

Australians at War Film Archive

Bernard McGurgan - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:35 **Can you give us an introduction to your life so far?**

My name's Bernie McGurgan, I now live in Capalaba in Brisbane. And I was in the army for a period of say nearly 25 years. A bit of background to my being here, I guess I was born in Victoria on the 29th April 1944

01:00 at a place called Seymour, which happens to be next door to the large Puckapunyal army base. At about two years of age, my Mum and Dad, my Dad was a contractor working on earthmoving, they decided to buy a dairy farm at a place called Tatura, which is near Shepparton, about 90 acres there, 90 odd acres, and we moved to the dairy farm in 1946. Where I was, where I went through primary school and most of my secondary school.

01:30 My last couple of years in secondary school, I went to a school in Bendigo, Bendigo High School, and Marist Brothers College Bendigo. Back at Tatura, I went to the Catholic convent by the name of the Sacred Heart, primary and secondary school, they don't exist any more, unfortunately, but they were good schools in those days. About 1962, 1963 I left Bendigo and I joined the Victorian Forestry Commission. I became a clerk in the head office in Melbourne.

02:00 I joined the CMF [Citizens Military Forces - the Army Reserve] then in 1963, a unit called 91 Forestry Squadron, which was a CMF unit, or SR, actually, Supplementary Reserve and I did a couple of camps with them in 1963 and 1964 and got a bit of a taste for things army. Early 1965 I actually was in my 20th year, or 21st year coming up actually, and I applied for national service and they said "No you're too old." At 20 years of age,

02:30 turning 21 in April, so that was that. So instead I applied for Portsea, I happened to be in Sydney at the time, and I applied to Portsea, that's the officer cadet school at Portsea in Victoria, for training young officers over a 12 month period and I was accepted and in June '65 I boarded a train in Sydney, I think it was the Spirit of Progress, the, what's it called, I can't remember it now but anyhow it takes us down to Victoria we had to change lines at Albury/Wodonga, and we got down to Spencer Street [Station] and straight down to Portsea.

03:00 After 12 months I graduated second lieutenant to the engineers at that stage and started my army career. I served in various units, mainly in Brisbane, Townsville, Kapooka, Sydney basically all the eastern states of Australia, and attended lots of the big exercises. I forgot to mention my extraction,

03:30 I am mixed, mainly Irish extraction, with a bit of German thrown in, my mother's mother was an Irish lady and my mother's father was a German, second or third German, generation in Australia. My Dad's family are all Irish, all the way through and he came from a large family of six brothers and two sisters. And they are a big family around the place called Kurting [a railway siding], which is near Inglewood in north eastern, north western Victoria. So that is my

04:00 basic ethnic background. I went to Vietnam in 1970, 25th of March actually to be precise, and I went straight to a unit called the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam [AATTV], or more commonly known as the Team. Had a pretty hectic time there, I did seven months straight as a Battalion Senior Adviser, with a Republic of Vietnam battalion up in what's called I-Corps [pronounced EYE Corps], which is in the northern reaches of South Vietnam. Where there's

04:30 a lot of main force units, NVA [North Vietnamese Army] units and lots of contacts and large battle contacts all the time. My last five months I spent in, down the bottom in IV Corps right down the bottom you can't go much further. If you visualise Saigon, Vung Tau and Nui Dat, where the Australians were, we were south of there again, about another 140 kilometres, 150 kilometres And I was down there involved in training the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], regional forces and the popular forces, which is equivalent to our army reserve or CMF. The Delta's a very bad place and

05:00 it's got, it's covered in water most of the time, so it's very difficult to carry out military operations because there's water and noise etc, it's a bad place for that reason. Came home in 1971 March,

married my sweetheart from 1967 who also happened to be in the army. She was a captain of a nursing corps [RAANC] then and also served in Vietnam, we got married in December 1971. Went all around Australia on our postings together,

05:30 we had a son in 1976 at Ingleburn in Sydney, Michael John, he was born on 10 June 1976 and my last posting in the army was in Canberra, which is a place I really detest, however I was sent there by the army I couldn't do much about it. I don't like Canberra because it's too phoney and too plastic and full of public servants and a lot of other reasons, but that's basically why I don't like Canberra, oh yeah well the other fact I guess is I got married and I got divorced there, so come

06:00 December '85, my Leslie left me, and she got custody of our son and by 1987 I decided I'd had enough so I left the army went up north, in the hills just south of Cairns, south East of Cairns actually, there's a bit of an army enclave there, a few army officers retired there, so I joined in that sort of scenario. Stayed there for about two years, had enough of that, sold out, came back down to Melbourne, or not Melbourne, to Shepparton, and to Tatura.

06:30 Lived with my mother for a while then decided I better get involved in the workforce again so I applied for a public service job, of all things, ended up in the taxation office. In Brisbane of course so I worked there for 10 years, from 1990 to 2000. Decided I'd had enough and also I was having a few medical problems, few old problems catching up with me and the body was not getting any younger, so I retired from there in 2000.

07:00 And here I am in 2003, still in the same house, things are going well, lots of friends, I've settled down again, and things are looking good, that's basically it in a nutshell to date.

Fantastic, thank you very much. Before we get onto your service stuff, if I can take you right back to I guess growing up on the dairy farm with your brothers and sisters. Just talk to us a bit about what that life was like.

Okay, it was very good life, it was

07:30 probably in this day and age, probably not too healthy because of the amount of dairy products we were consuming. But Mum made, obviously we had milk, and we used to separate the milk from the cream in those days, so we had plenty of cream, Mum would make lots of ice cream, and we had lots of fresh milk. We had our own, we grew our own vegetables, we bred our own sheep for slaughter, and you know life was great, the milkman came once a day and delivered butter to us, from the butter factory, picked up the cream at the same time.

08:00 The local bakery in Tatura which was about three or four miles away, he'd deliver a loaf of bread once every couple of days at the front gates and somebody had to go down and we had two gates, a main gate and middle gate. It's about probably quarter of a mile long to the old farm house, the farm itself was very flat, we only milked a maximum of about 60 cows, that was all we could handle in those days and initially it was milking by hand, which was you know very slow and tedious and we eventually got an old motor and milking machines, which speeded things up but it was still a grind, every morning and every night you got to milk 60 cows.

08:30 And then separate the cream and clean everything up. We also had pigs we bred pigs, and the skimmed milk was ideal for that we used to pump it to the pig sties and the pigs would eat all that up. But life on the farm was great, lots of the town kids I went to school with used to come out and play with us, we had a lot of friends, played a lot of football and cricket, and cowboys and Indians, and that sort of stuff young boys go through. I'm the oldest of four in the family, my brother's about 18 months younger, my next sister is probably about two years younger than he and the other sister is about three years younger again

09:00 That's the family, Mum was a very good Catholic, she still is, she's now 85 and still going. In fact she's coming to see me very shortly and we used to go to mass every Sunday it was a big family occasion, you have to go to mass, 10 o'clock mass and I was an altar boy of course, had to serve behind the altar in those days and no women were allowed behind the altar, or behind the altar railings. Which is probably the way the Catholic Church should have stayed but however they changed and now women get to get in there and do their thing.

09:30 **And how did you find being an altar boy and having to go to mass every Sunday?**

No problems because the family went and we'd also get a treat going home, an ice cream from the local café you know. Yeah the old priest in those days was Father Scott who was an old Irishman himself and in those days we used to take the wine and water across at certain times so they could mix it in the chalice. And I'll never forget he always, when I went to put the water in, he always, wrong I put the wine in first, and he would always tip it up a bit more so he'd get a bit more wine and then when it came time to put the water in

10:00 he'd push me back so he had mainly red wine and very little water which was apparently better to his taste I guess, but he always did that. And yeah I guess another occasion I remember being confirmed by Bishop Stewart, it was a pretty important date, you get confirmed at about eight, or 13 years of age, I suppose, or 12 I think or whatever we were, and the Bishop from Bendigo, Bishop Stewart, he'd now dead, he came and confirmed us all and we all had our best suits on and the girls all had their whites on and little angels running around and all that sort of stuff, it's all it's all good gear, and you know religions'

10:30 religion I guess, but yeah they were good days, excellent days. We had lots of pets, horses, dogs, goats, you name it, a house sheep, which we never killed it was always there till it died sort of thing. And lots of birds we had WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, we had pigeons, we had guinea fowl, peahens, geese, duck, that's about it I guess. Pigeons were the best, my Dad raced pigeons, so we got involved with that at one stage, but pigeons are a bit fickle,

11:00 you put them in races, some of them come back some of them don't for various reasons. But yeah they were great days, good days.

And you had 90 acres too, so how did, were they, was there bush there to explore and stuff like that?

No, no it's fairly there's a lot of swamps in the area, because a lot of swamps are, the whole farm was bisected by a irrigation channel by about probably 20 foot wide and in parts six foot deep and the whole thing is irrigated from what's called the Waranga Basin which is a big

11:30 huge reservoir there which irrigates the whole Goulburn Valley area, so there was water in those days the whole year around, there was. So that bisected the farm and the rest of it's all flat there was an orchard there but that had all been cut down and Dad cultivated that, but there were plenty of, yeah there were bushlands along the verges, some of the canals or creeks, actually the channels themselves, so we had plenty of places to go, we used to go bird nesting, bird collecting, eggs and all of that sort of stuff.

Bird nesting, tell us about bird nesting?

Oh well we had a gang of probably about half a dozen my brother and I and the two boys across the road,

12:00 and two or three kids from in town and one was the official bird nester climber, he was a skinny little fellow, lightest of all of us and his job was to go up and get the eggs, put them in his mouth and come back down again but occasionally we'd make him laugh and he'd chomp of course and have bits of egg coming out of his mouth, but yeah, that was our sort of little gang and we had great fun. I guess it wasn't too, sort of we weren't aware those days of protecting nature, but I guess I mean there were lots of peewees, magpies and plovers and you name it, birds everywhere.

12:30 The birdlife was very heavy, water hen, water fowl, swamp area is the very best because you had about two foot of water you used to wander through you know and look for reed warblers, they're a bird that builds in the reeds, a little nest around two or three reeds, and they're beautiful little eggs and beautiful nests. The swamp hen, the swamp WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK hens, or the water hens, they lay big nests with about 14 or 15 eggs in it, which the hawks knock off if they can, and the crows. But yeah, there was birdlife everywhere, these days

13:00 I guess the swamps have been levelled and cleared and land built up and they use it for cultivation now, so that's all gone, but along the channels here there's still plenty of reed life and re growth and tree growth yeah.

And how did you split the chore of milking 60 cows every day?

Well, we all had various jobs to do, mine was to round them up most times, that was the easiest job, you didn't have to, I didn't have to go and physically milk or anything, get them into the cow bales. But we all had chores to do, even the girls got involved when they are a bit older.

13:30 But yeah, Mum did a lot of work, she was a very hard worker, Dad was okay but at the end he got on the booze too much and wasn't around at night time, and evenings we did all the milking but in the morning he was there. Yeah it was a chore but you got used to it. Dairy farming is dairy farming, but 52 weeks a year non stop, year in year out, gets to you after a while I guess, but the years they were good, very good, but the cows are very fickle, they get lots of diseases, you know they get mastitis in the tits and they get yellow eye,

14:00 I think it's yellow eye, green eye can't remember now one of those and things happen to them but now it's all controlled, all drugs, breeding's controlled you know with artificial insemination, in those days we used to just have a couple of large bulls running with the herd. But that had its problems too of course; if he escaped the paddocks and got to the next door neighbour's herds, well you know have to get him out pronto before he inseminated them.

He wouldn't have liked that too much.

No, well you know depending what they were breeding, we had a Friesian I think a Friesian bull, Tally Ho Thunder he was called, and he escaped

14:30 a couple of times and got stuck about the jersey cows next door but that wasn't very good, because they were two different breeds, I guess the local farmer wouldn't appreciate that at all. I guess if that had have been the same breed, they would have been alright, but no, you shouldn't interbreed, you know, Friesians, and Jersey and whatever. Yeah, a bit embarrassing, but they're hard to stop the old bull, very hard.

What sort of strife did you and the gang or other mates get into?

Well nothing very serious in those days, what, our favourite joke

- 15:00 was to get up above the railway line, the railway line was a quarter of a mile away, maybe half a mile to the west, and our grandfather who used to drive there occasionally used to toot the steam whistle as he drove past, and so we'd be all in a line there waving and carrying on. But we had, there was quite a lot of growth, the railway line has got a huge area on both sides, probably two or three chains which is oh I don't know, a chain is 22 yards, so 60 yards wide, and the line in the middle so there's plenty of grass trees and things growing, so we used to get up these trees and we'd wait until the train come and throw a few branches down. But apparently
- 15:30 one day we got a bit carried away and one of the big branches actually broke the glass on the driver's side of the steam engine pulling the carriages, and he reported it to the police of course, so we're mucking around with the railway still and the police came out, and we got into a bit of strife for that, but we just said "Oh it must have been accident, you know, we wouldn't do anything like that." And they let us off, with a bit of a kick in the pants and a stern warning, "Don't do it again." You know, and that was that. But other than that no we didn't get into much trouble, we were, you know, those days if you lived on a farm, you didn't get into that much trouble because you had
- 16:00 plenty of things to do. You had, we used to go rafting or swimming or chasing one another around the reeds and hide and seek, kick the bucket that sort of stuff, they were really good days, but these days, as you know, in cities, children haven't got that much to do, that's the problem, I think they're bored. We never had, in fact we never had power to the farm the whole time I was there. We had an old 12 volt battery radio which Mum used to listen to a show called "D-24" which was about the Victorian police force, 'only names and place names have been altered' and she wouldn't let us listen because it was all about women being raped and beaten up and murdered by these vile men and all of that sort of stuff.
- 16:30 So that was, we used to listen to the news at five o'clock, I used to listen if I could, at six o'clock if I had time, I'd listen to Tarzan that was the only show I listened to which was a good show. But yeah and you know we had a Silent Knight kerosene fridge, a wooden fire in the kitchen so we got by, two water tanks and we had a wood chip heater for the tank for the bathroom, so we were self sufficient. But power would have been nice; we had a telephone which was a modern contrivance I guess. It was one of those big box things with a little speaker in the middle and you
- 17:00 lift up the side bit and listen there and wind the side and talk into the central speaker, real old thing but it worked. Yeah.

And so what did you get up to at night time, I guess no electricity?

Sleeping probably, do our homework and have a meal, get the cows finished, have a meal, and then we'd do our homework, and then we'd go to bed. Up again the next morning about six at the latest and into it, and then winter down there it's very cold, very cold as you probably realised in Victoria, so we had to be well rugged up and it rains too, it's bitterly cold. So you know getting the cows in was probably unpleasant then, but not

- 17:30 so hard as milking the buggers in the cold I'll tell you.

And how did you get on personally with your mum and your dad?

Well, early on when I was grew up to about ten, Dad was never there, because always out contracting, he had horses and ploughs and big scoops and he used to get this huge dray, I'll never forget it, it had wheels about, you know, probably six feet high and he have four horses, maybe even six pulling that, draught horses, and two or three spares at the back

- 18:00 and he'd load all these goods and chattels on top of his ploughs and his scoops and all of this stuff, manhandle everything on top with a friend and away they'd go, he'd disappear with this other fellow, Nigger Morgan was his name, for about, oh you know, two or three weeks at a time, sometimes longer, sometimes shorter and back he'd come with all this money you see after he'd done a job. And that, and so Mum and I, or Mum and the kids, basically us kids and Mum maintained the farm while he was away. That sort of petered out when tractors came into vogue and more modern digging equipment and earth moving gear.
- 18:30 So then he was sort of was more at home at the farm, yeah. He developed a bad habit of drinking too much beer that was his problem, he was a heavy beer drinker and that didn't do him any good because he'd go into a hotel about midday and wouldn't come home until six or seven at night. If that, so you know, we'd end up doing the milking in the afternoon, but yeah, he was my old Dad, what can I say, he was one of the old school, drank too much beer, but he was a good worker when he had to yeah.

And how about discipline?

- 19:00 Yeah, yeah. Well we, you know, not only, if we did get into trouble with the police we'd also get a hiding from Dad, you know because regardless whether we were innocent or not, because the police came out and saw him, we'd be in deep trouble you know, we'd get a good kick up the bum or a box in the ears or belting you know, I didn't like that, so you know, you'd be very wary about getting caught doing anything, in those days. And especially if a policeman came out in his car, holy heck, you knew that was a serious offence, just paying a visit. Yeah.

And how about your mum, was she

19:30 **sort of stern at all or was she more a softer I guess?**

Oh she was a softie, yeah, she used to give us you know little treats, she used to make special things for us. She was a very fine cook, she used to cook, you know, everything. Cakes, used to, she used to make this ice cream out of milk in the fridge and the old Silent Knight kero fridge would freeze it. So it was like an icy pole a frozen ice cream, so we'd all get a bar of that every so often, that was great. But she was a very good cook, she cooked all the meat, all the vegetables, you know on the old fire, made a lot of cakes,

20:00 she even made her own bread at one stage but it was probably cheaper to buy it from the local bakery, but yeah, she provided us with excellent food, but as I said, we probably had too much dairy consumption which probably wasn't good for our arteries, which we now understand, but you know too late. The damage is probably done, when you're younger.

Oh I guess if you're younger and running around a lot you can cope with it a bit more.

Yeah, that's right, we were very active. You know we all played, or I played cricket for the under 14's, under 15's, under 18's, all that through school, played football.

20:30 It's a very, Tatura, to sort of put you in the picture is a very heavy Italian populated place, it's probably got about 8000 people, probably 4000 Italians and 4000 ex Irish descent or something like that, but because, the reason for that is that Dhurringile which was the local prison for POWs [prisoners of war], all the Italians in gaol there decided to stay in Australia and they married Australian girls and I went to school with all these sort of Italian/Australian children, they were all good people, you know my vintage

21:00 and they turned out to be fine Australians, but Saturday morning in Tatura is like being, I guess in down town Naples, somewhere, there's all these groups on the street blocking everyone you can't walk on the footpath you got to go on the street to walk to get past them, all chatting and carrying on you know, and they make it a big social occasion every Saturday morning, for some reason, I think it still happens actually, they all wander the hotels there on the streets, the wives, and the kids, you know, it's a sort of once a week get together in the main town. That's Tatura yeah, what were we talking about, on the farm yeah.

21:30 Mum, initially we had no car and Mum used to walk us all the way which took, in the pram and that took us quite a while, as we got older of course we had our own bikes or horse and we used to ride them in and Mum used to walk and then we got our first car which was, Dad got a car with a big running board, it was a Chevy [Chevrolet] actually, and it had those doors on the side, one opened forward and one to the rear so it was, opened the same, made a huge space you could get into, it was a nice old car but it was very ancient. And then the modern car we got was a 1952 Vanguard Spacemaster around 1958.

22:00 Which we had until I left home, it was a nice old car, four cylinder, British, had a very poor gear box but other than that it was a nice old car you know. Because money was scarce in those days we didn't have much money, and you know to get a car was a big deal. Yeah.

And you were at the Marist Brothers and Sacred Heart, were they tough schools?

Yeah, the nuns are very strict, very strict, you only have to muck up there once and I used to get a pepper, peppercorn twig, you know, quite thick, about as thick as your little finger,

22:30 peel the bark off it and whack you on the muscle on the leg, the same spot it really hurts you know, you got to stand, you aren't allowed to move, and they go whack, whack, whack and it really hurts. Or they'd box you on the ears hit you on the head with a ruler; you know they don't muck around and that was the discipline in schools in those days. And it worked you know, if you got caught mucking up you accept the strap or whatever you got. The Marist Brothers were worse, that's in Bendigo, because they used to use the big rulers and hit you on the knuckles, your knuckles would be up here, you know swollen, or they'd belt you in the head with a fist, no problems. Throw keys at you,

23:00 in the face, you know, or in this, at least in this day and age it wouldn't be allowed but I think we're sadly lacking it these days in some regard, yeah it worked.

