

Doug Hubbard, Jr. Oral Monologue

Doug Hubbard:

Mr. [Murphen?], this is Doug Hubbard, Jr. My dad has asked me to sit down and record a few of the highlights and some of the background information that surround the recovery of the relics that presently grace the Nimitz History Walk. Really, it all began about 1971, when the history walk was still very much in its early stages. In March, 1971, I left Vietnam on my way to Australia. And on that trip, I took the opportunity to stop in New Guinea for three or four weeks, at which time I looked around and talked to quite a few of my friends there, and asked them if there weren't items that may possibly pertain to the Pacific War, and which were possible to recover. One of the first things that I found that really sparked my interest was the story of the Latimore tank. And after hearing this story, I flew over to Popondetta from Port Moresby. And in Popondetta, I contacted a young police sub-inspector, Chris Cody, who knew of the tanks and who volunteered to take me down to Buna, which is about 15 miles away. We looked around, and in the course of this quick reconnaissance, we saw a couple of the tanks; three of them, exactly. Also, we observed the three-inch Japanese

Naval gun, which was alleged to have knocked out Latimore's tank.

I noticed that the positions of the tank and the gun seemed to pretty well back up the story of the airstrip action. I took quite a few pictures of this, and forwarded them on to my dad. And after several months of correspondence, we decided that it may be a possibility that these things could be recovered, and a few other items as well, which would help with the story at the Nimitz Center.

So in the very early parts of 1972, Admiral Moore, who was then the chief of staff in Washington, contacted his old shipmate, Admiral Sir Victor Smith of the Royal Australian Navy in Canberra, and asked Admiral Smith if he would provide any support that he could manage to assist the Nimitz with the recovery of the tanks, and whatever else we were able to acquire title to, and arrange for their eventual shipment to the United States.

So in January, 1972, I went to Canberra. There I met Admiral Smith and told him about the tanks, and advised him that if other items which appeared to be pertinent could be recovered

in the course of normal operations by the Papua, New Guinea defense command, which was distinctly an Australian show at that stage, then we would be most appreciative. After this meeting, I was referred by Admiral Smith to Brigadier James [Noria?], who was the commander of the PNG defense forces in Port Moresby, at Murray Barracks. And after I arrived in Port Moresby, I met with General Noria and his ADC, aide-de-camp, who was Major Michael Casey. And after this, things started to roll pretty well. Of course, the logistics of moving these items were pretty difficult, as we'll go into later on down the line. But the most immediate difficulty was the actual acquisition of the relics that we were interested in.

So first of all, we liaised with the staff judge advocate, who did a legal research for us in Port Moresby to find out what legal precedencies there were for acquiring these items. And I was referred to a gentleman in the administration there named Mr. Fitz Herbert, who advised that it was, indeed, possible to acquire items, but that it had to be done through the person or persons or authority who had salvage rights to the area in which the items were actually situated. So this sounds fairly easy, but in fact it was probably the most difficult part of the whole task; that is, the acquisition of title of ownership. And Mr.

Fitz Herbert went to quite a bit of difficulty to determine who actually had salvage rights, and in fact approached him personally, and told them what our mission was. And eventually, as I'll explain, was able by our submission of a token payment of \$5 Australian to grant absolute total title for the relics that we wanted. This process took six or eight weeks, as I recall, after we had actually determined what we wanted to recover.

But I've gotten a little bit ahead of myself now. In the process of determining what we had to do to get title, I also was asking a lot of questions of a lot of people, trying to find out what, in addition to the Buna tank and gun we could acquire for the Nimitz Center. And the Royal Australian Air Force staff told me at that time of an airstrip on New Britain Island, which had been a fairly active Japanese airstrip called Gasmata. Now, Gasmata is in an area of New Britain that has several hundred inches of rain a year, and consequently it's pretty difficult to get in and out of in anything other than a helicopter or a light plane. The Australian Air Force was flying de Havilland Caribous in and out on occasion, when the grass landing strip was firm enough.

