Transcription of audio files **(HD194851**–**aud**–**HT9603**–**01)** and **(HD194851**–**aud**–**HT9603**–**02)** (parts 2 and 1)

Interviewee: Richard (Dick) Thompson Date: Circa 1991

Interviewer: not specified Transcriber: Nina Buchan, Sept 2020

**[Start of recording, part 1]**

**Richard Thompson (RT)**: I just need to duck off, yeah, so about ten to, if we could finish, that’s okay? [discussing timeframe of interview].

**Interviewer (I)**: Yeah, right that will be fine… Ahh, so now if you could just start the year you went there?

**RT:** This was at the Exhibition Building?

**I:** Yes. Yeah.

**RT:** We would’ve arrived there, I think, about – oh – 1941, somewhere about February – March. I’m not sure of the exact date. But we could find this out from their Board records, without any trouble. I could look at my, er, certificate of record, and it should show the posting to ah, there.

But when I arrived in Melbourne, that was about January 1941. We went to a place in Spencer Street, a two-storey old building, it could’ve been a wool storage building, and we slept in there on paillasses [thin cotton or straw mattress], in beds, in these iron beds. Stayed there for a few weeks, ah, and then were posted up to the Exhibition Building, and I thought [sic] we were the first of the Air Force group, that had gone there. Although the Army had been there before us.

**I:** Yes. And where did you sleep? Did you sleep up on the balcony? Or…

**RT:** No – downstairs. On the ground floor.

**I:** On the ground floor.

**RT:** We came in on the side entrance –

**I:** That would be the south one?

**RT:** Yeah –

**I:** Where the steps were?

**RT:** That’s right, the steps, that was our operational area there. We used to parade out there and walk up the stairs, and straight through, almost to the other wall, where the aquarium was.

**I:** Yeah.

**RT:** And we were – sleep – we slept next to – almost next to the aquarium, within ah, what – 40 feet I s’pose [sic], 30 feet to the aquarium wall, ‘cause [sic] you could hear the seals at night time, popping around and snorting, whatever.

**I:** [Laughs] And did you sleep on paillasses on the floor, or did you have beds?

**RT:** From memory, I think some slept on the floor on paillasses, and some were on wire beds, that was a steel bed, which you’d remember the palias [sic] were on top of these…

**I:** Yes, yeah.

**RT:** And, ah, the beds could be arranged – you remember – that if someone came home a little later at night you could pop the beds up on their legs, and so they got into bed and the bed collapsed –

**I:** He he [chuckling].

**RT:** That used to go on regularly.

**I:** He he. Yes. And the organ [large musical organ], do you remember the organ?

**RT:** I remember the organ – the organ had been dismantled from memory. We went up to have a look at it, and there were holes in the floor, or wells, or something – or cavities, that you could quite happily fall down I think, from memory.

**I:** And where was that? On the balcony level or on the ground floor level?

**RT:** Ah, I think it was up on the balcony level.

**I:** Were the pipes still there?

**RT:** I don’t remember. Ah, they might have been, but ah, I didn’t take much notice of them at all, at that stage. Remember I was a young bloke, who was primarily interested in radio, and (?)

**I:** Yeah.

**RT:** And being very naïve, so you sort of looked at things that interest you. And mostly they were – to get up, get dressed, because you were organised in time – weren’t you?

**I:** Yes.

**RT:** And you’d go on parade.

**I:** What time did you go on parade? What time – what was the normal day?

**RT:** From memory – and this can be corrected – I think we would have got up somewhere about half-past six, seven in the morning. We used to go out – duck out into overalls, and parade outside the front of the building, that was the south side, in front of that little pond with the water fountain. And we’d then do some… ah, a quick bit of jumping on the spot, a bit of physical routine, and then we’d go for a quick route-march – a very fast, trotting thing, down towards the city, past the um – what is it? Little pond, through the park, down and then up round one of the side-streets, and in again up into the building. Into the front of the building. And I can remember everyone used to be, ah – you know it was fairly cold – some of them would duck around and get thrown into the pond in front of the thing. That didn’t please the disciplinary people. But then we decided, you know, if we’re galloping ‘round, it was so darn cold, that everyone would shout and kick up a noise. The neighbours in the various hotels or houses objected to this, so some were disciplined on that score.