How does a belt in the head differ from a box in the ears?

A box in the ears you can probably see coming but a belt in the head could be from the side and you wouldn't see it coming. Yeah, that's a basically a hit in the head, you know, that just happened. But I mean it got results and if you didn't learn,

23:30 the nuns would soon make you, if you were lazy at all in regards to learning anything, they'd keep you in and make you learn it you know. I had another reason for staying late sometimes, because I had a girlfriend at that stage, her name was Patricia McHugh she now lives in Rockhampton, Patricia McHugh, my first girlfriend and I was about 14 and she was about 14. Now about 14 the same age, that's right, but she used to have stay behind to do what they call, sewing and knitting and all the wifely type things for when you get married and I'd be in detention or something or whatever I had to learn something because I didn't understand it properly, so after that we'd knock off together from school

24:00 that is, and we'd walk home from school together and I'd take her home and then go on my way back to the farm, you know. This is about, you know, the latest about probably about five, school finished about three, so I'd get to home just in time for the milking etc. Yeah, but that was a good reason to stay behind

sometimes.

And how did you meet her in the first place?

At school, she used to sit behind me and her family and our family used to go to church together, or sort of, got to know her and then, oh the other thing that happened was, that we used to have to go to mass on good, on a First Friday every month, First Friday Mass,

- 24:30 well that was another logistic problem, because we had to finish the milking, get into town, go to mass in those days you couldn't have communion unless you'd fasted the night before, so we weren't allowed to eat before we went you see, so then we had to Doctor Lally's place, Jim Lally (Senior) was the town doctor he had about eight kids, eight children, we used to go there for breakfast, all of us. My brother and I, the girls were young at that stage and we'd have breakfast and then go to school. And Mum in the meantime would get the meals into us for lunch, you know our cut lunch or whatever, but that used to be a problem every first Friday of every month.
- 25:00 Not because, well I guess going to mass was okay, the problem was getting out breakfast and getting out meals delivered to us, that was the problem yeah. But yeah that just happened, and I think if you did I don't know, first Fridays of the month, you'd be rewarded with something, supposedly, I don't know that we ever were rewarded or whatever it's called and after ex number of first Fridays of every month and your prayers would be answered. But nothing ever happened, it was all in the mind I think.

And did your

- 25:30 **parents or Patricia's parents....?**

Yeah, they were friends, they used to come out at weekends and visit us they'd bring the whole family out or Patricia would come out on her bike and see me you know. But most of the family would come out we'd be all together, we'd have a bit of a luncheon together whatever you know, such as it was. And yeah, she'd come out and play with us, I'm talking about, you know, we weren't into sex or anything like that, just a little boyfriend and girlfriend thing and a couple of kisses here and there and a cuddle, that was about it, nothing serious. I'll never forget her, she was my first girl friend, I'm still friends with her, she's now married and living up in Rockhampton. Yeah,

- 26:00 after all this time.

That's very sweet.

She was a bit unlucky actually, she married a local boy and had three children and then he got killed in a car accident. So she was alone and single for about 10 years until she met her now husband, but she seems quite happy now, they've got a very good business going in Rockhampton and they're very happy. Yeah.

Fantastic, and in the local town was there a picture [movie] theatre or anything like that?

Yes there was but once again, used to be I don't

- 26:30 know one and six to get in, and money was scarce and we hardly ever went there. I, towards later years, I must have been 14 or 15, at this stage, I had another job of rounding up the neighbours cows on a horse, he had about 200 which was a huge job, it was real early in the morning, it was about five o'clock, I'd mainly do it during my school holidays, not during work, normal, when school was on but during my holidays I did, and they used to reward me by taking me to the pictures on a Friday night, in their modern Ford Customline and we'd have to go the back way because the main road was flooded occasionally,
- 27:00 And they'd take me to the pictures and shout me an ice cream or whatever and we'd see a movie. And I'd see a movie about once every you know couple of weeks, it was great because not many kids saw movies in those days, it was, except for town kids who could, who could afford it you know. Yeah. Tatura's, it's got three hotels, top, bottom and middle, obviously.

And it had those at that time?

Yes they're still there. It had one or two butcher shops, I think it's only got one now, it had about three cafes, I think there's still three there. And it's mainly, the people that still live there

- 27:30 are the people I went to school with, they're my age now of course, with grown up children, married children, and they're grandparents too, but they're all still there most of them I remember, we remember the kids we went to school with well, you know, if we don't we soon work out who we were or where we were. But yeah, even the state school kids I knew pretty well and there was, they were the opposition to the Catholic school. There was sort of the State school and the Catholic school and we used to play football occasionally against one another and you know the, we didn't like one another too well in those days because they were the Protestants and we were the Catholics you know.
- 28:00 The Catholic school was great, it was well set up, it was right opposite the church, the priest was there all the time, he used to come across and give us lessons. It was well organised. The Catholic school, they're well organised at indoctrinating children, yeah, that's the, thesis of all religions, the same with the Middle East, the same with Jews, the same in Israel, whatever, if you get the kids you got the next generation, there you go.

And you mentioned that, was it Puckapunyal that was nearby?

Yes, yes.

Did you know anything about that growing up?

No,

28:30 when I joined the CMF I was supplementary reserve, I went there for my first camp [recruit training] that's the first experience I had there. And the CMF people go to a certain area and the regulars another area, but Puckapunyal is a huge area, it's the, it was the biggest base in Victoria, the only big base in Victoria outside Melbourne and it was the home of the armoured regiment, which is all our tanks, our Centurion tanks. The home of the Transport Corps with is our Truck Corps and the home of the Catering Corps in my day, so we had three big schools there and there was a huge training area, so we could do exercises there with battalions

29:00 or when I went to OCS Portsea, we went there on field operations, field exercises. Puckapunyal, Broadford, all around Eastern Victoria there, yeah that's the first experience I had with it yeah.

And I mean you were fairly young when you joined the CMF to start with weren't you?

Yeah, I was, I would have been just on 20 I think or 19. One of those, I can't remember now, yeah but it was a brand new experience, and I thought this is good, you get a uniform a big, they issue those big studded boots, and gaiters, and you get a slouch hat and I thought

29:30 oh this looks pretty good and that's the reason I went I guess, and plus a few of my mates talked me into it, I actually went around Victoria a couple of times and was relieving on various forest office headquarters, and I got to meet some of the you know plant operators and the people that fight bushfires etc and they said, "we're going to join the CMF unit it's pretty good." And I said "Okay." And so we did. And we all joined together and I'm still friendly with two of them, but I haven't seen them for years, they live in Eastern Victoria around a place called NowaNowa, and they were foresters up there,

30:00 one was a dozer driver and one was a grader driver, operator. Yeah.

And what did you know if anything about warfare, or?

Nothing absolutely nothing. After joining the supplementary reserve I got a bit more interested especially the second year I was in there, I went to Sydney and I went to the School of Military Engineering [SME], and they put us through what's called Bailey Bridge building, which is a big British bridge, huge steel girders and sides and you can bridge a gap and run trucks and vehicles across it.

30:30 Well that was fairly impressive to me, well then we did demolitions, explosives and a bit of field engineering, digging holes and filling them in and constructing basic huts and things like that and it was all very interesting and I thought oh well, the army looks like it might be a good place to be. So I thought after that, I'll volunteer for the regular army, which I did and so I ended up in Portsea.

I'll just take you back to the CMF, I guess just your first days and your whole introduction to that, I mean how it worked and?

Right, well I didn't know a thing, so

31:00 we'd turn up at Puckapunyal and they put us through, you know, the basics of what soldiering is all about, how to clean our uniform, clean our boots, press our greens, bash the slouch hat, wear the badge, all the basics of being a good soldier which they do at a place called Kapooka, a recruit training establishment for regular soldiers, same thing only a much shorter period. Our camp was only about two or three weeks and we had to digest what they normally do, in my day, 12 weeks at Kapooka. So it was a quick rush program to train you as a basic soldier. And I got interested in that,

31:30 I saw, I had stuff coming in the mail from the army reserve unit, they sent me all of this information and I thought, oh well, might be a good thing to get into the regular army and go from there. I didn't have much of a clue really when I think back now, I was very naïve, you know, but you soon learn at Portsea. The Portsea course itself is very tough, you do 12 months there, intensive training, your day goes from about six o'clock through till ten every day, lots of physical activity. You certainly lose weight

32:00 and lots of study, you had to, to turn you out as a second lieutenant platoon commander, it's a pretty big step to get a bloke off civvy street [civilian life], straight in there and produce a second lieutenant in 12 months time able to command a platoon of 33 soldiers, that's what they do. And as I say it was very intense we did a hell of a lot of field work at places like Portsea itself in the hills there, the sand hills which is all a commonwealth owned area. About 90 hectares there or whatever that is in acres I can't remember. We'd go to Broadford, up in the hills

32:30 North East of Melbourne, we'd go to Puckapunyal and then back to the hills at Toolangi which is also north east of Melbourne and winter there is also bitterly cold, you know the lots of memories of that place, you know, on field training you, Portsea those days trained young cadets from the Philippines, New Guinea of course, New Zealand, Malaysia and Malaya in those days and of course Australia. So we had a variety of overseas students there

- 33:00 and I remember particularly one camp at Broadford, it started to snow, it snowed for three days, well all the Asian students had to be evacuated, they all got hypothermia. To a local hospital so the exercise was called off, and we lit these huge fires and warmed ourselves up and it was great, non tactical for about, I think it was about I think two days at the most, but we all got warm again and all the, we used to call them Noggies, all the Asians, it's a sort of generic name for Asians, Noggies, all the Noggies came back from hospital and everyone was happy again, and back into it.
- 33:30 It didn't snow again, but it was still bitterly cold, but yes, I'm still very friendly with, during my time in Portsea, Malaya separated from Singapore and some other place and became Malaysia, so I had friends, Noggie friends who were, no longer had an army to go back to, the Malayan Army did not exist any more, it was now called Malaysia. So some of them went to Singapore and some of them went to Malaysia. My father, at Portsea, you have a father- son relationship when you first go there, the senior class,
- 34:00 some bloke in there adopts you and looks after you the first couple of weeks so you get on the straight and narrow and my father happened to be a Malay who came from a place called Ipoh, which is a big tin mining area north west of Singapore, anyway, Anuar Bin Adam was his name, I'm still friends with him to this day, he's now a millionaire and he came out this year in fact and gave me a beautiful birthday present, a beautiful 800 dollar camera. All singing, all dancing, he's now
- 34:30 well he's, he used to be a ladies man in those days too, he's now happily ensconced with a 30 year old young lass from Melbourne, very attractive I might add too, but they live happily together up in Kuala Lumpah somewhere. And he's a millionaire so she's got the best of everything, she drives a Jaguar, she's got her own horse, a polo horse, she plays polo and she's from Toorak so she's obviously used to the better things in life, but he's done well, yeah. But the other fellow who was my classmate, whose name was Shariff Bin Abdul Garfu and he was also a Malay,
- 35:00 he stayed in the army until he made lieutenant colonel and then he retired and I have never heard of him since. Yeah, they were my two sort of Malay friends, Malaysian friends, but the rest of the crew at Portsea, all 60 of us, my best friend died last, or two years ago, lieutenant colonel Mike Kelly, a couple have been killed in accidents, back in Australia, one was killed in Vietnam by his own soldiers, well, should I mention his name or not, Bob Convery was his name,
- 35:30 in 1968, 1969 I think it was, and a couple of his soldiers didn't like him very well, and one in particular, obviously, and he was asleep in his tent at Nui Dat and in the tents you have these bunks and you have mosquito netting on top and you lie under the mosquito netting so it is all around you, so he just went over and lobbed a grenade onto the mosquito netting, which went down and sat around his groin area and then ran off. And of course the grenade went off, killed BobConvery, obviously, and that same bloke is now, he got, he got 15 years gaol I think
- 36:00 but he got out of gaol after about eight years and now he's walking the streets a free man. Manslaughter, you know manslaughter, anyhow, that was Bob, another fellow got killed, just after Portsea graduation, he'd just got married too, which is more of a shame. He was returning from a match, football match at Puckapunyal in which he played, and he fell out of a car, he had too many beers obviously, he fell out of his car and got run over by the car. He wasn't driving, he was the passenger, but he fell out and the bloke driving actually ran over him and killed him, that was a big sad too.
- 36:30 But, you know the, I guess the military life takes it's toll on the individuals, more so the officers because you moved around every two years, you know over a 25 year period, it's a lot of postings and wives and children get sick, or wives in particular get sick of moving all the time and it creates a lot of strain. I think I mentioned some figures in that book of mine, you know, that in my class of 60 graduates 17 were divorced, 20 or 30 or so still married and the rest living with girls, not married
- 37:00 whatever and the others dead. But you know, I know the toll because I've spoken to these blokes, we have reunions together and find out what's going on, and I've got a detailed list of what's happened to everybody, more so than what I would, you know, expect of someone who went to school and never joined the army, because you know exactly what's happened to your fellow officers, but yeah it's a pretty heavy toll. More so than what would have happened to a young bloke in civvy street [civilian life] in the 1960's you know.

And what were you doing actually Bernie, just before you joined Portsea, the regular army?

- 37:30 In Sydney? In Sydney yeah, I had a bit of trouble with a girl down there and left for various reasons, and, I won't mention that.

You don't have to tell any names.

Well alright, what happened, I got a girl pregnant, in Bendigo would you believe and I decided I better get out of the place, so I did, and I ended up in Sydney and there I joined the, would you believe the previous Australia Post which was called the PMG [Post Master General's Department] and I became a clerk there at a place called Villawood and I worked in an office there.

- 38:00 And what actually happened, I had applied to the Portsea the year before and they said "No, come back next year." So I applied in Sydney this time, so as a result, I was accepted, but I ended up with a regimental number starting with two, Victoria is three you see, but two is always better than three I

guess, so I didn't mind my New South Wales number. So that's how I joined I got to OCS Portsea [Officer Cadet School] yeah, I'd only been in Sydney probably about eight months when this happened.

And why did they knock you back the first time?

They said I was a bit young. Had the, had to mature a little bit,

38:30 that's what I gathered, but they, I wasn't told that, they just said "Reapply next year and everything should be okay." I said "Okay." I mean a colonel telling me to do that, okay I'll do it so being a good soldier I did. And got back in or got in the first time yeah.

We're going to have to pause there to switch tapes.

Tape 2

00:31 **Bernie, something occurred to me when you were talking to Chris [interviewer] about the animals on the farm, was there a time in Vietnam when some of the animals, local animals there reminded you of any animals in Australia?**

Probably the pigs only, although Vietnamese pigs are, shape wise a little bit different to Australian pigs, but, pigs in Vietnam, they transport them in these big bamboo sort of bird cages.

01:00 And they either put them on these bamboo poles, or they put them on little rickshaw things and motor around with them on the back, one pig either side, you know, it looks quite strange but, they truss them all up so they can't move. They're inside this little bamboo cage, yeah, you don't see many animals in Vietnam. No dogs because they eat them for a start, they love dog, all the Vietnamese I knew ate dog, up North.

Did you try any?

Yes unfortunately.

You didn't like it then?

No, hated it. I didn't know it was

01:30 dog until I was told, about half an hour later, you know. Yuck, but yeah we did, we captured a VC [Viet Cong] dog one time a little pup, little fat pup, he looked like he had a bit of German shepherd or something, but he was real fluffy, not very old, and he used to woof down all this rice, and I said casually one day, "Well what happened to that VC dog?" back on the regiment hill this is, in the regiment, and he said "Oh we ate him out there one time." I was oh alright, and that was the end of him. So you didn't see many dogs in the villages or the huts, or the little hamlets they're called hamlets or villages there also, depending on their size, what they're called,

02:00 but they're just sort of huts where the Vietnamese live, normally with a bunker underneath and normally on the side or at the back a buffalo pens for the buffalo because they're prized and the whole family, whole family could be you know 15 people in one or two little huts. And they're quite you know, most of the villages I went into, they had no, adults as such, they were all young people, young kids, like from about, two years of age up to about 15 at the most, 14, 13. And then old people and no people in between, so that meant that they were either local

02:30 VC and they were hiding underground or they'd been seconded by the local VC or NVA whatever, they were gone. So that was the big thing about the areas I was in, up north that is. So we never saw many you know adults as such that could work, the people working in the fields were all women, the women do most of the work. The men sit back and do a bit occasionally, whatever they do, you know, smoking their big cigars or cigarettes, or you know, drinking a bit of the local rice wine [Ba Si Day]. But yeah, the women are very hard workers; they actually have children in the field. Unbelievable, I actually saw a woman

03:00 squatting in the field having a baby and she was back at work probably two hours later. So that's the sort of stoic race they probably are, the Vietnamese have got a lot of stoicism about them, yes. Other animals, horses, the odd horse or two, they use them to tow carts you know, they use them in town to move stores or to move produce, buffalo of course, lots of buffalo, buffalo everywhere, because that's the stable plougher of the rice fields and giver of the harvest sort of thing, drag the harvest in.

03:30 What other animals, well there was a lot of bird life in the mountains, yes, there was lots of birds, and snakes. Down in the lowlands, no, buffalo only, no dogs, no cats, never saw a cat the whole time I was there, never saw a cat. But yeah, yeah no, the pig is the only animal I guess, that reminded me of home, yeah, but you have got to appreciate that the Vietnamese are a different race altogether and they're a bit of a dirty race at times. I mean you can be

04:00 anywhere in Vietnam and a woman or a man, if they want to go to the toilet, just squat down in the street and do it, all over the place, you know. So my, which I mention in my book, first impression I have of Vietnam was the noise, the humidity and the smell, and the smell's a result of all these open,

sewerage drains and toilets wherever you want and the high humidity and the vegetation rotting. It's a smelly place it is, it's quite scenic but it's very smelly. And, you know I laughed the other day, I saw someone recommend that

- 04:30 you could eat the vegetables from the Delta which is south of Saigon, I wouldn't eat them because they're grown in human excreta and lots of germs and diseases go through that way. And you probably end up with anything, even the water; the frozen water they get is full of bacteria. I'll never forget one other time, I was down south, one of the jobs I was doing and they had these little toilets above the impoundments or little dams, and they had a little jetty going out and a toilet on the end and you go and sit down over the hole there and do your business and you'd be sitting there and you'd hear this snap, snap. And it's these fish
- 05:00 jumping up to grab the, grab the remains you see and these same fish, they use them to make what's called Nuoc Mam sauce, which is, which is Vietnamese sauce. They get these fish, crush them in these vats and run percolated water through them and that makes this bitter Vietnamese sauce which is used on all meals, so, it's really smelly stuff, but it's really strong, so it takes the taste of everything away. You don't know what you're eating, you could be eating snails, dog, eel, snake, meat, meat from somewhere else, I will admit their fresh seafood is good, excellent.
- 05:30 Their mud crab, they make beautiful mud crab meals, and fish meals and they love eel, they love eel up north, eel is going out of fashion, eels okay to a degree and snake, they eat snake too, they eat, anything that moves, they have a lot of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s [fowls] over there yeah, and ducks. The local villagers, all little boys, about you know 13 or 14, they've got these long bamboo poles, a little bit of a string on the end of it, and they round up and they herd up the ducks like they're a herd of cattle and they push them this way and push them that way and chase them that way and chase them away keep them altogether. That's their sole job, but when they kill a duck for instance, they use every bit of it,
- 06:00 they bleed it initially, on the neck, cut its neck and it just dies from loss of blood. And they collect the blood, then they use every part of the duck, the beak, the neck, the legs, everything is cooked up, except the feathers, and the blood which is used in later on meals, they make this, I don't know what it's called, I don't remember now, it's too long ago, but they make this dessert type thing with this congealed blood on top with rice on it and it's a, it looks okay but it's not very appetising I can tell you, I don't think you would like eating blood.
- 06:30 And the other thing they have, is they put these eggs away, WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK and duck eggs. They take the egg and bury it in the ground, I don't know how many, and it's, and it's nearly a hatched egg, so after about 30 or 60 or 90 days, I think they call them 90 day eggs or something, after about 90 days or something they take them out and eat it. And you know, imagine what that must taste like, yuck.

