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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Wing Commander Clarence Edward Barrington Wilson (Ret'd) as an airframe fitter No 77 Fighter Squadron RAAF, Korea 1950-1951, interviewed by Dr Chris Clark

Recorded

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by: Lenny Preston, AWM Staff

Description

Wilson talks about service as a Mustang fitter in 3 Squadron, Canberra in 1949; his reasons for joining the Air Force; being engaged; his sudden posting to 77 Squadron, Iwakuni, Japan in 1951; an aircraft incident involving Lyall Klaffer, whilst in Canberra; his arrival at Iwakuni; an air fitter's duties; working conditions; the employment of Japanese nationals; sharing Iwakuni with the Americans; relations with the British and South Africans; posting to Pohang, Korea as a corporal; a fatal accident in a tented camp; moving to Yongpo in North Korea; life at Yongpo; the military situation, including the Chinese; cold-weather clothing; a fatal accidental rocket firing from a US Marine Corsair and an accidental rocket firing at Pusan; messing arrangements and lack of recreational facilities; evacuation plans for a Chinese invasion; being equipped with small arms; the onset of snow and working in the cold weather; the strain on the pilots; an appreciation of the squadron commander, Dick Cresswell; showering in a snow fall; Chinese attacks on US Marines; evacuation from Yongpo delayed by the need to service an aircraft; civilian conditions in the area; evacuation to Pusan; fitting long-range drop tanks to the Mustangs; returning to Iwakuni to prepare for 77 Squadron's conversion to Meteors; problems with the Meteor 8s; an inadvertent ejection from a Meteor and other incidents; differences between operation from the front-line and a main base; fitting radio compasses to Meteors; finding a role for the aircraft; his leaving 77 Squadron to prepare Mustangs for return to Australia; comparing the Meteor with the Mig-15; returning to Australia by sea with the Mustangs; arrival in Sydney; 77 Squadron's return to Australia and being married for over fifty years.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, December 2002

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Identification: This is an interview with Squadron Leader Clarence (Ted) Wilson; it is conducted by Dr Chris Clark on 10 May 2002 at the Australian War Memorial Sound Studio. The topic covered is his experiences as an air-frame fitter with 77 Squadron RAAF in Korea in 1950-51.

Squadron Leader Wilson was born on 7 February 1929 at Subiaco, Western Australia, and was educated at Safety Bay Primary School near Rockingham, south of Fremantle. He joined the RAAF and attended the Ground Training School at Wagga Wagga in New South Wales in 1947-48 before being posted to 3 Squadron at Canberra which operated Mustang aircraft.

In the search for Mustang-qualified ground crew he was sent to join 77 Squadron in Japan within days of the start of the Korean War. He served with the unit at Iwakuni, Japan, then in Korea at Pohang, [Yongpo] and Pusan. On his return to Australia he served with 87 Squadron at Port Hedland, Western Australia, 1952-53, then 86 Wing at Canberra. 1958-61 he was in the United States for flight engineer training on C-130 Hercules after which he was posted to the Officer Training School at Point Cook. He was Senior Engineer Officer with 1 AFTS in 1966-68, and 75 Squadron in Malaysia, 1970-75, and in between filled staff appointments at Headquarters Support Command, 1968-70 and Headquarters Operational Command, which was his last posting before retiring in 1975.

Well, good morning, Ted, and thanks for coming in and being part of the program. I'd like to start the interview by talking about your experiences here in Canberra and in the air force in the couple of years before you actually found yourself in Korea. I understood that you actually joined the air force in '47 and Canberra was your first posting after you completed training. What sort of work were you doing here with 3 Squadron, which was a Mustang unit?

Well, 3 Squadron was a TACR squadron - tactical reconnaissance squadron - and their Mustangs had been fitted up with cameras and we had various operations beyond Canberra, both to show the flag, as it were, and also to carry out photo-reconnaissance work. At that stage the Interim Air Force was still in effect and we were the beginning of the Permanent Air Force, and as such we became the nucleus of trained Mustang fitters.

The thing is that the Mustang aircraft, at that stage, was the air force's front-line fighter, as it were, and the time we spent in Canberra was very interesting - it was slow, it was peaceful, we made a lot of friends. There were some airmen from World War II and they took the opportunity of adopting us younger people, who had just come in, and we formed some very nice relationships. In fact, I can remember one particular weekend, I went with a group of these older people into a local hotel and unfortunately drank a little bit too much. On the way out a policeman arrived and said, 'We'll have this young fellow, we'll take him in charge', you see, and these older hands they said, 'Oh, no, no, you don't want to do that, he'll be alright, we'll take him home, we'll look after him.' So they did that so I escaped the clutches of the ...

Of the law.

... of the police - yeah. But the following weekend then, when we went back to the hotel again, they then sat me up in the corner on a stool and put a glass of lemonade in front of me, and warned everybody to stay away from me because I was a fighting fool.

You'd been all of nineteen or so when you came here.

That's right, yes, absolutely, but it does show just how warm and generous these older hands were. And they also taught us a lot about the aircraft itself, shortcuts and how to be specific in certain areas, and things like that. It was a wonderful experience.

What sort of work were you actually doing as an air-frame fitter?

Well, as an air-frame fitter you took care of everything, you took care of the entire aircraft, except the engines and electrical instruments.

And armaments?

And armament, that's true, yes. So you had the hydraulic systems, any pneumatic systems, flight control systems, the coolant systems, wheels, olio, legs, struts, and the general air-frame completely - seat, cockpit areas, radiators. The Mustang was a bit of a ... the only drawback as far as air-frame fitters were concerned was the difficulty in removing the coolant radiator, just similar radiators you have in a car, but in the Mustang it was about, oh, almost three-quarters of a metre square and probably a third of a metre deep, it sat right in the bowels of the aeroplane so it was quite difficult to get out. I only mention that because something happened in Korea later.

Well, we'll pick up on that. But you said the Canberra experience was very peaceful, very pleasant.

It was peaceful.

But it was because you are talking about an air force that was winding down from the World War II experience.

That's right - and they introduced the Interim Air Force, which was a two-year stint, then from those people they attracted they then selected those to go on and become - if they wanted to - volunteer for the Permanent Air Force. So you were in a state of flux, but it was really an extremely peaceful time. You'd work from Monday to Friday; Friday afternoon you would throw lime across the hangar floor and sweep it all up so it was nice and bright, and bring the aeroplanes in and park them, and could go away for the weekend.

So it was a nine-to-five job during the week, presumably - similar?

Yeah, it was eight-to-five and things were peaceful and progressive. But it was a good atmosphere in which to learn (about) the aircraft, mainly because of these older World War II airmen that had stayed on.

So you were actually looking to make the air force a career?

Yes, even then.

You were looking to volunteer yourself for the Permanent Air Force?

Yes, it was absolutely incredible, I couldn't believe it. My father wouldn't let me join the navy,

which was my choice, because they had a twelve-year engagement. He said, 'That's too long', and then when the air force offered two years as an Interim Air Force he said, 'Okay, try the air force', so I did. And the moment I arrived I just fitted in. You've got to have a particular mental quirk, I think, to be really suited to service life. I really don't know what it is, but some people are eminently suitable to it, others are not.

Did you have a trade before you joined the air force?

No.

So this was a means of acquiring a trade?

A means of acquiring a trade, yes.

I can see your dad's logic then.

Yes, absolutely - well, there was no industry at Safety Bay, and in fact, just before I joined the air force I was just delivering ice around to the caravan parks and things like that.

So this is an opportunity away from that sort of prospect?

Absolutely. Also the primary school was the highest education facility at Safety Bay - the primary school.

Well, certainly this seemed to be a useful stepping stone. You mentioned to me before we began that you were thinking in longer terms while you were here in Canberra too, on a personal front.

