:10 The skipper then came over and said, "Prepare to abandon ship," when a third torpedo hit on the port side. After that, it was out of ammunition. Abandon ship was given then.

28:29 I went down aft onto the quarterdeck with some other fellow. Helped put some of the rafts overboard, and the Carley float - large float. The fellow next to me standing by the guardrail, he said, "Well, aren't you going over?" I said, "Yeah, as soon as I kick these shoes off." I wish I had've kept them on, because the following day on a hot steel deck of a Jap destroyer, it would've been handy to have them on.

29:06 But anyway, I went over the side and into the water. That was it. Floating around, and saw our ship go down. The *Houston* also went down just shortly after. All survivors were captured by the Japs over the next few days.

29:34 Where we ended up that night, in a lifeboat, almost sunk. Off one of the Jap transporters I saw the name on there when we bailed it out. It was something *Maru*. So we got into that. We thought, 'Well, this is pretty good. We'll start rowing for the shore.' But the current there was about a five-knot current and we were exhausted after two days of action stations.

30:12 A Jap destroyer on the other side of the strait doing patrol work headed towards us mid-morning. As it leered, the skipper, who spoke in English, ordered us to stop. We said, "Er, what are we going to do? Oh, bugger it. We'll keep going." We weren't making that much headway towards Java. The Jap destroyer moved in closer. Again, it ordered us to stop. This time, they trained the for'ard gun on us. Five-inch gun. So, looking down the barrel of a five-inch gun from a few hundred yards away didn't have much promise or much future, so we stopped. Then, the next order was, "Follow us out," which we did.

31:15 Took us on board. Had to discard all our oil-soaked clothing, from the fuel oil. Stinking stuff, it was. We were issued with a piece of cloth about a yard long, foot wide, with a string at the top. Tied that around our waist and put the cloth through our legs and lapped it over. Your lap-lap - that's what it was. That was our wardrobe for the next six weeks or so.

31:56 We were kept on board that night. Treated all right on the destroyer by the crew and the skipper. The following day, we were then transported to one of the Jap transports, the *Somdong Maru*, anchored in the bay. We were on there for about a week or so. Again, okay. Treated us okay. Then, from there, taken ashore to a place called Merak in Western Java. We were then handed over to the Jap army, fronted by two machine guns. The Jap officer said, "You are now prisoners of war. If you try to escape, you will be shot." Made to squat down. "No talking."

33:11 Two machine guns were in the enfilade position. We just squatted there with the lap-lap on in the hot sun for a couple of hours. There was a waiting shed there. While I was sitting there, I just turned around. It was just like an ordinary waiting shed you'd find anywhere; probably for a ferry going from Java to Sumatra. There was a poster there and it said - would you believe it - in English, and Dutch, probably: *'Come to sunny New South Wales.'* On that poster was the depiction of the Three Sisters from the Blue Mountains. Blue Mountains scenery. I said, "I can't believe this." So I nudged the bloke next to me. I couldn't talk. I just nudged him, indicated to have a look. He turned around and had a look. I could see the look on his face. He didn't believe it either.

34:34 From there, we were taken to a filthy place called Serang and lodged in an old cinema there- a disused cinema, no seating capacity, Just a concrete floor - along with other fellows. The *Houston* survivors were in there already. We were kept in the cinema just on about eight weeks. Bad news, that was. Dreadful. We were made to squat down all day in rows on either side of the aisle on the concrete, and numbered by the Jap guards, which took anything up to an hour or more for counting. One behind the other, sitting down, legs drawn up. There would have been, I think, at that time, about 400 or 500 in there that had been rounded up on Java and all that area.

35:59 We were given a small-sized tin, about the size of an ordinary plate of rice. Very shallow. Cooked by the natives and stowed outside of the cinema in the hot sun while this numbering took place - *tenko*, it was called, the roll call - and when it was brought in, it was caked on the top by the hot sun. That was our first meal.

36:43 The next one was anything from 8 or 9 o'clock at night. It was a small bun in the shape of a loaf of bread, but it would be the size of a dinner bun. That was our meal for the day. We thought, 'Oh. The Japs only eat two meals a day,' we thought. But that was it for the next three or four weeks.

37:18 So, consequently, when we stood up we got dizzy. We were half starved. With the cooking of the rice by the natives and stowed outside the cinema, myriads of flies no doubt were having a feed on that too, and they brought it in. Consequently, most of us got dysentery. We had a pit dug outside. That was the latrine. A few branches from the tree put across it where we squatted. It wasn't very good. That was Serang.

38:04 Machine guns were placed on either side of the projection room, pointing down at us. Each day, a Jap officer, an arrogant so-and-so, would come in. We knew when he was coming in because the guard would yell out, "*Kiotsuke!*" Japanese for jump to attention. He'd stand there looking at all of us. Not a word. Silence. You could hear a pin drop. He'd drag out a Luger - click-click. You could hear it in the theatre. He put it on his hip, and he'd have his full uniform on, stride down with his jackboots to the stage, turn around and survey us as though he could shoot the lot of us, and then went back again. Anybody that was not in line squatting down got a boot from his jackboot.

39:32 One of our fellas was there - I saw this; I was in one row, he was in the other - and he had two pieces of schrap in his leg from the paddling. He couldn't bend it up, so he had it sticking out. One day, this fellow, the officer, strutted down, saw the leg out and put a boot into it.

40:03 Another fellow had been to the latrines. Came back. Wasn't in line with standing. The officer smashed him across the jaw and broke his jaw. Collapsed. Things like that happened. We thought, 'Oh well, we'd better just behave ourselves.' It's the way things were.

40:37 We had to salute all Japs, whether they were officer or private. Had to salute them either by bowing if you didn't have a hat on, or if you had a cap or something on, salute.

40:56 That lasted two months. Then they gave us a uniform. Clothing. Green uniform with a Dutch hat. From there, we were transported by truck up to Bicycle Camp, as it was called, in Batavia, or Jakarta as it is now called. Some of our army fellas had been captured in Java. They'd been up there. 2/2nd Pioneers. Good bunch of fellas. Came from Victoria. They had been over to the Middle East, fighting in Syria against the Vichy French in the French Foreign Legion. They thought, 'Who are these blokes?' when we got off the trucks. Emaciated, unshaven, filthy. Still had oil fuel on them. They couldn't do enough for us when they found out we were off the *Perth*. We'd escorted them, I think. So, there you are. They were terrific.

