DES FRENCH

3.9. **Born 1925**
DEC. 8.7.2013

Commando Squadron 7th Division AIF

Fisherman

Stanley

North West Coast

Tasmania

From a distance, the little historic town of Stanley appears to snuggle up against its iconic backdrop - an ancient volcanic plug referred to as 'The Nut'. Accessible by chairlift or walking trail, its flat top offers a magnificent panorama of distant bays and beaches that are fronted by the endless blue waters of Bass Strait, as well as a bird's eye view of Stanley's harbour and its quaint, nineteenth-century stone cottages. Tourist brochures refer to Stanley as a 'seafood paradise'. A local resident, Des French, has been one of many fishermen who, throughout the years, has helped Stanley earn and maintain its enviable reputation.

The township of Stanley at the base of The Nut

At 86 years of age, Des has retired from his life at sea. He lives alone in a small weatherboard house surrounded by his well-maintained gardens. He proudly tells how his house, which "started out in 1948 as a big tin shed" expanded over the years when he "got a few bob and gradually built up the inside and added a bit here and there." He points to the kitchen's ceiling and continues, "Incidentally, that beam up there is out of a shipwreck. It was also part of an old shed on the wharf ... that shed was falling to pieces so I used bits of it everywhere in here."

Most of Des's stories highlight his ability to adapt to change as the focus of economic activities in this north-western corner of Tasmania shifted through time. During the depression years, Des was raised on the family's dairy farm on the outskirts of the nearby town of Wynyard. Stanley was a port town then, exporting produce such as timber, potatoes, butter and red meat from its surrounding hinterland. Back in those times Des, along with his four younger siblings, "didn't get into much mischief cos if ya

View to the east from the flat top of The Nut

could walk about the place then ya could work." Des had to cut the maize with a sickle, separate the milk and clean the horse stables out night and morning - "had five horses instead of a tractor in them days."

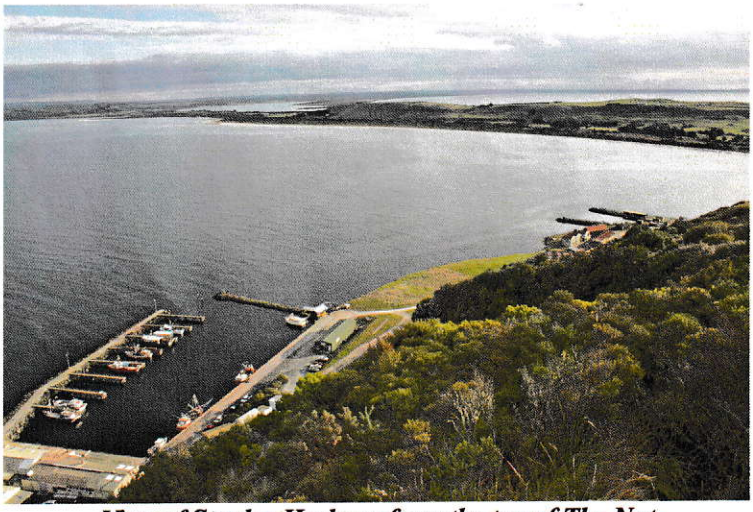
When Des was aged ten, in 1935, his father moved his young family to Hunter Island in Bass Strait "to try and make a better living looking after this fella's beef cattle and trying to breed from 'em too." Des and his family were the only people who lived on this small island, the southern point of which is located six kilometres from the north-western tip of Tasmania. The island measures 25 kilometres in length and six kilometres at its widest point. "We had to use a horse and an old sledge to cart our furniture two miles up to the house when we first arrived."

Des fondly recalls his seven years of island life, even though his work hours slowly increased during this period of his adolescence. "It was very good for kids – there was no bloody mischief to get into and there was always something to do." Des hunted, fished, mended fences and snared wallabies when the season was open – "the skins were worth a pound each."

At first, Des's mother educated her children, but eventually found it too difficult to continue with this and "everything else as well – damn near impossible." After two years, a teacher was appointed to the island, having no choice but to live with the family "cos there was no other house here, ya see." Her job was dependent on enrolment numbers. "I forget the exact number, but I remember my cousin was asked to live with us ... also, there was a shipwreck on the island ... a father and a son survived ... the son stayed with us for a while to make up the numbers ... when he finally left that buggered up everything." However, this predicament didn't affect Des because he had reached the school-leaving age of 14 by this stage. On the other hand, his younger siblings were required to attend boarding school on the Tasmanian mainland.