Absolutely, yes.

You were about to get married.

Oh, yes. I'd met a young Queanbeyan girl actually, through the efforts of the Catholic Youth Club, I think it was, and we went out on this picnic. And as soon as I saw her come around the corner I thought, oh, gee, she's nice. Took me two years of courting - these are in the olden days, of course - and we became engaged, and within a month or so later I'm on my way to Korea.

How did that happen? I mean, the Korean War, of course, caught everybody on the hop ...

Yes.

... the northern invasion, and in Japan, of course, 77 Squadron itself was on the point of coming home ...

Yes.

... and packed up on its way back.

Yes, it was packed up and ready to come back, in actual fact. And the night that they were told

that they were going to see action in Korea they were actually having their wind-up party, their farewell party.

What happened back here?

Well, in Canberra what happened was that we knew this, we'd heard the Prime Minister Menzies commit the squadron, and we knew the squadron had gone to the action. I was on guard duty on this particular Sunday - it was just around about 2 or 3 July, and it was on a Sunday, I am on guard duty at the main gate. In those days a lot of the signal traffic and correspondence was delivered by Australia Post - it was known at the PMG in those days. I was in the guardroom, this PMG courier pulled up - and he's riding an Indian motorcycle with a sidecar, all painted red with 'PMG' on the side - so I got the satchel that he handed over, and signed for it, and took it upstairs to the person looking after the switch upstairs, who was a friend of mine. And unbeknownst to me he smartly went through the correspondence and found the posting authority with my name on it. So he called out, he said, 'Come up here, Ted', and I went up. He said, 'You're posted to 77 Squadron.' So I read the signal then before ...

Before even the unit knew about it.

That's right. And there was quite a team of us from 3 Squadron, pilots and ground crew, and in fact, the orderly sergeant at that time was Bob Hunt on that particular night, and he was one of the pilots to go as well.

So this was really the frantic effort to flesh out 77 Squadron ...

Absolutely.

... to give it some sort of capacity.

Put it on a wartime footing as far as pilot strength was concerned, and ground crew strength. And in fact, by 6 July we were actually in Korea - at Iwakuni.

But it's interesting because there were forty (*sic*) of us altogether - there were thirty-eight ground crew and twelve pilots - and the officer in charge of the flight was a Flight Lieutenant Olorenshaw - Ian Olorenshaw - and it's interesting that some time later he was instrumental in my being commissioned; we met up again later on. But anyhow, we were in a chartered aircraft.

Let's go back a little bit. This was on the Sunday.

Sunday I found out.

And presumably on the Monday you were told officially.

That's right.

And then what happened, what was the process you had to go through to get you ready?

Well, normally you had to be cleared from the squadron you were in. This involves obtaining a lot of signatures to make sure you don't knick off with a blanket, or some piece of equipment, and it can take a considerable period of time. We were all cleared within the one day. On that

night I went and told my fiancée that I was off to Korea, and then on Tuesday we were on our way.

So where did you actually leave, where did you fly from?

We flew from Sydney, from Mascot - it was a Qantas DC-4 - flew to Darwin.

So how did you get up there from Canberra?

Train.

You trained it up to Sydney?

Trained it up, yes, trained up to Sydney. When we went out to the airport we met up with the remainder of the crew that was going up.

So how many went from Canberra?

Well, I can't remember exactly how many there were now, but I know there was four or five pilots - Ross Coburn was one, Bob Hunt was another - Meggs came up later - Lyall Klaffer, he was a particular friend of mine, he was a pilot. These were what they called P4s, they were non-commissioned pilots. It was a very interesting set-up they had, it wasn't very satisfactory. They had the privilege of the sergeants' mess, but they probably had the disciplinary powers of a corporal - pretty horrendous.

I understood that they were basically given rank in Korea.

Yes.

Basically to protect them if they were shot down and made POWs.

That's right, yes - it was a very invidious position for them. But Lyall Klaffer, as I said, was a friend of mine and interesting enough, he had been involved in an aircraft accident just prior to this. As a matter of fact, on that particular day I was just walking past the hangar, and I was just standing near the CO's office - and he was a chap by the name of Saunders, and we used to call him 'Socket Saunders' because when he got cross his eyes used to bulge out of their sockets. So I'm up there and I'm watching the three Mustangs preparing for a show - and we also had a Wirraway up there aerobating at that particular time. The next minute I could see the Mustangs broke away, the Wirraway went one way and I saw a little bit of a flash of white, and there's this Mustang spinning down. The next minute Lyall Klaffer is beetling down the strip at Fairbairn - he went up over Mount Ainslie and did a turn. By this time I'm knocking frantically on the CO's window, I came in and said, 'We've just lost an aeroplane.' And then Lyall Klaffer came back and put it down on the ground, tore the reduction gear out and the propeller spun away - but he'd lost a substantial part of his main-plane actually, and he couldn't reduce his airspeed below a couple of hundred knots. So he was extremely lucky.

The reason why I mention it is because he was lucky to survive - he was really lucky - incredibly lucky. But he couldn't bail out because the aircraft would immediately go inverted. I saw the flash of white, that was his parachute, but unfortunately his parachute cords had been severed by the propeller so he plummeted to his death.

The Wirraway pilot?

No, Mustang pilot.

There were two Mustangs that collided?

Three Mustangs and the Wirraway. The Wirraway forced them to lose concentration and they touched wings.

There was one Mustang pilot killed.

One Mustang pilot killed.

Lyall got out of it - what happened to the third?

He was virtually undamaged, just a few holes here and there. He came in later when things had quietened down.

How soon before you actually recall going off to Korea did this all happen?

This was only, as far as I can recall - I think this happened in late '49.

So it's a year or so.

It would have been less than a year, yes. As I said, I mention it because there was a young - I think he was only a P4 - and he later went on to become quite renowned in the air force with a number of decorations, and he should have been killed that day.

Absolutely.

So you need a lot of luck.

I know Lyall from Vietnam, he had a Vietnam connection as well.

Oh, really, I didn't know that.

Yeah. Okay, so you went by Qantas ...

That's right.

... and that got you up to Iwakuni?

That's right - we went via Darwin - breakfast at Darwin - and then we stayed overnight at Manila. I remember the hotel because they had a big sign up when you went into the foyer, 'Please check your guns here', because they were having the rebels, the 'Huks', were pretty active in the Philippines at that time, so that amused us somewhat. And then we checked the beer supplies out and a small, little 375 mil (millilitres) of beer was costing us almost a pound Australian, so we didn't have much of that. And then we landed at Iwakuni on the Friday, marched, moved out of the aircraft. The warrant officer that was there came up and he said,

'Right, all air-frame fitters and engine fitters remain', the rest were escorted away to their barracks. And they said, 'Right, you blokes are working', so we went straight down to the hangars and started to work. Of course, this meant that when we finally got up to the barracks we had the worst rooms.

They didn't even give you time to sort of drop your bags or anything like that?

No, straight to work.

What gear did you have with you, what had your brought?

Well, we hadn't been really kitted out, we just came out with what uniforms we had - and as we were going to a colder climate we had all our blue uniforms, which is the heavy serge uniform. That is what we had, heavy serge uniforms and a greatcoat.

But you were not given any special issue of clothing or other equipment?

No, not to get there, we were issued with it later on when we went to Korea - that was some nice stuff too.

But this was because, presumably, the aircraft were already in operations and flying out over Korea from Japan?

