

Participant 7: BAF

Location 1 [08:18]

War broke out on the third of September in 1939, and my father was travelling to the mountains (where I live) and he and his parents stopped on the way to have a drink, and they heard a radio broadcast at the time to say that Britain was at war, and therefore Australia was at war. And I remember my dad telling me that his parents just looked at him. He didn't really understand why at the time, but in hindsight he realised that as he was a 21 year old, he would be conscripted. And it felt to them as if they had just come out of the First World War, and now they were seeing their 21 year old son go to war himself. So my dad was conscripted into the army. He became a corporal, and he always wanted to fly, from what I can gather. And in October, on the 10th of October 1941, he got his dream to start that process: he was enlisted into the RAAF. He did his training in Australia, in Victoria in South Australia, and then he embarked, 'to who knows where,' he said! He put in for New Guinea at the time, and he was sent to Britain. So he embarked with many many other servicemen from Melbourne, and they didn't know where they were going, but they arrived in Bristol via America. And he was sent from there to the holding station of Bournemouth to, I'm assuming, find out, which squadron he was to join.

Location 2 [11:50]

My father did his initial training in Australia. Because he joined the RAAF in 1941, and not immediately when war broke out, he was trained in Australia – a lot of the pilots that went straight into the Air Force were trained in Canada, and also South Africa. But Dad was trained in – he did his ground training in Sommers in Victoria, and then he got his wings in Benalla in Victoria. Subsequently he was sent on to South Australia, to Malala. This was all under the Empire Air Training Scheme, as part of the commonwealth, because Britain had the aircraft, but not the pilots to fly them. So they recruited pilots from all around the commonwealth. So he got his wings in Benalla, he learnt to fly twin-engine aircraft in in South Australia, then he was put on a ship, and off he went to the UK. And while he was waiting to find out which squadron he was going to be attached to, he noticed – or he must have seen somewhere – that they were recruiting pilots to do a general reconnaissance course, at Bridgnorth, in the Midlands. He said he volunteered – and I'm quoting from his book – 'I thought later that that was probably the only time in the army or the air force that I did anything to shape my own destiny.' The story about that is up ahead. So Dad went up to Bridgnorth. He met some Canadians there, they were also doing the course, and on the first Saturday of their leave from this course – I don't know how long it was, it must have been a few weeks I think – they decided they'd go into the closest town, which happened to be Wolverhampton.

Location 3 [15:00]

So they went to have a drink – obviously, these young airmen! – Dad would have been ... this was 1943 and my father was born in 1918, so he was 20-something, early 20s. So they went into Wolverhampton, and reading from his book: 'On the first of our weekend leave breaks from Bridgenorth, the other Australian – his named was Jim Sharp – and myself went into the nearest big township, which was Wolverhampton. It was getting towards dusk when we reached there, and we thought this would probably be an appropriate time to quench our thirst, and possibly get accommodation for the night. We selected the Molineux Hotel – and the

Molineux Hotel, actually, it still stands. I was so pleased to see it still stands in Wolverhampton, and it houses their archives. So I did take Dad's book there as well. And so, they went to the Molineux Hotel. They had 'no trouble with their first request for a drink, but were not able to get accommodation for that night. As it happened, there was a lady standing nearby who overheard our conversation, and she, like many other women throughout England, made her home available to stranded servicemen.' So they had a drink at the Molineux, and they were taken to Richmond Road, where this lady lived in Wolverhampton. 'The lady's name was Marion Sant, and she lived in Richmond Road,' (this was significant, says my father in brackets), 'with her husband, her young son, and her niece Eileen. The next morning, Eileen dashed across the road to a friend of hers, to let her know there were a couple of Australian airmen in their house. The friend's name was Barbara. Funnily enough, my wife's name is Barbara!' – and that was my mother. My mother met dad – she was 20, it was May 1943 – and it was obviously love at first sight. They were married for 60 years, and from that meeting on, Dad says in the book – and we know, too – that he went back to Richmond Road many times during the Bridgnorth course, the GR course at Bridgenorth. He went back many times from there, and also from Alness, where he was posted to learn to fly the flying boats – and the rest is history, with my parents!