But then we’d come back, form up, and then breakaway and we’d have to go inside. You could have your showers, from memory – we had to go downstairs. We went into the main entrance – there was to the left – we went down little stairs –

**I:** Into the basement?

**RT:** Into the basement.

**I:** Yes, oh that was used, was it?

**RT:** Yes, oh we used that I’m sure, that had to be it.

**I:** Was the canteen there? Do you remember a canteen?

**RT:** Ahm, no I don’t remember a canteen at all –

**I:** What would be in the basement?

**RT:** The basement was showers –

**I:** Showers?

**RT:** Yeah, well, we only saw them, and it was so darn cold you might sometimes get hot water, and other times it was freezing, icy water that you’d pop into and have a shower – and you got out quickly because you know breakfast was, y’know, on top of you. So popped back into overalls, went back [and] lined up for breakfast – and that was – if you walked in the main building, the eating area where we were served was directly opposite towards the outer (?) door, towards the aquarium on the other side of the building. If you walked up the front stairs – and straight through to the other side of the building –

**I:** On the right?

**RT:** If you walked through to the other side of the building they had the kitchen, and the servery, and we just sort of um –

**I:** Oh they were in the building itself?

**RT:** Oh yeah, in the building itself.

**I:** What was on – in the oval?

**RT:** Um… where? What oval are referring to?

**I:** There is an oval, behind the Exhibition [Building]…

**RT:** Yeah well, I don’t remember using it –

**I:** No, no. I think possibly later on, when more people came.

**RT:** I think so yeah, I ‘ve got a feeling also that later on, I came back for a second course about 1940… er... it’d be… 1942… between ’42-’43 [1942-1943], to do a special course in VHF [Very High Frequency Radio] transmitters – receivers down here, and I think I came back to the Exhibition Building – this is a bit vague , I might have to check my records. And there was um, I’m sure, a little hospital unit inside the building, roughly towards where the mess [soldiers’ mess hall] used to be… that would be where the aquarium was, or close, this side of the aquarium, inside the building. It was more a little general sickness cure, if someone caught measles or something like that. They put them into something like this. And that would have been about 1943, from memory. I had to go in there with a bit of eye trouble. And ah, they showed me one of the beds, they thought I might have slept in, but that belonged to the hospital, that was purely a hospital bed. And there was a carrying… one of these ambulance carrying beds [a stretcher] made of canvas with two wooden poles that went through them – there’s one down there in the museum still, and that belonged to the ordinary carrying ambulance thing (?).

**RT:** [continues] But anyhow, in the morning we would have lined up, had breakfast, grabbed our books, wearing overalls – back up to the front, paraded outside, and then marched down to 1STT [No. 1 School of Technical Training] – I’d have to verify on the road-map, perhaps, the route we took. But I know we paraded up outside, turned to the south end, to the opposite end of the building. If you stood in front of it, we were in the south end, did a left-hand turn, and went out that way. Sometimes we went through the park, and came out, other times we went straight out, down the road and ah, I’m not sure of the name of the street, but you could check that, and we went towards what was ah, 1 School of Technical Training…

**I:** Was that at Melbourne Tech [Technical College], or where was that?

**RT:** There was AWA [Amalgamated Wireless Australasia?], there was the Melbourne Tech, um – it was about half a mile down the road – it had a… um…

**I:** I know they used Beecham’s (pills?) Building.

**RT:** That’s right, Beecham’s Building was one.

**I:** Yes, that’s right. Well they had buildings spread around.

**RT:** That’s right, they were. Some went to Beecham, some went to AWA, we (?) were called the School of Technical Training, and for the first month there, as I say, was all Morse code and telegraphy… we concentrated eight hours a day learning the Morse code, sending it and receiving it – mostly receiving it, for the first week or so. We were trained by a reserve army captain, or lieutenant, I forget which is the title, an elderly bloke, a delightful character; he would have been in his, ah, 35s – 40s [years old] probably. An assistant or another member of the Morse code fraternity, I think he was an ex-PMG [Post-master General Department] bloke – he wasn’t tied to the PMG in any way at all, and whether these blokes were just volunteer men to assist – but um, they were very skilled in the Morse code and very good men. We used to sort-of have a break for morning tea, about 10 o’clock, and then go on ‘till about mid-day, parade outside the building, march back to the Exhibition…