Yes. Well, of course, at that stage the North Koreans had pushed everybody - the Americans and the South Koreans - into a tight little area just around Pusan - I think it only measured about fifty miles by twenty-five or thirty miles, they were operating out of there. Well, the Mustangs from 77 Squadron, they would fly on operations from Iwakuni to Korea, do their job of work and then come back. If they ran short of fuel they'd land at Pusan, but that was strictly a refuel stop only. This was very difficult for the operations, of course, and the COs and other people were pretty keen to get the squadron situated in Korea; but there wasn't much left, the North Koreans had it all. So it wasn't until later, after the Inchon landings with MacArthur, and they were able to break out of the Pusan area, the squadron then was able to go to a place called Pohang.

When you first got there the sort of work you were doing as an air-frame fitter was instant repair work on aircraft or meeting maintenance needs to keep them going.

That's right, yeah. It was the maintenance of the aircraft, the regular servicing. As you probably know, before the aircraft can fly it has to be serviced and all trades have to decide that a particular service has been carried out relevant to the particular flight that the aircraft is going on. It was a particular document you signed, what they called a EE-77 - it was about A3-size, I think - and the inside of the front cover, and the inside of the back cover was covered with very fine print so when you signed your signature you signed everything. You could almost be hung if anything went wrong, you were covered by every regulation concerning aircraft.

A lot of the work that the engineers and the ground crew had to do were, of course, before the aircraft even got operational first thing in the morning.

Absolutely.

So you are working during the night.

Absolutely, yes.

What sort of shifts were you working?

Well, we were working a twelve-hour shift at that stage, and we were working six days a week - these were all staggered, of course.

So the squadron was operating around the clock?

No, it was basically restricted to daylight - they might come back late sometimes. They had a lot of trouble with - didn't have a lot of trouble - later on they did have trouble with the pilots not being fully trained on instrument flying. It seems strange to think about it now, but there were some difficulties. And also, as far as the Korean terrain was concerned - it's extremely mountainous, a revolting place to fly in, particularly when you've got to come down to ground level and attack something, and dodge the hills going back up again. But also there was an extreme shortage of navigational aids.

I heard Dick Cresswell talk about this.

They just weren't available.

Was there much battle damage to the aircraft that needed attention?

Yes, there were, there were some fairly spectacular ones, but mostly they were minor holes from ground fire. There was one in particular I remember, but that was later on actually, it had been hit by a MiG and hit between the three guns on the port side and had blown the leading edge in. That was a very extensive repair, but in actual fact the repair was carried out by some Japanese nationals that we had - we had quite a few Japanese nationals working for us at Iwakuni. Most were cleaners or aircraft handlers, but we did have a few trades people. They really did a fabulous repair on this leading edge. I had a look at it because that was part of our job, and it was extremely complex. So between the couple of Japanese nationals that we had, and our section, it was repaired and it was extremely successful. It was quite complex and it was interesting, but most of the repairs were just minor repairs. But of course, with the aircraft flying they would come back for major servicing, and then the aircraft had to be pulled apart and items changed or renewed, or inspected, put back together again.

We found that the aircraft itself was quite cold. It's all metal, it's very confined, so you would be working in the cockpit area, upside down, with your head up underneath the instrument panel, with your shoulders pressed against the cold floor, and you are fiddling to try and do a union up on a pipe, or to do a nut up, or to put a split pin in a safety control rod of some sort. You might be there half an hour, forty-five minutes, just upside down, then somebody would grab you by the feet and heave you out. He'd get in to try and fix it, then he'd give up and there you would be back in there again. Of course, every now and again he would fluke it and he would walk away quite pleased with himself.

All the fitters that we had at that stage were all thoroughly experienced. There were no people that hadn't had probably two or three years experience on Mustangs - or more.

Did that stay the situation ...

Yes.

... or was there a shortage of trained personnel to replace?

No, the shortages become evident once we began to rotate back to Australia. And in fact, shortly after, say, in '51, they were beginning to post in mechanics rather than fitters. One of those was a friend of mine so the trade qualifications dropped down. Of course, there were sufficient experienced fitters to maintain ... But the thing is that the initial part of the squadron operation, particularly as far as the aircraft were concerned, and the fitters - I liked to refer to it as the 'happy times' because we had a magnificent aeroplane, an aeroplane that was vintage World War II, but had an incredible record as a long-range bomber escort, as a fighter, as a ground strafing machine, a robust and a pretty aeroplane - it really looked beautiful. And in 77 Squadron we had Japanese nationals who actually polished the aeroplane. We used fullers earth and polished the aeroplane, polished all the outside of the aircraft, so it was bright and shiny, and it added an extra knot or two to its speed, in actual fact, it was just fractionally faster because of this very smooth surface.

What was Iwakuni like as a base to work?

Iwakuni was a marvellous place.

The RAAF had basically operated from there, and had it to itself until the war started, and then American units came in ...

That's true.

... and it became a shared base. Did it cause problems that you guys experienced?

Well, Iwakuni itself actually - just as a point of interest - was a kamikaze Japanese unit - that's where the kamikaze pilots, towards the end of the war - before that it had been a Japanese naval area.

When the Americans moved in I don't think they caused - there was not a great deal of friction between the Australians and the Americans, there really wasn't, we were very close, and in Korea we were particularly close because we were with the Americans all the time. The people that we didn't sort of get along too well with - we only ran across them occasionally - were the South Africans and the English.

The South Africans had their own, they had a Mustang squadron there too, didn't they?

They had a Mustang squadron that operated somewhere in Japan, I'm not quite sure, and they were in competition with us, they gave us a bit of a hard time.

But on Iwakuni itself did you share facilities with the American squadrons, or basically had separate squadron areas?

We basically had separate squadron areas, separate accommodation blocks, and there would be mingling on the periphery and in the beer hall - we had different messes and things like that, so

there wasn't a great deal of mingling.

So at what point were you deployed forward into Korea?

Well, after the Inchon landing and the North Koreans began to retreat, an airfield called Pohang - which was an American base too - 77 Squadron was sited at Pohang - that's on the east coast of Korea. At that stage they decided that the ground crew would rotate on a six-week basis, approximately, and before the first six weeks had gone past that's when I was posted there - I was posted to Pohang probably early November.

Had you been promoted corporal by then?

Yes, actually I was promoted on 1 November - it was quite pleasing, yeah - I had decided that the air force was going to be my career anyhow - I was interested in promotion and moving on. Yeah, I was promoted to corporal so as a corporal I went to Pohang.

At Pohang we were accommodated in marquees and tents, and they were World War II manufacture - and as a matter of fact, it was because of the tents that we, within three days of my arrival there, we had a tragic accident.

This was the two officers who were burned?

Yes. I was lying in my tent, I was woken up, and I looked up and I could see flames flickering on the inside. I rushed outside and these two poor pilots staggered from their tent, aflame. They were both alive at that time, but I think one died before they could be medevaced out, and the other died some time later.

About four days later. You were next-door to this?

Yes, we were right next-door so that wasn't a very nice introduction, you felt so sorry for them, but some useful lessons came out of it. They feel that, firstly, the tent caught fire because they had jerry rigged some lighting to make things easier for everybody - a little bit of electric light from a mobile power car. On that particular night there was a high wind blowing and apparently the wind blowing had chaffed - the tent moving - had chaffed through the wires and caused the spark. But the major cause was that those tents were World War II tents, were heavily camouflaged with oil-based paints - it was soaked with oil-based paint.

So they just went up.

Now, the American tents were made of fire-retardant material, so those pilots lost their lives because of poor equipment.

And that happened within days of you arriving?

Yeah, within days of our arriving, but already the battle front had moved so far north, beyond the 38th Parallel, into North Korea, that once again the Mustangs were spending a large amount of time going to and fro the targets rather than being over the targets, so that's when they decided that we would move the squadron from Pohang up to Yongpo which is up in North Korea. We sent an advance party in the middle of November, and then - I think on 18 and 19 November - we moved up, the whole party moved up. We were accommodated in Japanese

barracks - old Japanese aircrew barracks - which consisted of very small rooms - no windows, all the windows had gone.