42:15 We were kept there, working on the wharves, oil wells, for about eight months. Then we were told we were going to a better place, by the Japs. Took us down to the Port of Batavia, Tanjong Priok, put on board a transport, down in the hold. Not much room down in there. We thought, 'Where the hell are we going?' That was our first leg to Singapore, on our way to Burma.

43:05 We landed in Singapore in what was called Changi, but it was a barracks that the British had. Selarang Barracks. Plenty of room in there, lawns, the whole works, overlooking the water. 'Pretty good,' we thought. But we weren't treated that well by our own crowd there, because they said, "You're in transition camp only, and then you're on your way." We were still barefooted, some of us. Didn't have shoes or anything like that. Those that were in charge of the place, said, "You're only here on transition." So we didn't get any supplies that way, but we did get a small amount of food from our own crowd.

44:10 We were there about a week or two, and then loaded on board another transport and headed to Burma, Moulmein, in Burma. We got there one night. We'd been stuck down in the hold, of course. Stinking humid hold. When we got out it might have been around about midnight. I don't know. Landed on a pontoon and then on the shoreline at Moulmein. Cold. It was freezing. Cold, with wind coming down the Salween River. We only had shorts on. Things like that.

44:58 Jap guards there, soldiers, and an officer-in-charge who spoke English. Said, "Right. We march to the local jail." The local jail was the Moulmein Jail, built by the Brits when they were there. It was a bright moonlit night. Cold. Deserted streets. We thought it was about midnight. Taken to the local jail.

45:33 The Japs then handed us over to the local Burmese, or Indians, who were there in the jail looking after the inmates. The Japs then went to the front of the jail, away from us. We were in this compound with the young Indian jailer who was just looking after us, in a different compound. He spoke English well, being an Indian. He said, "We've got to go through here," from the Japanese. "We've got to go through that door." "Okay."

46:18 We were walking with him to get into some place where we'd get warm. He had a bunch of keys. Opened this iron door. I was near him, and he turned to me and he said - no Japs, they were out the front - he said, "How long, master? How long?" That's all. I just looked at him. I said, "How long before we get out?" They'd have the Japs by that time. Eight months, been in there. I said, "Oh, Christmas." I didn't say which Christmas.

47:06 They took us into another compound. There was a two-storey timber building, barrack-type. That's where I went with a lot of blokes. Others went into a small place, isolated, or a roundhouse. Some went in there to get out of the wind.

47:30 The following morning, the Japs came in. Tenko number again. Took a while. Went out. Left us to the Indian gentleman. He came in amongst us after the Japs had gone. He said, "We will get some rice shortly. Some food. How did you sleep last night?" "Oh, good. Okay, yeah. In up there." A few blokes said, "Oh, we slept in that round building over there." The Indian jailer, his eyes widened a little further and he said, "Oh, master. You slept there?" I said, "Yeah. Yeah, it was good. Out of the wind." He said, "That is where the lepers are!" I said, "Oh, we slept all right. The other fella: "I slept down there in that isolated place, that little building down there." Well, the Indian jailer nearly fell over. His eyes widened still, further. "Oh, master. You slept down there?" He said, "Yeah. Yeah. I slept in there." He said, "That is where the dead men are!" It was the morgue, probably. He said, "I had a good sleep there," he said, "I wasn't disturbed."

48:57 Anyway, we got our Dixie of rice. Melon water on it. It went all right, you know. Melon water. We had a three-kilometre march to Thanbyuzayat, it was called, which was the railhead of the rail going through the jungle. We marched through Moulmein on that bowl of rice, or Dixie of rice. The local people came out. We had

guards all around us - Jap guards. When they saw us, mainly women, they went down back to their camp and out of their own meagre rations, they brought up food. The Jap guards didn't like that. With their rifle butts, pushing them away. That didn't matter. They went down and got more. More people came up. Mainly women. Women coming up, giving us food that they'd probably prepared for their own breakfast, and this carried on right through Moulmein.

50:28 In the end, the Japs just gave up. The women then prepared meals and gave it to their kids, and they were running up giving us food. I've never forgotten that. They were terrific. Their courage. Their courage and compassion was terrific.

It's amazing, isn't it? That's 70 years ago and you're still very emotional from what happened.

51:35 [Unclear 51:35].

What was the next thing that happened? Did you stay there very long? Then what?

51:54 From Thanbyuzayat, we were put on trucks. Taken out along to a camp. 35 Kilo Camp. That was our first camp on the line. Along the line for 150 kilometres, it would have been.

You walked all the way?

52:25 450 kilometres along the line. I think it was 450 kilometres. Every five kilometres there was a camp where our fellas were.

Did you work on the railway, building it?

52:51 We got to the 35 Kilo Camp. That's right. From there, the work that we did, with the Japs in charge, it was the dry season and it was quite okay. We were reasonably fed at that time, after eight months with the Japs. We were given a workload to dig 1.2 metres of earth a day, each man, to build the embankment of the railway. We thought, 'Oh. This is all right. We'll do this,' which we did. Got our rice for lunch. Dixie rice.

53:44 Went back to the camp that night. There was a small stream there and a well. We could get water and do our bathing, so we were okay for a couple of months in that camp doing that type of work. We used to cheat a bit. After a while, we got a little bit used to it. The Jap engineer would come along with his metre stick and measure the 1.2 each day. Where the earth had been dug the previous day, you'd go on from there. So when he'd gone to give another few fellas their work quota, we'd dig the old earth, or that that was open, we'd dig along there and make it look as

though it's just been dug and trim about half a metre, or something like that, with the next lot. We got away with that for quite a while.

55:04 Then, the bridge building. That was another thing. It was a bamboo structure on either side. Because of the dry season, the dry riverbed, and the scaffolding built, with a Jap engineer who would climb up on it, and then there was a rope running up - thick rope with strands coming out that we manned on each side. These ropes went up over the scaffolding and down. On the end of it was this weight, huge weight, so big and cylindrical. A heavy weight to do the punching of these logs in to build the bridge. This Jap engineer, he'd be up on top: "*Ichi, ni, san*. One, two three." It was a singsong way: "*Ichi, ni, san…*" We'd: "*Ichi, ni, san…*" all bloody day. Pull the weight up and then it would drop down on this log and push it into the sand. This kept going on for weeks.

56:31 The fella up top, the Jap, after a couple of weeks of this, he'd say, "Oh, one more. One more. *Kampo*." We'd go back to camp after we did one more. So we did that for a little while, after a couple of weeks.