Des paints a picture of quite an isolated existence on Hunter Island, but one that does not seem to have caused him concern or dissatisfaction. By necessity, his family became almost self-sufficient. However, they were reliant on "a thirty-footer to bring the mail and a few supplies like tea, flour and sugar once a month," but it mostly arrived "whenever it got there." Some other small boats used to call in at the island "to take the cattle over to Stanley" for further fattening, with most also needing to recover from the "bruising" they received from their rough boat trip across Bass Strait.

The island's isolation was highlighted by one particular incident that Des vividly recalls – the death of his grandfather on the island. "He came to visit us ... got sick and died ... he was getting on in years." No one predicted any delay with his burial arrangements back on the Tasmanian mainland. "If ya got into trouble like that ya lit three fires and made 'em as smoky as possible." This was to catch the attention of the skippers of small trading boats, frequently plying the waters of Bass Strait. However, all did not go according to plan. One of these "traders" was within three kilometres of one of the fires and "thought it was sand blowing about the place." It finally



View of Stanley Harbour from the top of The Nut

took five days for someone to come. In the meantime, "Dad built a coffin to bury my grandfather on the island." As a result of this experience, Des's father delivered an ultimatum to his employer who owned all the cattle on the island: "If ya don't get me a pedal radio we're leaving." His request was quickly granted.

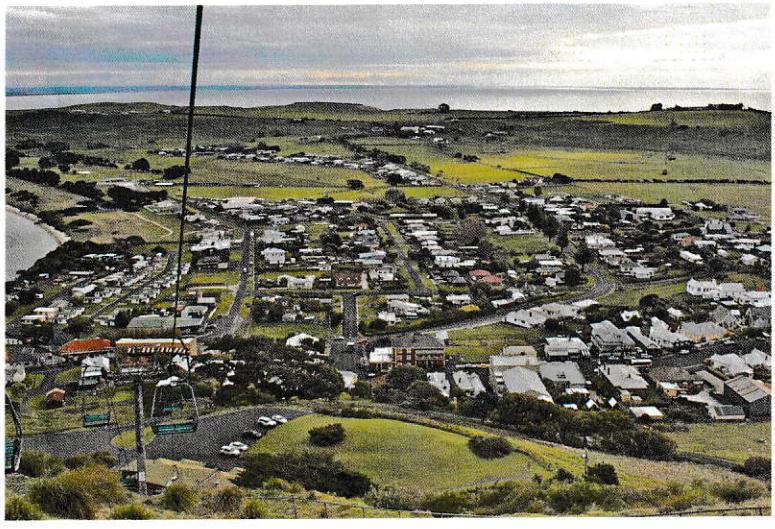
In 1942, when Des was 17 years of age, he and his family moved back to the Stanley area because his father "got work in a sawmill for a while ... better pay and hours." Meanwhile, Des was offered a job as a shark and barracouta fisherman on a boat owned by "the skipper who brought us off the island." Des admits that his formal education had been scanty and spasmodic and so engaging in an activity, to which he had been accustomed on the island, seemed like a natural progression. Also, his isolated existence on Hunter Island had equipped him with the necessary attributes to withstand the long and lonely stints at sea that were part of a fisherman's way of life.

"The cannery staff use to get blood poisoning from just touching these fish cos they was so rotten."

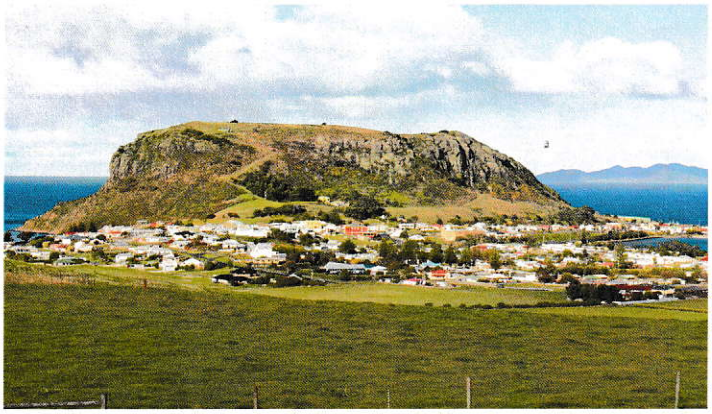
Des mostly fished for barracouta out in Bass Strait, including the waters surrounding the nearby islands of Robbins, Three Hummock and his old stamping ground, Hunter Island. "We caught 'couta for the Poms. They was short of calcium and these bony sods of things were full of the stuff. All we done was scale 'em, gut 'em and chop their heads off. The canneries then just chopped 'em in chunks. But these canneries treated the fish so bad, so that when they got 'em to England, the Poms wouldn't even allow 'em to be sold for pet food – they ordered 'em back to Australia. Ya see, if the canneries were busy, a lot of the 'couta use to sit in boxes on the wharf all day after we brought 'em in ... real warm days ... with the flies in 'em ... terrible. The cannery staff use to get blood poisoning from just touching these fish cos they was so rotten. Anyway, that was the end of it – it ruined the 'couta industry." Des philosophically adds that the barracouta market was on the decline anyway "cos that fish had too many bones in 'em."