Location 4: Officer's Mess Building [19:50]

So my father had met his future wife, my gorgeous mother, and he was still waiting to be allocated to a squadron. And in the time that he was waiting, he learnt that he was going to be posted to a Sunderland squadron in Pembroke Dock – but to do that, he had to learn to fly the flying boats. So he went back from Bridgenorth, went back to the holding station at Bournemouth, and then was sent to Alness to learn how to fly the Sunderlands. In his book, he says, 'it's worth mentioning the journey: it wasn't in an electrified conveyance (train), but in a steam train, the type you might see in some old film: boxcar carriages, two long seats facing each other with luggage racks overhead on either side, and a passageway outside the seating area running the full length of the carriage. This was the mode of travel for the long haul, as it was there in the old days,' – it was a long way from London to Alness in those days by steam train! 'The first destination was Inverness: the train didn't go any further. So it was a matter of changing onto a smaller one, luggage and all – similar type, but only half as long – to cater for the rest of the journey.' So Dad went to Alness. He was allocated to a crew as the first pilot, in a crew with a captain that he said was a fantastic captain. There are 11 crew in a Sunderland, so it's a massive aircraft – it's flying boat. It's easy to say 'flying boat,' but if you actually say, 'it's a flying boat,' you get the feeling of what it must have been like. So he learned to fly. He was then sent back to Pembroke Dock, as the first pilot on this crew. And of course he'd met Mum, and Mum was still in Wolverhampton, so they corresponded, and every chance he got, he'd get on one of these trains – I think he would have had to have gone from Pembroke up to London, and then up to Wolverhampton, I'm not sure about that. There were a lot of train tracks all over England, I know, so it might have been more simple, but it seems as if it was steam trains. So he went to Alness to learn to fly, and he was then sent back to Pembroke Dock. And he visited Mum in Wolverhampton every leave. And they met in May 1943, and in July 1944 they were married. It was a wartime romance that lasted more than 60 years – obviously, as I said, it was love at first sight. They were married in Tettenhall, just near Wolverhampton, and they had their honeymoon in Ludlow. The crew of the Sunderland that Dad had joined all

came to the wedding and formed a guard of honour for Mum and Dad, and they stayed on a few days, all of them – I mean, it was 1944, I don't know really how you got leave to get married in those days, but it must have been able to have been arranged! It was just after D Day, when I think about it. So anyway, they were married on the 21st of July 1944. And then, of course, dad was now a married man, so he went back to Pembroke Dock with a wife! He'd previously been in the officers' mess, which apparently was one of the most spectacular buildings – in the officers' quarters – one of the most spectacular buildings, and sadly it was demolished. I don't know why, to build something? But nothing's ever been built on the site, and it was a beautiful building. But as a married man, Dad wasn't able to stay there, so he and Mum had to find some lodgings – and they were very lucky to be able to find lodgings right in Pembroke Dock, very very close to the base, in Wellington Street – number 11, Wellington Street.

Location 5: No. 11 Wellington Street

Since Dad was married now, he had to find accommodation with Mum in Pembroke Dock. I'm not sure how they found this accommodation, but a lady named Mrs Buchanon offered them a room in a terraced house in Wellington Street. It was number 11 Wellington Street – in Dad's book there's a photograph of Mum and Dad outside number 11. And I found Wellington Street, it's just off Dimond Street, it would be five minutes' walk from the base, so it was absolutely perfect for them, certainly perfect for Dad. And I wish many times now that I'd asked my mother what she used to do when dad was out on a patrol, because they lasted for 13 hours, and there was also preparation time before the flight and then afterwards, so dad could be gone 17 or 18 hours, and Mum would, you know, see him off. If it was a night time patrol she would see him off at number 11, Wellington Street; if it was a daytime one, she might go down to Milford Haven and watch him take off. I've stood in front of number 11, Wellington Street, on the occasions that I've been to Pembroke Dock – and I've been so lucky to have gone there three times now and found my way around, with the family knowledge that I have. And I've stood across the road from number 11, and I've imagined Dad coming down in his uniform and walking to the flying boat base. I've imagined Mum kissing him on the doorstep and seeing him off. I've imagined her there, wondering when he would be back, and if he would be back really. And just knowing that they were in that terrace, upstairs in the front bedroom, when I stood there and looked at it, has been quite an overwhelming feeling. I know that also in Dad's book, he's commented that, because they had lodgings close to Milford Haven, if it was daytime when dad was coming back, one of the crew would often say, 'oh, look, there's Barbara, down there! She's rock-hopped out into Milford Haven to watch us land – you have to do a good one this time, Captain!' And it's really only about a five minute walk to Milford Haven as well, from where they were, so they had perfect lodgings. And I guess Mum could have gone up to town – Dimond Street, I can remember ,doesn't really look much different than the photograph in Dad's book, and I'm sure it was a little bit different, but you can still get the sense of how it would have been during the war.