56:56 We said, "We'll give it to him one day." We had a couple of little characters. Sato, this fella's name is. He said, "We'll start singing Sato. Instead of *ichi, ni, san*, we'll say, Sato is a bastard." As we were doing it, "Sato is a bastard," Sato: 'Oh,' he heard his name, Sato. He thought that was good. He didn't know the rest of it. We did that, until one day this bloke said, "We'll give Sato something." So, instead of singing 'Sato' when he wanted one more, we said, "One, two, three," and we pulled on - the weight went up, hit the scaffolding, Sato did a somersault, straight down in between and bounced off a few - in the dry riverbed. We said, "Oh, well. There's a good Jap. He's dead." A bloody week later, who should we see with his major stick there, stumbling up the road? Sato. All he got out of it was a few bruises and a dislocated ankle or something. That's all. He was still there, Sato.

58:40 We got through that. Then, the wet season. Oh, it was a horror, the wet season. The wet season - we didn't think they'd do it. They didn't think we'd work through it. See, we're on the Burma side, then they had another lot on the Siam side and we were to join up at near Three Pagoda Pass, it was called, or Nikki; it was a trading joint. Anyway, we kept going through the wet season. We didn't think they'd do it, but they did.

59:26 We were then called the Mobile Force. After the embankment was built, we had to lay the rails - sleepers, rails, and the spiking - so they gave us spiking hammers to do this, and the fellow with the auger, just boring a hole about so big while the Jap

engineers were there, we got him to take it down further when the Jap engineer was there. Make it easier to get it in. So, it wasn't very secure, while we were doing this. While we were able to auger down a couple of inches, there wasn't much holding the rail, but we did that right along.

60:22 We were getting weaker because of malaria. We were getting malaria every few weeks. Our doctors called it recurring malignant malaria. Fellas were just collapsing. They were starting to die. They had malaria, dysentery, beriberi, which was a tropical disease from deficiency of vitamins. Your face would swell up, your eyes would almost close, your hands would swell up with the fluid inside your body. You could put your finger in - it was like dough - push your finger into your flesh and it would stay there for a couple of minutes before it finally came out. That was beriberi. Hardly see out of your eye. Belly would be up. Legs straight. There was no shape in your legs; they were all swollen. But the Jap engineer said, "Out to work." The doctors said, "Try not to." Well, they'd bash the doctors up and give them a beating because, "No, he can't go out. He's sick." Give him a bashing. Then, the Jap engineers and guards: "Out you go."

62:08 With these fellas with the beriberi, the Japs - the engineer - would give you your workload for the day, and the bloke that was sick with beriberi couldn't lift a shovel up. He'd be given what his work quota was, but the other fellas would do that. He'd be with his legs propped up against the embankment, just to try and drain the fluid back out of his legs. I believe some of the chaps had it that bad that their lungs filled with fluid and more or less drowned them.

62:52 The topical ulcers; oh, they were a shocker. You'd be in bare feet going along the track, and you'd be ballasting, putting a ballast in, knocking that in with the flat picks, and they'd fly off sometimes and might give you a scratch on your ankle or somewhere there. That scratch, in a couple of weeks, would be festered, diseased, festered, and spread. It'd spread from the ankle up to the knee, and the ulcer - without any basic food or basic medicine which would've cleared it up - went straight into the bone, or almost into the bone. Rotten flesh. The smell was nauseating. They had a separate hut that they called the ulcer hut. The fellas in there, they only had to have that, and a dose of malaria or dysentery, and that was it.

64:14 In the wet season, I was on light duties with malaria, working in the camp. I was in the funeral party, taking the fellas out to be buried. The stretcher - two bamboo poles and a couple of empty rice bags stretched between them. You'd put the fella on there and then put an empty rice bag over the top of him. Soaking wet. Pouring

rain. Monsoonal rain pouring down. You carried the bloke out to be buried. He was only just skin and bones. The place where he was to be buried, the grave, was already filling with water. You'd empty him into there and, with your shovel, pour the mud over the top of him and put a wooden cross on the top of it. We buried 15 blokes one day, doing that.

65:38 They sounded the bugle at this time. The Japs let us sound the Last Post. One of the Perth blokes was a bugler, or two of them, and he was doing that; sounded the bugle over this fella. As we walked back past the ulcer ward, our doctor came out and he said, "Please don't sound the Last Post again." He said, "These fellas are in a state. It's demoralising them. They're thinking that might be for them next." So we stopped blowing the bugle. I forget what that camp was. 105, I think it was. Past the camp, or the Three Pagoda Pass. Past the border. A place called Songkurai, I think it was, or Konkoita. The Burma side, although we called them kilos: 5, 15, 25, 30, 105, they also had names. 55 Kilo was [Unclear], I think. Some name like that. Another one, Tha Muang, and so on, but we called them kilos. On the Siam side, it was their name; the name they called it. Nong Pladuc was one, that's right, on the Thai side.

67:33 That's how it went through. We kept going. Blokes dying right, left and centre. Still had to go out to work. They were bad.

67:49 The Korean guards, they were just as bad as the Nips. They were treated by the Japs as second-class citizens. Of course, they took it out on us.

Were they worse than the Japanese for you?

68:07 Some of them were, because they were bigger than the Japs. We had one bloke there, six-foot. We called him Boof Head. That was one name he got. He'd strut around in jackboots. We had one bloke called Konsito. The different names we gave them. There were a couple of young-looking ones, like boys. We called him the Boy Bastard. He was a nasty one - and his mate. We called him the Boy Bastard's Cobber. That's how it was. But if you forgot to salute - well, you didn't forget to salute - if you just went past them, you'd get bashed up.

So how did you get out of there? How did that end, that period of your life?

69:13 There was one thing I was just going to say. Sorry.

69:19 The Stormtrooper. Boof Head. The Stormtrooper. We had an Englishman there who was captured in Hong Kong, spoke Japanese fluently, and he was the camp interpreter. Real decent bloke. We were having a bit of a singsong one night, about a dozen of us. We'd had an easy day out on the line because we were waiting on rails

to come up. We were singing *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*. I think that was it. Something like that.

70:12 Planes at that time, bombers, were coming over, doing Bangkok over - our planes coming over the camp - Boofhead - something must have upset him. He called on Drouer, the interpreter. Captain Drouer. "Who's been singing?" Fallout. So, half a dozen of us, we were all there. Captain Drouer said, "He wants to know what you are singing." We said, "Oh, When Irish Eyes are Smiling and Gundagai," or something. He said, "What are the words?" Boofhead wanted to know. We said, "Now, you won't believe this. 'When Irish eyes are smiling, you can hear the angels sing.'" That was the next line. Boofhead, as soon as he heard 'angels', "You are signalling the bombing planes!" He had a bamboo stick about that long; about two inches wide, and each one of us - whack! Said to Drouer, "No more singing." And that was it. No more singing. How stupid. "You're signalling the planes." So that was it.