When you say they had gone, they weren't boarded up, they were just bare spaces?

They were just holes in the wall - we soon boarded them up though.

Where you slept at night - if you can just imagine a tiled bed - and underneath was provision to light a fire. So you'd lie out on your tiled bed with a fire underneath, and of course, not being too experienced with these things, the first lot of fires were extremely hot, so after a little while you'd be jumping out of your bed.

But I did mention, as a result of the two pilots burning I think that they were caught, they couldn't undo the zippers, in the fright of the moment, of their sleeping bags, and I never, ever did my zipper up on my sleeping bag thereafter, not once. If I'd needed to get up quickly I was going to do it - and they did catch [fire] too, you know.

Anyhow, so we were accommodated in these blocks - it was quite comfortable living.

I was going to say, because it was pretty damned cold at this stage.

I was getting cooler and we were in an area where in winter time the local farmers would wrap the trunks of their fruit trees with felt. They would wrap felt from the ground level up to the first branch to save the trunks from bursting with the cold during the winter months, but it hadn't got that cold at that stage, but it was still chilly. But around about the time that we arrived there the airfield itself was subject to guerrilla attacks from time to time and we were guarded by one Sherman tank, I believe, and a number of American guards - just outside our place there was a hole in the ground that was sandbagged, and it was always manned by two Americans armed with 0.5 machine guns.

Were you ground crew required to go around armed?

Not at that stage, no, not at that stage, but around about early November the Chinese, obviously getting worried with the incursion of the United Nations and the Americans getting close to their borders - and the Russians must have been a bit concerned too because the Republic of Korea, South Korean troops, were moving up that east coast and were approaching near their border.

To the Yalu?

Yeah - so the Chinese had already made a foray into North Korea in considerable numbers and, of course, in retrospect this was to serve as a warning - say, 'Listen, you guys, you had better get out of here, we don't like what you are doing, we are worried' - and there were some very sharp exchanges and quite a considerable number of Chinese troops; and then they withdrew. So I guess the powers that be - actually MacArthur's headquarters in particular - with some faulty, or bad, intelligence - or perhaps they were just keen to get to the Chinese border and wipe up the North Koreans, which we were proceeding to do, sort of thing. But the further you moved into North Korea, particularly in our area, there was a single track road that led from where we were

up to the Chosen Reservoir, which was the hydro-electric scheme. Apparently that was where the Chinese had drawn the line, once you entered up that area they were going to come into the war properly.

Did you have defensive positions dug around the squadron area?

No, this was difficult to do. There were certainly defensive positions out on the perimeter, but within the airfield itself it wasn't practical because of the movements of the aircraft.

But I wasn't sure whether they'd have sort of trenches alongside the hangars in case you came under fire or something like that.

No, no, they didn't.

I understand there was quite a good hangar ...

Well, actually there were some good hangars there, but like everything else in North Korea, they had been bombed or blown up in World War II and so lots of pieces were missing sort of thing. We did all our servicings outside in the open.

Okay, so what were the problems for ground crew working under those conditions?

Well, early on it was the sheer, bitter, cold wind blowing, and this wind was very, very cold. We had already been outfitted with clothing by the Americans. In actual fact, a standard rig at that time for the ground crew were 'Mickey Mouse' boots - and they just looked like Mickey, the old cartoon of Mickey Mouse with the black boots. That's what they looked like, and they called them 'Mickey Mouse' boots - the bottom half was rubberised material, and then they had leather uppers that came up to just below your knee, and the lace was about a metre long - lace your boots up. Inside you had inner and outer socks, and then you had these boots.

Your outfit consisted of your under clothing, naturally, and then we had inner trousers, inner vests, and then over that you had outer trousers, then you had an outer coat, hooded, and you had inner gloves, you had outer gloves, and you had a fur pile hat which you wore underneath [sic] all that.

So how did you hang upside down working underneath ...

Well, this is right, this became extremely difficult. So the idea was for us to do the minor servicings which was necessary to turn the aircraft around, replenish them, carry out any repairs that were urgently required - anything major, any major repairs, or major servicings, went back to Iwakuni - so we had become really a front-line squadron that consisted of replenishment, and rearming the aircraft and getting them back in the air again.

What were conditions like generally? What sort of hours would you have been working during that period you were at that base?

Once again, because of lack of navigation and the difficulty in flying in terrain at night - it was just totally impossible, it was so mountainous - that virtually flying stopped once the sun went down. So then we were able to recover any aircraft, do our repairs, do our replenishment, and have the aircraft ready next morning. So next morning all we had to do was brush the snow off

the main-plane, and just check that nothing had developed overnight - hydraulic leaks and things like that. The engine fitters would warm the engines up and we'd be waiting for the aircrew to come down. And then during the day it was just backwards and forwards, aircraft go, do their job.

During that period we had a little bit of slack time. I used to go down and visit the Corsair squadrons which belonged to the Marines. I made friends down there on their flight line, I'd talk to them. And as a matter of fact, one day I was talking to this particular - we weren't friends, but he was a good acquaintance - and we used to sit beneath the wing of the Corsair - and the flaps were right down so you were protected from the wind. We'd sit there and talk.

On this particular day I got up and said to Al, 'See you later' sort of thing, and I left the vicinity of the aircraft. I wasn't more than twenty or thirty feet away and the rocket below the Corsair ignited and away it went. I rushed back and the chappie I'd been talking to was mortally hurt.

This is from the back-blast?

From the blast of the rocket, that's where we were sitting - and the armourers were moving down connecting the rockets up and testing the circuit. Now, this was a thing that could not happen because there was what they called a squat switch on the olio leg, so when the weight of the aircraft went on to the leg it came down and enclosed the squat switch itself and that isolated the firing circuit. You should not be able to fire your guns, or drop bombs, or fire rockets, but it happened and this poor chap was killed.

Interesting enough, a similar thing happened when we went down to Pusan, so it just showed the systems ...

Was this Corsairs as well, or with one of our aircraft?

No, it wasn't one of our aircraft, but when we got down to Pusan the local commander there had just inherited a bright, shiny, new Mustang - they were it, you know, he used to stooze around in this bright Mustang. And it was parked, he virtually hadn't taken delivery of it at this stage. An aircraft on the other side of the airfield had a mishap, fired a rocket, went right across the airfield and struck this Mustang just behind the wing root, and the Mustang settled down in two pieces. So these things do happen [despite] all the protection in the world.

You mention you went down to a neighbouring squadron; what other activities could the ground crew do while the squadron aircraft were out doing operations?

Well, invariably there would be aircraft that needed more than just maintenance, and we did do some semi-major work such as removing the oleo - we did a complete oleo leg change which is reasonably (complicated) - well, it is complicated and time consuming. So there was work there, we still had work to do, only occasionally were we lucky enough to ... But I made point, I was pretty keen to just see how the other half lives, sort of thing; I was pretty keen on how the squadron operated too. I had made a suggestion as soon as I arrived at Pohang - of course, I was totally ignored - rightfully so too.

Were there much opportunity for sort of recreational outlets?

No.

A bit of sport or something like that?

No.

So when work finished for the night and you had mess ...

We joined what they called the chow line, the food lines, and took our turn to be fed by the Americans.

Okay, so the squadron wasn't responsible for feeding itself?

No, we were clothed and fed by the Americans.

What was that like? Was it acceptable to Australians?

In semi-permanent places like Pohang it wasn't too bad because they had mess tents - you'd go up to the mess tent - but in Yongpo you waited outside in the cold, and moved in, and got your food, and sat wherever you could, then beetled off back to your barracks. No, there were no picture shows, or UN shows, or anything like that, no, nothing, that just didn't happen.

At Yongpo you weren't there very long though, were you - it was only about three weeks?