I was really hungry before, but now I've completely lost my appetite.

The funny thing about that though,

- 07:00 in my battalion up north, we had, we had our normal three or four, three rifle companies and the headquarters company and we had another company called the prisoner company which was all Vietnamese, they're all Vietnamese of course and the prisoner company consisted of all the bad buggers in the battalion that had done something wrong and they were being punished, and they carried no weapons whatsoever. But they carried all the livestock, WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, pigs, ducks, and whatever else the CO [Commanding Officer] ordered all the bags of rice from America on operations, so going through the bush it sounded like old Macdonald's farm coming up you know, so you'd make sure they were well back otherwise,
- 07:30 because the noise factor was poor tactics, you know, give you away immediately. So, they used to fall back with the rear rifle company usually, well behind us, so we couldn't hear them, because they were a dead give away but that was their job and they couldn't do anything, if they tried to run they had no weapon, they'd be shot, so they had to serve their time and to get back in the battalion as a private, Binh Si is a private or enlisted man over there. And that was their punishment for you know, six months, six weeks, or whatever, as given by the battalion commander, who was God.

Did you lose any men because of the noise they made?

Probably not because they were too far back but, you know, once the battle started, once a contact starts, they probably can come up,

- 08:00 but you know going through jungle they're a dead give away. Because you can hear quack, quack, and you know chicken noises and oinks from the pigs occasionally. So, yeah, you've got that problem, but you solved that by putting them with the rear rifle company but they didn't like it either, because they'd give their position, away you know. Yeah, but we had a strong CO and as battalion commander he had a life or death command of his soldiers you know, that was the crux of the matter, he was God, whatever he said went. Regardless and he was a captain like I was. And he had you know anything up to
- 08:30 800 soldiers under his command and he was a North Vietnamese, he was a North Vietnamese Catholic my battalion commander. You might remember, Dien Bien Phu in I think it was 1954 actually. When the French got done, about 90,000 no, there were a hundred thousand Catholics, who fled from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, he was one of those. Dai Uy Thanh, very nice fellow, spoke fluent French,

passable English and

09:00 obviously Vietnamese with a northern accent and his RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major], who was actually, originally, a Viet Minh [independence fighters for Vietnam against the French]

RSM?

Regimental Sergeant Major of the battalion, was actually a North Vietnamese, a Viet Minh who fought the French at Dien Bien Phu, and he changed sides. And he was a really old, wizened soldier, you know been in the army, you know, been in various armies for 30 years plus and he was his trusted RSM, so, you know, but he was bad news on operations, because everywhere he went, he always got wounded, so no one liked to be around him, and when in contact, big contacts with the enemy,

09:30 because if you were there you would probably get wounded with him.

Because they wanted to get him?

Well because he sort of drew the enemy fire for some reason, I don't know why. But wherever he was, he always got wounded, with a grenade, or shot in the bum, you know grazing wound, or blown up with, nearly blown up with a mine, or you know, all the shrapnel wounds all the time. It was uncanny, on most operations he got wounded not seriously obviously but most operations he got wounded and had to be taken out, you know.

I thought you meant that because you know the enemy would...

No, no.

Consider that a prize.

10:00 No, what it did though, it meant that our soldiers wouldn't go near him, as soon as a contact establishes itself they all clear out from the RSM, because they knew that if somehow they were near him they might get wounded too, so they didn't like being near him, which wasn't very good. It wasn't good being the RSM, because he's supposed to look after the soldiers you know.

I'm looking forward to getting into that with you, I just wanted to bring you back to your early days on the farm, did you learn now to use a rifle?

Yes.

Before, like when you were a kid?

Yeah. Dad had a shotgun, double barrel shotgun, beautiful old shotgun, and a rifle, and we used to go shooting,

10:30 you know duck mainly, we used to sneak around the waterways and knock off the odd duck and bring it back they were good eating. And the rifle we'd shot rabbits with, we had rabbits all over the place, and at that stage we didn't have ferrets, we had these big farm tom cats, so they used to hunt rabbits, we had pet cats on the farm and they were real big tom cats, they'd actually stalk rabbits, the rabbits used to burrow into the banks of the channels, quite near the house actually, the farm house. And one cat would get out in the open so the rabbits could see him and the other fellow would be above the rabbit warren up above the hole entrance and as soon as one of the rabbits come out too far,

11:00 he'd pounce on him, it was uncanny. This when I was about 12 I suppose, about 10, these two cats used to love rabbit, and we used to catch them of course, with rabbit traps. Chase them with dogs, we had a lot of hares around too, lot of hares there too, because Tatura, believe it or not, was the last of the live courses in Australia, using live hares for greyhound racing. That would have been about I think, they stopped about the mid '60's, I don't know but this was back in the '50's,

11:30 late '50's, mid '50's and they had a huge paddock there full of hares and of course some of them used to escape and breed. And the sick ones they'd let go anyhow and they wouldn't use them in the racing, they only use the top hare that could run so the greyhounds wouldn't catch it, but as a result the whole area was inundated with hares. Night time there was hares everywhere, so the dogs, if they're lucky catch them, whippets can catch them but the normal sheep dog has trouble because they're too slow and the hare can run really fast, but the greyhound or whippet yeah they'll catch them, so we used to catch the odd hare or two

12:00 but never tried out, you know juggled hare or anything, never ate them, because they were sort of a gamey type animal compared to a rabbit. I've eaten plenty of rabbit, but not hare.

So do you think learning how to use a gun such an early age helped you when you first signed up?

I was always a reasonable shot yeah. I guess, you know, comparing a .22 or a shotgun to our SLR [Self Loading Rifle], .303 initially, and then SLR, there's not much comparison, I mean they're two totally different weapons, but yeah, it gives you the basics,

12:30 but, to learn to become a good shot with a 303 and an SLR, in particular and an M-16, takes lots of practice and range shoots, you know. Different sights and different weapons of course, much different weapons. I mean I still remember the SLR itself it has a 20 round magazine 2700 feet per second

velocity, and the M-16 is 3200 feet per second velocity so they're high velocity weapons as compared to a shotgun which is very slow and a .22 rifle which is also very slow, so these are high projectile weapons with

13:00 heavier rounds.

But even if they were slow, they could still get a rabbit.

Oh yeah, yeah. I mean they're fast enough to kill a rabbit, but I mean, compared to the SLR and the M-16, they have a very slow velocity, you can't see them still, but I mean they're not half the velocity of these military type weapons, that makes them more dangerous of course, because they're bigger, a bigger lead piece, lead round, at higher velocity, does more damage as simple as that. I think it's all based on you know, kinetic energy is half the mass

13:30 by velocity squared, that's the impact so there you go.

That's beyond me that stuff.

Oh okay.

No, no, I get what you're saying, just mathematically I'm a bit challenged. But I was a bit curious to know, they put you in the engineers, were you interested in engineering as a kid or model aeroplanes or trains or anything like that?

Yes I was. But all I had was model aeroplanes basically. The only reason I went to engineers in the CMF was because the unit was

14:00 fostered by the forestry commission, fostered this 91 Forestry Squadron, so that's where I went and then I had this, when you're going through Portsea, you have a guidance officer, Captain Bricknell who was a bit of a lad, a boy actually, and he sort of coerced me into nominating engineers when I graduated. I wasn't going to but he said since I had engineer experience I should stay there. Which I did, but as you know I transferred corps four years later, went to the infantry which is, it is the only real corps in the military and that was the infantry, every other corps supports it.

14:30 Although other corps mightn't like it, but that's the sort of, that's the way things were, infantry is the basic soldiering, and you've got to have infantry on the ground to take ground. That's their job, you can't win a war without taking ground and the infantry does that, that's their job.

Wouldn't that also mean, correct me if I'm wrong, that you then putting yourself more in the firing line?

Yeah, yeah.

Why would you do that?

Well basic soldiering is all about the infantry, that's the infantry, I mean you can hide in a tank, you could, you can't these days, because they get blown up,

15:00 or you can be back firing artillery shells from behind, it used to be the front line. But in infantry you have got to be out there, the only protection you have got is a hole in the ground and a weapon pit or a bunker, that's the basic you know, soldiering, that's what it's all about. And as I said before, you know the artillery supports you with artillery fire, the tanks give you shock impact if you want them for attack, the signals provide you with communications, they all support the infantry and the infantry is the basic unit that the whole Australian army is designed

15:30 around basically. Even though in my days in Vietnam, from my days in Vietnam, we had nine different battalions, we've now got six, thanks to Gough Whitlam [former Prime Minister of Australia], he got rid of three, and those six are severely under strength too, I might add. I mean in my day there used to be 792 men in a battalion, we're probably down to five or six hundred men now. So that's the difference, and I mean when you, when you compare Australia these days, sitting here on this continent, with six infantry battalions, Indonesia's probably got

16:00 600 if not 1000 infantry battalions.

So you think Indonesia's a big threat?

Yes. Eventually yeah. Things will happen in Papua New Guinea one day, they've already taken Irian Jaya which is West New Guinea, there's a fragile border there, New Guinea's got big oil and natural resources gold, in fact in Bougainville. Indonesia one day is going to want that. And that's their whole intent, to spread throughout the archipelago they reckon that's the Indonesian Archipelago, so sure things will happen.

16:30 Thankfully they haven't got very big air forces or navies, but that's not quite true these days, they're getting stronger all the time.

You're not the first person to tell us that about Indonesia actually and if you don't mind can we talk about that later, because I'd like to hear your opinion. I'm just wanting to know, when you first went on the officer training, was there any form of snobbiness going on there?

No, no.

So it wasn't like Duntroon [Royal Military College] where it's sort of got this....?

No, no. In fact we used to get Duntroon backsquadders, the ones that couldn't

17:00 graduate because of academic reasons, they used to come down to Portsea and graduate with us, they'd do six months with us and actually graduate. So we actually had all RMC less quality students, they'd come down and go to Portsea, Portsea was a mixture of people straight off the street, people from army reserve service or CMF. People from regular army battalions and units with ranks of corporal and sergeant who wanted to become commissioned, and I mentioned people off the street like myself, or part time CMF, you know. We had that you know,

17:30 so we had, you know, that mixed mass of people with varying military experience. And it was up to you to do your best and achieve what you had to achieve. I mean a lot of people missed out, a lot of people got sacked, we had three cadets sacked three days before graduation. And I'll tell you, John Hunter, became the RSM of the armoured corps, the Regimental Sergeant Major of the armoured corps, and had a brilliant military service, military record. Did very well, made highest non commissioned rank and went to Vietnam twice. John Kerr,

18:00 who was also kicked out three days before graduation, he became a senior Commonwealth public servant in Canberra and in fact he looked after our superannuation, DFRDB [Defence Force Retirement and Death Benefits], which I want to talk about later, yeah. And our super system, we have a separate system to the public service, which we've still got. And the third bloke who was an Englishman David Hatcher, he was about to get married and got the sack from Portsea and I have never heard of him since. So the three of them, that's the last three that got the big boot during my time at OCS.

Well that's interesting

18:30 **that two of them actually went onto have quite successful careers.**

Yes, yes, well supposedly, you know, the selection process is very hard, you have to be in the top 20 I think it is, percent, what's the word, you know people haven't got a certain amount of knowledge, and, what's the test they do?

Percentile, oh no um.

What the hell's the word?

IQ [Intelligence Quotient]?

IQ test yeah, so the 20 percent, Portsea entrants are supposed to be in the top 20% of the youth I

19:00 **of that era, of that vintage, so maybe there's something in that. So yeah, Duntroon the equivalent, to get in there you need good secondary school results otherwise you don't make it. There was a lot of rivalry between Duntroon and Portsea, of course there is. It took Portsea graduate officers until about 1970, the late '70's I think, maybe mid '70's, and bloke called General McLaughlin was the first one to make major general from Portsea, up until the it was all Duntroon people they were all God's gifts to the army and they progressed much quicker through the commissioned ranks, much quicker than Portsea graduates.**

19:30 **Even though, the Portsea graduate had probably been in the army, actually working with troops, three years before his equivalent Duntroon counterpart got out. There you go you see, they were the favoured ones.**

I had heard about money being your way into Duntroon.

Oh I don't know about money but you needed to have, you needed to have good academic results, prior to that, you had to come from a good family background, yeah, see you go in there at 17, and you come out at probably 20, 21. Whereas Portsea, you go in at 17

20:00 or go in till up to about 25, and do the same thing in a year, that's the difference. More mature people came from Portsea, they were boys too, some of them were real lads, you know very immature, and some of them made senior officers I might add.

What's that, there's no accounting for taste, no that's not.

True, but that, I've got a very good friend, General John Hartley, I can't think of his name now, Hartley, who happened to do, he did the foreword to my book on Vietnam.

20:30 And he, he's a Duntroon graduate, he was badly wounded in Vietnam with the Team and he's a very fine officer, I can't say the same of some of his contemporaries, about the same time, but there you go. They were all Duntroon of course. But now, Portsea blokes are making their name and they're making equivalent ranks as the Duntroon bloke so there's no distinction, Duntroon is still in existence, so there's ADFA which is the Australian Defence Force Academy, which trains the army, navy and the air force. That's a three to four year course again,

21:00 whereas, Duntroon now is only 18 months, Portsea has been disbanded would you believe, they ceased

in 1987. Portsea was originally established in 1952 to train officers that Duntroon couldn't produce because they were too slow, so when Vietnam come up, we had to, Portsea had to actually increase it's output so they had enough officers to send to Vietnam. Basically it went from 1952 to 1987, it's now been, now been demobilised, I suppose is the word,

21:30 or taken off the order of battle, and, only two training facilities ADFA, and the RMC [Royal Military College] Duntroon remain. And Portsea in the mean time, the State of Victoria was trying to get it and redevelop it, because it's a very historic area, it's used to be the old quarantine station, when the ships came into Melbourne, and had diseased people on board they'd pull into there, and they have to go through all of this decontamination and healing of all their pox or whatever they had, illnesses, so it was a quarantine station that people stayed in until they got better.

22:00 Lots died there, and were buried there and the Portsea officer cadet school was built around that. The buildings there are very historic, really old three storey buildings, beautiful sand rock buildings, and plus the training area, it's a beautiful area. And I see now it's going to remain that way and the state government is going to put some sort of university facility in there, use the buildings, and the land will still be kept free for people to wander, you know, I wouldn't go wandering too far because there's lots of demolition ranges and, and field firing ranges out there and there might be a bad accident

22:30 there one day someone blown up but yeah, that's what's happened to it. As an aside, but yeah, so Portsea officers are now making good in the army, very good.

Can I ask you, how was your reaction to the discipline when you first got in there?

Didn't like it but you had to change, lots of young blokes didn't like it you know, but you had to change. We had, in actual fact, two regular army soldiers who got jack of it, McFarlane and McNamee,

23:00 McFarlane and McNamee I think it was, yeah and about three or four weeks maybe five weeks into the course, they just upped stakes and disappeared, went AWOL [Absent Without Leave], haven't seen them since, they came from regular battalions and they didn't like Portsea, so maybe it was a little bit harder, or a little bit stricter than the battalions had at the time. So, yeah, it was strict, very strict.

Can you give us a day in the life of the Portsea training?

Yes. Six o'clock is reveille, you get up, you can't get up before, otherwise you get into trouble.

23:30 All go down and shower and shave and get ready for the first parade, or for breakfast actually. Seven o'clock till about seven thirty or seven 15 is for breakfast, you all storm into the mess hall, and you're all being trained to be officers so you got to do it all, you know, in a genteel way and use your knives and forks and spoons the properly etc, etc.

Sorry can you this is just for the benefit of the archive, can you explain being genteel, what does that mean?

Well they put you through training how to use a knife and fork can you believe, I mean some of the blokes probably needed it, maybe some did maybe some didn't, but

24:00 they bring in these young ladies, or not young ladies, or mature ladies from around the area to teach you how to use a knife and a fork and a spoon and how to lay the tables, that's all part of it, and they teach you how to dance they teach you that, or some people say dance but you know. And we had what's called the Dragon Squad, they used to come every Friday night and we'd have dancing with them and carrying on, you know.

Why were they called the Dragon Squad?

Oh because most of them were pretty ugly. But some of them weren't and actually some of my fellow cadets married

24:30 some of them you know, so I guess the ones they married were okay but we used to call them the Dragon Squad for want of a better reason. So breakfast would be hurried up, you had to get your room inspection order by about seven 30, quarter to eight is your parade. I'm probably a bit out there, probably about half past seven you parade and first class is probably by about quarter to eight. And that could be PT [Physical Training], it could be into a classroom, it could be anything and you had, you had what's called a duty student who marched the platoon,

25:00 from where we lived in the accommodation to the first lecture whatever it was, in one of the halls or one of the field education areas whatever, and we double timed everywhere, you had to double, you had to run everywhere, so in a formed group, platoon of about 30, double time down to the next, you know where you had to be and he'd hand over to the officer in charge, reporting that, "There's 30 cadets present, one at the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], all accounted for Sir." And this goes on every time you change locations, throughout

25:30 the day, so you stop for morning tea, probably 10:30 to a quarter to 11, lunch would be probably from 12 to one, somewhere in there, you got a bit of a break there and then it'd go on into the afternoon till about 4:30. Then if you'd been a bad bugger, you had what's called CB [confined to barracks], and ED parades, Extra Drill Parades. Extra Drill Parades meant you'd done something wrong you'd been charged by one of your fellow cadets for doing something wrong and you were, you were a slacko and you were being punished for it.

26:00 And that normal parade used to occur before breakfast, between six thirty and quarter to seven, somewhere in there, you have to parade down the parade ground and under the control of a cadet and be put through a bit of a drill, in certain dress uniform and then belt back upstairs, back to your accommodation block and change back into the dress of what ever the day was. So it just inconveniences you for that 15 minutes, but you lost that, to get your room spick and span and make sure it was and made sure it was right. Sport was good, you had plenty of sport there, I played sport for the OCS 11. [Cricket Team]

26:30 First 11, did alright there for a while there.

What did you play Bernie?

Cricket, and we played against Melbourne teams and I won a couple of trophies. The first game I played, I made 69 not out and I took three wickets, so a bloke by the name of Spook McPherson, a captain, or might have been a major I can't remember now, artillery corps. Spook was a bit of you know, artillery are always sort of the, I suppose the poofter [homosexual] officer class of the army you know, not that they really are, but they act that way. So,

27:00 he took me under his arm, took me under his wing at least, and was coaching me you see, so after I made this 69 and three or four wickets the week before, I went out two weeks later, bowled first ball and only got one wicket. So, that was the end of my illustrious cricket career with him, but yeah, I kept on playing. The army's mad on rugby union, and I'd never heard of rugby union, being a Victorian born and bred. I never even knew it existed, so my one and only game of rugby union was, I was out there, I think I was in the second row or, yeah, second row or something and the pack

27:30 went down and the other pack came over us and we were in a big scrum there and I was being beaten by my side and the other side, I thought this is no bloody good, so I tried to stay at the back, yeah so that was my only experience of rugby union I didn't like it at all. If you understood the rules I guess you were right, but I never understood the rules, although lots of my friends, Wally Harris in fact, he was an Australian under 18 Wallaby [Australian Rugby Team] test rep [representative], he went touring with the Wallabies, he was very good, , but Wally this day is in very bad shape because his knees are gone and his hips are gone, all because of, probably football and the army, on top of it,

28:00 has ruined his both his knee joints.