72:00 Drouer, I might add, he survived. I met him down in Melbourne at one of our reunions. His hand was pretty useless. One hand. He fell out with one of the Jap officers in the camp, one camp, and the Jap officer - nasty - made him dig a foxhole. He was about six foot tall, Drouer the interpreter. Made him stand down in a hole after he got beaten up very badly. They filled that hole with water. Kept filling it with water up to his neck. He had to stand in it. That was one of the tortures that he got. They kept that up for days. He survived, though. Got back. But they did something with his hand. He couldn't use it.

73:17 But anyway, we're getting towards the end, where we join up with the fellas from the Siam side.

73:27 Think back what I said about the spikes, not very secure. We were being taken across the border to a large camp near the River Kwai and the bridge. Tamerkan, it was called. Large camp. We were transported on two bogies, say there and there, and the length of rails placed on them and tied on each bogie, and that was our transport to Siam. To the other side - Thai. When we got to the Siam side, we were going around, looking down at the river about 100 feet below. We thought, 'Oh, I hope these blokes did a better job than we did,' on the rails, you know, spiking the rails, because we didn't do a very good job. But we did it.

74:39 We got to this place, Tamerkan, and we got better food. The barges coming up the river were able to bring food, whereas, on the Burma side during rainy season, a lot of it was impassable. The food couldn't go under.

75:00 Anyway, we were there, Tamerkan, with the better food. The Japs then went through our ranks and picked out the fittest blokes. I was one of them. In the Jap's eyes, if you could walk, you were fit for the Japan Party. We were to be transported through Japan to augment the workforce in Japan. Because that was in '44 - they were getting a bit knocked back down; feeling the pinch. We were placed on board a transport, the *Rakuyo Maru*. Over a thousand of us. 1300, to be exact.

76:06 After Tamerkan, the Japan Party, we were taken down the Mekong River, landed at Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia and, what surprised us, we looked at it - French influence, see? They didn't fight the Japs. They more or less came to the party. Beautiful tree-lined streets. We thought, 'Oh, this is heaven.' It was, after Burma, you know, in the jungle. But then, from there, we had to march through the jungle; hundreds of monkeys everywhere and through the old temples in Cambodia, onto Vietnam. We didn't know it as Vietnam, it was just part of Indo-China, into Saigon. They kept us there for three months. We could've done the rest of the war there. It was the best camp. It was the best camp. Food plentiful. We'd just arrived there a couple of days and I told them what was going on. They didn't believe us about Burma.

77:35 Well, we marched through Saigon and the French people came out, saw us, surreptitiously give us the 'V for Victory' sign. We started singing. Some of the fellas that had been in Syria fighting the Vichy French, they knew the French national anthem. A couple of them who didn't have a bad voice, they started singing it. Well, the French people came out. The Jap guards, they didn't know what to do. 'What's going on?' They've seen that. I said, "Hey listen, fellas. They'd like to know who we are. What about singing Waltzing Matilda?" So some of us knew some of the words. So that was it, going through Saigon. Quite good.

78:45 We're still singing as we go into this camp where there were a lot of Brits. They were jaw-dropping. 'Who are these blokes?' as we were singing. One, in a cockney voice, he said, "They're Aussies, don't you know?" They heard some of our blokes talking.

79:18 So, Saigon, we were there three months, I think. That was an eye opener to us. As I was saying, one of the little carts had driven in with loads of greens in baskets and that, and eggs, just after we got there. I thought, 'I've got to get some of these eggs.' So I rang alongside it, taking these eggs. One of the Brits saw me. He said, "What are you doing, Aussie?" I said, "What do you think I'm bloody well doing?" I said, "I'm getting some eggs." He said, "They're going to our kitchen." I couldn't believe it. I said, "Going to the kitchen?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Oh." I said, "Over in Burma,

we didn't see an egg for a long time." So that's how it was. It was quite good there. The work was easy at that time that we were there.

80:33 I'll tell you an incident. It was after noon. I went to the tongs to have a bathe, and I took a shortcut. The Jap commandant, or the officer there, had his cottage within the area, and a tennis court there. So I thought instead of going right around I'd cut across the tennis court. Here I am, you know, little towel and what have you. Jap officer, he's coming down, smoking a cigarette. I thought, 'Oh, crikey. I'm gone.' I got half way across. I gave him a decent bow. I thought I'd better give him a good one. He said, "Oh," in English, "where are you from?" I thought, 'I don't believe this.' I said, "Burma, sir." "No, no, no. What country are you from?" I said, "Oh, Australia." "Hmm. You Japan Party?" "Yes, sir." "Oh. I hope you have safe journey." He's the commandant. I said, "Oh. Thank you, sir." Bow.

82:26 I went back and told my mate. I said, "I've just been speaking to the commandant." He just looked at me. He said, "What?" I said, "The Jap officer-in-charge," and I told him. He said, "Crikey. What's going on?" That was the difference there that I saw and experienced, than Burma. Or anywhere else for that matter. Anywhere else.

83:08 Then, when we got to Japan, that was bad news too.

Why did they send you to Japan?

83:17 To augment the workforce. They were feeling the pinch at the time. Not that we did much in the way of the war effort. No.

83:28 We were sunk going up there by the Yank subs. The *Rakuyo Maru*. Five days out from Singapore, 1300 of us jammed down in the for'ard. That was bad news too. Stuck down in there, 40-degree heat, blokes with tropical ulcers, dysentery, malaria, collapsing in the heat, putting blocks over and put them on the shelves to put them up on the upper deck to recover, and only a narrow stairway down or out of that place. Only one man at a time could go up or down. Some of our officers who were with us spoke to the Jap officer-in-charge, told him of the conditions down below, and it took a lot of convincing to allow a couple of hundred at a time up on deck on a roster basis. They'd be up there for an hour or so, down, another couple of hundred.

Was it a submarine or was it a ship, the ship you're describing?

84:53 No, no, it was a transport. A merchant ship, sorry. The *Rakuyo Maru*. Oh yeah, 1300 of us down below in a hole. Oh, yeah.