With the advent of the war in the Pacific, Des enlisted in the 7th Division of the AIF and served in Papua New Guinea. "I wanted to go in to the water transport cos I was a fisherman." However, the army, "in its wisdom" placed him in a commando squadron instead. For the last six months of his wartime service, Des was in hospital, suffering from malaria. He admits that his time in Papua New Guinea, "wasn't too bad ... but it might be a different story if I was there a bit earlier ... anyway, I made a few good mates." Des's mood then becomes tinged with regret as he explains that he has not kept in contact with most of his fellow servicemen because the majority of them returned to other Australian states.

Upon his return to Stanley, Des applied for a position in the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme's Fishing School that was being conducted in Cronulla, Sydney, "to learn the trawling game." He had his doubts about his enrolment prospects "cos of my education." However, he acknowledges his good fortune when "a bloke from the Shetland Islands interviewed me and took me in cos I was about the only one out of the 60 there that'd ever fished – a lot was from the air force, ya see." During his eight-month attendance at this school, he met his future wife, Peg, who was working at a slipper factory. "At a Friday night dance at the Cecil Hotel, somehow or other the two of us lined up ... we was married 63 years all but a few days." Des



The town of Stanley viewed from The Nut's chairlift



Stanley and The Nut

suddenly becomes quiet, but adds in a short while, "It'll be 12 months on the second of next month since Peg passed away - she had cancer all through her in the end."

Des's interest in the trawling industry quickly waned when he realised that he was "about 20 years too early for trawling in Tassie – there was a lot of money and a lot of water needed to go under the bridge before trawling became anything round here." As a consequence, Des continued fishing for barracouta and shark, being absent from his home a week at a time, and often accompanied by three other crew members. Their catches went to Melbourne, with "only a bit going to Sydney, cos Sydney wouldn't eat shark in them days." Des caught the sharks using gaff hooks, about six feet in length. "Ya could get 'em aboard pretty easy once ya got the knack. Well, the main thing was, as it landed on the boat, ya cut it across the back of the neck or chopped its tail off – make it bleed – they get ammoniated if they don't bleed pretty quick and that'll spoil 'em. Later on, we had to head 'em and gut 'em. Sometimes they'd want the fins off - it varied. We got a factory going here in Stanley - all the shark was processed in that."

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the Tasmanian crayfishing industry was gaining prominence, Des began to focus his energies on catching this delicacy along the rugged and isolated coastline of North West Tasmania. He acquired an anchorage at Temma Harbour, about 21 kilometres south of the mouth of Arthur River, and drove down there from Stanley to fish for a week or two at a time, "depending on the weather." After crossing the Arthur River by punt, Des still faced more challenges before he reached his anchorage. "Once ya'd crossed the Arthur River the bloody shovel would start to laugh – ya'd dig ya way in and dig ya way out, wet or dry. The sand was just as bad as the mud. Then when ya got to fishing, ya'd pull ya pots two or three times a day. As the years went by, ya'd slack off at this. Ya maybe only pull 'em twice a day." Des had, on average, 27 pots to "pull."

Des reiterates the fact that the weather was unpredictable and needed "to be watched - it was the main problem." He has had his fair share of "stormy days and nights" with the accompanying tumultuous seas. However, there is one morning, in particular, that he will never forget - "my brother, George, and his son was lost at Sandy Cape." It happened in 1972, when Des and his brother were crayfishing along this north-western coastline. On the previous evening "the weather changed and started to blow." George sought shelter at Sandy Cape and Des at Temma Harbour, about 20 kilometres apart. The following morning, "when it had quietened down a bit", the two brothers went to their different spots "to pull up our pots and get on out of there." Another fisherman, who had been anchored with George the previous evening, called George on his radio at seven o'clock. "He thought he heard a garbled something, but ya get a bit of that, especially in bad weather ... come eight o'clock, George still hadn't answered."

