

ANZAC Centenary Project Interview on 17 December 2014 between Andrew Allen and World War II Veteran Reg Hulbert at his home in Rosemeadow

AA When and where were you born?

RH I was born in Bowraville which is about halfway between Sydney and Brisbane on the Nambucca River on 15 November 1924 which makes me 90 at present.

AA When did you first come to the Campbelltown area?

RH I came here 11 years ago. My daughter lives in Campbelltown. We used to live at Oatley and we were travelling backwards and forwards in our late 70s and early 80s so we sold out while we had the chance because at that stage the house was pretty old so we came to Campbelltown. My daughter only lives five minutes away.

AA When you joined up in the Second World War were you living in Bowraville then?

RH No, I was working in Sydney. I was going to night school and two of the blokes at night school wanted to join the navy. I was only 17 at the time and I said I would go down with them. I was the only one accepted because I had my intermediate pass from school. They didn't have their intermediate and had to sit for an exam and they both failed the exam. So you might as well say I joined the navy by accident.

I enlisted on 1 April 1942 but I wasn't called up until 1 June 1942. I went down to Flinders Naval Depot and did by 13 weeks course and then I was sent back up to Sydney. I was on a mine sweeper for 20 days. I was seasick every day that I was on the mine sweeper. I ended up in Balmoral Navy Hospital and I was classified with chronic seasickness. They then sent me to the Australia. I was only on the Australia for about a week and I got sick again. They took my appendix out and I never got seasick again, it was appendicitis all the time.

A funny story when I had my appendix out. We were up in the Coral Sea which was just after the Canberra was sunk. The anti-aircraft guns were going off and they rushed over to tell me it was only a practice shoot.

AA I was going to ask you if you got seasick, but you've answered it for me. How did you feel when you first joined up in the war? Were you apprehensive or looking forward to it?

RH I was just looking forward to it. As I said earlier, I really had no intention of joining up. I only went because of my two mates who wanted to join up that I said that I would go with them. It wasn't exactly straight away as I had to go home and get my father's consent as I was only 17 at the time. I didn't have any worries about joining the navy even though I couldn't swim. I doubt I could swim 5 yards; I've got a lead bottom!!

5 mins

AA So, if the boat started sinking you would have been in strife.

RH I would have been in strife. We had life jackets.

AA How did your mother feel about you joining up?

RH I was only 84 days old when my mother died. I was reared by my sisters. They went crook because I joined up. My brother older than me joined the army and I was in the navy. They sent me photos of some of my nieces saying had I forgotten about all this. But I was quite happy being in the navy.

AA Your father was OK with it.

RH He OK'd it. He signed the papers and I went back and handed them in. That's why it took two months from when I signed up. I had to go home and get his permission and then they called me up.

AA So where did you go first?

RH First of all we went down to Flinders Naval Depot. We did a 13 weeks course. Mainly the course was marching in the middle of winter. As it was the middle of winter I didn't have to pass the swimming test. It was more or less getting used to taking orders I reckon. At that time we got weekend leave fairly often. There was a French couple living in Melbourne and they went guarantors so that we could go to their place for the weekend. They were more or less carers, when we went on leave we had to go to their place. We had a good time anyway.

AA When did you first go overseas?

RH I came back to Sydney after the 13 weeks. I had a couple of weeks at Garden Island then they put me on board the minesweeper and we just went outside Sydney Heads for those 20 days and I was seasick the whole time. But I reckon it was the appendicitis all the time. Being confined to a cruiser only was a good thing because it made sure I was on a good ship all the time.

The first time I actually went overseas was when I joined the Australia. After the 20 days they immediately transferred me to the Australia. I had to go up to Townsville and they picked me up by boat and took me out to the Australia. After a few days was when I got the appendicitis.

AA Do you still get seasick now?

10 mins

RH Later on when we came home from the islands we would get 28 days leave. One half of the crew would have 28 days and then the other half would have 28 days. The first day back out I would feel a bit squeamish but I wasn't actually seasick. I was lucky really. They called the Shropshire the lucky ship. She was torpedoed twice, one missed the bow and the other missed the stern of the ship and she hooked a mine and towed the mine about 15 or 20 feet away from the side of the ship for several hours. After daylight we got rid of it. All the suicide planes we contacted in the Philippines classed us as lucky. At one stage the Australia got hit by five suicide planes. We got a message from the Australia, you knock them down and we'll catch them. They blamed us for shooting them down and they would crash onto the Australia. It was a lucky ship. I was lucky right throughout the war.