85:12 Five days out from Singapore in those conditions. We were on the for'ard part of the ship. That night, five days out, on that night, the lead destroyer was torpedoed, and it was the *Shikinami*. Now, as fate would have it, the *Shikinami*, the destroyer, took part in the Battle of Sunda Strait and then it was sunk there, the lead destroyer, by American subs, who were four subs sweating on the convoy. The Yanks had broken the Jap naval code and they knew the convoy was coming through. They sunk half that convoy that night. Two tankers, destroyer, put two torpedoes into us; one amidships - tremendous explosion - and another one a minute or so later right up in the bow. In the bulkhead, where our fellas were in that hole, all of us - and some of us on the upper deck - that bulkhead held, so it didn't do any damage to the ship itself, other than a great hole in the bow and right up.

86:54 All the Japs, they heard them clattering across the deck. Lowered some of the boats, most of the lifeboats. Left two jammed, in their panic. Jammed two lifeboats down aft in the davits. One on either side. A few of us stayed on board the *Rakuyo Maru*. It didn't sink straightaway.

87:27 I meant to tell you this. When we embarked on the ship, each POW had to take on a square of rubber, so big, with handle fashions in it. The Japs were taking it up to Japan, all the rubber. There would've been over a thousand pieces of this rubber. Individually, they were heavy. Put them in the water, they'd sink. But we think that they more or less stopped the water coming in too much. Just a trickle of water coming into the ship when it was hit with the torpedo, because it floated most of the next day, that ship. Strange!

88:23 Some of us stayed on board when we [unclear] just on an even keel. I said to my mate, "It's not going down yet." He said, "No. We'll have a look around." A few other blokes did too. So we went down to the galley to see if there was any food. First thing, food. It was underwater. Came up on deck. Saw a couple of dead Japs. Went up on the bridge. Of course, all the other Japs had gone. They were in their lifeboats. I said, "Oh, here's some charts here. I'll take this chart. It might be handy for something." So I took that and put it in my pocket. I had a dirty pair of shorts on. Met some other blokes, our blokes, down aft trying to get the lifeboat off. So we went past a couple of dead Nips there and went down. Finally, we got it off and there was a Jap girl there - one of their comfort women, as they call them - crying her eyes out. We ignored her. We just said, "Let's get this boat off."

89:50 Eventually, we did, and made out to the girl, "Do you want to come?" "*Ikimasu?*" "You want to go?" So we tied a rope around her middle and lowered her

into the boat. She was just taking room in the boat, the way we looked at it, my mate and I, who helped lower the boat. It was packed, because a lot of blokes in the water, treading water, jumped in - or scrambled in. We thought, 'Oh, there's no room for us," but we clambered down the ropes and had to hang on to the side of the boat. There was no room in it and there was only about that much freeboard; two inches of freeboard. Over 100 in there, I reckon.

90:48 The Japs were about a few hundred yards away, and we called out to them. "Ah! Girl. *Matte. Matte.* Wait." We thought, 'Oh, wait? Here we are, my mate and I, hanging on the side of the boat in the water. Come over and take her. Which they did eventually.

91:17 One of the Japs, when we said there was a girl there, "*Presento. Presento*. You can have her." 'We don't want her. She's taking up room in the bloody boat.' Eventually, they came over and then they took one small keg of water that was there. We said, "Cover the other one up." We had another keg of water. Only small, about that big. They took that with them, but we couldn't do anything about it because they were armed with rifles and bayonets. Anyway, away they went.

91:58 That afternoon, two Jap destroyers came along and picked up all their own, abandoned their lifeboats. We said, 'Hang on. What are they going to do now?' We thought they might've opened up on us. One destroyer left and the other one just circled around. Eventually they turned, and they started to go away. We thought, 'Oh, that's good. Because they've abandoned their lifeboats, we can get in there.'

92:39 One officer, one of the Japs, came down on the quarterdeck as they were going. Through a loud-hailer, he said, "Goodbye," in English. "Goodbye. Hope you all drown." Away they went. We gave him a sailor's farewell, in no uncertain terms.

What's a sailor's farewell?

93:04 Can't tell you in front of the lady. I couldn't say. "Goodbye and…" the rest. So he went. They went. Then we got into the lifeboats. There must have been about 10 lifeboats. Yes, eleven altogether. A lot of our blokes thought I'd gone, carried away by the current.

93:53 Our lifeboat was still pretty packed, and we were sorting ourselves out, and this lifeboat just - my mate was steering it with his legs. He was just standing up in it. He said, "We can take two more." I said, "Okay," and called him by name. I said, "Righto, mate." I'd finally got on, just on the tiller on our boat. There was no other room. Our folks clambered out of the water onto the tiller.

94:29 My other mate who helped lower the boat, hanging on with me, swam back to the *Rakuyo Maru* during the day. He said, "Are you coming? I'm sick of hanging onto the lifeboat here." I said, "No, mate. I've been through it. I won't go back." So I stayed there. Eventually, when they took the girl during the day - the Japs. I was able to clamber on to our lifeboat. Now, later on, when the Japs are gone. This lifeboat, with my mate steering it, it came nose into ours and said, "We can take two more." Most of them in that boat were *Perth* survivors I said, "Righto, Ritchie. I'll go in there." As I got up to go forward, two fellows stepped in to their lifeboat. My mate said, "Oh, we've got our two, mate." I said, "Okay, mate. I'll see you later."

95:43 Why I'm telling you this, that lifeboat headed in an easterly direction later on towards the Philippines. It was never sighted again.

And your lifeboat went the other direction?

96:05 Our lifeboat, together with three others, headed in a westerly direction, nor-westerly, towards China, hoping to make a landfall there and join up with the Chinese Guerrillas.

96:24 The Philippines, at that time, was being invaded by our blokes - October '44. That's when it was. We had no food, only a small keg of water, and there were about 20 of us on the lifeboat. So we said, "We'll row…" We estimated we were, I don't know, 300 miles from China. We thought, 'With a bit of wind…' we had an old blanket for a sail. Rowing. We thought, 'We might do it while we're fit enough.'

Three hundred miles you rowed?

97:12 No, no, no. We estimated it was 300 miles to China and we thought we might make it by rowing and having that blanket up for a sail.

Did you make it to China?

97:33 We never found out, because a Jap frigate came along on the third day, heading towards us, manning their guns. Prompted one of our fellows to say, "If you believe in God, you'd better start praying." Probably, he thought of the machine-gun fire we heard the previous day, and that boat I was going on to the Philippines was never sighted again. We think they were massacred.

Did they sink the other one, the lifeboat, you think? The Japanese?

98:22 Yeah. Oh, yeah.