**I:** So you went back to the Exhibition Building for lunch, did you?

**RT:** For lunch. And then in that time, I’d either drop a line home to Mum and Dad, um – and the post office – as you walked in the side door, it was to the right, a little outrigger platform section built, and that was commanded by the post office themselves, and you could buy the stamps, lettergrams, all that sort of stuff, or bring them there. So I used to sometimes slip one a day home, because the kindly old post office used to say ‘Have you written to your Mum today?’ So I’d duck in and scribble a few lines and whatever, so you’d have about, I think, three-quarters of an hour, I’m not quite sure – It might have been half-an-hour – for dinner. Breakfast consisted – as yours would have done in [sic] overseas or here – I think we had porridge, you could get sausages and gravy, onions, maybe some mashed-up eggs, that sort of stuff. Toast.

**I:** All the high cholesterol stuff! [Laughs]

**RT:** All the high cholesterol stuff, all the young blokes, they kept you warmed (?) down this way. Cups of tea – I drank milk in those days, I didn’t drink tea. So after breakfast, I said, we ducked off, went to work, came back, dinner [lunch] was probably much the same, without porridge, sausages, and ah – there was plenty of it. Back again outside, march back to wherever we went to – the 1STT building, Beecham’s Building or AWA – depending on the type of course. If you were doing telegraphy, I think we went to either Beecham’s or 1STT, or AWA.

**RT:** [continues] And the mechanics, the mechanical side were distributed also. So there were radio mechanics who didn’t carry out or didn’t have to do any Morse code tuition or procedures. So we studied then or carried out the Morse code understanding ‘till about um, four in the afternoon, paraded again outside, [then] I think we had a bit of a break in afternoon tea [sic], for a cup of tea or bikkie [biscuit]. There was a little canteen on the spot, and ah – paraded outside, marched back to the [Exhibition] building, and broke up, disbanded, and then we sort of had a bit of leisure time to either have a shower, tidy-up. You could go out ‘till, I think it was, about 10 o’clock at night.

**I:** You could go out every night?

**RT:** Pretty well every night, from memory.

**I:** I did come across something where they said that they [airmen] were allowed out Wednesday night, and weekends…

**RT:** Well, some of these slips of memory, that’s quite possible. I do remember, we couldn’t go out… we weren’t allowed to stay out ‘till after it was either 10 or 11 o’clock… some of the older members of the fraternity of the Air Force wanted to stay out ‘till 1 o’clock in the morning. So it was decided we’d all parade outside in the morning, no-one would go inside, after say 10, half-past 10 for example, no-one went inside. So the commanding officer with the warrant officer, disciplinary, appeared and said ‘What are you blokes doing out? This is mutiny!’ you know – well, nobody said anything. He ordered some of the blokes inside, and he had a pistol, not that he was going to use it, it was just a sign of authority, and nobody moved. So he had the Service Police arrest a few people, and we were all going to stay out, ‘cause the majority wanted to stay out ‘till after 11 [pm]. But because the mass of us agreed that we should stay out if we wanted to, then ah, no action was taken. So everyone went back inside and carried on as if nothing had happened. The commanding officer – I forget his name –

**I:** would it have been Francis?

**RT:** Francis rings a bell [sounds familiar], yes.

**I:** He used to run a chain of chemist shops

**RT:** Did he really? Quite a nice bloke… as young Air Force blokes, as you would have been yourself, you looked up to these officers, as you know, they were the old Air Force dignitaries and they had discipline you agreed with and it was good – I had no objection to discipline at all, as long as it was just. And in most case, it was, y’know. So you kept yourself tidy, and obeyed the rules, and ah, enjoyed the days I s’pose.

**I:** Yes. And the… at one stage there was… I came across one of the letters… about a fire, that was in the Exhibition [Building] where there was a curtain that was on fire. I wondered where the curtain was? Can you place where…?

**RT:** No, I ah, don’t remember that. But again, using the front steps as a position indicator, if you came into there, and you turned to the left, um, there used to be a hall where they’d have occasional night concerts. This didn’t worry me at all because I was interested in radio and studying so I’d sit inside or you could go downtown, and there were plenty of things to see, I didn’t… virtually straight from first-year apprentice or school, my interest was in the technical field. So anything that was there that I could go and look at in the night-time was great.