So I flew to Rabaul, and with the assistance of the Royal Australian Survey Corps was able to hitch a ride down to Gasmata. And there at the strip, very close to a little rest house, I saw the VAL dive-bomber, which eventually made it back to the Nimitz Center. And this dive-bomber had been parked along the strip during one of the frequent air raids that the allied forces made on the strip. And a large bomb had lit underneath the tail of the plane, which forced it up onto its nose and blew the tail off, and pushed the landing and arrester hook over on the top. Well, the plane was really not in very good condition, but on the other hand, I didn't know of another VAL that was available anywhere. And since it played such an important role in that part of the Pacific War, I thought that we really should make some sort of an effort to recover what was left of it, no matter what they eventually decided to do with it. That is to say, whether they wanted to restore it or leave it in its present condition which, of course, is what they've done.

So after arriving at Gasmata and quickly surveying the situation, I had planned to rush back to Moresby with my exposed film and contact John Fitz Herbert and arrange to gain title. But as it turned out, the weather socked in, and the Royal

Australian Air Force Healey that I was flying on was grounded because of weather. And I was there with Air Force personnel, and we didn't have rations and we didn't have any place to stay. And as it turned out, we found a copra shed down the beach a ways that was fortunately empty, and it had some canvas in it. So we all just wrapped up in that canvas through the stormy night, and slept in a big heap until we could finally get out the next day. And to sort of add interest to this, we were very low on fuel, so one of our hops back to Rabaul via Talasea was pretty eventful, because we arrived with about five gallons left in the tank, which is a fairly serious situation in a helicopter, a modern helicopter, anyway.

So I eventually made it back to Moresby, and told John Fitz Herbert that we really did want the VAL, if there were any way we could organize it. Eventually, we were able to acquire title without too much difficulty, because the people there who had salvage rights were fairly amenable. While in Rabaul, on one of several trips over there, I had seen some anti-aircraft and some heavy artillery that was situated both in the bush and at the [Cocopa?] police station. And the folks there, while they didn't really have the legal prerogative to give it to us, said that they would be happy to let us take it away if we could get

title to it. We had a rather unpleasant incident there with the local Catholic Mission, who insisted that nothing was to leave, even though they had no legal prerogative to do so. What we had hoped to get was a Japanese 150 millimeter gun. And this was not to be. But we were able to get the three-barrel, 25-millimeter anti-aircraft gun. And this was hoisted onto a Public Works Department trailer and delivered out to the airport, the military side of the airport in Rabaul, where a tent was put up over it to sort of hide it from attention. And a C-130 Hercules later flew it out. Of course, I greased the skids along the way a little bit with a couple of bottles of whiskey and a few beers at the pub, and everyone really worked pretty well with us in spite of the unpleasantness with the Catholic Mission over the 150 millimeter gun.

The instructions were that the items were to be collected in Sydney for eventual transshipment to the United States, and the three-barrel anti-aircraft gun was eventually flown to Richmond Air Force Base, which is outside of Sydney a ways. So that accounted for one of the items. Now, the tanks and the VAL dive-bomber, of course, are considerably bigger than that anti-aircraft gun, and logistic support was considerably more involved. What had been suggested by Admiral Smith at the

outset of this project was, that one of the Australian heavy landing craft, which are designed for transporting tanks, could be utilized for shipping our tanks and gun and dive-bomber back down to Australia for eventual shipment back. However, these landing craft were all being used in logistic support for a large-scale survey program of the Barrier Reef in New Guinea waters, and their movements were necessarily erratic. And we had to be ready on a moment's notice to assist and move to get the items ready for shipment.

Eventually, we were told that the Army LCH Balikpapan would be available for several days, and it was proposed that she would sail from Moresby around Milne Bay up to Gasmata on New Britain, and then on her way back down would stop at Buna to pick up the tank. Well, that sounded like a good scheme, but at this point we had to quickly get a crew of Royal Australian Air Force men over to disassemble the VAL, and then arrange for a Huey with sling equipment to transport it from Gasmata out into the bay where Balikpapan would be anchored. And to complicate things further, the hydrographic charts for both Gasmata and Buna were old, and they were incomplete. And normal is really sure what was where, because there really just had been no reason at all to run any shipping in that close to the coast.