I think union started in Sydney as a boys college sport didn't it or something like that?

Yes I think so but it was very strong in the army, the army rugby union side was very strong, very good. And in fact the touring teams in those days used to actually practice against the army, or sorry the service side, which had the army, navy and air force representatives and they were good sides. We had some, the army had some actual Wallaby reps, Brown, I remember well from the 5/7th RAR [5/7th battalion], he made the Wallaby side on the wing, young Brown, he's one

28:30 I can mention and I think there was a bloke up north I can't remember his name but he made the Wallaby side too so there were some good players, very good players.

What about Aussie Rules then since you were a fan?

Yep you play Aussie Rules too but it's only a minor sport, it was then, so you know, and the problem was at Portsea, if you go on field exercises, you're away for three weeks or two weeks, so you miss that weekend, unless you're exceptionally good, and played rugby union didn't go back so they actually call those people out of the bush and they'd go and play, but the Aussie rules, no, they can stay out there, were not allowed to go, so it was a bit of discrimination that way, yeah.

29:00 **How long were you in the army until you started going away on bivouacs, is that what they're called?**

Oh well training.

On three weeks away?

Well my first unit I went to 24th Construction Squadron which is here at Enoggera out in the western suburbs of Brisbane, and that's a construction squadron which basically builds roads and air strips, and buildings, and we went away just about immediately on an exercise called Barra Winga.

29:30 I graduated in June went straight to this unit, the exercise was late '66 was held at Shoalwater Bay Training Area, which is north of Rockhampton, huge area there we have got for training and we had battalions, we had armoured, we had Centurion tanks there, was a huge exercise in those days, 20,000 troops, British troops, American troops, Australian troops, everybody, so it was very impressive. And it was dusty as all bugger, it was as hot as hell, you know, so it was pretty uncomfortable but I'd run into a few blokes I'd graduated with it was great you know. We'd get a bit of leave in Rockhampton occasionally, and one night I think it was,

30:00 maybe two nights, yeah and it was my first experience of a big exercise, and it was, I was pretty impressed, it was huge. The biggest, it was the biggest military exercise up until that time, after the Second World War would you believe, 1966 Barra Winga.

Actually, that brings up an interesting point, that was the last question about your past that I didn't ask you, did you have any relatives or know of anyone in the family or relations that went to the Second World War?

Yeah. I had, my, now names, Uncle John, Jack, Jack McGurgan, sorry,

30:30 Uncle Jack was army, Second World War, New Guinea, he died very young, I think he got badly wounded up there but he, I never knew him that well, he died, they lived in Melbourne and we were at Shepparton so Uncle Jack was in the army, I found his record actually on the new website for World War II veterans from the Australian War Memorial. And the other fellow was Uncle Sid, he was air force, he did two years in the air force during the war, he never got hurt though, I think he was more a base wallah, you know in a base area somewhere.

31:00 Although he was a pilot but I don't know exactly what he did. But he came back okay, so that's really the only two connected with the army, or the army and the air force and before that, oh yes I do know something. I happen to be digging through the internet one night and I went to the Boer War Contingent in 1889, I think it was 1889, from Melbourne, number two contingent, went to the Boer War in Africa and in there was 2389 Corporal J. McGurgan.

31:30 Who happened to be my great, great, great grandfather I think who went to the Boer War, who came back, obviously otherwise I wouldn't be here, but yeah that's interesting I found him.

It really is.

Yes, yes. I'm doing a big of a genealogy study right now, but it's a bit confusing, the McGurgans arrived either a), as a convict aboard one of the first troop ships that came out, or b) as one of the British soldiers with that contingent. I'd much prefer to think it was one of the soldiers, but anyhow I don't really know.

32:00 **It doesn't really matter now anyway.**

That's right, true.

So can you tell us what made you think, did you think at all that you'd end up going to war when you signed up?

No, no, I had no idea, I liked the aspect of the army the fact that it was a nice uniform and I thought, you know, well you know, probably lots of girls like young blokes in uniform. That was my, that was one of my ulterior motives, but I liked the

32:30 aspect of you know being in the army and being a man's man, and going out in the field and training and doing this and that, you know. And it was a regular job, even though regular jobs were plentiful in those days I mean, when I left school, jobs were unlimited, you could start work on week and if you didn't like it, go to another job. And there was no problems, you could do that. And I thought well the army, I might give it a go, it's good pay, I actually earned my first year in the army 32 dollars a week I think, they changed over would you believe in, half way through the OCS course there, it was originally about

33:00 16 pound and then it went to about 35 dollars a week, which was good money, because you could fill the car up, I had a little car then, I bought a car eventually, you could fill the car for about five dollars, or the equivalent.

What year was that?

'65. '66 in there. And you know I think a beer was about 10 cents or 15 cents, I can't remember now, it's so long ago, but yeah much, compared to now, it was because you only earned 32 a week, it might have been 32 a fortnight actually, I can't remember now. One or the other, so

33:30 32 dollars, where would 32 dollars go these days? You wouldn't get anywhere. I mean a carton of beer is 24, 25, a meal would cost you more than that, so you know I guess it was a long while ago. You know it's 39 years ago now, or more, so you know.

So when you sent, so when you got sent to go up with the construction squadron, were you aware there of what was going on in Vietnam?

Yes. We'd been told

34:00 the first advisers went there in '62, and the army puts out a newspaper every payday, every fortnight, which is very informative, so I knew the Training Team existed and by then we'd sent our first battalions over there in '65, '66. I think it was '65 the first battalion went, 1 RAR [1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment], yeah, anyhow they were there, so by '66 we had three battalions over there, nearly three battalions over there and the Training Team had been there forever sort of thing, from '62 onwards, so I knew we were involved and I knew Phuoc Tuy Province and I knew where the Australians were, I knew

34:30 the Training Team were scattered throughout Vietnam, but I didn't know what they did, but I knew they had casualties because they had people killed by then, so I knew that, and in the army newspaper it would be put down, so and so was killed in action, so and so and you'd read all that. But you were fairly

blasé, but you say “Okay but it could never happen to me.” You know you didn’t worry about it and I guess the feeling remained that until I officially, I actually volunteered in the end for Vietnam and was actually told in 1969 I’ll be off there, see so that was my, well I needed to go because I needed the experience as a young officer you want to get the experience to help promotion etc.

35:00 **Did you have an interest though in doing the training, or did you just want to get over there? I mean teaching the training, teaching?**

What do you mean by training, back here?

No, back over there in Vietnam?

No, well I sort of tried to explain it before, the Training Team, the use of the word training is the wrong word. You’re an advisor.

An advisor?

Yeah.

Did you have any wish to be advising over there?

Yeah, I thought I had something to give, I didn’t care as long as I went to Vietnam in fact that was basically it, so by hell or high water, you wanted to get there,

35:30 I didn’t expect to go to the Training Team, but next thing I knew I was doing all these courses and away I went. So that was, you know, all in a matter of three months I was away, gone. But yeah I thought I had something to give, all my mates were going into the battalions, and they were having a hard time, you know people being wounded and lots of things happening. And, I thought well I’ve give this Training Team a go, or I had no choice I was told I was going so I said “Okay great.” But I didn’t know what to expect of course, except that I knew they had a fairly high attrition rate and people getting wounded and killed and, it was probably a hairy job which it was yeah.

36:00 And getting back to the name of the Training Team, that was probably a third priority, the first priority was, in a lot of cases, our advisors were actually combat commanders in Special Forces, and Mike Force and Special Forces in I Corps and II Corps they actually commanded companies of either Montagnards, or Vietnamese in Special Forces, Strike Forces. And the second job was as an advisor to a battalion, all battalions of the Vietnamese army [ARVN]. So as a captain, you’d go and

36:30 advise the CO which is a one hell of a responsibility because he’s got 400, 600, 800 soldiers underneath him and you as a captain, junior captain as I was, you’re talking to a captain who’s been fighting the war for 20 years, with the Vietnamese Army you know. And then the third job was training, we actually trained people in the end, places, you know, I’ve got a bit of a bone to pick there too, I’ll mention later, but, yeah we trained people in IV Corps on night operations, they were called the Night Operation Training Team [NOTT] and the Night Operation Advisory Team [NOAT]

37:00 and we also trained people later on, very late, ’71, ’72 at Nui Dat where the remnants of the Training Team trained the Cambodian forces who were called FANK [Forces Armees Nationales Khmers] or Cambodian Army. Cambodia borders III and IV Corps. But they weren’t, there was no combat involved there, all they did was train these people and send them back into Cambodia. So these advisers left were strictly non combatant, and non operational, as opposed to my blokes in IV Corps, like at one stage down at the bottom of South Vietnam, we were training the RF [Regional Force] and PF [Popular Force] and ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] , ARVN

37:30 is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, but we actually went on operations with them, ambushing. Big difference and my point was going to be later on but you know these people later on in the Training Team received the second unit citation whilst my blokes (mainly WOs [Warrant Officers]) in 1970 got nothing, got nothing. So, the citation went from 1962 to 1969 from 1970 to late 1971 nobody got anything and then from 1971 to 1972 they got the second citation, I mean, how ridiculous is that.

Politics.

Well, more than politics, it

38:00 degrades the medals, attractiveness and it’s authenticity you know, rubbish. But,

Gee you’ve done so much fascinating work Bernie, I just got, okay, I might just go back a bit, you talked about the first reason for going over to Vietnam and doing this advising, was because there were Montagnards, now they’re the mountain people from the Northern...?

No the Montagnards occupy I-Corps, II Corps, III Corps areas, they’re on the high country, in the mountains,

38:30 that’s why they’re, I think Montagnards stands for -“dweller in the mountains”, or I’m not too sure, but they’re the mountain tribes, who to this very day are destitute, because the Vietnamese hate them and they’re not allowed to work. The communist government won’t let them work so they’re in very poor shape right now, right this very day, 2003.

Were they good soldiers?

Yes, well I never worked with them but I have a friend, Captain Barry Petersen who did, he started off this Montagnard army actually and in the end the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] considered him to be a risk and they got rid of him. Sent him back to Australia because he had so much control of the Montagnards.

39:00 But Montagnards are a separate tribe, ethnic tribe and they've always fought with the, they originally lived on the coastal plains but the Vietnamese pushed them back, Vietnam is like a big S, and all on the coastal areas, probably a mile to two miles up to 10 miles coastal plains where they grow all the rice, and then all the mountain range inside of that and then the Montagnards occupy the mountain ranges now, basically.

And the second lot of people were the M'Nongs?

The M'Nongs, yeah they're another race again I think, I'm not, I don't know much about them either, but they're a, I think

39:30 M'Nong and Montagnard are as probably synonymous you know.

And then there was the third lot?

ARVN, that's the, the ARVN are the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and that's just the South Vietnamese Army and was at one stage it had 1.2 to 1.3 million soldiers in it, so it was quite big. And then you've got the regional (RF) and popular forces (PF) who are like our army reserve type people. They were in companies and platoons and guarded bridges and worked and guarded villages, hamlets, small towns that sort of thing and then you have the regular

40:00 army (ARVN) on top of that, so it was quite a big force. A lot of people under arms, and then you had you know these, you had a lot of weird organizations too, like village platoons, V-DATs, Village defence advisory teams, all these sort of splinter groups that were doing their own thing around villages and hamlets and trying to pacify, you know the local area, and keep the VC out, or the NVA out, it was very complicated, very complicated.

Were you, we're going to get onto this in a minute,

40:30 **but were you taught all about these different groups before you headed over there?**

Basically yeah. You do three courses basically to become a Training Team advisor, you do the jungle training centre [JTC] course at Canungra, down the road here, on the way to Southport, a bit further south of course. That's an 11 week basic infantry training course, run by the Australian Army of course. You do a weapons course, it used to be at the Infantry Centre at Bardia Barracks at Ingleburn at Sydney

41:00 that's about a week and a bit, you familiarise yourself with all the weapons, both the enemy's and ours, so the ARVN weapons, the NVA weapons, rifles, assault rifles, and mortars that sort of thing. And the last thing you do is a colloquial language course. This is run by the Intelligence Centre, at Woodside in those days in South Australia, that took I think three to four weeks, I can't, either three or four weeks, yeah. So, you learn very basic colloquial Vietnamese and the last couple of days is a big test and you speak to the corporals

41:30 that ran it who were now married to Vietnamese girls so they, we actually spoke with Vietnamese females in their own language and conversed or tried too. So it was quite good and interesting and basically you came out with a basic understanding of the Vietnamese language, the Vietnamese language is very hard to speak, it's quite difficult to pick up, tones and nasals and all of that sort of thing, it's very complicated but after a while, you soon find out when you get there, you soon assimilate and learn words with actions you know so you know what's going on.

That's fascinating.

Tape 3

00:31 **At Kapooka you were training some of the regular army and nashos [National Servicemen] as well weren't you?**

Yeah Kapooka I went there September 1967 until April 1968 and I was a platoon commander of 18 Platoon, Charlie Company. Platoons in those days, probably in Kapooka had about sixty and that was enlarged somewhat to around 70 to 80, when we had back squatters

01:00 come down from Puckapunyal and Singleton which were the national service training battalions. The ones that didn't make it there were sent to us and we would have fifty or sixty regulars and another ten or more nashos tacked on the end of that to finish their training, which they hadn't completed before, so we had a composite platoon at the end but national servicemen to me were the same as the average regular soldier. You know they did well and tried very hard and they were treated the same in every respect. Kapooka was interesting in that it had a huge,

01:30 because of Vietnam, it had a huge output. We had four rifle companies there in my day, each of six

platoons so we had twenty-four platoons of about sixty to eighty people. Quite a lot of soldiers being churned out on an eleven week cycle. This is the minimum time you need to train a platoon, these days they try to do it in six weeks which is absolutely ridiculous you know. I have been down there, I know what they're doing now because Bev Gordon my girlfriend, her son just graduated, and he trained in six weeks the equivalent of what I taught in

02:00 twelve weeks, you can't do it. He did well, he won the physical efficiency award which is top recruit for PT or physical training and he has gone to become a cook, or a chef would you believe. And he has gone, been posted to 3 battalion, 3 RAR [3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment], and I said, "Once you get your qualification as a cook transfer to the infantry." And he said, "Yeah good idea." So that'll probably happen this year or next year, and he will become a good soldier then a proper soldier. 4 RAR [4th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment], that's the parachute battalion, sorry,

02:30 so he is into parachuting, he liked that too. That was Kapooka.

Were any of the conscripts unhappy to be there?

Yeah a lot of them objected, after twelve weeks training or eleven weeks training most of them could see the better side of it. I guess they were annoyed because they were interrupted for some of the best two years of their lives. But okay a lot of them stayed in, and served in the regular army afterwards. Probably the ones that objected,

03:00 more than say a country lad or city lad, were the ones with university qualifications, like a doctor's degree or a science degree, see we had doctors, dentist and everyone coming through there. Finished their training or about to and they were called up. So they obviously went to medical corps or whatever but a lot of them stayed on but a lot of them went back and completed their training and became whatever their specialist role was. Yeah we had nashos but you get that amongst the regulars too. Some of the regulars once they find out the lifestyle

03:30 they start jacking up and doing the wrong thing too, so they either get discharged or change their attitude, it is all in the mind. The army is pretty good at changing your mind patterns I guess, with enough training, enough repetition.

And you reckon twelve weeks is enough?

For recruit training yeah. But then again in those days once they had finished recruit training they used to go to individual employment training which is corps training. Training to be an infantry soldier,

04:00 training to be a signaller, training to be a gunner, and that probably takes another twelve weeks again. And then when they get to the unit, the unit puts them through another specialist type training, sub-unit training it is called and they become part of a platoon. Three sections of infantry to a platoon and those section commanders put their sections through various training, and then the platoon becomes an integral part of the company and so on. So the whole battalion is up to scratch, it takes a long time, it used to take in my day a good year and a bit

04:30 to train a bloke from recruit training to his position in the battalion and then you have got specialist training on top of that, if you want to become a signaller, a mortar man, an assault pioneer, a tracker, an assault pioneer or whatever. Basically a private has got to extend his knowledge in the section, become a machine gunner, become a 2IC [Second In Command] become a section commander, and then become a sergeant, become a sergeant of a platoon, blah blah all of the way through.

05:00 The battalion life is great you have got you know you have got three distinct classes, you have got the officers, the senior NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] and the diggers. Each has their own mess, mess hall for entertainment and drinking, mess for eating. And unfortunately the powers that be, the civvies in Canberra are trying to break it down, so you get combined messes now, you get combined messes of officers, other corps, combined messes of diggers of other corps, combined messes of sergeants with other corps

05:30 and it's not right because, eight hundred men, you're an individual entity there, and infantry are infantry they want to stay that way, they don't want to mix up with the gunners or signaller or engineers or whatever you know. I mean it creates a bit of an esprit de corps problem. In that you are mixing too much with other parts of the army which you don't want to mix with, because if you're in isolation you can look after your own people better don't get me wrong the other corps are required, but you can control your own unit better if

06:00 you can do your own thing in your own area, that's the whole point.

So you think in action it affects camaraderie?

Yes. It's how do you explain it? A battalion should be a battalion not mixed up with anybody else. And when you go on operations you expect the support but you have got to do your own thing and you do it and you're well trained to do it. Discipline suffers if you have got other people around who aren't disciplined as much as you are in your unit, morale loss follows because the other units might be getting more leave than you're getting at this juncture

06:30 you don't know this if you're in your own little unit and you're looked after properly there. You don't know all of this is going on. The people that are disciplined most in the army are the artillery, the

infantry and probably the armoured corps, they are the three fighting corps, the biggest, and they are the most disciplined. The engineers are pretty slack, signals are slack, truckies are sometimes slack, sometimes regimented but they are the three top regimented corps. Artillery in particular they are very regimented.

- 07:00 Infantry has got to be. And so is armoured corps, armoured corps is pretty strict too, but the rest of them you know, some are good and some are bad. And you have got more of them, to support you. You know when you're in action the normal support ratio is three, four, to one. So your one infantry bloke out here and you have got three or four back here supporting him, not infantry but other corps, that's how the ratio works. You know you remember, I don't know whether you were aware, say American had six hundred thousand troops over there at one stage in Vietnam, there would be only two hundred thousand fighting soldiers, the rest,
- 07:30 four hundred thousand, would be supporting troops in big bases and who never saw an angry shot fired. Maybe a mortar bomb but other than that, so that's the ratio you work on to support your fighting forces.

You were trained as a sapper originally? And here you are actually training the nashos and regulars how to fight, that's what you ended up doing?