So, where did you go? You're in the open ocean. You're heading towards China. What happened next?

98:31 This Jap frigate, manning the guns and it prompted our bloke, one of my mates, to say, "Well, if you believe in God, you'd better start praying." Anyway, there was astern of us: one, two, and ours, and they were there. The frigate slowed down. It almost stopped. It did stop. Took a risk. There was a bit of confab going on between the lifeboat with our blokes in it and the Jap captain. He said, "What's going on?" The next minute, we see a rope ladder put over the side. They took that lifeboat crew on board. They came alongside us and took us on board.

99:30 What we think might have happened there, the skipper of the Jap boat - the Japanese skipper - queried who they were in that lifeboat that had just had the fellows just taken on board. He said to one of them, "Are you Americans?" They said, "No." "Are you British?" They said, "No. We're Australians." Took them on board.

100:08 What we feel - what I feel - they were told, the Jap officers, not to pick Americans up, nor British. Australians weren't mentioned. Knowing the Jap way of thinking: they were Australian; not to pick up Americans or British; wasn't told not to pick up Australians. That's the only way we can think of it. We were taken on board.

Then you went to Japan on that ship, did you?

100:44 From there, that frigate took us to Hainan Island, we think. Then we were loaded on a transport, like a big ship.

Japanese, of course?

100:58 A Japanese whaling ship. Another whaling ship. Huge thing. Fifteen-foot ladder going out of where they drag the whales up, I suppose. A nightmare voyage to Japan. We had submarine attacks all the way, and we got through it.

American submarines?

101:26 Yeah.

101:28 The night before we got into Japan, Western Japan, the ship on our starboard side - might've carried ammunition - blew up with a terrific explosion. Shattered all the windows of the bridge of our ship. That's how close it was.

101:50 Anyway, we got through. Landed at a place called Moji in Western Japan near the Shimonoseki Straits. That was the western end of Japan. We were taken there and put ashore there. A grey day, it was. Grey day, but we made it, we thought.

102:18 Grey timber buildings in the shoreline. They made us sit down there in rows again. Jap guards around us. Full view of everybody. Some of us - we'd just been shipwrecked: unshaven, filthy, dirty, half-starved white men in Japan. Out of the

windows of people living, young people, jeering and laughing and pointing at us. 'Welcome to the cherry blossoms,' I thought. Japan. It was the most degrading welcome ever.

103:22 Some blokes just had a piece of cloth around them, half a blanket or something like that. I had a pair of ragged shorts on. We were led away from there to a low building which was a big pool, like a swimming pool. Two japs, with masks on - we got to learn to put masks on after a while, that the Japs gave us. Anyway, where this swimming pool was, Jap on one side armed with a long bamboo pole, and one on this side. 'What's going on here?' Whatever gear we had - very little - stripped off. We get into this pool which was about a metre deep. Highly-smelled disinfectant. We were being cleaned, I suppose. Disinfected. We stayed in there. Then we knew what the fellows were with the long bamboo poles: pushing us under to disinfect us. It reminded me of cattle going through a sheep dip, or sheep going through a sheep dip. That's what it was. That took us, I don't know, ten minutes or a quarter of an hour.

105:03 We got out. Nothing to dry ourselves with except the clothing we had. Then we were led away to a hall and given some food. First food I reckon in two days. It was a little - like you see in these sushi bars. A bento box. A lunch box. That's what it was. Oh, and it was welcome. We got rid of that quick smart.

105:38 Then, the hall. We were split up in two groups. One went up to Sakata, further north, then Tokyo. We were put on board a train. Shutters pulled down. Couldn't have a look out. 36-hour journey to Tokyo, actually Yokohama. We landed there. We got off the train there on a deserted platform. Yokohama. Met up with a tall Jap who spoke with a Yankee accent. Apparently, he had gone to the States and lived over in California for a while. Spoke like a Yank. He was to be the camp interpreter. The Japs got him when he went back for a holiday when the war started, so they grabbed him and put him into the army. Interpreter. Which he was at our camp. When we heard him, we thought, 'Who the hell is this, speaking with a Yank accent?' "Come on, you guys…" We thought, 'Oh, strike. Who's this?' We found out later he was the interpreter.

107:15 Got into this camp, and what struck me is before, we had plenty of room. Even though we were POWs, we could walk around. There, high stockade gates, Japs there, a guardhouse, the Jap officer himself had a small building/cottage and it was in the shape of an L, like that. Jap guardhouse there, latrines there, kitchen near the Jap guardhouse, and we were housed here. But it was all so small. The compound itself was no bigger than that garden out there. There was only about 150 in the camp.

108:25 We were given two uniforms. Skinny stuff; thin, very thin. A jacket, trousers, and a cap, and another one, thicker, for winter. The number I was given, placed there, and a larger one on your back about that big, and one on the cap, so they saw you coming and going. My number was *hyaku-gojuu-hachi* -158.

109:23 We were to work in a factory. Steelwork. Cold. Miserable. The guards in charge of us were referred as fumen.

What?

109:42 Fumen. They had a sign on their armband, like that. Fumen. Where they got it from? So, a British and Yank is in there in the camp, and they'd been there for months, and these fumen, they were brutal, sadistic guards. Maybe rejects from the army. They were bad news. They killed one bloke one night. They'd make up something. You wouldn't be doing anything and they'd just, "We don't like this bloke," and do you over.

110:51 We had one army bloke later on in the camp, we called him Napoleon. One little bloke there one day, Indonesian, I think he might have been, Dutch Army bloke. He'd done something wrong, so this Napoleon got hold of him, got him by the neck and down below the belt. Practiced judo on him. Got him like that, took a step forward. Right above him, then took a step forward and just threw him back onto the concrete floor. Knocked him out. This went on repeatedly, different times, different days. Then they'd get [unclear ???] and they've have buckets of water everywhere because they were frightened of fire, the Japs - fire prevention - and during the winter months there'd be a sheet of ice over the top of it. Told this bloke they're going to throw it over him, bring him to. Three-kilometre march back to the camp in the freezing weather. A recipe for diphtheria, or [unclear] or whatever. That's how it was up there in Japan.

112:19 Then, the air raids. Air raids, air raids, air raids, by our blokes. B-29s coming over. The firebombing of Japan, if you've seen photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some 50,000 incendiaries were dropped one night by 300 B-29s, the Fortresses, over an area of 16 square miles. Completely burnt out. Complete burnt out. Our camp also, but the guards got us out of it.