Location 6: Dimond Street [24:20]

Thinking about what mum would have been doing while my father was out on patrol – Pembroke Dock isn't a very big place, and during the war I don't think you would have wanted to wander too far away from your lodgings. And Dimond Street is the main street, it goes right up the centre of Pembroke Dock. It's almost from where the

base is – it's a very long street. So Mum and Dad's lodgings were closer to the end of it – not the town end, the other end. And so walking up Dimond Street, I often would imagine that Mum probably did that, maybe to go and buy something – if you could buy things during the war, I know everything was rationed. But knowing my mother, she was never one just to sit. So I think she would have gone for a walk around Dimond Street, because she did have a lot of time by herself when Dad was gone. And it doesn't look very different to me from the photograph that I've seen in Dad's book, to today. So I did get such a sense of Mum walking there, and probably walking there with Dad at times. I'm sure they socialised with other people on the base – but just walking up that street is a real sense of how it was during wartime. And one particular aspect to the flying boats being on Milford Haven – and I know that it was the biggest flying boat base in the world during the war – there's a plaque on the town hall, which I'm sure is in Dimond Street, a plaque to the two Australians Sunderland squadrons, 10 squadron and 461 squadron, commemorating the fact that these squadrons assisted in winning the war. Churchill said that the only thing that he ever feared, or the thing that he feared the most, was the U-boat peril. And that's what Coastal Command was formed for, to ensure that the U-boats didn't attack the shipping convoys. Hitler wanted to starve Britain, and that's why we needed the flying boats – and the Navy, but the flying boats, being able to see from above, they were so important. And so this plaque on the town hall commemorates RAAF 461 squadron and 10 squadron, the Australians squadrons.

I recently had quite a few sales of my father's book, at least 20, and I sent the money over to the Heritage Centre. One of the gentlemen who bought the book is retired from the RAAF but he did not serve during the war, and he had an association with RAAF 10 squadron and RAAF 461 – 461 squadron was my father's squadron, and 10 was the other Sunderland Squadron. He said that in 1987, a plaque had been taken across to Pembroke Dock, and he didn't know where it had ended up because the heritage centre didn't exist then. It is on the town hall in Pembroke Dock, on the outside of the town hall. So that would be something that people would be interested in too.

Location 7: The Bush Tavern [38:56]

When I went to Pembroke Dock, I was determined to find The Bush Tavern. I'd seen a photograph, in my parents' wartime photos, of my father with his crew – actually, it was my father with his crew, and then another one of Mum and Dad with his crew and the proprietors of the Bush Tavern, and on the back of it Mum had written, 'VE Day, 1945.' And there's a Union Jack in the window of the tavern, and obviously everybody is celebrating the end of the war. The Bush Tavern is actually on Bush Street – I thought that it might have been just because it was called 'The Bush Tavern' that they were frequenting this, but I think probably both things. And it was obviously somewhere where they enjoyed to go and have a drink, especially because they were with the proprietors on VE day. And it's still there, and I've been in and had a drink myself! There were other pubs, I know, in Pembroke Dock, one was called The Flying Boat – it was closed, not just closed but locked up, when I went the last time. There was another one called The Rose Tavern, I think that was close to the base. I'm pretty sure they went there as well, but I've got photographic evidence of them at The Bush Tavern.