It didn't matter because Kapooka to this very day,

- 08:00 you have got young officers there from all corps. It is a basic skill just to train a basic recruit, that's what's got to be done so it doesn't matter. It should be a predominance of the fighting corps again, armoured, artillery, infantry, engineers and signals are the fighting corps, so you should have more young officers from those areas so they can train people up, but you are going to have to have some of the pogos, because the Australian Army is so small, I think now we haven't even got thirty thousand in the Australian Army, I think it is about twenty-four thousand
- 08:30 now, twenty- six thousand somewhere there, so you are going to have restricted platoons and restricted young officers there to train them because you haven't got enough of the combat corps. You haven't got them to do the job. So you have got to take what you can get. But yeah it matters because obviously a corps bloke has done his proper training to teach a young recruit better. And same with the instructors, the corporal and sergeants, if they come from the fighting corps too, they are much better instructors than say if they had come from a pogo unit [slang for non fighting unit] which is an ordnance corps unit or a
- 09:00 survey unit or something like that, they wouldn't know anything about the real stuff.

Our researchers wanted me to talk to you about some of the early engineering work you were doing up in Townsville and Mount Isa, how did you, because you were doing a bit of field work in Townsville weren't you?

Well after I had been in 24th Construction Squadron for twelve months they sent me to the School of Military

- 09:30 Engineering and you do what is called a Young Basic Officer Course, that's twelve months actually. And you do everything. You do airfield construction, road construction, plant operation, demolitions, explosive, blowing up things, field engineering, building bunkers, underground command posts, that sort of thing. Anything to do with horizontal or vertical
- 10:00 construction or destruction, that's the way to put it in six words, anything to do with vertical or horizontal destruction and construction okay. You do that, you either pass or you fail, I just passed, because I didn't have very many academic skills behind me, you needed to pass this course some kind of engineering diploma or degree you know, and I didn't have that but I scratched through. And then they sent me to 18th Field Squadron, no I went to Kapooka first and then I went to 18th Field Squadron and what 18th Field Squadron's
- 10:30 job is, is to support an infantry battalion, so a troop of engineers which is about sixty strong would go out and support an infantry battalion. So a captain and his sixty little troopers, sappers, would go out and support the battalion commander and all of his soldiers, and they would be attached amongst all of the platoons and companies within the battalion. In Vietnam they were actually the mine clearers and the tunnel rats that cleared the tunnels with infantry companies, that's their job in war. But anyhow up there, we would support the battalion and we would also do a lot of construction work in what was called the High Range training area.
- 11:00 We built roads and airstrips in there, we put culverts in them, we built basic scale accommodation, which is rough accommodations so battalions can pass through, cook house, a store area, a couple of buildings for the senior officers, infantry officers where they could have a drink and talk to one another. And basic accommodation to filter battalions through, so we built those and connected electricity and put water through. Built roads with culverts
- 11:30 and generally made an area where units could go through on exercises. That's the engineers' role actually, that was it yeah, support the battalion and construction on the high range training area. That went on until I went to the 35th Field Squadron at Mount Isa which was a pretty big eye opener.

In what way?

Oh Mount Isa I think was late 1968 early 1969 I

- 12:00 became 2IC of this engineer unit out there, once again SR unit, which is supplementary reserve, a special unit. And it only did camps the same as 91st Forestry Squadron. So the unit consisted of all Mount Isa mines underground employees. Like all of the miners down the hole, and most of the senior NCOs came from there and the officers came from the administration staff. In my case, the major, I think his name was Kelly. He was a New Zealand Duntroon graduate
- 12:30 and went back to New Zealand and gave it away but joined Mount Isa mines but he was the OC [Officer Commanding] he was good value, and we had about a hundred and eighty personnel and we used to do, once again we would go out and we would build light aluminium bridges for troops to run across from point A to point B across water. We would carry out rafting exercises with pontoons. We would do field demolitions, field exercises, blowing up
- 13:00 structures and well most of our men were qualified, well they were miners so they knew all of that. They just had a bit more practice to blow up things above ground rather than underground. That was basically it for the 35th Field Squadron, yeah they were a good unit, but Mount Isa itself was a shocker in 1968 although it was a thriving place. Initially I was booked into the Mount Isa Hotel which was an old wooden structure, about four stories high. The way the hotels
- 13:30 operated, there were four hotels in the main streets of Mount Isa, the Mount Isa, the Argent, the Boyd and the other one I can't remember the name. And Mount Isa mines works on three shifts, so no matter what time of the day the hotels were open for whatever shift was coming off so they could get a drink. So it was open twenty-four hours a day and here I am trying to get some sleep and there is all of these drunken yahoos fighting and carrying on. So I eventually moved out to a private residence with these friends I haven't seen to this day actually, and then Mount Isa mines management (Mr Footes) decided he could put me in one of his staff quarters.
- 14:00 They had these, behind the Barclay Hotel further out towards the airfield they had single quarters for the single men and single quarters for the single women. Four men to a house and four women to a house. Well that was nearly as bad because there was about fifty women and about three hundred blokes living next to one another in these single quarters. I was in a house with a draftsman from Australia, an engineer from Australia, a geologist from Canada and myself. And of course there would be parties in the women's area one night and the next night back in ours.
- 14:30 And there would be sixty blokes there and about ten decent looking girls. So you either struck on with one or you didn't, interesting days. I made some good friends out there. One bloke Garry Avis is his name, he is big time now in AMP [Australian Mutual Providence] in Sydney, I haven't seen him for years but he is a good bloke. My house mate was another bloke by the name of Robin Slaughter But he happened to marry
- 15:00 one of the Queensland state minister's daughter, who owned a station himself, so he is living out there somewhere, no he is divorced from her now, he is now married to an overseas lass. And I haven't seen the other bloke, Geoff Ebdon, ever since. But Mount Isa days were very frantic, lots of beer drinking, lots of smoking which I used to do in those days. Lots of good work, interesting. And then I found out I was going to Vietnam so I came back and went on all of these courses, yep.

15:30 **And was that good news to get?**

Well as I said before I was a bit taken aback initially, I thought hell I didn't want to get killed but now I have got it I may as well go. Next thing I knew, three months of courses and away I went. Next thing I was in Vietnam, straight into it.

What did you know of communism at the time?

Well we were taught pretty well, Holt [Harold Holt, Prime Minister of Australia], back in 1965, not 1965 when did he die? Whenever he was Prime Minister

- 16:00 he explained the domino theory, you know if the communists came down through North and South Vietnam they would go down to Malaya, Malaysia now, into Indonesia and all of the way down to New Guinea and Australia, it was the pretext, the reason given then. And we believed it, well most people did. The army itself took that role up and explained that while we were there, "We are helping to free South Vietnam from the possibility of becoming communist." The Americans were the same, so it was a well received plausible reason why we should be there. And we were invited,
- 16:30 a lot of people will tell you that we weren't but we were. I think it might have been set up, as part of SEATO [South East Asian Treaty Organization] I think it was we were obliged to help America. And she was in there first so we helped her, and in turn helped the South Vietnamese, that was the SEATO obligation. So there was no plausible reason why we should not go there, it was quite plausible. As I said it might have been set-up, there might have been a lot of contrivance by people but we went. And after that I thought let's go I want to get there,
- 17:00 so away we went. I didn't know what to expect. I had an idea, but my ideas from the real thing were probably miles away.

Can you tell us a little bit about what you were expecting and your rude awakening?

I was probably expecting a more conventional type war, you find the enemy, you have a contact and you get rid of him or he gets rid of you. But in actual fact, there was no safe

17:30 place in Vietnam anywhere. You could be in a rear base as we mentioned before and have a mortar lobbed on you or rockets lobbed on you and get killed that way. So there was no front line as such. The big bases were protected, I worked at a big American base and a big Vietnamese base and they're huge, the one in the Delta, I was with the 9th ARVN Division, was a square mile around you know, that's how big it was. And occupied by a Vietnamese division, that's how big it was. A division is probably about ten thousand troops you know.

18:00 And the Australians operated the same way basically, Nui Dat was where the 1st Australian Task Force was, say three or four thousand troops, that's was the fighting area, and back here Vung Tau was the administration area, logistics area, which was also well defended. And they operated out of those two bases. But regardless of where you went in Vietnam the enemy was there, either local VC, or particular up north the NVA, regular soldiers which is the North Vietnamese Army. And the only time I ever

18:30 experienced straight on warfare was in the mountains where my battalion was facing a regiment of the enemy. And then we sort of, I mentioned in detail an operation out of a place called Thuong Duc in I Corps, which is west of Da Nang about thirty miles, up in the hills there, near the Laos border actually. We got surrounded by an NVA regiment reinforced, so I had eight hundred soldiers on the ground with my battalion, we were surrounded by about five to eight thousand NVA soldiers, you know.

Actually I want to get you to tell us about that later in a lot more detail but can you tell us

19:00 **about your first days in Vietnam?**

I arrived on I think it was a Wednesday morning, 25th of March 1970, I happened to be sitting next to a bloke by the name of Major Frank Hickling, Engineer Corps, he later went on to become a major-general of the Australian Army. But my little bitch here was that we were on the same plane and we arrived on the 25th but his DVA nominal roll war record says that he arrived on the 24th, the day before, and I arrived the 25th. I don't know how that happened but there you go.

19:30 You can't trust some of these records clerks at all. So on the same plane I arrived 25th he arrived 24th so he has got a days extra whatever. Allowances and fame I guess whatever, so we get there, we took off from Mascot [airport], it was night time actually I am not too sure what time. Our first refuelling point was Darwin, we got out there for about ten minutes, stretched our limbs a bit and got back on again.

20:00 Next landing was in Singapore and that was for about half an hour, they had to refuel and do some other rubbish and I met some of the blokes that were attached to the UK forces at the time that was called ANZUK, Australia New Zealand United Kingdom Commonwealth forces in Singapore. Met a few blokes that I knew from the Australian Army. Back on again, and we hit the coast of Vietnam just on first light, would have been about six o'clock in the morning with the sun coming up from the east over the ocean and Vietnam stretched out here under the port wing. It looked to be that the southern part of South Vietnam was all water.

20:30 And we landed at Tan Son Nhut which is Saigon's main international airport. And I got out of the plane and the first thing that hits you is the humidity. It's stifling and it is March. And the next thing that hits me is the noise. There are helicopters, there are planes, choppers, jet fighters taking off and landing, everything around you moving, just incessant noise. And then the last thing was the smell, and I mentioned before the rotting vegetation, the water, the faeces

21:00 and everything on the ground. And the other thing I guess was the activity, soldiers of about six or eight different armies on the base, air forces and armies running around the huge base, and Tan Son Nhut is quite a large base probably about ten square miles, huge. So then we get picked up by the adjutant who happened to be Captain Dave Rowe who had had a hard time for the first six months in the Special Forces, he had been wounded a few times and he was a bit nervy and shaking and carrying on. Anyway he was okay then, picked us up. Go and get our issues,

21:30 that's the US army issues, they give you a PX card [US Army canteen], US Army driving licence, all of your gear, uniforms, boots a couple of knives, well a knife, your steel hat and all of that sort of stuff that you needed to go on operations. And next thing I am back at the adjutant's office at AATTV headquarters. The HQ was part of the Free World headquarters in the middle of Saigon. Had all of these flags up, flying for every nation that was fighting. There were about six nations flags there. There was Korea, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, US Army, US Marine Corps, Vietnamese of course and so there are all of these flags up there.

22:00 And our little headquarters stuck in there. So I got in there and the adjutant takes me to the CO who is Colonel Clark, excellent man, good soldier, who quickly briefs me on where I am going. He says, "You are going to replace Wally Sheppard in I Corps, 1/51st ARVN battalion." So I say, "Very good Sir." Didn't have a clue what the hell he was talking about. 1/51st ARVN battalion is up there somewhere in I Corps, I didn't even know where I Corps was you know. So I tried to look intelligent, I knew a little bit about what he was talking about, not everything. And I said, "Okay Sir fine."

22:30 "Any questions?" "No Sir." "Okay." He passed me back to the Adjutant -- so off I go. We had one night there, might have had two nights. Anyway the next morning onto a bloody great Hercules, C130 Hercules, along with all of the American Army blokes, Korean blokes, women and kids and everything

you know on board, Vietnamese people. Straight to Da Nang then from Saigon and landed at Da Nang then.

- 23:00 Well Da Nang was a huge base, big as Tan Son Nhut if not bigger, and also with the fighter side of it, more fighters, Da Nang was probably more active than Saigon was with regards to the actual war because of the closeness to North Vietnam, the NVA, and closeness to where the main action was being held at that stage. So you had F-4 Phantoms and God knows how many other aircraft taking off and landing every two or three or minutes. You had Pan Am coming in and QANTAS and American bloody civil airlines coming in. You had helicopters going everywhere, you had more helicopters. You had Hueys, you had
- 23:30 CH47 Chinooks, you had CH53 Sikorskys, US Marines were also there, they fly their own choppers and the US Army flies its own. Same thing again, except Da Nang was closer again, when you land there are mountains to the west, huge mountain ranges running west and then north and south right next to Da Nang. So then I got picked up by one of the warrant officers, from the Australian Team Headquarters (Uc House), the Australian Army Headquarters in Da Nang. And he takes me back to where our buildings are there,
- 24:00 our little headquarters and I meet Major Frank Johnson OBE [Order of the British Empire] who is the senior Australian there. And he tells me, "Wally will be in the next day to pick you up." So okay next day Wally comes in picks me up and away we go first of all we got to pick up some more gear, Marine gear. I collected a big K-bar knife, which was an excellent knife and a few other things I couldn't get from the US Army. And then Wally decided he would take me and show me some of his local haunts. We had all day to get back to our regiment and our .
- 24:30 battalion. So he took me to a place called The Pink House which is a whorehouse in actual fact. Two or three stories high and it is guarded by a Korean platoon, it is their financial venture, they ran the place -. So you go in there and you have got all of these numbers on the wall in little boxes. And you could say, "I would like to see number twenty-six, or sixty-nine or forty-two or whatever." This little chick comes down and takes you up there and away you go. And you can have a beer up there
- 25:00 also have a few drinks, and that was a bit of an experience.

Was there any way to know what the girls looked like before you matched up the numbers?

Wally said a couple of numbers to be aware of, and there was no disease there because they were looked after by the Korean doctors or the American doctors. They weren't actually all Vietnamese. There were Filipino, French/Cambodia, Chinese, and Vietnamese of course and a couple of races so they weren't all Vietnamese.

- 25:30 There was quite a mixture of girls there all young, in their twenties, very young.

Were any nationalities pretty popular?

Well the Vietnamese were predominant, so you stayed close to them. I guess if you found a good girl and she was good in bed you liked her so you stuck with her. But we stayed there about an hour and a half I guess, whatever it took, two hours. Then headed back to where the battalion was. So we were wandering through another area, and there was a ranger battalion there, this is heading south

- 26:00 west out of Da Nang. Da Nang is a huge city, biggest city in that area, about a hundred thousand people then and a huge airfield on the western outskirts, and a huge port. And it was headquarters of the American Marines (USMC), for I Corps they had a hundred and twenty thousand or something I think, Marines, plus the army headquarters for the American Army, plus the Vietnamese headquarters for all of the Vietnamese units. The Vietnamese units in Da Nang are huge. There are armoured elements and there are infantry and there are always regiments, there and further north. And then divisions,
- 26:30 1st ARVN Division was basically along the demilitarised zone, protected the northern part of South Vietnam from the immediate invaders coming over the border, that was the ARVN 1st Division assisted by the America Marines. Then we had 2nd ARVN Division south of Da Nang, and then my little 51st ARVN regiment out here, which is four battalions to the south west and another independent regiment, the 54th ARVN regiment, just north of Da Nang, and then eventually we had the ARVN 3rd Division..A division is between about ten and fifteen thousand soldiers
- 27:00 So out we go out to the hill. We are driving and driving going past all of these blown up bridges that the NVA and the VC had blown up. The rail line didn't exist anymore because they had blown all of the bridges and they couldn't use the rail, but the rail line was there and it just stopped on this side of the river and then started up again, the bridge blown down in between, what a waste you know.

What was Wally telling you all of this time about Vietnam itself?

Not much because I was too petrified. He is sitting here, left hand drive on the jeep and we're driving on the right hand side of the road and there are all these huge armoured vehicles and trucks tearing up the other side, and I am sitting there saying geezes,

- 27:30 big wheels, big tracks coming past you know. So we couldn't talk much because of the noise you know. But he didn't say much, we didn't say much until we got to the hill because it was too noisy for a start, and it was pretty petrifying when you're sitting in a little jeep and there is huge earthmoving equipment

like dozers and trucks screaming past on trucks you know on big low loaders, tanks everywhere. It was certainly an eye opener the first couple of days I was there.

28:00 We get to the regiment I am met by the team commander, first of all he takes me to the regimental commander who was a colonel. Then we went to the battalion commander and I met him and all of his people. First I went to the American advisory hut and met the American Senior Advisor, Colonel Bacon, Robert E Bacon, and a couple of his senior staff and then back to our battalion and met the Vietnamese staff and the advisors who were already there. My team only had two advisors there, an American lieutenant from the Deep South, white.

28:30 And a sergeant Negro from the deep north, black.

How did that go?

Well they were both very young, twenty-five, twenty-six, younger than me. And we had no conflict but I thought it pretty amazing that this American Lieutenant could handle that because he was from the Deep South, and the sergeant from the deep north, and the American Army was pretty segregated, well he was an advisor, the advisors I worked with anyway there was no problem with race. We had Puerto Ricans, we had Negroes, we had white Americans and brown Americans.

29:00 We had Australians, so we all mixed in together. Probably within about three days we went out on the first operation. Wally in the meantime was giving me a few more detailed briefings, and he actually came out with me on the first operation for the first couple of days.

So what did he actually tell you about what to expect before you went out?

Not much. he said, "Here is the battalion, it has got three rifle companies and a headquarter company which is also a rifle company, it also has a prisoner company." whatever that was. We operate with the battalion commander, where he goes we go, you advise him, you help him with his air support and whatever else he may request.

29:30 Re-supply, chopper support, artillery support. So what you had been taught at Canungra you had to put into action then. So otherwise you talk to the Americans and the Americans bring up their fighters for you. We you know, the way they operated then, you had a Forward Air Controller American Air Force who flew around in a little Cessna , OV -2 the thing was called, a. "Push- me Pull- me" Cessna with a motor in the front and the back, that was the FAC [Forward Air Controller] and he could talk to the fighters and he could talk to you and

30:00 you would put smoke down and he would put the fighters on it. That's was the way that the air support worked, same as the choppers. And the artillery was mostly US Marine Corps , I could handle that myself and sometimes they had what was called a forward observer (FO), with an American Marine lieutenant, or a US Army bloke attached and he controlled the guns for us. I just told him, "I want fire grid reference so and so down there now." And he would go bomp bomp, I would give him all of the grids, the references and away he would go. But it was all American, everything. See the Vietnamese artillery support was limited, only 105 mm artillery that's got a maximum range of eleven thousand metres, so it was pretty useless where we were.

30:30 We were miles from there, so we had to use the American Marine artillery which is heavy stuff. Eight inch, 175 and 155 mm artillery

And so who would you take your lead from in terms of co-ordinating the air and artillery support?

Find out what the battalion commander wanted to do and go about the best way of doing it. Obviously when you have got artillery firing and you have got fighters in there you have got to make sure you don't hit one another so,

31:00 yeah it is a matter of co-ordination. So the FAC helps you , he makes sure all of his fighters stay out there while we bring in artillery, stop the artillery, bring the fighters in. Stop the fighters coming in and put the gun ships in and stop that and put the artillery back on again. So it is a matter of yes, no, go sort of thing through the FAC, pretty complicated but he can handle it, he has got more radios than I have. I control the artillery he controls the air asset on my behalf..

31:30 **And you just mentioned that this was your chance to put the training you received at Canungra into practice?**

Yes.

But how was the training you received applicable to coordinating all of these people?