**RT:** [continues] I remember going to the theatres, you moved on your own, or you might go with a friend of a cobber [fellow service member] that you’d picked up with a similar interest, but it was just to sort-of, walk around, see the city, get back home you know. I can’t remember the curtain being burnt. But it’s quite possible. But as you walked in, to the left, these little concerts were held at night-time, and I remember sort-of lifting one of these curtains and I heard this tune ‘The Last Time I Saw Paris’ – I heard that being sung, and I thought, that stuck in my mind ever since. Every time I hear it, I can’t [help] switch back to Melbourne.

**I:** Yes. Did you ever er, they dug air raid trenches – did you ever get involved with that?

**RT:** No, I didn’t. No.

**I:** Were there any, prob’ly, were there any there? At one stage there were some in the front –

**RT:** No. No. Can’t remember those at all.

**I:** That would be – they would be dug after – ah, what – December ’41 [1941] I s’pose. So it’d be ’42 [1942] sometime, so you prob’ly would’ve missed that.

**RT:** Yeah, yeah. Well, I was only there for a six–months period, and I really wasn’t there for all that time, because they gave you the option, if you wanted to, you could be billeted away out of the Exhibition [Building] –

**I:** Ah, yes – for an extra, what –

**RT:** You were paid extra, to cover the cost of that. And I was billeted with some people down on Saint Melbourne beach – South Melbourne Beach. So we had to appear on parade, just as normal.

**I:** Yeah. That’d be better than sleeping in the drafty Exhibition [Building]?

**RT:** Yeah, well it was. It was an adventure also, to go out, sort of, meet other people, see Melbourne. We were down on South Melbourne beach, I was with a chap by the name of John Crawley (sp?). I’m sure he finished up in the railway institute – the railway department – in Brisbane. I think he was fairly high-up in the rating in the end – and he’s retired, I could probably contact him – but he and I were billeted together down at South Melbourne beach. Ah, we booked in, or were billeted in, with a family, and we used to call her ‘Ma’, that was probably the most convenient way of identifying her. And she looked after us well, like an older lady did. And the older [and] younger people in the house, there was a hubby [husband] and wife, and a young son. And the hubby and the wife were the Queensland – or rather were – the Melbourne dancing champions. So I was taking to learning to dance through them, at the Melbourne Dancing Academy. I was still two right feet at that time but at least it gave me some basic introduction to dancing.

**I:** Yeah, yeah. Did you ever go upstairs, or anything – explore the Exhibition [Building]?

**RT:** Ahh, a little, but most of that from memory I think was out-of-bounds, because of the danger – particularly around the organ. But I do remember wandering up there one night with a friend –

**I:** No, I wondered whether you’d gone outside and climbed up to the Dome [of the building] or anything like that?

**RT:** No I did not. No, I think it was restricted, and most times, you didn’t have the time to do it. When you’d get up, it was dark pretty-well, it was dark when you went outside to the galloping ‘round the fountain and down the road for exercise, so you got back, showered, breakfast, outside, you’re all organised – and you had no chance really to do anything. Back for dinner, again you had a limited time. So ah – and again, probably I obeyed the disciplinary orders laid down, so that was about that.

**I:** Is it still working? [Recording device?]

**RT:** Still working, yeah.

**I:** Yes, it’s ah…

**RT:** But, y’know, lovely old memories when you go back and look at them, you probably dream more memories than even existed, I s’pose. [Laughs]

**I:** It’s pretty hard – sometimes those things are gone – it’s only sometimes that you can recall –

**RT:** That’s right.

**I:** Flashes now and then, and you think to yourself ‘oh, I wonder why I thought of that?’

**RT:** That’s exactly it.

**I:** Where you saw Nina Stanton[[1]](#footnote-1), you went downstairs, did you?

**RT:** I went downstairs.

**I:** That was supposed to have been the ah –

**RT:** That’s where I’m sure the showers must have been down there.

**I:** The police, the prison or something there, they used that for. That was the story.

**RT:** I don’t remember that at all.

**I:** It’d be the SPs [Service Police] – could’ve just used [it] for a holding camp, or something.

**RT:** It could have been, too. We had SPs ‘round, and they used to be standing on the door, and ah, but there was no major conflicts or major upheavals at all.