So the Army does things a little differently than the Royal Australian Navy. They use a warrant officer, which is a senior NCO to us; it's not a warrant officer in the American sense, but like a master sergeant, as the master of the craft. And Warrant Officer Dennis was very good at his job, and he was a lot less intimidated by hydrographic charts and other niceties than the Navy were. The Navy had a LCH in the area, the Brunei, with a full commander aboard who did some preliminary soundings in the area before Balikpapan arrived. But like I say, they were merely preliminary, and just designed to cover people up in the event that there were any problems with the landing.

So when Balikpapan suddenly became available, we moved pretty fast and we got this crew of Air Force people in to Gasmata, and they quickly disassembled the VAL, taking her wings off, which is pretty easy, of course, since she has folding wings, took her tail and her motor off. And the Huey's that were assigned to the Royal Australian Survey Corps, one of which was in the area, came in and when Balikpapan arrived in Gasmata, they hung the parts on a big sling and set them on the deck of Balikpapan, where they were wrapped in canvas and stowed against the bulkheads. Now we do have a couple of pictures of this; they're

not very good, but I think my dad will probably enclose them to see if you can possibly use them. The whole operation only took a matter of a couple of hours, and Mr. Dennis, in the meantime, wheeled around and headed down across the Huon Gulf towards Buna.

Well, in the meantime, since it was apparent that I couldn't be in two places at once in this operation, I decided that the best place for me to be was at Buna, where we hoped to recover three tanks and the three-inch Japanese Naval gun. Brigadier Noria assigned Captain Brian [Kowald?] of the Royal Australian Engineers to handle the logistic side of the recovery. And we flew over to Popondetta on Air Force transport with a couple of his SAPA assistants, who were Papua New Guineans. We took explosive ordinance disposal equipment with us, and we stored quite a few chains and tools and whatnot that we thought we might need there. We only had 24 hours, virtually, to organize the recovery. I had contacted a contractor in Popondetta who had an old D7 bulldozer, and he agreed to put this at our disposal for \$20 an hour. So we raced down to Buna from Popondetta and hired a crew of local people, about 20 of them, and distributed shovels and chains and whatnot, and began the recovery.

Well, I think dad has explained to you the story of Sergeant Latimore's tank. The reason we were so excited about the Latimore tank was the fact that we had determined that Latimore, Jack Latimore, was still alive in Sydney. And the fact that the tank was still sitting in its original position where it had been knocked out, and the fact that the gun which knocked it out was still in its original position, presented what we thought was a genuinely unique possibility for an exhibit. So we started with the recovery of the Latimore tank, which we wanted for the Nimitz Center. Now the Australians, or particularly the old alumni of the 7th Division, who made the real assault on Buna, have a pretty soft spot in their heart for all the men they lost there. And they didn't have a relic which would tell people something of this story. Consequently, one of the things that I did was to procure title to another tank for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which is absolutely one of the finest museums of its type in the world. One of the conditions of this was that we would deliver a third tank to Port Moresby, where it could be placed in some sort of a museum; this condition having been made with the salvage company who owned salvage rights to Buna.

So it was my decision that we start with the recovery of the Latimore tank, since to us, that was the most important part of the whole operation. Also, it appeared as though recovery was going to be the most difficult of all, since the landing spot for the LCH Balikpapan was at a location known as [Cape Andadre?]. And Cape Andadre was some distance away from Latimore's tank. And to complicate things further, there's a very nasty, murky swampy creek between the two locations, which was bridged by a very primitive sort of a causeway. We really didn't think we were going to have much problem with this, since the old tank had much of its weight removed; the motor and some of the tracks had been removed. Since she weighed 25 tons fully fitted, we really didn't think we were going to have much problem.

So the day we started out, we went and took the bulldozer down to the side of the tank and simply hitched a couple of chains on to it, or cables, I think they were, and started pulling her along. And she went pretty well, when we started out. We had problems because of the fact there were no tracks on her. We had a five gallon can of WD40, which we applied liberally to the boat used, and most of them moved, which kept her up off the ground, but we had the cables attached to the ripper on the back

of this D7 Caterpillar, and the old tank kept wanting to nose down on us. We couldn't seem to get enough lift to get it up, when we started, that is. We eventually solved that problem later on. But it was about noon when we started, and we got her straight down to Sanananda Creek -- no, sorry, just -- I can't remember the name of the creek just now, but maybe later.