Location 8: Starting at Gun Tower and walking to Heritage Centre [46:03]

One of the places that I've looked at, and imagined my mother with the rock-hopping out to watch Dad come in in the flying boat, is near the gun tower – because when the tide goes out in Milford Haven, it goes out quite a long way, and I think my mother was very agile, and she would have been able to rock-hop quite a distance out into Milford Haven. The gun tower is such a significant landmark in Pembroke Dock: built in 1851 to protect the Royal Dockyards and used during both wars to protect Pembroke Dock. I know Pembroke Dock was bombed very early in the war because of the big oil refineries there. So the gun tower, I know, was used for protection. And after the war, it became the first seeds of the Heritage Centre. It was 'the Flying Boat Centre.' And I came across it when my daughter went to England to work. I went with my two younger children to visit her, and we went to Pembroke Dock – we had to go to Pembroke Dock, because Dad was there, and that was Mum and Dad's first marital home. And we just discovered the Flying Boat Centre! And as that has evolved, it's now become the Heritage Centre, Pembroke Dock Heritage Centre, which was opened by the Queen and Prince Phillip, and it's housed in the dockyard chapel, which was the chapel for the squadrons during the war – and it was also the garrison theatre: so it was used as a theatre, I know that servicemen often did shows during the war and it was used as a theatre. But it was also used for ANZAC Day services, because of the Australian squadrons there. It's the most magnificent building, and it's evolving all the time. And I know at the moment they're working towards becoming an accredited museum, and that would be wonderful, because it's got such a history, Pembroke Dock has such a history with the three services. But so well-known during the war for the flying boats. And I often imagine – I've heard a four-engined aircraft, here in Australia, but there was so many flying boats, and the noise must have been phenomenal, really, with them coming and going at nighttime and daytime – there were Polish squadrons as well, two British squadrons, and the Australian and Canadians squadrons. So, they were a lot of flying boats on Pembroke Dock during the war. And the Flying Boat Centre, which is now the Heritage Centre, is just the place to go to see this sort of history – and my father's book, that he wrote from the time he was 80 to 87, is for sale there, and I'm so pleased, because all of the money from any sales goes back to support the Heritage Centre, which is the most wonderful place.

Location 9: Heritage Centre/'The Avenue' [52]

When you go to the Heritage Centre, you may have the opportunity to stand at the end of 'The Avenue,' also known as the Carriageway, but it was always known as the Avenue during the war. And this was the route that the servicemen, on ANZAC Day, took, when they marched from the officers' mess or the sergeants' mess up the Avenue, to the dockyard chapel, for ANZAC Day services. And when you stand at the bottom of the Avenue, and look up towards the chapel, through the two rows of trees on either side, you can't help but almost hear the feet walking, their boots walking. It's a beautiful approach to the dockyard chapel, and it would have really given the servicemen, especially the Aussies, on ANZAC Day, who would want to commemorate – ANZAC Day is a very special day to Australians and New Zealanders – and to be able to commemorate, to be able to march to the church, would have been a very special thing for our servicemen. And you'll certainly get the sense of that when you stand with the end of the Avenue and look up towards the dockyard chapel.

Location 10: Boat trip [54:45]

I was very lucky when I went last time to Pembroke Dock, and spent a lot of hours in the Heritage Centre again – not just a lot of hours, a lot of days, each day I would go there! And on this one particular day, one of the volunteers said to me, 'have you ever been out onto Milford Haven?' And I said, 'no, I've walked around on the banks of Milford Haven, but not been on the water.' And he said, 'well, I would love to take you out there if you would like to come.' And I said, 'that would be wonderful!'

Because to be able to get onto the Sunderland, you had to be taken out by boat, to the flying boat, and then you were able to board – you couldn't just board from the bank. So to be able to go onto the water, and to go right out to Angle Bay, at the end of Milford Haven – which is where, if it was a nighttime patrol, that's where the Sunderlands would have to take off. If it was a daytime patrol, they could taxi during the day on the waters of Milford Haven, and negotiate around whatever aircraft were there, but at night time they had to be taken out by pinnace, little boats, and then the Sunderlands would take off, at the end of the bay. And so to get that sense of what it would have been like for the flying boats to get airbourne was the most amazing thing – taxiing along on the water, and then, as Dad said, once you had your speed up, there was just nothing it could do but to get airbourne! And I really had that sense. And also, on Milford Haven there is still a wartime buoy to which the flying boats would have been tied up, so there's still a wartime buoy there for the Sunderland flying boats. That was amazing to see.

I was talking to my aunt in England, she's 93, and one of her daughters, my cousin, we do a Facetime every now and then, and she always says that, 'I can't believe that you're going into spring and we're going into autumn!' It's funny, isn't it?

I want to do a good job for you, but I want to do a good job for my parents too.