**I:** No… Did you go to the aquarium while you were there? Can you remember much about that?

**RT:** Um, no I can’t. I might have gone ‘round, had a look at them, and that was that. But I wasn’t interested in – ah – oh what would I say – natural phenomenon of that order. But I might have – I cannot say accurately say that I didn’t. I probably wandered ‘round, and there was a maze out on the front, and I can’t even remember if that maze was there when I was there. But I came back with my wife and family, about, oh, 25 years back – and I took photographs of my wife and son, who’s now close to 30 [years old]. And we’ve got those at home still, and the maze was there then –

**I:** Ah yes.

**RT:** So she thinks we might have photos of the maze, whatever, but it was all destroyed [the maze?]. But I can’t remember much of the aquarium except that we slept near the seal’s pond, and you could hear those –

**I:** It must have been disconcerting –

**RT:** Oh, you got used it to it. They talked to us after a while.

**I:** [Laughs]

**RT:** So, whatever…

**I:** Do you want to have a break now?

[Pause in recording]

[Recording resumes – apparently different part of interview]

**RT:** Well, after the first raid [Air–raid] – shall I go from there?

**I:** Yes, yes, yeah.

**RT:** We walked back, after I was telling you about this poisonous vine thing – it gradually worked out. And there was a Kitty [Kitty Hawk fighter aircraft] straddled across the runway, the pilot had been shot down, it was taken out. And curiously enough, like all Australians, everyone was interested in souvenirs. And ah, I think the Perspex [plastic screen] was ripped out of the poor old Kitty, [laughs] that sort of stuff – it had had its day anyhow! And this was after the first raid, so we walked across the runway, to 12 Squadron Hanger, and there was a Liberator [heavy bomber aircraft] standing outside. And you wouldn’t read about it, but ah – one of the signals officers, a big bloke, was an amateur radio operator. And he was interested in the transmitting gear, in the crystals and things. So the crystals were lifted out of the transmitter, they were obviously no use to anyone, and the aircraft, unfortunately, was straddled by bombs and blasted [in] the next raid. But everything was normal until that stage. But, ah – you were asking me about the commands given?

**I:** Yes.

**RT:** That was so, because after the second raid, and most of us – sort-of, ah – were unaware that this was fairly high-level stuff, and you looked up and saw these lines of bombers coming in, I think from accurate information given they would have been up around 20,000 feet probably, Japanese bombers. I remember them quite clearly, groups of three flying and groups of other formations. And you could see – when we lay down on the ground – because they were far enough away from the trenches – you could see the bombs falling out of the aircraft, and you could see the sun flashing on them. And, like everyone who were hearing bombs falling [sic] how they were going to affect us, they straddled the ‘drome [aerodrome] and fortunately missed us, but they must have knocked over the 12 Squadron Hanger, the Liberator [aircraft] was burnt to pieces, and a lot of the aircraft around the place were flattened. One of the ah, I think it was one of the hospital huts, I went over to see it, and there was a great hole in the ground that you could put a large house into – it would have been a thousand-pounder [bomb] that flattened it.

**I:** Mmm…

**RT:** There were twins, too, Air Force blokes – brothers – that came up on the boat, on the Montorro (?) with us. And one of his brothers was in there with either dysentery, or chicken-pox, and he was killed. But that happened to lots of cases. But after the first raid, it was just sort-of, wandering ‘round, and we were ordered to move from the ‘drome, into the bush. Now, the bush came – the identification line was a barb-wire fence, that encircled the ‘drome wire fence, the bush really was part of the drone. So to move into the bush, it wasn’t hard, you just took a step out of the thing – and you’re in the bush. But we were told to move out of the bush for the night, after the air raid, and gather down the road about half a mile or so, and we’d all reform and have breakfast there in the morning. That was positive. I came back with another friend, and there was a corporal, [to] whom we said ‘We’re going to stay on the ‘drome, or wander ‘round’, and ‘What are you blokes doing here?’