Anyway, we got her to the creek where the causeway was. And this causeway consisted of a couple of galvanized drain pipes with earth heaped over them, and some very poor mortar and rock mixed up and put on the sides to hold the road bed in place. And as soon as we got that bulldozer on it, it began to shudder a little bit. And then when the tank itself arrived onto the causeway, well, it slipped to one side and broke away one whole entire side of the causeway. Well, the locals that we'd hired as laborers to assist us on this became immediately and noticeably hostile to the efforts of Captain Kowald and I, right there on the spot immediately promised that we'd make good on the damage. That night I managed to find some concrete in Popondetta and the following day, we hired a good portion of the local village to repair this thing. But in the meantime, the old tank was sitting there on the causeway, and there should be

some pictures of this, where she'd broken through in some of the more poorly filled parts of the earth fill.

We were able to get some extra chains and cables on her, and just dragged it on across, pretty well destroying one whole side of the bridge the following day. At this point, we had to negotiate a coconut grove -- please remember if you look at any of the pictures of the Buna action that the area there is all coconut plantations. And it was pretty low ground, and the ground was soft. And I think we got the old tank bogged down something like 12 times, before we even got it close to the beach. And of course, the beach was all sand, and that wasn't a heck of a lot easier. By this point we're getting a little bit concerned that we weren't going to have these tanks all ready on the beach when Balikpapan arrived, and since she was only authorized to stay there a day because of her shipping commitments, we were beginning to think that the whole thing might fall on its ear. Eventually, we did get the tank down to the beach.

The Latimore tank, well, there are quite a few pictures of it, I think the slides are labeled to show which is which, but the Latimore tank eventually was dragged down to the beach. You'll

notice at that point it was missing one of its front drive wheels, which makes it a little more distinct from the others. Well, it was raining like it often did around there, and we were pretty lucky to get her to the beach, we thought.

Now to regress a little bit, before we actually got the bulldozer down there, the third tank -- not the second tank which went to the War Memorial, but the third tank -- which was destined for Port Moresby we found had a live 37 millimeter high explosive round in the breech. And strangely enough, the gun was directed straight at the old plantation house where the old Australian who ran the plantation lived, an old boy named Gill Renton. And Renton was blind, totally blind. He had a couple of natives who looked after him. He knew about this, but he'd lived there next to this live round, which was pointed right at him for years and years, like from 1946 to 1972. But we knew that we had to get rid of this round before we could transport this gun. And Kowald had done quite a bit of explosive ordinance disposal, and he took a guncotton primer and very gently pushed it down the muzzle where it was close to the warhead on this round, packed the muzzle full of dirt, and fired it off. This happened after we had tried to gently extricate it with WD40 and wrenches; it was sort of a last-ditch effort. We

are pleased that it didn't damage anything. The breech was open, so the round simply exploded and blew out all over the inside of the turret.

So after we'd gotten the Latimore tank to the beach, we pretty well decided we'd better get the three-inch gun out, since it was another one of the long hauls that we'd have to take across the creek. Again, we got every spare body that we could from the local village and gave them all picks and shovels, and they started digging. Well the pictures of the three-inch gun before we started digging will show that it was almost underground. We didn't have any idea that this large metal base which secured it was below and holding it in place. We knew there was no concrete around it, but we had no idea what really was holding that gun in place. We started to dig, and we dug and we dug and we dug. And eventually, we got down about six feet and found this base. Not only did we have to dig out the base, but we had to dig out a ramp that the bulldozer could negotiate.

After all the digging was done, the rest was pretty easy. We had the Latimore tank down at the beach, and it was simply a matter of reversing the bulldozer and the crew, and getting back to the three-inch gun, throwing a chain around the base and

pulling it out. In the process of all this digging, we unearthed some pretty interesting items; the three-inch gun was set into a position, classic defensive position, with a ring trench around it, where infantrymen were posted to defend the position itself. We uncovered various personal items; cartridges and a rifle, just in the process of digging that ramp out. Of course, there were probably quite a few other items in there too that we missed.