AA What are your memories of the Shropshire apart from it being lucky?

RH We used to play deck hockey and entertain ourselves. We played deck cricket. We had a good crew. There were 1100 men on the Shropshire, 75 radar operators and officers. Radar at that stage was all manual. My job when I was at action stations, I had a big round table in front of me and I had the earphones on me in contact with the radar operator on the aircraft ship. He would tell me where the planes were and if they were friendly or enemy planes. I would plot all those and in three minutes I had to tell the officer what direction the planes were going, how high it was and what speed it was going. I had a slide rule and in that three minutes I would have to put the slide rule between a couple of crosses and work out what speed they were doing.

We got ashore a fair few times up in the islands and one of the main things that I can remember, the Americans would ask the Australians to write to their girlfriend or wife. We reckoned that because we were an Australian ship they would think they were out near Australia somewhere. I wrote to several of their wives and got a note back thanking me very much for talking to their husband or boyfriend so they knew where they were.

15 mins

We had good times. Once we came home from Manus Island and we were going back to Sydney on leave, we called into Guadalcanal and they took the majority of the ammunition off the ship and put it out in the jungle as storage. We went back to Sydney and they re-armed the ship and after any engagement we had, the supply ship instead of coming back all the way to Sydney would go to Guadalcanal and pick up the ammunition that we had offloaded there. In

between lorry loads there were a lot of tropical vines hanging off the trees and there were a lot of Tarzans amongst the boys, swinging from tree to tree.

I really had a good time. We had our serious moments. We were involved in the battle at Surigao Strait when we helped sink the 14-inch Japanese battleship Yamashiro. The Americans landed in Leyte on 20 October and on 24 October 16 Japanese ships came to try and attack the landing crew. Forty odd American ships and two Australian ships met them in Surigao Strait. The Americans lost one destroyer and nearly all the Japanese ships were sunk including the Yamashiro. According to the reports, in 14 minutes and 40 seconds the Shropshire fired 332-8 inch shells at the Yamashiro, put her out of commission and she sank. We started at 3.30am when we first met the Japanese and about 4am before we opened fire and by daylight she had sunk. That and the suicide planes were about the only time all throughout the war until we went to the Philippines that we encountered the Japanese planes. The first plane that we saw was when we got to the Philippines. We did a couple of invasions in Borneo. That was why they called us the lucky ship.

AA Were you at the radar when the Japanese ships got sunk?

20 mins

RH Yes. The officer in charge of our section said at 3 in the morning that there was no aircraft in the vicinity. He allowed us to go out and watch the Yamashiro firing 14 inch crazy shells. We saw the first lot coming and they landed about 100 yards short of us. We heard the explosions. We saw the next lot coming and heard the whistling of the shells going over the top of the ship. It's a sound that you never forget. We saw the next lot coming, one short and one over, where is the next one going to land. So we all made a dive for cover so we wouldn't see where it landed, I believe it straddled us. So once again luck was with us.

When the war was over we went up to Japan. We got up there a few days before they signed the peace. We were anchored only about half a mile away from the Missouri where they signed the peace. Going towards Yokohama in Tokyo Bay all the aircraft carriers stood out at sea, it was like a swarm of bees. All the American planes were flying over the city. If the Japs had started something there were hundreds of planes up in the air which would annihilate Tokyo. We were allowed ashore in Tokyo and we were anchored near Yokohama. We were taken ashore and then taken by plane up to Tokyo. We always went around with at least ten in a group. We were told not to go out on our own because we never knew what the fanatics would do.

There was this big shop and you went up and there was a landing. There was an organ on the landing. One of the Australians from the ship could play the organ. He was playing all the latest boogie-woogie music and they had to

disperse us because we were blocking the stairway. You remember all the funny things that happen to you.

When we were in Manilla when the war was still on we got ashore. We took a few packets of chewing gum and cigarettes; you could swap it for anything, Japanese money invasion money, anything. I got a lot of photos of the damage that was done and a lot of souvenirs. I've got a matchbox cover in Tokyo 2 September the day before we signed the peace. I've got a couple of 40mm anti-aircraft shells. One has the ship's crest on it; the other one has a map of Tokyo Bay.