**RT:** [continues] You should be out in the bush or going down to the group point’. So that was positive. It wasn’t a question of anyone being scared, that was the order given – to clear off the drome, and then re-group, which we did, and then come back later on. So ah, being a young Air Force bloke, you did as you were told. Everyone was – there was no fear – we just carted our gear, rifles and stuff, moved down the road and the Army did the same as we met them in the bush and re-grouped and had morning – or breakfast – it was baked beans, and bully-beef – and taken by truck back to the ‘drome. So those orders were given – it wasn’t a panic – we were told to do it and we did it. What purpose it served I don’t know.

**I:** Because, ah – the anniversary [of the Darwin bombing] is next year, isn’t it?[[2]](#footnote-2)

**RT:** Yes, next year is Darwin anniversary, yeah.

**I:** Are you going up?

**RT:** I’m not quite sure, it’s a – I thought, since we were part of the do [event], the Air Force should take us up [to Darwin]. Being mercenary-minded, it would cost you $1000, about $1200 to go there, and the cost of living, and apparently the American Air Force has already booked hotels out! So whatever… But I’ll see what happens… A friend and myself may go up, I’m not quite sure. There was one area, and I think they mentioned the Darwin, and the procedures to be carried out next year, and another one at Batchelor [NT]; there was only one raid at Batchelor, and I was right in the middle of that at night-time – I was doing wireless telegraphy at that stage, we had to carry out telegraphy watches, and we did those all day and night, so if you’re on that night–shift, you’d work from about 10 o’clock at night, ‘till about 6 in the morning. I was sitting there at night, and we had beds everywhere, and if the watch wasn’t busy you could lie down, so I was lying down and they got a call…

**RT:** [Interrupts self under breath to refer to tape] I think we’re still got a bit to go yet… oh yeah, quite a lot of this tape [interviewer agrees].

**RT:** [continues] So anyhow, we got a telephone that an air raid had started already on Darwin, and they thought that an aircraft was flying towards, somewhere towards Batchelor, at the depot. We had an Air Force base there, the Wirraways [training aircraft], some of the Americans – I think from memory we’d already mixed with them – and we had a transmitting station, which was on the other side of the ‘drome, and the signals office was away from the main living quarters, and anyhow we could hear these aircraft appearing in the distance, it was night-time, I’m not quite sure – it could have been early hours of the morning – and so we decided y’know ‘lights out!’ and we shot outside, it was a little too late, the aircraft were ready to drop [bombs] so we just, um, we couldn’t get into the trenches, I ran towards the trench but it was dark, and [I] ran into one of the guy wires [tent supports] so I thought I’ll just lie right flat on the ground. And you could hear the bombs dropping and they straddled to the left of the Signals Office, by about ah – of it would have been – 40 feet – if that. We were splattered – some of the bombs went off and then splattered us with bits of mud and ground, and then they just passed through. But had they been a degree to the right, then they would have flattened the whole Signals Office.

**I:** Mmm.

**RT:** We were operating through to – from there we used to talk to – Daly Waters [NT], to Townsville, back into Darwin. And so we just stopped operating, rushed outside and lay down, and that was that. In the morning I got up and had a look at what happened and the trench we were running into – here’s a 250–pounder, 500–pounder [bomb] sticking up out of the ground! Didn’t go off. There were a couple of them that were mis-fused. So we were lucky we didn’t hit the trenches. That was the one and only raid on Batchelor.[[3]](#footnote-3) And I think the dates are given for these things. Whatever.

**I:** And did you go back…Where were you discharged from? Brisbane I s’pose was it?

**RT:** Yeah, I came back from Darwin, I was posted to ah, 3 WAG School [Wireless and Air Gunnery School] at Maryborough. And I had to then instruct the Wireless Air Gunners, in the radio side, the operational side, transmitting, receiving things. And I was there for about 15 months, I s’pose in Maryborough. And then, ah, you could volunteer for active service again, which I did. And that took me back through the islands – I went, ah through New Guinea, or stayed at Pinchaven (?), and to the Admiralty Islands for about a month, I joined the mobile fighter control unit, which was a ground–operational thing for monitoring aircraft, and then came back to Strathpine [Qld], reformed, and then went back through to Morotai to Borneo. So I was in the invasion, of whatever you like to call it, of Tarakan, a little island off Borneo. Stayed there until we’d completed the island’s system, and then just prior to Christmas I came back, we had the option of coming back, I think it was on the Queen Mary [ocean liner] or something and I preferred a little old barge that – I think it was a 200-tonne Army ship – and a few of us were allowed to pop onto that, so we took our various collections and popped onto that, and they threw in some tins of stuff, and the Navy virtually fed us during the time. So we came back…