Well they taught you how to handle what sort of verbal exchange you had to have with the helicopters what they wanted. My first effort was a bit of a failure I said, "Go ahead and put the first chopper strike in." and I mucked around, what you have got to do

32:00 is get all of your locations and throw smoke so that the choppers know where everyone is. And I was getting a bit finicky and making sure that they weren't too close to the front, and the helicopters ran out of fuel, so they had to go back to Da Nang, refuel and come back. That was a bit of an embarrassment. When they came back I put them back on, but by this time the enemy had just about gone. That was a

bit of a failure, but I learnt after that very smartly. So you have got to be, get everything down on the ground, smoke up find out where they are and put them in. Particularly with fighters because they have got what is called a very low time on target, what's called TOT [Time on Target] because of their fuel usage. Choppers were a bit better,

32:30 they could last a bit longer but the F-4 Phantoms which I mostly used, they have only got a certain loiter time and then they have got to go back and refuel. If you dilly dally too much you won't get them you see, you will get someone else. But yeah after a while you get the gist of it and it becomes second nature. And re-supply is another big one. Bringing in fresh rations, rice, water, getting rid of the wounded, that's all by chopper and you control all of that. Not by the FAC, that's through regiment, you request choppers and out they come, Black Cats mainly. And they would be mainly American Marine

33:00 and American Army. When I first got there, there was no Vietnamese chopper support and no Vietnamese fighter support. In the end they were gradually coming in. but American choppers flown by Vietnamese, they are cowboys, there was a lot of skiting going on, so VNAF choppers were a bit hairy at times.

You will have to tell us a lot more detail about that. But it sounds like you have got a lot of commands coming through all at the same time?

Yeah not commands but discussions and what I wanted,

So how was that?

The Canungra course,

33:30 the people there had done exactly this job twelve months previously so they give you, the warrant officers particularly out there, say eight or ten of them who were instructors there, and the majors, they had been instructors there twelve months earlier so they knew exactly how it worked and so they went through everything for you. So exactly what you had been taught, you put into practice.

Oh right so it is very much training.

Yeah to become a Co Van Uc Dai Loi [Australian advisor] in a Vietnamese battalion, or company situation.

34:00 **So with managing strikes and manoeuvres with the artillery and infantry how would there be a priority then for a particular time, how would you gauge it I mean obviously fights and wounded ?**

You have got to, obviously you can't start putting choppers in to bring out the wounded in the middle of when the fight is going on. You wait until that all dies down and there is a lull in activity and you take them out then. Obviously if the enemy is attacking you, you have got to stop them, so the first thing you do is bring in artillery. And the first thing the NVA will do is come in very close to our forward defences,

34:30 so the artillery was less effective. They were lying low between our forward areas and the places forward of our artillery. So you have got to use gun ships to get them out of there. If that fails well you have got deep trouble, they are onto you. But mostly the gun ships and artillery stopped them. Every night you stop, you set up what is called DF (Defensive Fire) tasks, all around you, particularly in dead ground, we would always be on the high ground but we would have dead ground all around us so wherever the enemy could possibly set up and form up in areas to attack you, you made sure that was a registered

35:00 DF for the night. So six or eight rounds of 8 inch artillery DF would go in there and blast the buggery out of everything, gun ships are also good. And at night time you do the same thing with what's called the Stingers. That's affixed wing gunship and they were very good. With search lights and everything, flares and lots of ammunition on board.

Were there particular tactics that the NVA used that made your life difficult?

Yeah, like non stop attacks for three days, but anyhow.

Yeah that's what I am talking about.

35:30 This as I said we got surrounded at Thuong Duc, north of Thuong Duc there we had two rifle companies on this high ground there and the other company and the prisoner company on adjoining high ground, and basically that was it, and headquarter company was also there, So we had two pieces of higher ground and we actually got completely surrounded in the whole area. So to actually stop them, they attacked, day in day out for three days, broad daylight you know. So obviously if we had air superiority you can use that to your advantage.

36:00 And we must have killed. I will tell you how many we killed, in a minute anyway, roughly how many we killed. They took massive losses, we threw them back each time and things were getting pretty hairy so we had to withdraw and we just pulled back the same way we went in, by helicopter (CH-53's). And then put B-52's (Arc Light) over the whole area for a day. Blasted it with B-52 strikes and then went back in again in the same location we were in before, same holes, because what was happening when we first got in there, we landed in the middle of the enemy, one unit going out and one unit coming in.

- 36:30 That's called a "relief in place", so two NVA battalions on each high ground feature were moving out as we hit there, so we jumped into their holes so they knew where we were of course, but that didn't matter, we still stayed there. When we went back in the second time they had all gone, disappeared, everything was all gone. No bodies, nothing. So we went out looking and we found one big grave with about two hundred and fifty in it, dead North Vietnamese,
- 37:00 and another one with a hundred and eighty or a hundred and sixty or something. All dead, bits and pieces of arms and legs and bodies. So we dug them all out, you have got to do a body count, which was a pretty unpleasant job, but we got the body count.

So you are actually going through a mass grave trying to put bodies back together?

Oh well if you find a head and a torso that's one body you know, a leg and a torso that's another body, you didn't worry about it too much. But there were bits and pieces everywhere, so we had to dig them all up, put them back together and put them back in and cover them up again with soil. That was okay. We must have got about three or four hundred of them. But they also knocked over about a hundred and twelve of our blokes on one part of the first operation.

- 37:30 We had a whole rifle company that was ambushed and I think only about thirty or forty got back out of that. Out of about a hundred and something, whatever the company strength was, it was pretty horrendous. We lost a few too. Day in day out for three days, very stressful!

That's horrendous casualties.

Particularly when you can see the lights of Da Nang out to the coast twenty miles away, there is a whole civilisation down there. Here we are fighting with the NVA.

- 38:00 **Okay we'll pause there Bernie because we have got to change tapes.**

Tape 4

- 00:30 **Okay we're just going to go into more detail of that first war experience that you experienced in Vietnam?**

The one Chris was talking about? Okay well we were told we were going into an area that was probably safe initially, when I say safe there was no enemy activity in the area. We always went in by helicopter, either twelve to an Iroquois, UH-1B

- 01:00 about forty or fifty in a CH-36 or 37 which is the Chinook, and around seventy aboard the big fellows, the Sikorsky CH-53. we normally used the big choppers, the Sikorsky and the Chinook. So what they would do before we hit the mountain top that we were going to

- 01:30 pulverise all of the mountain tops in the area with artillery and bombers. To make the enemy not realise where we were actually going to land. They'd think we were going to that one if we hit that one or that one over there. But that didn't work, as soon as we landed there we started receiving mortar fire and machine gun fire from the high ground to our rear. Another big mountain at the back, they were lobbing large mortar round on us and heavy machine gun fire.

Hang on a sec Bernie so

- 02:00 **is that standard operating procedure that before you go in anywhere the bombers would come in and pulverise the area?**

And the artillery.

And the artillery sorry, to make the area safe?

Well it was to fool the enemy into not knowing which high ground you were going to land on. But when we got there they were already waiting for us. They were there moving around. So when we landed on this LZ landing zone we picked out there was this huge

- 02:30 amount on NVA soldiers scattering everywhere, like two battalion of them, we landed on top of them. But they all ran off everywhere, whether they were going to the high ground to the north or south east and west, and we landed there and meanwhile their mates are hitting us all with these mortars. Large mortars, you know 122 millimetre and 82 millimetre mortars.

As you were getting off the helicopter?

Yeah. So the helicopters were landing us and getting back out of there as quickly as possible.

I know this might sound stupid but did you all think, maybe we should just get back on?

No once they are able to land you have got to get off.

- 03:00 I'll tell you a funny story in a second about that. One of the choppers, the people were a bit tardy getting off the Vietnamese, so the old Sikorskys pilot just lifted the nose up and everybody slid out of

the back and he took off. They were all sprawled on the ground all jumping up and running everywhere, they got off satisfactorily, no one got hurt. But that's how you get out in a hurry see? Just tip the nose of the chopper a bit and everybody goes out the back, they have got these big landing ramps about fifteen foot wide and you can walk down two abreast or three abreast, he just tipped it up and they all slid out. The Vietnamese are only little people.

03:30 And all of the soldiers with their back packs on were rolling around, lucky no one got shot by their own people you know. They all got off okay. So we landed in there, and as this other enemy unit moved off very quickly their bunkers were still there, their mortar and weapon pits, they had dug them with cover etcetera, we jumped in those. We had to. The mortars were knocking us around. We got into their defensive positions, and they disappeared, and then the mortars stopped, we regrouped, and we left two rifle companies on this feature and HQ company and a rifle company on the other feature

04:00 and the prisoner company joined the back of HQ company. And thus we occupied the two high points we had and then about another thousand metres to the north, maybe a bit more, that's where the enemy was. They were on huge mountain that dominated us.

Sorry Bernie so they were looking down the hill?

Yes they were looking down from the high point, they could see us. We were on a high point; they were on the high point there. So they could lob the mortars from behind them. You could actually hear the mortars, when a mortar goes off you have got a primary detonation which is when the primary goes off in the barrel going pop, and over she comes and lands

04:30 on the area and explodes, we could actually hear that. So they were in the valley somewhere or the flanks of this enemy feature. But anyway, my advisors and I had to get into this large bunker which was a mortar bunker for the battalion that had moved out of there. But I think they had Chinese advisors in because they had all Chinese papers coins, newspapers, Chinese writing on their note paper. And it was all left there, coins the lot.

05:00 And this was much larger, North Vietnamese soldiers normally only build to a certain height standard, to cater for their height. So the Chinese I think being a little bit higher had their own special bunker, so that was interesting, so they must have had Chinese advisors there I reckon. So we occupied their positions, that was early morning probably about nine o'clock. By two o'clock we were being attacked by North Vietnamese mass waves. North Vietnamese soldiers of probably eighty to one hundred blokes

05:30 in a line, two or three paces apart, assaulting both positions and then followed up by another line about fifty metres back. And the only way to stop them was our massive air strike. US Air Force Phantoms, I will give you an example, put in something like two hundred sorties in two days. Double Phantoms, a sortie is two Phantoms, I put in two hundred of those, that was daytime. Within a time frame of about two o'clock on the first day until about four the next.

06:00 SO it was massive air strikes, and of course the American Marines loved it. The fighter pilots loved that sort of thing, close air support of a ground force. And we used to use helicopters, helicopter gun ships, Cobras in particular from the Alley Cats, because as I said once the NVA tactic was, you're not supposed to bring the heavy artillery within about any closer than about a hundred metres at the minimum. But in this country we were well dug in, everything was there, so we brought it in to about sixty metres, probably a bit more.

06:30 But the North Vietnamese were getting in behind that again. In front of it at least, between us and the line, so they knew the artillery was going to be behind them too, so they used to try and get down in there where the artillery which was blasting back towards where they had come from.

Okay so I might just go through things a little bit slowly for a second.

Sorry.

That's all right, I am trying to understand. You said the NVA didn't bring the artillery in closer than a hundred metres?

07:00 No that's our artillery.

Australian?

No American Marines.

American, was that a standard policy?

You have got a safe distance from various varying sized guns. 105 mm is very small, but it is supposedly two fifty meters I think from memory, the eight inch is supposed to be about four hundred meters, but I was bringing it in to under a hundred meters, had to, and the 175, 155 mm have similar safety distances, you are not supposed to be, where it impacts and forward

07:30 there is supposed to be certain area you keep clear where your own troops can't get wounded by your own fire? But in this situation where we were in the hills where we were in well prepared weapon pits, protection on top, and we could bring the artillery right in close. But the NVA I couldn't bring the eight inch on top of us or I would have started killing Vietnamese soldiers. I brought it in to about sixty to

eighty metres, the NVA got in front of it again, in the re-entrants, around the sloping ground there, and they were

08:00 within twenty or thirty metres of our forward pits, that's how close they were, they just all went down. And then when I brought the Alley Cats in that saved the day. The NVA then got up and got back then, they all moved

So they must have been pretty canny fighters?

Very professional, probably the best, my Vietnamese blokes were good too, but these blokes were good. And they had no artillery of their own, they only had mortars, no artillery just mortars, and RPG [Rocket Propelled Grenades], you know the rocket propelled grenades?

08:30 They used them with pretty good effect at close range. They were very professional. But yeah if you are sitting there just having a bit of lunch and they start blowing bugles and whistles and charging you, it is pretty nerve racking. When they charge you hear everything.

You were on one of the two features you had there on a hill in a bigger bunker? So were you kind of spinning around three sixty degrees sort of?

No I was watching these buggers right in front on me. They were attacking

09:00 battalion headquarters from the north, where I was. We had a rifle company with us to defend the whole thing. Say the normal battalion defensive area would cover mainly five hundred square metres around the top of this hill. You lay out your platoons, battalion headquarters here, then you have got the companies out there and then the platoons from the company go out so it gives all round defence. And as I said we took over their pits and they were laid out exactly as we would normally do, as taught in Australia, so we were, but they knew where we were

09:30 because they had just come out of there, so they obviously had a good idea where the headquarters was so that's why they were hammering us, trying to get to us. Day and night they attacked, within about fifty, thirty, twenty metres of us, of our forward pits.

So during this time it is your job to actually advise?

I didn't do much advising then I just made sure the -fighters and artillery were there real quick and the choppers were there real quick. The gunships also.

I advise we leave.

Well the worst was at night time, because you can't see them? So what you do is

10:00 put out listening posts, a couple of soldiers way out there somewhere and they hide away and if they hear someone coming they report back and come back quickly. That's the only reason you can pick them up, yeah they were attacking in the middle of the night too. But to counteract that I used a Stinger which is a AC-1191 I think, a fixed wing aircraft, the early ones, fixed wing aircraft.

Can you just explain the aircraft for a moment?

Fixed wings, twin engine and it has got all of these large calibre machine guns on the port side.

10:30 Left side. So it has got fifty cals and thirty cal machine guns, two or three down one side ,and it always circles anti-clockwise and fires at the ground that way, and of course you have got a tracer every sixth or seventh rounds a red tracer, that's something else I must mention, every sixth or seventh round a red tracer, but that indicates where the fire is coming from of course so the people on the ground that are being fired upon can fire back. Depending on the height it won't hurt much.

11:00 It has also got mortars, and later on artillery, on board would you believe?

So you actually, this sounds like a silly question, couldn't you bring the Stinger in all of the time then?

You could but they were normally used during day time on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was the resupply trail and so they had other tasks. More important, blowing up trucks and North Vietnamese movement down the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was a huge supply system for the North Vietnamese all the way down the border of South Vietnam.

11:30 So they had daytime tasks out there. But yeah you could have. Choppers did the same job and fighters do better. Night time the fighters can't be used as effectively or the choppers because they can't see what they are shooting at. Also the Stinger has got a huge search light. And he can turn that on and light up the whole area, like a football field just lit up. Once again that's vulnerable to ground fire too, but yeah the other

12:00 advantage of this of course is the ammunition they can maybe stay there for four or five hours and just keep firing, and plus they can drop flares to see what is going on, drop flares over a certain area they go up out of sight, they have got to be above you know the maximum range of an enemy 12.7mm heavy machine gun is about fifteen hundred I think from memory I can't remember. So they stay above that so they can't be shot by enemy 12.7 machine gun. But they saved us at night time.

Were you actually using, the NVA coming thirty feet away from you,

Thirty metres.

Thirty metres, were you actually using your rifle?

No. Had a couple of shots but I was mainly concerned with getting the artillery in the right spot and the gunships in the

- 12:30 right spot and that so I didn't have time to really fire, I killed dozens in aerial support yeah. That's where I got that badge there from that Viet Minh who fought at Dien Bien Phu. He was one of their first attacking mob.

Can you tell us that story actually?

Okay well when the first attack occurred which was on the first day about two o'clock in the arvo [afternoon]. They put in a day time attack on us with two big attack ranks, and the first attacking rank

- 13:00 actually got within about thirty metres of our forward troops in front of battalion headquarters area, when they all went to ground. And then I had to move in the gunships to get them out again. And then back with the artillery again, they backed back and I got the heavy artillery on them and that broke up the attack. Well immediately after that there was a cessation for about thirty minutes so we sent out a couple of our soldiers and they were picking around the bodies and I went down to have a look and I just saw this badge on this bloke and I took it. He was dead of course. We picked up all of the weapons and got rid of them but left the bodies there. But then they started attacking again

- 13:30 so we had to get back into our defensive area otherwise we would have got had. So that's how I got that, and what it is it was given to all of the Viet Minh, who were the precursor to the Viet Cong, in other words, the Viet Minh were the enemy in French days and the Viet Cong in our day. And they fought against the French at Dien Bien Phu which was the big decisive battle they had west, west of Hanoi, where they got defeated. And they gave every Viet Minh soldier one of these badges,

- 14:00 it has got a number on it, you know 1164207 or whatever. And it has got a little spring clip and it says "soldier of Dien Bien Phu, greater Vietnamese Army" or something, words to that effect in Vietnamese.

So he would have been in his maybe thirties or forties?

Oh older, Dien Bien Phu was 1953, say he was twenty years old then, 1953 to seventy is what twenty years? He would have been in his fifties at least, maybe sixties he was an old soldier for sure.

- 14:30 See I think I mentioned before they were hurting for manpower. The Ho Chi Minh Trail in fact in the end was all women, all females, not many people know that.

I didn't know that.

In the end it was mainly North Vietnamese women carrying all of the resupply down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. How they operated the Ho Chi Minh Trail was divided into five areas,

- 15:00 Areas north and one, two, three, four for want of better names, but they had numbers for the separate areas. And they would move mainly of a night time. Safer than daytime where you could be seen. That didn't work too well either. And most of the couriers, they started off with trucks and elephants in North Vietnam, out to the first staging point, and then as it got more hairy they would put them on little push bikes with mortars hanging over the handlebars or the back or whatever, women. And then rickshaws towed by blokes or men or women mainly.

- 15:30 away they would go again, it would break down further as it went south. It would become more and more one man or one woman carrying individual rockets or mortars or whatever she was carrying, food. What they would do they would stage every night in a supposed secure area, underground little towns. All disappear down holes and the Americans could bomb all they like or put Stingers in and it wouldn't hurt them. Next evening when it got dark again they would get out and head off, and that how they worked it. The principle was of course the more you put in up

- 16:00 north the more that's is going to come out down south, and so even thought the Americans bombed out bridges here and paths here, there were massive trails everywhere, it wasn't one big highway like that, but they had massive roads for trucks, roads for pushbikes and roads for walking, and it was a massive maze of these that headed south. If you blew out a bridge here and cut that one off they would just go another way. So in the end if they put in, as an example, at one stage there was 10,000 tons coming down a week, that was

- 16:30 in the mid 1960's, by the mid 1970's when they actually overran the place it was about a 100,000 tons. That's how much it improved, they had open slather with transport, they could use trucks because the Vietnamese Air Force didn't exist anymore, and they couldn't bomb them, so it was like a super highway. And I mean you put in more at the top more is going to come out at the bottom, you put in less at the top and less is going to come out at the bottom. And as I say yes they had trouble with

- 17:00 manpower at the end, women became porters, lots of women. I gave you some figures before I mentioned the North Vietnamese casualties, I think it was two million civilians, one point three or four millions soldiers killed. Another eight hundred thousand soldiers wounded and another two hundred

thousand soldiers captured. So those figures on the North Vietnam side, South Vietnam also lost two hundred thousand I think civilians killed, and I don't know what their exact figures were. The sad thing about it to this day is that you have got thousands of ex-South Vietnamese

17:30 soldiers getting around on one leg, no legs, one arm, no arms, this sort of thing, the mines were the worst yeah.