25 mins

I scrounged a lot of things. I've got two scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. I used to keep all the newspaper clippings. When I came home I got the scrapbooks and pasted all the clippings in them.

AA That's a good idea to do that. Did you get off the ship much in the Philippines?

RH In the Philippines we only got off once and we went into Manilla. We were stationed in Subic Bay and the Shropshire went round to Manilla. I have a photo of all the wrecked shipping. The Australian Air Force sank a lot of ships in Manilla Harbour. In any stories, you hear the Americans took the Philippines, they never mention the other nations that helped them.

When we went to the Philippines there were two Australian cruisers, two destroyers and three troop carriers. There were 200 Australian soldiers. When the troops came ashore they were directing the traffic on the beaches. There were a few Air Force as well in the actual invasion. So Australia was well represented there, there would have been about 5,000 Australians there with the Americans when they landed. But you don't read about that. It's always the Americans. Sometimes they say the allies.

AA That was under Rear Admiral Oldendorf I think. I remember reading about him. So there were the Australians, the Americans and were there any British?

RH I don't think the British were there but I know the Australians were well represented. Also we got praise from the Americans. They reckoned 90 odd per cent of the first sighting of enemy aircraft was from the Australians. The Australian radar could pick up enemy aircraft from 170 miles away. When they were 70 or 80 miles away the Yanks could pick them up. That was how superior the English radar was to the American radar, was the distance. There was a big difference. The first few times we could tell the planes were getting closer and closer. When they got 75 miles away the Americans would send out their fighters out to intercept them. I saw a copy of the message that the Admiral in charge sent out to all the Americans that any aircraft reporting that the Shropshire did must be taken seriously because we had excellent radar. In

fact after one operation they sent four American officers over to the Shropshire and they sent out two planes.

30 mins

We directed them and they were amazed how they could contact one another. One plane would shoot off on its own and one would act as the enemy and how they could intercept him. We could hear the one directing say "tally ho" which meant he had spotted him. After that the Americans were told that they had to take notice of what we said with regard to the radar. With the gunnery, our guns could fire about seven miles and the radar was accurate within five yards.

On the 50th anniversary of the end of the war I was in a march in Sydney. The Shropshire and the Canberra marched today. They invited us to go on board the Canberra on the day after the Anzac Day march. I went on board and they were interested when they found out that I was a radar operator during the war they wanted to know what I did. They showed me what they did and said that they weren't supposed to show me. All the officer had to do when he had a target was point a stick at the target and the computer took over. They only had two men where we had about eight in our little section, everyone doing something different. My job was very important. They wanted to know where the planes were and what speed they were doing and what height they were.

There were a lot of funny things also happened. I enjoyed myself. The canteen was run by civilians on the ship. When we got the peanut butter up in the tropics, there was only a little sediment and the rest was oil. You had to get a spoon and stir the oil in. We used to have boxing matches, but I never went in for that. We had entertainment. There was deck hockey.

35 mins

We were up in Yokohama and there was a Canadian warship not far away from where we were. They played us deck hockey on our ship and we were invited back to their ship after the game. They had all this rum, it was the first time I had tasted rum. I like it now. I've still got a half bottle up there that I have had for about ten years.

AA Did you strike any monsoons whilst you were up there?

RH Yes, at one stage we were in Borneo. We were on patrol in the China Sea and a typhoon struck. The waves were 60 feet high and it took us seven miles to make a U-turn. They reckoned we were getting too close to China. In that same storm one of the American ships broke in half. Both halves floated and they towed them back to port and put them back together again. I read the encounter, it really happened. Some of the things you tell people, they say that couldn't have happened, but they did.

AA Did you get a reception when you got back to Sydney eventually?

RH We went to Sydney, then we went down to Flinders Naval Depot and we had a march in Melbourne. There was the 7th Mine Sweeping Flotilla and the Shropshire. The Shropshire led the march. It took them over an hour marching 12 abreast. Because I had a stripe for 3 years' service, I was carrying a rifle. I had a photo taken after the march. Incidentally that photo and a photo of the crew of the ship were donated to the War Memorial in Canberra. I donated it and they sent me 10 copies of it. I was only a war time sailor. I was in it for three years and nine months. I'm in the local Campbelltown Naval Association. I feel like an outsider because the majority of the men down there are long serving, 9 years or 12 years or more. What they reckon is that I was there during the war and I'm entitled to be with them.

40 mins

AA Do you march on Anzac Day?