Actually, we went there - no, it was about three weeks actually, some of us were there a little bit longer, which we didn't want to be, including myself.

I was going to ask: were you one of those lucky few?

And it was because of what we thought we should have always been doing. Initially when we were in Korea, when servicing of the aircraft, the sergeant would come along and say, 'Right, this needs to be done, so you look after this one, that one, that one and that one.' That was alright, but some of us were faster workers - and let's face it, some of the blokes might shirk off a little bit so we found that the more experienced people - well, I found anyhow - it seemed to become apparent to me that the more experienced people were doing an unfair proportion of the aeroplanes. So when we went up to Yongpo I was pleased to see that we were allocated specific aircraft - so we had three aircraft, or five aircraft - I can't think what the number was now; I've got an idea it was five, might have only been three. Anyhow, we had a specific aircraft and we were responsible for those aircraft. That's why sometimes we were able - I was able - to go down to the flight line because all my aircraft were right ...

You'd done your job.

... and were flying - that's right - whereas other people were caught out with major repairs or significant repairs anyhow.

Around about that time the situation worsened because the Chinese did enter the war in earnest. In fact, just north of us we had a Marine general and he'd been pressured to move up into the Yalu River, and he procrastinated, and he established forward bases, he established supply lines, he established depots, and very fortunately he was good enough to have two airstrips put in

which he could be resupplied from. It was those airstrips, and it was those Marines, that saved us because when the Chinese entered the war one idea was to go south, which they did, but the other one was to surround the Marines and actually just kill them all - that was their idea. So they were constantly trying to surround the Marines, the Marines would come back, and these airstrips were in full use - and his supply depots, it was marvellous, probably a person has never been given as much credit as he should have been given. He got into a lot of trouble with his commander because the commander was saying, 'Press forward - press forward - go, go, go - we've got to be home by Christmas' - MacArthur and General Almond¹.

But it was round about this time that the CO called the aircrew together, and later the ground crew, and said, 'Look chaps, things are not the best, we may have to move out of here quickly.' He said, 'What I propose to do, if we do, is that we'll take a fitter in each of the aircraft' - 'Oh, yes?' - the idea was that we would sit in the seat, with the seat fully lowered; the pilot would sit on our lap. But I don't know what was going to happen because there were more fitters there than there were seats in the aeroplanes - I don't know who was going to be doing the balloting. And, of course, it was at that time that they also issued us with rifles and ammunition which we had to carry with us all the time, and the ground crew were issued with sub-automatic weapons and revolvers. That caused a little bit of an incident because as soon as the aircrew got hold of their sub-machine guns - actually, it wasn't aircrew, it was more the medical staff, I think - we had a doctor, he was a very keen type of chap. So they decided to test their weapons, so they went a little bit away, just outside the perimeter, and they were blasting - brrr-brrr - and, of course, the base is being secured. You've got people running around to stop us, they thought the North Koreans had arrived, so there were some very nasty and very specific words spoken to the people concerned.

We then had to carry these with us all the time. And, of course, accidents did happen. I mean, this particular time I was sitting down in the area that we were eating - it was an Australian that did it, he just swung his rifle over our heads, pointed it at the ground and pulled the trigger. The next minute all our lunches had been showered with concrete chips - that was a bit scary. I didn't like that, I didn't like those accidents happening like that, that worried us.

Then it began to snow and then our troubles started, really, because it made everything so difficult. But the Marines were in fairly desperate straits north, and it was the only time I knew of, certainly when I was there, that our aircraft flew beyond sunset. They flew into the dark, they completed their missions to try and just give these Marines total support that they could.

Now, when they came back to Yongpo - and the American aircraft had been doing the same - it was a shambles. Of course, here it was, an advanced air base, minimal navigational equipment, and we had aircraft landing every which way. Our aircraft were taxiing - there was no point in trying to bring them in and park them neatly in their lines, and things like that - and we were racing out and shutting the engines down - having the pilot shut the engines down - every which way, all over the place.

Part of our job when the aircraft would come in was to jump up and undo the pilot's straps, and help him out of the cockpit - we'd slide the cockpit cover back for him - canopy - and help him out - they'd been sitting in the aircraft for a long time. But as I approached this particular aircraft

¹ General Edward Mallory Almond, Commanding General X US Corps Korea 1950-1951.

the pilot wasn't moving, he had his head down, and I'm pretty sure he was fairly upset, if not crying, so I just stayed away for a while and eventually he made his way out of the aircraft. But that was the tension that was existing at that particular time - and he'd been through a frightful experience, I mean, up and down these mountain valleys, strafing and bombing, and then trying to find his way back into Yongpo.

The strain was beginning to tell on the pilots.

The strain was definitely beginning to tell.

It wouldn't have been easy on you guys either, once the snow hit and trying to service those aircraft.

Yeah, and the temperatures just plummeted so much so you could do a lot of your servicing with your gloves on. Okay, that was fair enough, but occasionally you just had, just for the feel, you had to remove all your gloves and hold the spanner in your hand, and you did the job as quickly as you could. Now, when you'd finished you would then go into the flight tent, which was just a tent where they had a fire going, and you'd hold your hand and your spanner over the fire and warm up so the spanner could drop off your hand - and, of course, it takes skin with it.

Did that happen to you?

Yes, it was really cold. And, of course, we tried to avoid it as much as we could, but sometimes you just had to do it. Yeah, that's pretty painful.

How long could you keep going with that sort of ...

Well, the cold did inhibit us, there's no doubt about that, it really slowed everything down - slowed down the turn-around time of the aircraft, no matter how hard you tried to work. And, of course, we were extremely cumbersome, by this time we had everything on - inner and outer clothing, hooded and caps on, and all done up tight - so it was pretty slow to move around. It did affect us, but still made a marvellous sortie rate - as I said, these were the happy times of the squadron. The pilots were magnificent and we had a magnificent aeroplane, a really first-class aeroplane, an aeroplane you could sort of go up and give it a pat, or even give it a kiss occasionally, that was a magnificent aeroplane.

Not in the cold or you would be leaving skin behind.

That's right.

How much of a force was Dick Cresswell in keeping the squadron going as a team unit in these sort of conditions?

Well, he made a habit of keeping the ground staff informed, and this was so pronounced because I would go down and tell the Americans, my counterparts in the American squadrons, what was going on - 'Oh, they never tell us those sort of things, we never see our blokes.' But Dick Cresswell did it, he was a magnificent man manager and he certainly made the ground crew feel as if they were a real part of the organisation.

That's pretty indispensable in keeping a unit functioning under those conditions.

Oh, the morale was so high - the morale was way up.

But one night actually - yes, it was that night actually - a thing happened to me that I'd never experienced before and that was that we had rigged up a contrivance that pumped out hot water; it was fired by petrol.

This is the shower?

This is the shower. We hadn't had a shower, or a decent wash, for four weeks, just hadn't had one, and even in the cold weather. Whether you smelled or not, the fact was that you just felt grubby, so we started this up. And I was looking at this contrivance, and all the blokes are taking their things off. I thought, I'm going to go last because if I go last I'll have the longest shower - always thinking - and this is as it worked out. I was the last in and all the other blokes had departed - because you didn't hang around.

So I'm underneath this shower - and it got very quiet, it really got quiet - and I thought, I'm soaping myself in this lovely hot water, and the clouds of steam are coming off my body - there was a little bit of light from a light nearby - and as I said, it really got quiet, quiet, quiet. I looked up actually and it was snowing, and the snowflakes would come down, into the light, and landed on your body and melt. I couldn't resist it, I just stayed there, in with the snow falling, in the hot shower, stark naked. Unfortunately, while this is happening there were literally - literally, each night - hundreds and hundreds of Americans being killed just north of us, and they were the ones that were saving our bacon because they were the ones the Chinese were after.