I wanted to ask you, just something that occurred to me then was how did you know, you said there was a cessation of thirty minutes and you came out and you got that badge off that old soldier,

18:00 **how did you know there was that cessation, was that an army guideline or a military guideline?**

Once they stood up again and were pushed back by the chopper fire and then the artillery fire hit them again they all disappeared back into their dead ground, where we couldn't see them. Over the high ground where they came from and down the other side of it or sides of it, so we couldn't see them again. Once they stand up and you can see them again you can shoot them back with the choppers, and once they go back beyond the choppers range the artillery was brought down again and that pushed them back further, it was a matter of using it at the right time.

18:30 **So how did you know when they disappeared that you would have half an hour?**

Well they were pretty disorganised by then, there was dead bodies everywhere and they had been pushed back by the artillery and the gunships, I don't think I would come out for five or ten minutes for sure. That's basically how it works you know, you keep the artillery going, you don't stop it, the artillery keeps going to stop them forming up again if you can. But they disappeared back into where they came from, but they didn't take long to reform, they took maybe like I said thirty minutes at the most. And

19:00 the second rank that was attacking also disappeared too very smartly because they couldn't get far enough forward to get out of the range of the artillery so they had to go back anyhow. So that left the forward rank up here attacking us exposed when they stood up and they had to go back too. So that's basically how it works, tooing and froing, it gets pretty haphazard at times you just do what you have got to do.

How long were you in that particular conflict?

About three days.

Three days all up?

Yeah. Day one, day two and then out the next day.

19:30 **And then you had to withdraw?**

We couldn't move, as I said we sent out a rifle company and most of them got killed and about twenty or thirty came back, and the battalion commander was crying and carrying on because he knew them pretty well and they had all been killed. What happened was they went down to the valley and there was a huge NVA U shaped ambush, like that, and they went straight into the middle of it from the open end and when they tried to come back this way they got hammered from the rear. They must have been ambushed by I reckon a battalion minus, well in the end as I said we had

20:00 my battalion surrounded by at least one regiment, perhaps two NVA regiments. So that's eight battalions around us, eight to one we were roughly outnumbered so the odds weren't good. And they were very angry with us for taking over that feature, see that's why I tried to explain what they were doing, they with withdrawing a force that had been there for a while to relieve them and put a new force in and we landed just before the new force came in and it buggered up all of their plans you see? And it was a big element I tell you, NVA regiments we are talking about.

20:30 **Well that's something interesting that you said as well ,they must have had a Chinese advisor the Chinese coins and what have you, and then that explains it, they had seen you land and racked off [left quickly]?**

Well we actually landed as they were racking off. So they didn't like it because we had gunships operating whilst we were landing that protected us, when we landed in our big choppers the Huey gunships and the Cobras circled up and brassed up anyone who was running away from the feature

21:00 or trying to get to us you know. If they see fire coming onto us they fire back and if they see people running off they know it is not our blokes, they fire at them. Because it is very hard, the daytime the North Vietnamese have got darker uniform and they wear those ridiculous hats usually. Night time it is very different and difficult, you can't tell who is who. You have got to be very careful, that's another interesting story I will tell you later too, same operation.

You can tell me now if you like?

The first night I used a Stinger which was that night that very night.

That first night?

Yeah well I had never used a Stinger before.

- 21:30 I got chatting with this captain, there is another interesting story I can tell you too. We had a bit of a chat, he came from Nha Trang which was the headquarters of the Special Operations Squadrons, Stinger operations, for I and II corps So we get out there and we're having a chat and he says, "Okay I want you to identify your positions", we had these specially prepared helmets, steel pots, take the liner out and they were painted white inside, and stick a strobe light inside the helmet and stick it up in a tree so the Stinger can see them. That's the only way you can identify positions at night in thick country,
- 22:00 the strobe just goes like a normal strobe on a jet airline, flash, flash, flash. Non stop. So we have got three rifle companies, and the headquarters company, and the prisoner company they're lucky if they have got a strobe, that's maybe five. We put all of these strobes on our positions and he comes back and he tells me, "Well I can see eight." And I said, "No we have only got five." So all right we had a bit of a chat between ourselves, the Vietnamese CO and I and we worked out that the three northern lights were where the NVA were,
- 22:30 they had been listening on our radio, so they are no fools. That was on VHF [Very High Frequency], that was the only set we had. That was the AN_PRC- 77 set. So it was our normal VHF frequencies, so I said, "No, no, quickly get the three northern ones." So he hammered the three northern ones and everything went dark, that was the end of that, and then he knew where we were as our positions were lit up with the strobe lights and so everything was fine. So I said, "Okay any fire coming into these locations
- 23:00 is not ours it is obviously NVA." And so he just sat there and waited and when they started attacking we had them again. And he put in strike after strike for about two hours. And his fire is fairly withering, it is a massive waste of ammunition I must admit, but it is certainly effective too because it is a round for every square yard on the ground. All over the place no matter where he fires.

How many bullets were in a round?

One round is a bullet, but what I am saying is one round every square metre or yard,

- 23:30 wherever you look at on the ground. So anyone there is going to be hit, basically standing up or lying down they are going to get hit, and the Stinger is very impressive you know. But the interesting part was that we used red tracer going down to the ground and the North Vietnamese were using green tracer going up out of their 12.7mm machine guns going up. And you could see the green tracer going up and the red tracer going down and the green tracer disappear which was good because it means we knocked them out you know. But they're obviously vulnerable if they get down too low because obviously 12.7mm machine guns can knock them over
- 24:00 Or fire at them, and also if they're very low from the higher ground the other machine guns can also come into play from the higher ground, so they always had to fly at a certain height, buzz around like that, always counter clockwise with the fire coming out of their port side. But they can also drop flares as I said, which is good. Light the place up because we had limited flares, and the artillery do the same you can have artillery flares too, light the place up. You can see then just like daytime you know, but it only lasts for two or three minutes and then it is dark again. I was
- 24:30 going to tell you about the... ?

Captain?

Yeah on the way out in the CH-53 Sikorsky I was in. What I did each time when we go out on operation I put myself and the battalion commander in one chopper, my lieutenant the American in the next chopper, and the Negro sergeant either with him or in the next chopper, and so if one chopper goes down there is always someone there to carry on. Anyway I was listening on the radio, chatting away to someone, my looey [lieutenant] actually on the second chopper, and this bloke up

- 25:00 and said, "Are you Aussie?" and I said, "Yeah." And he was one of the pilots on the Sikorsky and he was a RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] pilot on secondment to one of the US Marine helicopter squadrons. Had a bit of a chat with him, he was from Melbourne; he may have followed Collingwood I don't remember now. And I said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "Oh getting a bit of familiarisation with the American Marines." Which was interesting, I didn't know we had Australia pilots up there; he was the only one I came across. I didn't like the RAAF because of other reasons I explained before,
- 25:30 the RAAF had the least number of troops in Vietnam and they won the most number of valour awards, you know, always the way. Governments, I can go into detail about that later on.

Yeah that would be good actually.

So we got there and the Australian pilot, and he didn't know I was there, and I said, "There are another forty of us advisors in I Corps wandering around." He said, "Oh." And there were. I should re-iterate for the majority of the

- 26:00 ten years, the Training Team was there from 31 July 1962 to 17 December 1972 and during that period normally there were a hundred advisors posted each year to go over to Vietnam. Eighteen officers and eighty-two warrant officers each year. It changed in 1970 when we had 58 corporals posted in and, they worked in Phuoc Tuy province within III Corps. We also had the odd sergeant or two and even a private soldier posted to AATTV, but basically it was the

26:30 officers and warrant officers that made up the Team, during the whole ten year continuity. And the other thing I don't think I mentioned either, was that the Training Team never existed in Australia. The AATTV was a unit raised in Vietnam and disbanded in Vietnam, never served in Australia. Do you want to talk about the Team later on?

Well that's a fairly unique thing isn't it? Is that the only time in Australian military history?

Yes.

27:00 We had never had a unit like it, it has been taken off the order of battle, which is our sort of establishment, it doesn't exist any more. As I said it commenced activities in Vietnam in July 1962 and ceased activities in Vietnam in December 1972. It won the most awards, it is the most decorated army unit in Australian military history that I am aware of. I have got a list, do you want to know what the actual awards are? Okay well roughly there were four VCs, [Victoria Crosses]

27:30 two American presidential citations, two or three hundred American awards and two or three hundred Vietnamese awards. For a manpower that was probably nine hundred and forty I think over ten years. We had thirty-three KIA [Killed in Action] and about another eighty or ninety wounded in action [WIA].

Bernie I was just wondering with the AATTV, why do you think it was so necessary for them to

28:00 **be there as opposed to any other war?**

The South Vietnamese military was full of avarice and greed and money making. So when the Americans got there in 1960, the American advisory team went there in 1955, seven years before the Australian team got there, so they had been there awhile and the Americans actually got there in strength in 1965 around the same time as the regular Australian

28:30 troops got there, roughly the same time. A year apart?. And they soon discovered that the South Vietnamese military and army were not doing their job. Because the senior officer and senior NCOs were knocking all of the money off, not paying their soldiers, not buying rations, not buying ammunition, using it themselves for their own private purposes, and basically corruption was rife, that's the word I was trying to think of. So the Americans took over the fighting of the war. They brought the US Marines

29:00 into I Corps and the American Army, they put the American Army in II Corps, and III Corps and the ARVN and the US Army in IV Corps in order to keep on fighting. But they had to be, the South Vietnamese Army had to be re-equipped, remanned with new soldiers, retrained, re-issued with new rifles, in fact they had only just received the new M16 rifle either two years before I got there or one year before I got there. That's how slow they were getting the M16 Assault Rifle which was much lighter, before that the little

29:30 South Vietnamese Binh Si, the private soldier was carrying a 7.62 M-14 which is a huge bloody thing, which the Marines carry, can you imagine a little soldier carrying that? But they were carrying lots of little old weapons from the Second World War like a M-1 which is a little thirty cal, assault rifle. And then they got the M-16 which was much better, about two years before I got there, so that was the re-arming of them. And with new mortars and rockets launchers,

30:00 106 recoilless rifles (RCLs), those sort of things which the Australians and the Americans had already been using. So we had to re-arm them etcetera, etcetera. So in other words the US Army took over the operational responsibility while the South Vietnamese were being re-trained and re-equipped. And then once they had done all of that, the idea was in 1970 that the Vietnamisation program would put the Vietnamese back in control to fight their own war, that was the whole concept set-up. So when I got there my battalion had had a

30:30 couple of really nasty episodes, they had been ambushed one time in 1968, this was just south of Da Nang, in the middle of the pacified area I suppose, they got ambushed and they lost about two or three hundred dead, killed by a large NVA force so their morale wasn't very good. So they had to build them up again, that was just one incident and this was going on all over Vietnam. Also the South Vietnamese Army was losing soldiers left right and centre going AWOL. Because their meagre pay which was about

31:00 probably, when I was there, was probably about three to five dollars a month, wasn't going through to their wives and loved ones at home. So I had a lot of soldiers from Saigon fighting in our battalion and their money wasn't going home to their wives. So they would desert, take the money that they had with them and go back and make sure their wives and family had food and then come back later on. And they were the soldiers who were then put into the prisoner company as punishment. But at that stage they were losing about a battalion

31:30 a week at one stage from the South Vietnamese Army, and they couldn't keep that up, so that was why they were retraining and re-equipping. They had a huge desertion problem, a battalion a week is say five to six hundred soldiers a week. Can't afford that when you're fighting a large war

That's a problem.

That's a big problem.

What uniform did they wear the South Vietnamese?

They had their own uniform but they also wore US Army gear, they are only tiny people

- 32:00 so tiny American uniforms also, but they mainly had their own uniform yeah. All American equipment, webbing, back pack, rifle, steel pot I mentioned the steel pot before, they did have them. And all American supplied military equipment and ammunition. The steel pot they used for a variety of purposes they used it for cooking in, washing in, sitting on. Sitting on was good. If it was raining and there is a lot of water around you, you just put the pot down and you sit on top of it and you have got a dry place to put your bum on.
- 32:30 But they cook in it and wash in it, clean their teeth in it. Drink out of it, put water in it and drink out of it. Quite a good little thing to have around. When you cook in it of course you are going to get a lot of charcoal on it eventually so it goes a bit black, that's the only problem. Cook rice in it. So when I got there the US Marines, bloody good soldiers I might add, a bit thick but bloody good soldiers.
- 33:00 Very "gung ho", up the guts with plenty of smoke. They were looking after the DMZ demilitarised zone and protecting that plus they were carrying out pacification, in the eastern portion of I Corps, which was the five northern provinces of South Vietnam. But there was a combined effort up there, there was the US Army, there was the US Marine Corps, there was the Vietnamese Army all combining until 1972 to stop the North Vietnamese coming in and knocking them over. Hospitalisation too that was another case, there were three huge hospitals in Da Nang.
- 33:30 One run by the US Marines, one run by the American Army and one run by the US Navy also. They were all in the eastern suburbs of Da Nang city along the coast and the Marines had a special area there called Marble Mountain Air Facility which they operated out of. They had a Marine hospital there, the navy had what's called the Navy Support Activity Hospital, NSAH and the army had 95 Evac [95th Evacuation Hospital] I think it was, which was one of their huge hospitals. As an
- 34:00 advisor you could end up at any one of them, it wouldn't matter. But you could go to either one, if you got badly wounded and dusted off by chopper, probably you would be in a hospital within, no more than say twenty to thirty minutes, from whatever conflict whatsoever, that's how close.

Can I ask you about, you have been wounded, because you actually didn't tell us about that when you went back to that story.

On the first operation I went out on, Wally Sheppard came out for the first three days, and everything was fine I had it under control and learnt how to use the choppers without running out of fuel and away we went.

- 34:30 About day five Wally was back on our regiment hill, Hill 55, where the battalion came from and I was out there and we were going through this river, pretty wide river not deep water, probably maximum was about three or four foot depth and about eighty metres wide, big banks on both sides. And in I Corps the villages are always near the river on the high ground so they won't get flooded, and there is fresh water coming out of the hills. So anyway there was a couple of villages or hamlets around but that was okay. We were travelling through there and I normally
- 35:00 travel behind the battalion commander about twenty or thirty paces. But this particular day we had a Vietnamese artillery party (FO) with us of two officers and about three or four soldiers and they controlled the Vietnamese 105 mm artillery because we were in the lowlands and the 105's could make the ranges. Eleven thousand metres max, you know. So anyway there we were. And I travelled behind them luckily, and we went down and started crossing the river and the battalion commander disappeared over the far bank with his HQ party. And then the FO [Forward Observer] party from the Vietnamese Artillery started going up the bank,
- 35:30 and the signaller, there was one or two signallers there, and one of them dropped his handset and was pulling this like a little normal telephone on the end of a cord, I think it was the AN-PR 77 set and this stretches out for about ten foot, eight or ten foot or whatever and he was pulling it and he hit a trip wire which was attached to a 105 artillery booby trap. And of course on the back of that it went off right next to him, he was killed instantly. It killed three Vietnamese and wounded another five and I was half way up the bank and it picked me up and threw me back into the river upside down, knocked me out.
- 36:00 Did not know what was going on, couldn't hear for about three weeks. I got a couple of bits of shrapnel in my shoulder but nothing serious. If I had have been in front, I normally would have been in front of that FO party I would have got blasted from the back, I would not have been over the top of the hill you know. I was very lucky I was down the bottom still. And most of the blast went over my head. Very fortunate. My big Negro sergeant pulled me out. Lost my rifle, took us about half an hour to find the bloody rifle, M-16 floating down around there somewhere, we got that back but that was pretty scary. I did the right thing,
- 36:30 I radioed through what had happened, well I didn't radio through because I couldn't hear but the looney did and Wally Sheppard put it through to headquarters and you have got to put through what they call a NOTICAS, notification of a casualty, I stayed on duty but I notified them. Everything was fine after that. I just couldn't not hear for about three weeks, could not hear a bloody thing so I couldn't use the radio, couldn't talk, I had to watch peoples lips and say, "What the hell are you talking about?" You know.

Why did you stay in work I mean?

Oh well there was no real need,

37:00 there was no point, the operation finished about a week later. I could still talk you know, talk to people about map things and point and say, "There we are blah, blah."

Would they say, "You're yelling Bernie"?

Well I couldn't hear anything so it didn't matter. After a while my hearing came back but I reckon it affected my hearing forever more. It really has.

Were you concerned that it wouldn't come back at all?

Yeah I have had lots of tests done but they say, "No you're okay." I am going deaf in one ear I know that. About half, and this one

37:30 here just slightly so I can still hear okay thank God.

The Vietnamese that were killed did you carry their bodies to the other side of the bank?

They just get the bodies, we just pulled back to where we came from, secured a safe landing zone for the Huey to come in, and the Vietnamese are very short of gear so if anybody dies the first thing he loses is his boots, good boots if he has got them, some other soldier gets them. They just wrap them up in a poncho which is American issue like a hootchie [Australian plastic rain guards],

38:00 only it is a solid rubber raincoat, rubber mat. Line them up, in comes the chopper takes them away back to where they have got to go, normally Da Nang.

Do you, did you lay the bodies on or does the chopper?

No, no. The Vietnamese do all of that ,they just wrap them all up and put them into one of the choppers.

The Vietnamese civvies?

No, Vietnamese soldiers wrap their own dead bodies up, look after them, take the boots off, they want the boots.

38:30 They always lose their boots, rifle and webbing they need that for other soldiers that haven't got it you know?

What about the Australians do we do that too?

Oh no. Initially there was a bit of a hoo hah during early Training Team days. The Australia Government wouldn't bring the bodies back to Australia and they were buried in a place called Butterworth Malacca, in Malaya, but there was a bit of a hue and cry, an American advisor brought back his Aussie mate to Australia and got him back here so the Australian Government relented at last

39:00 and they brought, anyone killed then got brought back to Australian, but initially they didn't, because it is very sad because you have got to look after your soldiers, who wants to be buried in a foreign land? Away from his family and friends, know what I mean.

I have heard stories that the Americans were great coming down in their choppers to aid fighting to be really good supporters, did you find that?

Say that again.

I have just heard really good stories

39:30 **about the Australian pilots wouldn't come down in Vietnam in their helicopters but the American ones would?**

I worked with what's called the Black Cats and Alley Cats out of Da Nang, that was the American assault helicopter squadrons, airborne helicopter squadron which carry our troops and provide gunships. I only dealt with American Marine and army choppers up there and they were magnificent, they would fly day and night, hail rain or shine, never worried them. Yeah initially our

40:00 RAAF chappies, the Blue Orchids, in III Corps wouldn't fly at night apparently because of the dangers associated with night flying. They did in the end I understand, but I had no trouble, the pilots that supported us were the best in the world, same down in the Delta, I have got an interesting story about the Delta actually. There was a unit called the Emu Squadron (135 AHC) assault helicopter company, which was based at a place called Dong Tam in my time.

Hang on a second Bernie we will switch tapes now and,

Tape 5

00:30 **So Bernie we were just talking about chopper pilots and what was happening there in**

Vietnam.