RH I used to. The last time I marched was a long time ago. When I was talking about the typhoon we were in earlier, I took one step down and landed on the deck below and landed on my feet and jarred my back. Only being 20 at the time I put up with it. I never reported it. I had to go down to the Department of Veteran Affairs and I had to put my hearing aids in and I got a disability pension. It took them about 10 or 12 years because I was already on 100% disability pension. They now accept my back as a war disability. I can only walk about half a mile and I have to take a seat, but I get there that is the main thing. Not bad for a 90 year old.

AA What eventually happened to the Shropshire, it was broken up wasn't it?

RH Yes, it was broken up. After the war she was anchored over near the zoo, and then she was sold for scrap. I'm not sure if she was towed to Japan, but she was sold for scrap in the end. The mast was cracked they found out. At one stage we were up in New Guinea and they hit a floating log and bent one of the propellers and she had to come back to Sydney. They had to take the propeller off and straighten it and put it back on again. They painted it and painted it and painted it and kept the rust off it. Someone asked me about asbestos. All the asbestos they had on the steam pipes was heavily painted with fresh paint going on every six months or so. As far as I know none of the boys got cancer off the Shropshire. We were lucky that way.

After the march in Melbourne they took us down to Hobart. They took us to the Cascade Brewery and went up Mount Wellington. They looked after us down there. We didn't march down there. When we came to Sydney in the first place, we unloaded a few men. They offered us to sign up for another two years. I had virtually left school to join up and I wasn't interested. They didn't tell us that we

were going to England. After we got our discharge they were heading for the victory march. If I knew they were going to England, I would have signed on for another two years.

45 mins

AA Can I ask you how you feel about the Japanese?

RH We never came in contact with them. Politicians cause war I reckon and the so called Foreign Ministers. I have never known any Japanese. There would always be about 10 of us together when we went out in Japan. On one of the train rides we went on, this girl got on. The boys were all making wise remarks about how she was dressed. She spoke perfect English and she told us her parents came from Hawaii. Just before the war started her parents were recalled to Japan and she was waiting to go back to Hawaii. She didn't like it in Japan. That was the only contact that I had with the Japanese.

One of our boys was an ex-copper. He was a big bloke too. He was handing out cigarettes. He flipped the pack up and one cigarette fell on the ground and you could see all the Japanese eyeing off the cigarette. As we walked away he put his foot out and ground it into the dirt. As we walked away we looked back to see the Japanese fighting over the tobacco.

AA Do you still see any of the mates that you had?

RH No, there were three of us from the Nambucca River on the ship and I am the only one left. One passed on and the third one was killed in a plane crash. He and one of his sons got killed in a plane crash. I contacted one of the radar operators. There was a piece in the magazine that comes to us, he wanted to contact anyone. I wrote to him and he only wrote about two letters, I don't know what happened to him, I didn't get any more mail from him.

We made promises when we got discharged that on the first Anzac march after that we would meet at a certain spot. I went down there but there was no-one there that I knew. When I got discharged I was living in Sydney for a while. I went from job to job. Looking back it was a good three years and nine months that I had in the services. Being in the navy you are in action but not in personal contact.

50 mins

Thirteen times we bombarded the Japanese at various places in New Guinea, New Britain and some of the little islands in the Philippines and Borneo. We were five miles away. Our guns were going off and there was no opposition coming to us. We had it really well. I don't know if any of the other boys felt the same way but it never worried me. The only time it worried me was when the

suicide planes were around. In the job I was in we had a double crew, half hour on and half hour off.

In the half hour off we would go outside. I saw one of these Japanese planes coming straight towards us. The Shropshire used 8 inch guns as anti-aircraft guns and the shell burst right in front of the plane. The plane must have been doing around 200 miles an hour coming towards us and it just did a back flip into the ocean. It was heading straight towards us and the next minute over it went. That was caused by radar because radar was controlling the gun. One barrel was loaded at 10,000 yards and the other at 5,000 yards. If the 10,000 yards didn't get him they had a second shot at the 5,000 yards. The 5,000 yard one just flipped him backwards. In a booklet I have we were credited with shooting down eleven planes up in the Philippines. As I said previously that the only time that we saw Japanese aeroplanes was at Leyte. We never saw a Japanese plane the rest of the time. It's best to be born lucky.

AA Thank you very much for talking to me. It has been very interesting and enjoyable to listen to you.