**[End of recording, part 1]**

**[Start of recording, part 2]**

**I:** The fountains, were they playing, in the front of where you had the…?

**RT:** Ah, from where we were, yes I think they were. Because, the water was [on] – in fact they had little um – I was looking at them yesterday – I thought there were little rails or little guard rails ‘round so you weren’t allowed to duck into the thing. But accidently, someone was thrown into the pond.

**I:** Well, there was at one stage – I don’t know if it was when you were there – there was a fence on the south side, ah, was there a fence there in those days?

**RT:** Yeah, I think there was. I think there was [sic] fences ‘round that fountain –

**I:** There used to be one [on the] south side, that went to the east, and the – well, the main entrance – how did you get in the Exhibition [Building]?

**RT:** Through the door, walked up the stairs, through the side –

**I:** You had to get – ah well, did you have to get through a chain-wire fence, or something?

**RT:** I think we did, yeah, from memory. Um… I know it’s silly, but you just went there I s’pose.

**I:** Yeah, I know. Well, ‘cause it’s 46 years ago…[[4]](#footnote-4)

**RT:** We paraded outside – that’s right – we climbed over a little gate, or a chain-wire fence, I’m not sure. But it certainly would’ve been cordoned off.

**I:** Well how many were there? Was it very crowded when you were there?

**RT:** Well, 43 WT, that was the Wireless course, would’ve had – I have a photo of it at home – would’ve been 50 [men] in it. So we would’ve had - how many [under breath] – 500? There’d be enough in ranks of Air Force blokes to go from one end of the… to stand outside and parade… and it’d fill the… almost the end of one building to the end of the other.

**I:** Ah yes, well that’s quite a few. And were there any WAAAFs [Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force] there, in those days?

**RT:** No, WAAAFs hadn’t appeared, from memory, in that part of the world, I don’t think they came in ‘till later on in the war. That I’m not quite sure of, I had no association with them at all.

**I:** They weren’t… You didn’t see any in the medical or dental [departments] or anything like that?

**RT:** Um… There may have been, I wouldn’t have remembered. [Tram passes in background?] Later on in the war there would’ve been, yeah certainly, um, in Darwin… there weren’t any [at the Exhibition Building], from memory. I can’t remember any association with WAAAFs until I came back from Darwin, in say 40… 42 [1942].

**I:** Yes – well what I find amazing is that there never, er, there doesn’t seem to be photographs of the inside of the building. Surely in those days someone must’ve had a camera? But you prob’ly wouldn’t photograph it, it wouldn’t be exciting enough, would it?

**RT:** No it wasn’t so much that…

**I:** You’d photograph your girlfriend…

**RT:** No, did you carry a camera?

**I:** Er, yes, I did.

**RT:** Did you photograph any Air Force installations?

**I:** Er, well yes, ah…

**RT:** Should you? [soft laugh]

**I:** Ah well I don’t know, probably not!

**RT:** [laughs]

**I:** Well, see at one stage we used to photograph the crew in front of an aircraft…

**RT:** Hmmm… I know very few of us carried photographic gear at all… a) because of the cost of thing, unless we were – see, remember, I started off as an apprentice electrical engineer, and the pay was horribly low…

**I:** Yes, yes.

**RT:** And you come down here to five shillings – what was it – five bob a day – you didn’t have much to play with [spend frivolously]. And to buy and develop photographs and things…

**I:** That’s right, and of course, film was short [in short supply]. Well, ‘cause being on the station, things like that, there was a photographic section, you could also get film there…

**RT:** Yes, oh right, yes… Well, being a new rookie [beginner] you know, you were naïve to many things, so ah… Unless you’re interested in photographic stuff, ah… But the cost was the killing thing I s’pose, very few photographs were taken; I can’t remember anyone at all in our group who took photos.