While we were doing all this excavation, we also made a rather unpleasant discovery. About 12 81-millimeter mortar rounds stacked over in a revetment area. We blew those up before we got any further along, but a 30-year-old ordinance of that type is pretty treacherous, and we were lucky we found it in the tall grass. Actually dragging the gun back to the beach was not that much of a problem. The base is nice and flat, and we pulled one side of it up on the rippers, and got it down to the beach without much problem at all. You may notice from the photographs that the barrel was detached at this point. We took it out for ease of handling and shipping, and of course it's been replaced since its arrival back here in Texas.

After the gun was at the beach, we were really realizing that the crunch was on, and we had to work very fast to ensure that Balikpapan could make it out by that evening. The second recovery was the number two tank, the tank for the Australian War Memorial, and it wasn't all that far away from Cape Andadre itself. It was in very soft ground, but we'd gotten better at pulling them by that time. We simply hooked it up and pulled, and I think we only got stuck two to three times before we got to the beach. But one of the interesting things about this tank was that the barrel of the main turret gun had been spiked, either during or after the battle to prevent its further use. And it's blown off flush with the turret. So in the photographs, it's easy to identify that as the one that went to the Australian War Memorial, where it presently resides.

While we were in the process of hooking up the tank, the bulldozer, I got inside of it and rummaged around a little bit to see what we could find in their 30 years of residue inside. But there were a couple of butt plates left, which were obviously Enfield rifle butts, such as the type the Australian Infantry were issued. And there were numerous cartridge cases and bullets, which indicate that it appears to have come to a pretty tough end.

The last recovery was the Port Moresby tank which, as we explained before, we'd removed the round from the breech of. Really, the only noteworthy thing of the recovery was that there weren't many bogies left on the tank. It was fairly well stripped, and the ground was soft and it was raining. So we dragged up quite a bit of earth in the process of moving it down to the beach. Once again, we recovered a Japanese rifle and odds and ends just dredged up in the process of pulling the gun along. But once down at the beach, it became another problem -- that of getting all the equipment aboard the Balikpapan, which was sitting there with her hawser secured to the coconut trees. And by this time it was afternoon, and the wind had come up a bit from the east, which was driving some pretty good-sized waves in on us. The problem was getting these tanks, which were just deadweight without wheels that were really effective, and certainly without tracks, up onto the loading ramp and into the bay of the LCH. The master had rigged snatch blocks and had an electric wench aboard Balikpapan, and we had hoped that we'd be able to leave these bulldozers up onto the ramp and pull them aboard. And in fact, if you look at the pictures, you'll see that we were trying desperately to use the blade of the bulldozer to lift the front of these tanks up so they could be

winched aboard. The wenches, which were intended for lifting the anchors, were totally inadequate for the job. And eventually, we ended up having to push them aboard with a bulldozer, which was pretty rough on the LCHs. But when it came to the crunch, it appeared that was the only way we were going to be able to get them aboard. So once we made that decision, the actual loading process took place in about two hours, and we got everything secured aboard.

In the meantime, quite a bunch of the local natives had gathered with bows and arrows and shotguns, and they were feeling a bit hostile about the fact that we were removing property which they assumed was theirs, since it had been sitting there for so many years. But we managed to get away without any incidents, which made everyone happy. And Balikpapan arrived in Ports Moresby a couple of days later fueled up, and then headed down to Sydney. I'm sure my dad will have told you about the arrangements that were later made for loading all the relics aboard HMAS Melbourne, which is a converted aircraft carrier, for shipment to the States. I think this probably happened in early 1973 sometimes, when Melbourne was dispatched to the United States to pick up a load of CH-47 helicopters for the Australian Air Force.