As a matter of fact, I found out later that the Chinese Army that was given the instructions to decimate the American Marines, and the Americans were bringing their wounded and their dead out to a certain stage, and then they had to leave their dead behind. They actually excavated an area and buried them deep, and took readings so they knew where they were, but I don't believe they've ever got back there, of course, and the bodies have never been exhumed, as far as we know.

With this particular Chinese Army, after it was all over and Yongpo and Hamhung - Hungham - was evacuated, that army took two years to recover the damage inflicted by the Americans, but there were an awful lot of people killed, unfortunately. They scoured the base, they scoured the docks, there were British commandos, there were clerks that hadn't been out in the field for years, and they were just formed up and marched north.

To provide reinforcements?

To provide some sort of reinforcements, some relief. And the Dakotas were in and out of these improvised airstrips, coming back to Yongpo and unloading, and that was the main reason - in the finish, that was one of the reasons - why we had to evacuate from Yongpo, it was just too crowded, it was just absolutely crowded, there were hundreds and hundreds of aeroplanes. It was the main point of evacuation, replenishment, resupply.

Was there any real fear that the Chinese would put in air strikes on you?

No. At that time, although MiGs had been seen, they weren't in any great numbers. We found out later that the Chinese were having difficulty in organising with the Russians for supply.

And, in fact, it is interesting - a couple of things that I found out later that struck me as interesting - was the fact that the Chinese had to pay for everything they got from the Russians. The other thing that struck me was that the South Korean Army were not paid - they were given food, and they were given their uniforms, and equipment, but they weren't paid, they didn't have a pay, didn't have a per diem. I found that a little bit strange.

You mention that you were in the last to leave Yongpo.

Yes, well, this was because - I had mentioned before - let's have our own aircraft - other people, obviously, had thought of it too - so we had our own aircraft. So come the day we were to evacuate down to Pusan - but the aircraft were to do a last sortie to try and help the Americans again, and away they went. After the sortie they came back and landed, and would be refuelled and rearmed, and sent south. The last flight that came back contained my aeroplanes, and they were overhead, and I see one aircraft with a long, white stream coming from below it so I knew he had received a hit in the radiator and he was leaking glycol. So the aircraft landed, and they came around and said, 'Right, rearm and replenish these aeroplanes - away you go.' The Dakota aircraft was already loaded, ready to uplift us, and I'm looking at this wounded duck of a Mustang. The flight sergeant came down and he said, 'Oh, this is one of your aircraft, Ted. Bad luck - fix it.' They heaved the radiator out, pulled some tools off - and left the senior NCO and some other musterings there with me, and away they went. Here we are, looking at this aeroplane with this equipment. They said, 'Well, Ted, what are we going to be doing?' - the pilot's anxious to go too because he will be flying down by himself. So I said, 'Well, we've got to remove those panels first' - and they grabbed screwdrivers and they were undoing all the screws. I just sat back - and the main panel came out. Of course, you had to wait till it was cooled off a little bit - they undid the things.

Anyhow, to cut a long story short, we exchanged the radiator, buttoned up the aircraft, and tested it, and away the pilot went. I can't remember the exact number, how many of us were left, might have been eight or something like that - no aeroplanes. So we sat there, we had to wait there until we were rescued.

Which was what, one of our own DC-3s?

I can't remember, it was somewhere between three to five days extra we were there. Of course, all our aircraft were totally committed - and we only had Dakotas anyhow - so we were there.

So a Dak eventually came and got you?

Oh, yes, a Dakota eventually came and got us, but we did have a period of time in which we had nothing to do, virtually - and at that time they were blowing up stores. I had established a few contacts with the Americans and they were going to blow up this warehouse and burn it down, and whatever. I said, 'Hey, there's a lot of good stuff in there; at least let me throw this stuff I've got on off, and be re-equipped.' They said, 'Come on down, Ted.' So I walked into this magnificent warehouse, full of all sorts of goodies, including what they used to call B-15 jackets. These were a very nice short jacket with a nice fur collar, zippers all over the place, so I helped myself to those.

So Corporal Wilson did fairly well out of this.

Yes, I did fairly well out of that. But then it got a bit boring so I went down to the main gate and

I spoke to some of the drivers there, and they took me out on the road. So I went through the main gate, out on the road - it was in the snow, it was just something to do. That was terrible, the civilians, their conditions ...

You were seeing the locals, they were still in the area?

They were still in the area. As a matter of fact, they were flooding ahead of the Chinese advance, and they were flooding down into the port, which was Hungnam, and they were flooding down this road. The sights were indescribable, the suffering of these people, it was really bad. What I didn't know at that time was that that area, around Yongpo, around Hamhung and Hungnam, was a very large Christian community.

So they wouldn't have fared very well.

They wouldn't have fared very well. So they were all flooding down into Hungnam. Anyhow, we were uplifted to Pusan - and I'll tell you about that in a moment.

Well, let's take a break at this point, shall we?

Alright.

Okay, Ted, we took the break where we've got the squadron on its way back to Pusan.

Yes. Eventually we were picked up too, picked up by one of our own Dakotas, and we went down to Pusan. As a matter of fact, the airstrip was called K-9 and that promoted a lot of jokes.

But just before we cover that I'd like to mention the fact that when the Americans left Hungnam in late December there were 86,000 North Korean refugees went with them.

They got them away?

They got them away, I thought that was marvellous, I was so pleased about that when I heard about it later.

Anyhow, we arrived in a Dakota and away we went down to Pusan. Myself, I stepped out of the aircraft - and of course, the fact is that the fellows had been working so hard down there and so when I got in, boy, this is a stray bod, they'll grab me. So they said, 'Right, you can go to work.' I said, 'Doing what?' He said, 'We've got to assemble these drop tanks' - these are auxiliary fuel tanks we could fit to the aircraft to give increased air range because now they had to fly so far to get to the targets they needed some auxiliary fuel source.

They hadn't been using these before?

No.

So this is the first experience the squadron had of using them?

Yeah - well, the first experience that I'd had, yeah - I believe it was the first time we'd used

them. As a matter of fact, these tanks arrived in two parts, and some plumbing, so they had to be assembled. We had never had this type of fuel tank before, the ones we had were fully a unit, a fully contained unit, all welded up and everything like that. So that was my job, I was given the task of assembling those along with another chap by the name of Dinny O'Brien. Dinny O'Brien was - in every squadron you've got a real nice character, but very smart. He said, 'I knew you were coming, Ted, this job will do us.' I thought, oh, is that right then.

Anyhow, we made up these tanks overnight, and then next morning we would fit them to the aeroplane we were responsible for fitting them (to) and testing them, make sure that the fuel flowed and there were no leaks. But then we'd go down, make up the next supply of tanks, and after that time was our own. So once again, we fell into a rather easy time, but I owe that to Dinny O'Brien actually, it wasn't my doing so much.

Of course, the point is they are drop tanks ...

They were jettisoned.

You had a constant supply of them needed to be brought forward all the time?

Yes - next-day operations, you knew how many drop tanks had to be available. You see, every now and again you'd get a bonus because an aircraft would come back having used the fuel and not having had to drop the tank because he'd returned for some other purpose. So we had a gain there - we had a few plusses, but not many. That was alright.

Just near us actually was a prisoner of war compound for North Korean prisoners, it was quite close to the airfield. It was only a matter of time when one - American aircraft it was - actually crashed into the prisoner of war camp, killed a considerable number, unfortunately.

We also, at that stage, were experiencing difficulty with the fuel too - and of course, with drop tanks we were checking flow rates and making sure there were no leaks and everything. There was a suspicion that the fuel was being contaminated. I don't think it was ever proved or not, but I know Ross Coburn, who was one of the people that came from Canberra with us, he had an engine quit on him and there were some hairy moments, in actual fact.