**I:** No… One thing they do – speaking of, er, reading letters – they mention that the colds and things like that – I should imagine people had a lot of colds and things like that then, judging from the letters.

**RT:** Ah – I must’ve been healthy enough, because, ah…

**I:** What time… Were you there in the summer or winter?

**RT:** Ahhh… 1941… So February, March, April, May – something like that.

**I:** Be starting to get the cold weather in May.

**RT:** But we were pretty healthy: you walked, you exercised…

**I:** And three good meals a day!

**RT:** That’s right. Early nights, like I might have gone out to see a picture, and when I was billeted down at South Melbourne beach, I’d go for a swim every morning, and it was cold but never-the-less, I thought well, y’know, salt water [would] do you good.

**I:** What time did you knock-off [finish] lectures? It’d be 4 [pm]?

**RT:** Yes, it’d be 4 [pm] I s’pose. Something like that – 4, half-past 4.

**I:** So what would it be..? You paraded in front…

**RT:** We paraded from about 8 O’clock in the morning…

**I:** 8 ‘till 4…

**RT:** Something like that.

**I:** And an hour off for lunch or so.

**RT:** That’d be right. And we’d march back to the Exhibition Building again. And then go back again later in the afternoon. But ah, no, it is strange. And prob’ly had I been, say, 5-7 years older, I probably would have been more mature and sort-of had cameras, and tried to identify and record history.

**I:** Yes, yes.

**RT:** But like yourself, starting on these fields, you never really knew when you were going to come back or not anyhow.

**I:** No, that’s a point.

**RT:** You were very lucky yourself to survive the war [WWII] – areas you went through.

**I:** Yes, yes I was –

**RT:** So you really need to write down records –

**I:** Luck of the draw, I s’pose.

**RT:** It was, yeah. Just the luck of the game.

**I:** [under breath] That’s alright [adjusting recorder]

**RT:** Stop.

[Recording pauses]

[Recording resumes]

**I:** Whereabouts did you sleep?

**RT:** Well, if you walked in the door again, and straight across to the other side of the buildings, there was the eating area, and just a little to the right of that, you came up against the wall which was the other side of the aquarium, where the seals were. And we were sleeping about 20 feet away…

**RT:** [continues] from there. And ah, from memory again, on steel beds, paillasses, blankets and things…

**I:** Where abouts was the cook-house?

**RT:** It was, ah, if you walk through the door again, directly, almost as far as you could go, almost to the – if there was a door that opened to the other side of the building, it would have been there – because we used to walk up, past there, past where the seals were, and just [keep] going to the other end of the building , you’d walk up and collect your food, you know. From the mess table or from the rows that were there.

**I:** How did you go? See – looking at this plan – the tram goes down Nicholson St, to the city.

**RT:** I remember coming in – we used to parade outside this area [pointing to plan] there – to there. And there was an entrance there, because I remember this… um, there was a squadron leader, Francis, standing up here on this little dais, and sort-of ah, talking to the assembled groups that were there. And it was marked off, too, now that you mention it, either by wire or by chain, or by some indication, because I remember well walking up through there, and walking down through the park, and looking up through here – Rathdowne Street –

**I:** Yes – and that’s where you’d assemble in the morning? And you’d go down this way?

**RT:** Yes, well either through there, depending. Sometimes we’d just march and go straight down into there, down to whatever street that was, Lonsdale Street or something.

**I:** Yes, yes.

**RT:** But certainly, we used to run through here in the morning. Down through the park, and then back there, and disassemble and duck in and have a shower.

**I:** Yes.

[End of recording – disco-funk music plays].

1. In the late 1980s Nina Stanton, of Nina Stanton & Associates, worked with the Trustees of the Royal Exhibition Building during a major restoration, setting up archives, creating a museum in the basement and training volunteers to research, collate, store, document and take guided tours. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This provides a clue to the date of the interview, and probably refers to the major (and first) attack on Darwin on 19 February 1942. (At least 97 more air raids on the Top End followed, the last on 12 November 1943.) 1987 would be 45 years after the first attack; 1992 would be 50 years, more likely as a date for a significant anniversary, which suggests the interview took place in 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The air raid on Batchelor took place on 24 October 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. If the interview was conducted in 1991, 46 years earlier would have been 1945, which reinforces the possible interview date. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)