113:06 Eighty-thousand Japs died that night. Women, kids, old people. Some of the buildings, brick and concrete buildings, completely gutted, of course. It was just like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Went for four hours. Dreadful business.

113:36 My mate and I endured the raid, as another plane came over. They came down less than 10,000 feet. Very, very low, the bombers. They're only usually 20,000. This plane came over and my mate and I said, "Oh, strike me. He's going to be over the top of us." We got down by a low brick wall and the incendiaries dropped on this street - say out there; say at that street out there, a narrow street, jam-packed with Japs, with civilians. Exploded like fireworks right over that street. A huge fireball. That's all it was. No escape for anybody. That's how it was. Women, kids…

114:36 We were mesmerised by it. We just thought, 'Oh, God.' Then we said, "Come on. Let's go, before the next one comes over." So we caught up with the main bunch, got out of it, and they let us back the following day. It went on for four hours. Firebombing. Incendiaries, napalm. Whatever.

115:01 See, people don't realise the firebombing of Tokyo. Eighty thousand died. A million made homeless.

You were in Yokohama still?

115:15 Yes. We were there between Yokohama and Tokyo, our camp was. Kawasaki area.

You were working in the factory still?

115:32 Yes.

What were you producing, again? What were you making?

115:35 Oh, we were just on arc welding, steel, all the stuff that we did was out in the yard and it was still there. Well, what was left of it because all that area was bombed.

So let's fast-forward to the end of the war.

115:54 Okay.

Tell me about the last day of the war. What happened?

115:58 Well, just before that, I have to tell you. One night during a B-29 raid, four weeks before the war ended, we were in a factory area. After the firebombing of Tokyo, we were moved down to a factory area building there. This night, the raid had been going on for about an hour and they were getting closer. They were pattern bombing this time. I was sitting down on the timber decking, a couple of feet off the ground where we slept. He said to me, "Mac, what do you reckon we go up the air raid shelter?" which was just a few sandbags on top of the soil, because it was water-charged ground where we were, not far from Tokyo Bay.

116:58 Anyway, as he's talking to me, a plane came over. Next minute, I heard this noise: a roaring, crashing noise like thousands of bricks coming down. Direct hit on the camp. I was blown to blazers, somersaulting as I went. It was a strange feeling, as though it was happening in slow motion as I was going up and over, up and over, and then down - fortunately, feet first. Some blokes landed head first and they got buried in the rubble. I ended up in water. As I surfaced, I thought, 'Where the hell am I?' I thought I was blown out into the bay. Hit against something and put my hands up. Water was up to my chin, fortunately. Some blokes were down below. I just hung on. Apparently, the building had been blown apart. I think it criss-crossed over the top of the crater and I was in the crater, with just head above water. Then there were fires going on, yells, screams and all this.

118:23 I was finally extricated out of it, but I couldn't move from there down. My back. I had a fractured back in the lumbar region. I was paralysed.

118:38 One of the Americans who had been caught up in the Aleutians, he'd been there. I got on well with Mike. I remember his name now. He dragged me out. Half carried me. Put me in the compound with the other blokes. Laid there all that night. Excruciating pain. I found out later it was the lumbar L1 fractured, and T12. I couldn't walk.

119:13 I'm carrying on too far.

You were taken to a hospital, were you?

119:21 Yes.

Tell me about what happened in the hospital.

119:25 The following day, daybreak, we were cleaned up by the others who got away from it, put some clothes on, put on the back of a truck. Oh, strike me. It was bouncing over the rubble that had been caused by the bombing and with my fractured back, I passed out. I don't remember anymore until we got into the hospital. I was carried in and put down on a stretcher. A couple of Jap doctors came over and started talking above me to one another. I didn't know what they said. Then they moved away.

120:13 Now, there were a few other blokes worse off than I was. Two of them had bad shrapnel wounds in their legs. We had a Yank looking after us; a medical orderly. He was a good bloke.

120:37 I'll cut it short. These two fellas had their legs amputated by the Jap doctors and they were coming good, the fellas who had the schrap wounds. They wheeled

them into the theatre one day. I'm lying there, still paralysed. Later on, they were brought out, and the medical orderly came around to me and he looked down at me and he said, "Mac, so-and-so and so-and-so are dead," the two amputees. I said, "They were coming good, Buck." He said, "The bastards have murdered them. Cut the artery in the groin. Drained all the blood out of them. Both of them." 'I might be next, I thought.' I said, "Buck, help me up." Which he did. I couldn't move, though. I could just stand there with him. But he agreed with me, he said, "I think you're right there, Mac." I could just wiggle my toes, so there was feeling coming back.

121:59 After a few days, I managed to stagger around a bit. Then we were ordered back to the camp. Yeah, they murdered them, those two blokes. They wanted the blood.

122:16 A couple of days after that, or a week after that, August 15, we were in the factory too, with a fractured back. I couldn't do much. Midday, all of us were put into a dugout type of building. We didn't know, but we learnt later, that the emperor had spoken to the Jap people, and after about an hour we were allowed out. I said to my mate, "What's going on? There must be an invasion." We thought there'd been an invasion of the place. The guard had been doubled. The fumen were still there, but the regular army blokes now had taken over. Took us back to the camp. Locked the gate behind us. Doubled the guard again. Said, "This is it." Blokes with [unclear] in there. I said, "There must be something on."

123:34 The Jap officer came out and, through the interpreter, assembled us outside and he said, "The camp commandant is going to talk to you." So, there we are. The camp commandant came out. Through the interpreter he said peace talks were going on between Nippon and America." He got his fist like that, smashed it into the palm of his hand, and he himself spoke: "Nippon is still strong." Afterwards, I thought, 'I don't think they are. We're getting too many air raids.'

124:30 Sure enough, my mate said, "I think the bloody war is over." I said, "See if there's any air raid tonight, mate." There was no air raid. I said, "Oh, you might be right." Midday - sirens went. No. Only a recce plane came over. It only lasted half an hour.

124:57 Then, the following day, food parcels were going to be dropped. We were given paint brushes, white paint on the roof of the hut, 30-foot letters: PW. I said, "It's over, mate. I agree with you now." Sure enough, the B-29s came over. Only a few hundred feet up. Bomb bays opened. I thought, 'I hope it's not going to drop bombs.' They dropped these food parcels. They were huge. Coming down by different

coloured parachutes. Broke one bloke's arm. I said, "I'm not going to be killed by a bloody food parcel." I went up to the air raid shelter. So, there it was.