Also, initially, the North Koreans didn't give up, they had guerrilla teams and even where we were they had snipers up in the hill that were firing at you, but they were so far away I think the bullet would just sort of be - clunk! There wasn't much danger involved.

Did you ever know that you were under fire?

Oh, we knew that they were firing down where we were, yeah - well, I didn't know, but I was told. Yeah, that was interesting.

It was about mid-December that the squadron was told that it would be converting to Meteors.

Yes, that's right. At the end of December I went back to Iwakuni and our squadron came back in April; and when I went back to Iwakuni I was then involved, along with everybody else - a lot of other people - with preparing for the Meteor, getting them ready.

What did that preparation entail, what were you doing?

Well, the first Meteors came out on an aircraft carrier so they were in pieces - two pieces - they had to be assembled, they had to be cleaned down, all the systems had to be checked.

They were received the end of February, weren't they, or early March?

They were ...

Received, the first Meteors.

I think they were received a little bit earlier than that - wait a minute. I came back in December - yeah, you would be right, yeah, that's right.

They came in two batches, as I recall.

Yeah, they did - yes, they definitely came in two batches. The day arrived when we had this bright, shiny Gloster Meteor Mk 8 sitting on the tarmac ready to go. Then I thought myself, well, what a dog, what an aeroplane - ugh!

Not impressed?

I wasn't impressed with the aircraft just sitting there, it didn't look right, it didn't inspire you in any way (to) say, 'Wow! look at this', it was just a ...

Well, you obviously spoke with real enthusiasm when you were talking about the Mustangs, so that was the comparison.

Yeah, that was a beautiful aeroplane, but the Meteor wasn't - to me - other people, pilot, probably found it marvellous, I don't know.

What did it actually mean though in terms of air-frame fitting? Was it an easy aircraft to work on or was it, as you said, a dog?

No, for all practical purposes it was a pretty easy aircraft to work in above the wings; below the wings it was difficult because it was a very low-slung aeroplane and that made things a little harder. But the story of the Meteor is quite interesting because they actually flew in 1943. They did tropical trials on the Meteor at Darwin in, I don't know, '47, somewhere of that vintage, and I know that at that time the Director of Technical Services in the air force said that the air frame, and the engine, would mean that they would never be of any use to the Royal Australian Air Force.

Okay, that judgement had been made back then.

It had been made back then - and the choice of the Meteor, that was third, that was the third choice, that was the only one they could get.

The only thing that was available?

That's right. Now, the Mk 8 couldn't drop bombs, hadn't been proved.

Although I understand from Dick Cresswell that there were trials done with fitting it with bombs ...

That's right.

... but they weren't approved, it wasn't pursued.

Wasn't approved - no rocket rails. The guns - the 20 millimetre guns - had compressibility and other effects on the nose of the aeroplane and they weren't firing for a little while; the rear of the canopy was covered with a metal so pilots had great difficulty in looking over their shoulders.

They had a blind spot?

They had a blind spot. Underneath was a ventral tank which extended virtually from the nose-wheel, below the pilot, aft, and, of course, this ventral tank proved to be the funeral pyre for a number of pilots. Of course, when it is emptied - and it was used almost first - when it was emptied it was full of fumes and ground fire into that tank and you had a bomb right underneath your aircraft, underneath the pilot. So we lost a few aeroplanes that way too.

So the Meteor was not a happy story prior to it getting out here, but it was the only thing that was available. But - it was just my uninformed opinion - we would have been better off to have stuck with the Mustangs, operated in the ground-support capability until we could get a good jet aircraft; this was not it, sort of thing. But accidents happened almost immediately - of course, we were warned, we hadn't had jet aircraft before and ground crew were warned about being sucked into the intake; and sure enough, it didn't take long for one of our blokes to be sucked into an intake, but fortunately the engine was running down and he only received a bit of a bump on his head, sort of thing.

But the aircraft was still new and every time an aircraft flew we'd go out and watch it. We had a pilot there, Stoney, he took one up one day - he was doing an acceptance flight on it, I think - an acceptance flight (is where) it had just been serviced and put together - so away he went. And we were watching it up in the air, and here he is, doing a few aerobatics, and things like that, then he'd put it into a dive sort of thing. Up came the aircraft, and (we) looked at it, and there's a black object dragging a chute floating down, then another chute came out, and there's Stoney drifting to the earth. The Meteor did a lazy, slow, gradual dive and then did a turn, came back and went into a gradual dive. We were all looking there with our mouths open, there's Stoney floating to earth and there's this Meteor roaming the sky. It finally crashed into the hillside - boom!

What had happened, apparently, was that Stoney, when he pulled out of the dive, that the ejection seat operated by itself.

Spontaneously?

Spontaneously - blew him through the canopy. When he came to - he was unconscious - when he came to he was in the seat with the seat drogue stabilising the seat. I don't know whether the rest of this is true, but I believe - he was a bit of a storyteller - that when he hit the buckles to release the seat he hit the wrong one, he hit the parachute buckle, so he had to do up his parachutes again, then hit the right one to disengage himself from the seat. That maybe a furphy,

but it could have happened.

I gather he got a back injury out of that.

He did, yes, he had a slight back injury, yes. And then another one got lost; he took off and went into cloud - he was just a new pilot, certainly new to the Meteor. We did have GCA at that time, but his speed was such that on the GCA he'd come on as a blip, and then disappear. So eventually he ran out of fuel and crashed into the sea. And, of course he ditched the thing into the sea in the approved Mustang manner, which is totally opposite to what you should do with the Meteor, and he was lost, gone. Then the Operations Officer received a telephone call - guess who? - he was a real larrikin, this bloke. He wasn't very impressed. The story goes that he survived the ditching of the aircraft, stepped out onto the wing, inflated his dinghy, stepped into it and paddled to shore - walked to the nearest habitation, which happened to be a station master at the railway line, and rang up the station and said, 'Come and get me', which they did.

But we also had Meteors collide at the end of the strip - of course the canopy had fogged up, one didn't see.

What sort of impact did this have on the ground crew, seeing this sort of stuff?

Well, I didn't have a lot to do with the ground crew at that stage any more because the people I knew, like Ross Coburn, Klaffer (in fact aircrew), had sort of moved on, been promoted or whatever, and we were busy with this rehabilitation program with the Meteors, so I didn't have a lot of contact. I guess, what happened was that when you go back to your main base you then are split into your definite rank structures, sort of thing - officers' mess, the sergeants' mess, and the airmens' mess - whereas when you are in the front line you are talking all the time, you are really ...

So this was a very different experience to what you'd had up in North Korea?

Oh, absolutely.

You called that 'the happy times'. Could you contrast this to what you were experiencing back at Iwakuni?

Well, it wasn't that happy really, I wasn't happy, I didn't think much of the aeroplane - but I didn't have a great experience (of it), but I knew the troubles it was having. It wasn't to be allowed into Korea until it had radio compasses fitted, so we went into a modification program to fit the radio compasses - the gun problem had to be fixed - and fitting these radio compasses - did that - the room had to be found for it. Finally finished, the control box was down here on the floor somewhere so the pilots flying at night-time, he's twiddling with this thing down here; I don't know how they did it, but there was no way they were going to be admitted into Korea without at least a radio compass.

Also how the aircraft was to be used was another inhibiting factor, it was so - 'Mustang?' - 'Yeah' - 'Go and shoot up somebody'; 'Meteor?' - 'How are we going to use these things?' Are they going to be an interceptor fighter? Are they going to be a ground-support aircraft? Are they going to be a guard aircraft? No-one seemed to know. I didn't know all this, but it was obvious that we were going through this program.