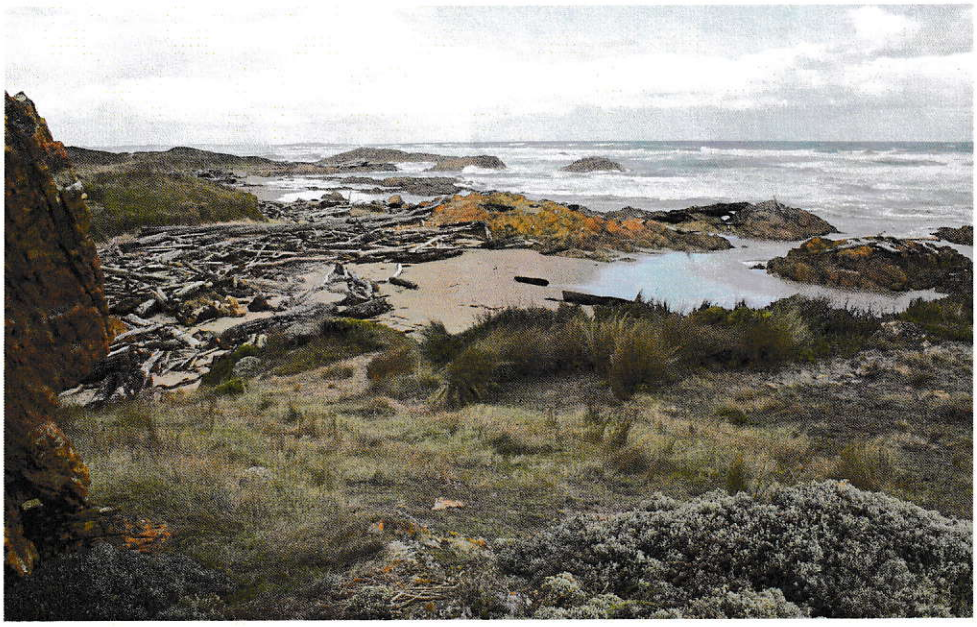
"... they could only see the bloody mast floating about in the water, wreckage up on the rocks everywhere - she'd smashed to pieces."

After receiving information from Des regarding the possible location of George's pots, this fisherman sent a few of his crew "walking up the hill at Sandy Cape to check things out." Tragically, down below "they could only see the bloody mast floating about in the water, wreckage up on the rocks everywhere – she'd smashed to pieces. I reckon they was killed, not drowned - I reckon the sea dropped on top of 'em." Arriving at the scene the next day, Des witnessed "waves crashing like an earthquake ... when they'd

break the whole bloody rock structure would shake and shudder ... that's how big a roll there was ... the force of the water ... God! Strewth! ... they found the son's body a week later, but they never found George." Des pauses before adding wistfully, "We've lost a few others too - my word we have - in them waters."

The section of the north-western coastline of Tasmania, where Des's brother and nephew lost their lives, is generally referred to as 'The Edge of the World'. It is rugged, unspoilt wilderness, bordered on the east by the world's greatest area of cool, temperate rainforests - The Tarkine - and by the turbulent waters of the Southern Ocean on the west. The next landfall across the ocean is Argentina - 15,000 kilometres away, across the longest stretch of ocean in the world. Along this coastline is where the winds - the Roaring Forties - howl and the waves pound the driftwood-littered shores. Ironically, some regard this metaphorical 'edge' as a place of mysticism and spiritualism and find a sense of inner peace amidst the powerful natural elements confronting them.

Des, a great-grandfather of three, has witnessed the changing economic and social environment of his picturesque corner of North West Tasmania. He might pause for a moment to lament that "no produce leaves the port of Stanley anymore ... there are not as many fishing boats here these days ... and a large percentage of the town's population is floating," but his sense of humour always underpins these nostalgic lapses. He values the friendships he has forged in his local community and emphasises the friendly atmosphere that permeates the social fabric of his small town. Today, Des's favourite pastime is "going to golf most days and meeting some of my mates down there." His parting words epitomise his ability to accept the inevitability of change: "It's a funny world, ya know. I use to look around not that long ago it seems, and say, 'I'll ask old so and so where I can find such and such.' But now I find that I'm the one getting asked such things cos I'm the old so and so around the place now – time's gone so quickly."



The rugged, driftwood-littered coastline near the mouth of Arthur River - 'The Edge of the World.'

At the mouth of the Arthur River
on the North West Coast of Tasmania,
a plaque has been attached to a large stone.
On this plaque Brian Inder's poem,
'The Edge of the World,'
has been engraved.

"I cast my pebble onto the shore of Eternity
To be washed by the Ocean of Time.
It has shape, form and substance.
It is me.
One day I will be no more
But my pebble will remain here
On the shore of Eternity
Mute witness for the aeons
That today I came and stood
At the edge of the world."