125:43 Then we were taken down and put on board a hospital ship. They treated us like royalty, the Yanks. They were a generous lot. Incredible. Hot showers, fluffy white towels, soap. I said, "It can't be. Soap!" And that's how it was.

126:07 Then, from there, we got put on board *HMS Speaker*, a small aircraft carrier. Took us an hour to go out of Tokyo Bay. They lined up all these ships. The *Missouri*. We went past the *Missouri*. *HMAS Hobart* was there. They wanted to bring us back. They said, "No, they've got to go through medical." Took us an hour. We went down on one ship, got a lot of cheers: "Yeah! You beaut!" and all this business. It was fantastic.

126:49 Then, from there, to Manila. From Manila, I met a bloke who I used to work with. He was there in the army. He was looking after the fellas coming back, the POWs. He came to the tent one day. We were all there, only about a week. "Frank McGovern there?" I said, "Yeah, mate." Phil Phillips, a fellow from the Water Board where I worked. I said, "What are you doing here?" He said, "Looking after you blokes." I said, "When are we going?" "Straightaway." I said, "Go straightway?" I said, "Yeah. Now. Right now." He said there's a flight going out tomorrow morning. Liberator. I've got a photo of it, by the way. Liberator. He said, "There's a spare seat on it." He said, "I've never seen a bloke get dressed so quickly as you did that day."

127:57 So, eleven hours from Manila to Darwin. Engine trouble on the way. RAAF crew said, "It's all right. There's one engine out. We've got three others." I said, "Good."

128:18 We were in Darwin for about 24 hours until they flew a part there, and 11 hours then down to Sydney. Beautiful. 17 September 1945. A sunny spring day in Sydney Harbour, glistening in the sunlight. Flew in low over the bridge, and around, and did another circle. I thought many times, 'I didn't think I'd see that.'

128:52 Then the navy took over. Took us to Balmoral, the pair of us. That was it.

Well, you must have some lucky angel looking after you, what you survived. Incredible.

129:06 Five times. Five times, and I do believe. I do.

Your guardian angel.

129:20 Yes, I do.

I've got a few more questions.

129:23 Yes, mate?

What was the worst thing, do you think, about being in that war?

129:32 Oh, being away from my loved ones from home. That was the worst thing. I always had faith that we wouldn't get beaten, but we had to survive. We lived from day to day. That's what I mean.

Your brother didn't make it, did he? Tell me about him.

129:57 Vince, as I say, was in the navy. Permanent navy. Engineer room artificer. Two years older than I was. the last time I saw Vince on board was that afternoon before we sailed that night. There was an air raid on, and I didn't see him that much on board because, you know, there was nearly 700 in the crew and different parts of the ship. Some people couldn't understand that. When I came back they said, "You must've known what happened to him." Midnight. Shells going on everywhere. Torpedoes hitting the ship. Different parts of the ship. Doing our own job. Vince was down below. I was on the upper deck. That's how it was.

131:05 The last time I saw him was that afternoon when the air raid was on. I was going to the guns, closing up, and he was in a passageway going down below to his station. He said, "Oh well, it's on again." I said, "Yeah, mate. It is." I said, "Oh well." He said, "[Unclear 131:29] a few." I said, "We'll do that. See you later."

So sad. Now, you've been awarded recently with a Medal of the Order of Australia.

131:41 Yes.

That's an honour.

131:44 It is, really. Yes. I've got it in there. Do you want to see it?

Okay. Sure.

That's very significant.

131:54 Oh, yes. It's really something.

Wow. You should be proud of that.

132:06 I am. I am.

You've certainly deserved it. That's for sure.

132:13 Thank you.

Just a few more questions. You had a long association with the Perth *survivors. The* Perth *Association, is it?*

132:24 Oh, yes.

Tell me a little bit about that, in a few words.

132:30 Oh, well, we got together shortly after the war and formed an association with the survivors in each state and called it the RAN Ex-Prisoners of War Association. A few years later we were talking about it and I said, "What about naming it the HMAS Perth Ex-POW and Naval Ex-POW Association, which we did. But over the years - a few years - only *Perth* survivors came along to each of our reunions. No other naval ex-POW. There were a few on the DEMS, as they called them: Defence Merchant Ship Gunners, whose ships had been sunk and they had been captured also. I met a couple of them on the way back. But they never came along.

133:50 So then we made it HMAS Perth Ex-Prisoner of War Association. I'm the only one left.

You're the last one…

134:03 Yes.

…of the HMAS Perth Association?

134:05 Ex-POW. Yes.

How do you feel about the Japanese today? About Japan and - because you suffered at their hands. Do you still have any ill feelings?

134:22 No. You can't keep hating. It will rebound on you, I think, if you did. So, I don't. I've been back to Japan with a mate of mine. He's dead now - passed on. We went up there and visited the Allied War Service in Yokohama where our fellas as buried.

What about your personal life? Did you get married after the war?

135:09 I did.

Tell me a bit about your wife and…

135:13 I met up again with my wife. Before I went away, we used to go dancing quite a bit. Met her at a dance one night. That's how we met people then. Formed an association. But then, away I went, and that was it until I came back. Met up again with her. Got married in '47.

How many years were you married?

135:55 My wife died 13 years ago this month.

So it was a long marriage, yes.

136:03 It was. yes.

Do you often think about your mates and those people who didn't make it back?

136:09 Oh, yes. Often. Often think about them.

How come, do you think, that you were lucky and they were not?

136:23 Just one of those things. I don't know. I often think about it. I say, "Why me?" But I don't know. I don't know.

What's important to you now at this stage of your life? You're 99 and three quarters. That's not bad.

136:49 Thank you. Oh, the family, and they're good. I am very fortunate to have them around. Very fortunate.

How many children and grandchildren do you have?

137:05 Children? Four: Two girls, two boys. Grandchildren: 10. Two great grandchildren.

That's fantastic. So how would you most like to be remembered?

137:19 As not a bad bloke.

I think that's definitely right. Is there anything else you want to talk about before we end this session?

137:32 No. Thank you.

Thank you. We've really been very impressed by your story. It will go into the libraries and Woollahra Council will put it on the internet. We'll let you know when that's going to be. It won't be long. There'll be a transcript done, which is every word that you've spoken will be written down, so you can have that, with the compliments of the Woollahra Library, for your children and grandchildren when we do it. We'll give it to you.

138:07 Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you very much. An honour to have been able to interview you. We both are very honoured.

138:14 Thank you very much.

Thank you so much. Thank you.

So that's the end of the interview with Frank McGovern. Thank you.


H.M.A.S.

HMAS Perth, c.1940