But there is one thing, they started, for the first time in our air force anyhow, a training program. We were trained by factory representatives, and experienced RAF people, on how to service this aircraft. The Australian Air Force kept that on and they did that with every new aircraft type that was brought into the service, and it proved of tremendous benefit. Before the aircraft would arrive you would have some experienced blokes there and they would just teach you. With this one there was a definite program on which we were instructed, and that was good.

This was all done back at Iwakuni?

That was all done back at Iwakuni, yes.

At what point did you know that you were coming back to Australia - what time were you notified?

Round about June - round about June.

And you were told when you were coming back?

Well, what happened there was that I was to go to Kimpo with the first lot of Meteors, then the warrant officer came to me one day and he said, 'Look, Ted, we want you to stay here because a lot of these Mustangs are going back to Australia, and so we want you to be in charge of the party to take them apart, prepare them for transport, and actually go back with them.' So I was a bit disappointed about not going to Korea again with the squadron, but later on I found out I was a bit lucky because things weren't very ... it wasn't very good over there, they were poor conditions - poor flying conditions, an aircraft that was no up to par with the other ones with a subsequent drop, I believe, in morale - a definite drop in morale.

So you had seen 77 Squadron at its best, you felt?

Pardon?

You had seen 77 Squadron at its best.

That's right, I'd seen it at its best and now it wasn't at its best; it had a new aircraft, its role had not been defined. It was finally defined as interceptor fighter at which it was outclassed. As a matter of fact, the interesting thing is that the MiG - the MiG-15 - was lighter; it was faster - almost 100 miles [per hour] faster - it was faster; it was better armed, it had a 37 millimetre cannon - and the pilots reckoned when they fired that 37 millimetre cannon it looked like footballs coming toward you, but I think that was an exaggeration.

I'm sure it would have been.

And the other gun was a 23 millimetre, which is a bit heavier than the 20 millimetres we had in the Meteor. But what happened at the end of the war, the Prime Minister of England, Mr Churchill, gave us a gift - to the Russians - fifty Nene jet engines. Now, would you like to ask me what engines were fitted into the MiG-15?

Okay, the Nene.

An extension of the Nene engine, yeah. That's just beside the point.

But back in Iwakuni things had settled down and I was pretty well involved in getting the Mustangs together to bring back to Australia. Some of the Mustangs did go to the South Korean Air Force, but I can't remember the exact number that we brought back, but I'm confident it was in excess of twenty.

How were they brought back?

Well, actually they were brought back by ship, on a ship called the [*Nankin*] - *SS Nankin* - and we finally got them all geared, all prepared, to bring back. We went by barge through the Japanese Inland Sea, down to Kure Harbour where they had to be transhipped onto the freighter.

On the way down, as the corporal - a corporal in the Japanese Army or Air Force is somebody of note, so I'm in the captain's cabin, sort of thing. I look out, there's my two LACs down there - friends of mine, Bob and Trevor - 'Up yours, chaps'. Anyway, we arrived at Kure and the tide was out, so I look up at the quay, which is about twenty feet up in the air - God, hell's bells, what happens now, sort of thing?

I managed to find my way up onto the quay and I was met by a British serviceman. He said, 'The warrant officer wants to see you', so I walked in and he was a red-cap - I don't know how the red-caps came into the business, but they were the service police, and they had a pretty fearsome reputation, you know. He said, 'Are you in charge, laddie?' - 'Yeah, I'm in charge' - 'Well, you just sit down there, I'll get everything organised.' So I got Trevor and Courtney up and sent them off to their barracks, under escort, and I said, 'I'll wait down here and make sure that everything is done right.'

So I sat there in this hut with this MP - and by this time night had fallen - they got to work, they did all the work, I'm sitting down and I drank scotch whisky with this red-cap - i didn't want to refuse because I was just so pleased to see those aeroplanes moved off the barges and onto the freighter. So I drank this whisky with him - he was a very nice chap.

But it all worked?

It all worked, yes. Next morning, came down, got on board the freighter - had to go around because the Japanese nationals had tied them down - had tied them to inappropriate things like doorhandles and things like that, they had to be re-sited onto the deck cargo. And so we steamed out of the harbour. I only found out later that that was the day that the war officially ended.

The treaty was finally signed?

Yeah.

How long did it take you (to get back to Australia)?

It took us three weeks.

Three weeks to get home?

Yeah, three weeks to get home.

The aircraft were off-loaded, what, in Sydney or Melbourne?

In Sydney, and we arrived in Sydney and the other two chaps, Trevor and Courtney, their wives were there to meet them - my fiancée was on the wharf. These two blokes, being a little bit younger than me, and sillier, they jumped from the ship to the quay. I'm looking at this gap, I thought, holy smoke! - and there's my fiancée there. I thought, I can't let her down, so I took a jump too.

Anyhow, everything was right. A short time later we all went back on board the ship and sat in the stateroom. The captain gave us the run of the ship, everybody on the ship was wonderful to us. We were in the wardroom, sort of thing, and on came an officer - air force officer. He introduced himself, he said, 'Yes, I'm in charge of the party to lift the aircraft from here and take them to Richmond.' I said, 'Oh, that's good.' He said, 'Yes, we'll want you blokes to guard them tonight.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'Yes, we can't leave the aircraft unguarded.' I said, 'Well, I'm not going to go out there and ask these blokes who have been away from their wives for fifteen months to guard aeroplanes tonight, on their first night home.'

How crazy.

How crazy. But he saw the point, he was only a young bloke, he was doing the right thing, so right. After that I just went straight on leave. I might mention that Margaret and I were married in November and we celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary last year - and still together.

Well, excellent, that's a nice point to finish it off.

Ted, is there anything we haven't covered that springs to mind that we perhaps should have picked up on?

No, I don't think so. There was a distinct sorrow, on my part anyhow, that the Meteor didn't live up to its expectations. People viewed it with a very prejudicial eye, they were very hopeful - it just wasn't up to scratch for the role. Eventually it went to a ground-attack aircraft, but as a ground-attack aircraft the ventral tank was subject to damage by ground fire - I mean, it was longer than this room - like that - and lost a large number of aircraft, or a number of aircraft. And also it had the jet engine, like most jet engines, not very responsive. For a reciprocating engine with a propeller, you jammed the throttle forward - uhh! - away you go, but with a jet engine, you ram the throttle forward and - uhh! - away we go - there's a lag. Now, that lag meant that if they were too low in a dive angle, and too far in, it couldn't pull out, it wasn't responsive enough to pull out. We lost some aeroplanes that way too. So it was just a dog of an aeroplane - it was just a dog of an aeroplane.

What did you experience when you got back to Australia in the peacetime air force that we had back here?

Well ...

Was there much of an awareness of what was going on up in Korea?

No, not really. The only time it got anything of note from Australia was when the wharf labourers went on strike when we were up in Korea and they wouldn't load the ship with war materials - because it was communist dominated at that stage. That was it.

How did it impact the unit?

Well, of course, when we came back we just split. We just went to various other units, you were just absorbed into the mass of the air force. As a matter of fact, we used to have a special badge on our uniform. Well, I'd only been back a day and I was told to take that off - 'You are not in Korea now; take that off'. But that was alright, that was the name of the game. So I guess it was because the squadron came back in dribs and drabs over a period of time that we missed out on a few bits and pieces. But we weren't subjected to the hatred, or the intolerance, shown to the Vietnam people who came back, we didn't experience that ever.

But you were saying the unit came back; of course, it didn't come back, it stayed there in situ and it was just the personnel rotated through it.

That's right.

So there was no sense of the unit having returned from the war?

No, no, there was no sense that the unit had returned, because they hadn't, it was just the personnel. But, of course, the squadron did eventually come back and they overflew Sydney in a formation, and things like that.

Ted, that's been very helpful and thanks very much for your time this morning.

Thank you.

12/02