Well, there was only one other really interesting large-scale recovery of note, and this was the recovery of the tail that presently sits next to the VAL dive bomber. You see, I wasn't certain if an attempt was going to be made to restore this plane, and since the tail had been blown off many years ago, I thought it would be good idea if we could try and find another one. And I asked a lot of questions. Eventually, I got an interesting letter from a district officer, who had been stationed at Cape Gloucester, which you may recall was the site of the first Marine amphibious landings in early 1943, on New Britain Island, the far west end of it. Anyway, this district officer, or "Kiap" as they're called, K-I-A-P, told me that there was a VAL wrecked at a certain location about 20 miles down the coast from Cape Gloucester. And he said that when this plane went in that the tail was ripped off and that it was in the top of a tree for a good many years, and that it had only recently fallen to the ground. It was supposed to be situated within a mile and a half of the beach. So this seemed like a pretty good bet to me. I thought we might be able to get the tail, and also a few other odds and ends that might assist someone, if they ever tried to restore the plane.

So I flew Cape Gloucester by commercial airline; one of the two flights a week, got a de Havilland Twin Otter, and arrived there on the old allied military landing strip. And it was a pretty bleak sort of a place. There weren't many people around.

Fortunately, there was a mechanic that had been sent over there by the administration to fix the district's one lone tractor. He knew which way to walk to where the district officer lived, which is really all there is on Cape Gloucester today. So we walked three or four miles down along the coast to the Kiap's place. And they very kindly put us up overnight and fed us, and arranged for me to meet with the sisters at the local convent, which was only a mile or so from Cape Gloucester proper. Of course, the reason they suggested this was that the convent had a trade boat. It was an old wood-hulled affair about 40 feet long, pretty well open with a sort of a sun shield on the top and a motor a-mid ship. I managed to hire this boat for a day to take me down the coast to where this trail was supposed to be located.

Now, this was one of the most interesting parts of my whole time in New Guinea, because Cape Gloucester is really pretty much an out-of-the-way type of place. There isn't much that happens there, and the people are still pleasantly simple about modern

civilization. In fact, when I hired laborers later on in the day, they didn't know what paper money was, so I had to take large rolls of shillings, or 20-cent pieces along to pay them off.

Anyway, I organized this trade boat without too much difficulty, and we left early in the morning and stopped in a village along the way and picked up a dozen laborers, and landed at the area where this tail was supposed to be. I went inland with several people to guide me, and sure enough, there was this tail. And it was in amazingly fine condition. It still bore all the Japanese inscriptions, and it appeared to me as though there was surely enough there to make up for what had been blown off on the original VAL. Of course, the jungle was pretty dense there, and I had to use most of the laborers to cut a track through the jungle. And once this was done, well, they tied large logs underneath it with jungle rope, hoisted it up on their shoulders and carried it to the beach. We got it to the beach all right, and sat down, and we were all pretty thirsty, so one of the boys went up the tree and collected coconuts and fixed us all up. Then a couple of the more adventurous ones got an outrigger canoe, and we stuck this tail section on top of the canoe and roped it down.

Well, with the two men, the Papua New Guineans, and the tail section, it only left about two and a half inches of freeboard on this canoe. And there was about three hundred yards to make it out to where the trade boat was, so there were a few tense moments on the way out. Everyone was waiting on the boat, and in the meantime, we'd taken logs out and shored up the roof, so that we wouldn't break it down too badly. And we got it down aboard the boat and back to the mission that night.

Also, in the process of this, we got an extra propeller, which still has .50 caliber machine gun holes in it, which more or less backs up the official allied record that several VALs were shot down in this vicinity by Navy aircraft, in the process of the landings. I found human remains in the wreckage, which we collected in a small sac and turned over to the Australian authorities for original return to Japan. And the only other item that we recovered was an extra wheel, since I knew that one of the wheels on the VAL which is here now was pretty badly damaged.

Anyway, we managed to get all of these things aboard the old trade boat and back to Cape Gloucester, and they were eventually

transported out to the airstrip where all the Australian Air Force personnel disassembled them and flew them to Port Moresby on Caribou aircraft. And I had them all steam-cleaned there to pass Australian quarantine, and they made it down to Sydney and across to Long Beach on HMAS Melbourne, with the rest of the stuff.

Well, I hope this hasn't been too long-winded. It's kind of a thumbnail sketch as best I can do after six years. But I hope it'll help. And if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

END OF AUDIO FILE