Yeah I made a mistake, I think I have become modernised in the Australian Army. The chopper support squadron was called the Black Cats from Da Nang, they flew the resupply Hueys, and the Alley Cats, from the same squadron or company flew the gunships, that's the Huey gunships and the Cobra gunships. So you have got Alley Cats and Black Cats in Da Nang that supported all of the ARVN battalions and mainly flown by US Army pilots

- 01:00 And then on top of that you had your Marine Americans Marine gunships on top of them for support. I was going to mention, down in the Delta my last five months at a place called Dong Tam there was a special unit there called the EMU squadron. Its official name was the 135th AHC, Assault Helicopter Company. And what it was, it was half American (US Army), and half Royal Australian Navy. So we had
- 01:30 the navy element coming from the Royal Australian Navy. In other words they were pilots and ground crew, so you would have in these choppers a big bearded fellow who was obviously Royal Australian Navy with his helmet on, and in the next chopper you would have a young American pilot ,young looey or warrant officers. Most of the Us Army pilots were warrant officers not officers. That's the differences between the two services, Australian and American forces. Most of the pilots in Vietnam were warrant officers from the
- 02:00 American side but all Australian pilots are always officers, either air force or navy. That's the difference, but anyhow, this Emu Squadron, say the AHC, the helicopter company was about three hundred strong, so there would be a hundred and fifty Australians there, there wouldn't be that high , two hundred strong a hundred of each, hundred Australians, hundred Americans. They were called the Emus which stood from Experimental Military Unit that's why they call it that, and it operated for five years.
- 02:30 Really started off in Vung Tau, which was where the Australians were, and then went to a place called Black Horse and then Bien Hoa and then it went down to Dong Tam, which was where I was in 1970 and then finally they went back to Di An which was near Saigon, then they disbanded in about 1971, but they were tremendous pilots these blokes. I am still friends with one particular pilot who won the Silver Star, another particular story there I will tell you about, he is up in Townsville now. He had the
- 03:00 rank of sub lieutenant I think he was or whatever the equivalent was in the navy at that stage. But he won a Silver Star in 1969 flying out of Black Horse or Black Hawk one or the other in III Corps. He had a brand new chopper at the start of the day and they were shifting Vietnamese platoons, each chopper load and at the end of the day his chopper was so badly shot up when he landed the last time, they couldn't fly it again, wrote it off!. He got back all right though I don't know how. Machine gun fire, Bullets
- 03:30 through it , holes through it. That's another story there. He was supposed to receive a Silver Star before he came home but on the day of the parade the American general said he could not give it to a non-American so he wasn't given it. So it wasn't until about twenty years later which would have been about 1988/1990 that he was finally given the Silver Star back here in Australia for his efforts that day, twenty years later. So that's it. That's how ridiculous this was , again the Australian
- 04:00 Government didn't offer any assistance, didn't help him. A Silver Star is an excellent award for a helicopter pilot. Andy Perry is still around, up in Townsville, has a good life, comes down here on occasions, I see him. He was an excellent pilot.

I might get his name and number at the end of the day.

Yeah. No problem. Okay. The Emu Squadron probably saved a couple of my WOs lives in IV Corps, the Delta. Once again they came to our rescue, where was it WO Gary Sutherland, where was it? Wherever it was two of the WOs got

- 04:30 pinned down in an ambush

What do you mean by pinned down sorry?

They walked into an ambush and they couldn't withdraw, they couldn't move, couldn't withdraw or advance or anything. They eventually had enough Vietnamese there to return fire to break the ambush, one was badly wounded. The Emu Squadron was flying around escorting the general for IV Corps,

- 05:00 the ARVN general who was a three star general, whatever he was. Boss of the whole area, Vietnamese, he was flying around in his chopper at the time with these EMU people and a couple of other escort choppers, and Gary Sutherland was the bloke, he was badly wounded. And the general landed his chopper, threw him on board and flew him back to hospital, this was the general. An ARVN general picked up an Australian warrant officer and took him straight to a hospital in a place called Can Tho and they operated and saved Gary's life. He was very lucky to live. And there he was dying and bloody on the back of this, Vietnamese generals always have leather cushions
- 05:30 and seating and the best upholstery in their choppers, he was lying back there with blood coming out of him. And all smears of dirt and water and trash all over the general's seat, and they took him back to Can Tho I think, well done, very good.

Okay you wanted to make a correction Bernie?

Yeah I have been talking about the American, the US army helicopter squadrons, they are called AHCs which stands for Assault Helicopter Company.

06:00 And there were probably seventy or eighty of them scattered down from my I corps down to IV Corps. What they basically do is take assaulting troops into combat, land them on a feature and troops assault from the helicopter, they also provide gunship support. And they also do resupply and medivac sort of thing, Dustoff is obviously a big job for them. But they are assault helicopter companies, my mistake before thanks.

No Worries, now you have talked really highly of the... we just need to pause for a second.

06:30 **You have talked really highly Bernie of the American pilots in the choppers and everything, what about just the regular US soldiers? What was your opinion of those while you were there?**

I didn't have much to do with US Army soldiers, I mainly worked with US Marine Corps, we did a lot of operations with them and with the Koreans. But from my experiences, the US Marine Corps

07:00 in I Corps in particular were excellent. They had a shocking job to do, I don't know whether you realise that their job normally is to form a beachhead or an airhead and allow the ingress of US Army battalions through them, and all they are, are shock troops to get a foothold, and let the rest of the US army come through. Well they didn't actually do that in Vietnam that was not their role at all. Their role in Vietnam was two fold, this is the Marine Corps; one role was to protect the DMZ which was the demilitarised

07:30 zone and stop incursion from the north; and the other was to carry out a pacification type role as the US Army, as the Australians, as the Koreans were doing in the eastern verges of the five northern provinces of I Corps. So their roles were completely foreign to them. It was like conventional warfare in the DMZ and the guerrilla warfare on the eastern fringes of the I Corps five provinces, so that was a big challenge for them.

08:00 And consequently the province I was in, Quang Nam Province had the highest casualty rate of the Marine Corps in the whole of Vietnam. I think from memory in I Corps alone roughly thirteen and a half thousand Marine corps soldiers were killed and the majority of those say six to eight thousand were killed in Quang Nam province which was the province I was in, which was the third, yes the second or third province down from the DMZ. So that explains why the casualties were high, what they were doing etcetera. As regards to US Army I did do one operation with them, they carried on

08:30 reasonably well, did what they had to do. Most of these operations I am talking about were sometimes rather large operations, in other words regiment size, two regiments plus and even division strength. You would have two or four battalions blocking, two battalions sweeping, try and flush the NVA out into a trap, that was basically in low country, in high country totally different ball game. Battalion against battalion, regiment against regiment. And Marine battalion against NVA battalion etcetera. Same as us. Same as the ARVN that is.

09:00 Also you should remember that the US Army was very stretched in the number of battalions it could put over there. The bigger number of soldiers on the ground the less professional in their training. They had six hundred thousand on the ground at one stage and to train those six hundred thousand up to a satisfactory level it is much more difficult than say training the Australian Task Force with eight thousand.

09:30 We could train much better because we had less numbers, it just stands to reason. But I know that there were bad American units and bad Vietnamese units, it always happens you get the good and the bad. The majority were quite okay yeah.

The huge variety of ops [operations] you were involved in, I mean for example you were just talking about having to flush the VC out into traps, what sort of traps would you use for the.....?

Well that's what's called the cordon and search. So what you do you get two battalions or whatever Americans,

10:00 or ARVN and you sweep them through a certain number of grid squares, in other words on a map, put them into the first ten grid squares they sweep directly north from there, and the other battalion sweeps the same direction and you normally push them towards the river. At the river you have a blocking force, set up across the river to stop anything crossing the river. And you put some sort of blocking force on the flank. So once they get into a small U, large sides, small bottom, you have two battalions dug in there or something,

10:30 and half a battalion either side you flush the NVA or whatever, VC out, and you push them towards the river and you have got them. They can't escape, and you have got two battalions this side, another two behind and half there and half there. On both flanks blocking, so it is a large operation, regimental operation but that's what we used to do yeah. Same time you would sweep through hamlets and villages and see what is going on there. As I said before most hamlets, and villages, have got huge bunker systems underneath their huts, so you wouldn't know who was down there,

11:00 could be VC could be NVA could be just peasants. Because they had to hide sometimes from stray artillery, stray air craft dropping bombs on them. All of that sort of stuff. So unless you actually

physically cleared the dugouts or tunnels that were underneath the huts you wouldn't know who was in there. That's the whole problem.

And can you talk to us about that whole fact of Vietnam that you wouldn't know who was enemy and who wasn't?

Well it didn't really affect me so much in I Corps because

- 11:30 there we had a very dedicated NVA enemy most of the time with the odd VC thrown in. It is probably more applicable down in IV Corps or III Corps where there was not as many large NVA elements in other words regiments and divisions, and more VC. It creates a problem because during the day, some young bloke out in the field there, or some young woman, she might be doing her thing, planting rice, picking rice or thrashing rice whatever. And come night time she might turn into a local VC with AK47 [Kalashnikov rifle] and go out and create havoc.
- 12:00 That's why, the only way to pacify that was to have regular patrolling. Lots of smaller movement, platoons and companies doing their things in certain areas that way you claim the night back from the enemy. If you give them initiative they can maintain it and destroy you if you sit in the compound. There was a big problem in IV Corps, the French mentality of sitting in their mud compounds. They were pretty hopeless. They built these huge compounds, triangular ones and
- 12:30 circular ones and sometimes even oblong ones. But what they basically were was a compound made out of mud and timber and more mud and timber, and three strong points, and you would put an RF company in there, that's all they would do. Laze around with their womenfolk or whatever they were doing, not doing any patrolling, not doing any aggressive movement through the night and beating the VC at their own game. But that was because of the French, the French had that weird idea of "fortress mentality" and not patrolling aggressively.
- 13:00 You have got to do that you have got to patrol. So that was the concept of the operations in IV Corps

And the Australians had a good reputation for that specifically didn't they?

Well because we had just come out of Malaya, Borneo, Indonesian confrontation, and Malaya again with the British. And our warrant officers were all the experts in counter revolutionary warfare and rifle company tactics, guerrilla warfare, it happened in Malaya the Brits and the Australians, we managed to beat them up there.

- 13:30 And it was exactly the same situation in Vietnam however, the only difference was Vietnam was governed by the Vietnamese still. Whereas in Malaya for instance the British ruled and we could basically do what we liked there, but yeah the same concept. You have got to have aggressive patrolling and go out and kill the enemy before he comes to you, and then pacify the people, get the people on side, win their hearts and minds, which is very difficult. That's the other aspect.

Can you talk to us about winning hearts and minds?

Yes well what happened in I Corps when I was

- 14:00 there the Marine Corps had a very good system going, I forget what they call it, I think Combined Action Platoons, companies and battalions [CAPs etc]. However what it was, was a Marine platoon of say thirty Marines, with well obviously squad leaders, would go out and take a medic with them a doctor, someone who had limited medical knowledge, a dentist, and someone who had some sort of engineering expertise. and they would go to the village and live there and help the health of the children in the villages themselves.
- 14:30 Provide rations and food for them, and then help them with their defences. Setting up wire barricades, mine fields, improving their housing and water supply, possibly building buildings and all of that sort of stuff. Which was a big effort, but that's what they used to do, and the Marines used to have dozens of these little units wandering around Quang Nam province, well not wandering around but living in villages in Quang Nam province. I would come along with my battalion and in the middle of nowhere you would find this little village defensive area, and a platoon of Marines and there would be no support for them for miles, except for artillery perhaps.
- 15:00 **And how many would be in a unit supporting a village?**
- About twenty, thirty Marines., but they had of course the choppers. If something happened they would call on immediate artillery and air to ground fighter support. Ground support and this sort of thing. It was fairly hairy though I tell you, I wouldn't like to do that. It was akin to our SAS [Special Air Service] I suppose working in about groups of five. It is straight out war then, you are living with the people, you don't know who is VC and who is not. You soon find out I suppose. But yeah
- 15:30 then the VC sneak in at night and do nasty things to you if you're not alert. So that's what they were doing yeah.

And what kind of physical defences would they build around the villages?

Oh moats, they would build, berm walls, berms are barricades of mud with height. Built up high. They had mine field out there, warrant officers used the outposts, they know all of these things, you had one entrance to get in and another entrance to get out. If you have got to get out in a hurry, and these little

village areas in those days weren't very big. Ten or twelve huts. So you could surround the whole place, that was the idea of it,

16:00 to get them on the side of the Saigon regime, that was the whole idea. The medical and dental was good because they were able to give the kids inoculations and all of that sort of stuff. Provide them with sweets and so on. And the food situation was good too, because rice is their staple diet, if that goes bad or there is a flood or something goes wrong with it, gets encrusted with some disease or germ or something. Then you help them out with food then.

And from what you actually saw did these tactics actually work?

Yeah it was working quite well.

16:30 But as I said they brought in the Vietnamization programme for the whole of Vietnam. In other words the Vietnamese take back the war into their own control. So before when the Vietnamese were non-aggressive and doing all of the retraining and resupplying and so on, the Americans were doing all of their fighting and then eventually in 1970 the Vietnamese started to come in and do the operations themselves and American started to pull back troops because of the political unrest at home,

17:00 and a few other things, money and supplies. And eventually handed it over to the Vietnamese and they eventually lost because of their non-support from the American government simple as that. Non-support in money, military assistance everything. And that was the only reason they lost really.

There is just so many questions.

17:30 **From your experience was it true that a lot of the South Vietnamese that would become VC at night time was it essentially due to pressure put on the by the VC? Threats? Or were there other reasons?**

Depends. In I Corps it was a little bit different because of the huge friendly ARVN forces in the area and the NVA couldn't come down and stay there, they got pushed out again. But in IV Corps yes the VC were very strong because it is a long way from Saigon. There was no large Vietnamese forces there so

18:00 all of these little hamlets in the area, it depended on who was strongest in the area at the time. If the Americans and the Vietnamese, the ARVN were there all of the time they were friendly to us, if we withdrew the VC came in. what they would do , they always assassinate the doctor, the head man and the chief nurse and say, "That's what happens for being friendly with the Saigon regime don't do it again. " and then they all become VC. It was intimidation. There was an old saying the

18:30 Americans coined this I think, it goes both ways actually, "If you grab them by the balls, their hearts and minds will surely follow." Simple as that. That's what it boiled down to. In other words whoever, them or us, the stronger in the area. I don't blame them why would you? You could play both ends of the stick. The RF and PF in particular had a lot of VC infiltrators in

19:00 them. But regular army not so much, in a battalion of six to eight hundred we had about half a dozen VC sympathisers and they used to disappear under mysterious circumstances. And down south the RF and PF were very fickle and the RF company commander and also the local district chief. If he was sympathetic to the VC that's the way things were going, so yeah down there we had instances of whole RF companies

19:30 just deserting overnight and becoming VC. That sort of thing, disappearing. And turning over to the other side.

And just in the case of the brutal intimidation tactics VC used that I have heard some horrendous stories. Did you witness any kinds of those atrocities?

Yeah a couple of times I. We once had two prisoners, prisoner company blokes run off ,this was another operation up on the Laos border.

20:00 They were rather foolish actually, anyway run off and disappeared. And we had already swept from the south to the north over about five or six kilometres. And instead of running back to the south they ran to the north and got captured by the enemy, and about two days later we were wandering up this ridge line and found these two heads on posts. These two soldiers had had their heads cut off. Looked like pretty nasty too, because they were grimacing and so on, but the battalion commander got the two heads buried straight away so that no one except for headquarter company saw them. But that the sort of things they would do, that was NVA too, not VC.

20:30 IV Corps was very brutal, what can I say. From my own research, see IV Corps was a different kettle of fish IV corps was run by the CIA. Straight out, that's the Central Intelligence Agency from America. And it had a dual system of running. It had, we had a thing called CORDS, which stood for Civil Operations and Rural Development Support

21:00 Which was the civilian side of things from America, American civilians came over and helped them redevelop their farms and tractors, and all new equipment, blah, blah, try and get their rice growing really maximum. But at the same time you had the US military and the two blokes at the top were equal in rank. Which created a bit of conflict at the time, so you had these two systems and in between you

had the CIA who were doing all of their nasty things wandering over to Cambodia mostly. CIA was really strong in IV Corps. You could pick out their planes and helicopters because they were all silver basically. They had headquarters in Can Tho, I worked with a couple down in

- 21:30 the bottom of South Vietnam. They lived in nice caravans they were separate from the American Army advisors, did their own thing, wandered around in cities and carried 45's under their arm pits and M16's and all sorts of rubbish.

Makes it pretty covert doesn't it?

Well there it was, but they had a lot of activity in Cambodia, they were flying over there and coming back, God knows what they were doing. No idea. And the amount of money was going into there from the American government, trying to win the people over again, and get them to produce

- 22:00 rice on their farms basically. But you know IV Corps was very wet, most of the place was under water most of the time, two or three foot under water most of the time it was a horrible place. So all of the hamlets and villages there were all right on the edge of highways. You would drive down a highway and it was built up and there was all of these houses and villages on the side. So what the people used to do when they were harvesting, stick all of their wheat sheaves on the side of the ride and the vehicle traffic going past would blow the chaff out and leave the wheat there, and it worked. They would bash it around a bit and the chaff would blow off and you have got wheat left

- 22:30 on the side. Interesting concept but it works.

That's pretty good.

And most of the big American trucks did all of that, going up and down all of the time. It also makes you very vulnerable because you are always on one access, you are only on one road all of the time. Prone to ambushing and mining and all of that sort of thing. I can't, oh yeah another time up north we were advancing on another operation, a battalion and two rifle companies up, us in the centre and two rifle companies behind us.

- 23:00 And one of the lead platoons had an officer there and he was waving his map around and he got shot by a sniper straight through the neck, dead of course. So we surround this village, it wasn't very big, probably eighty people in it I guess. And the old head man came out, old fellow he had a big long beard and a walking stick. As I said, once again they were all old people or young people. Anyhow the battalion commander was talking with them and they wouldn't tell him anything you know. And he was really annoyed because this young platoon commander got shot from inside one of the huts. So he sent all of the soldiers, we couldn't find anything, down the holes, we couldn't find anything,

- 23:30 so in the end he just grabbed all of the people over there, the old people and the young people that is. And the village head and through grenades down in the bunkers under the huts, burnt all of the huts, burnt the whole place down. And they were all crying and carrying on and he got a bit sick of that so they told them to shut up and they wouldn't, so they started butt stroking them with the rifles knocking them out, and shutting them up. But I couldn't do anything about that. It was Vietnamese and Vietnamese, couldn't do anything. What could I do? Couldn't do a bloody thing you know, but that was fair enough because we lost a soldier,

- 24:00 shot through the neck by a sniper about fifty yards, fifty metres, and they knew which hut it was in but we couldn't find a bloody thing. As it was when we were just on the outskirts departing and it was all on fire we heard about two or three huge secondary explosions so you know, they had ammunition hidden and other gear that went up when it all caught fire. So they were very VC prone. But I mean once we leave there they will be even more anti-government and anti-ARVN but that's the way it goes. This was only, this was about twenty

- 24:30 miles south of Da Nang on the coast there. That's the way it was. And you know, you got to know your areas, you would know who was friendly and who wasn't friendly, whether it was a bad area where there was a lot of mines and where there wasn't a lot of mines and all of that sort of things. That's sort of second hand knowledge after a while, the Vietnamese know. And we lost a hell of a lot of ARVN casualties by M-16 mines jumping ones, the ones that jump out of the ground, about three foot and go off. And they maim you something shocking you know. They send all of these little pellets

- 25:00 pieces of shrapnel and they are very dangerous.

Booby traps and things like that?

Yeah they were very prevalent too.

I guess what were some of the booby traps that you would probably run into?

Well the main problem up north, all of the highways were built up sometimes ten foot, six foot above the paddy field. Dirt and then the bitumen on the top so all you have got to do is tunnel in the side and then lay a big explosive charge there

- 25:30 with some sort of pressure device and of course along comes the first truck there a 'Wooff!!'. Up she goes. Those sort of mine's even the basic M-14 anti-personnel mine and the M-16 jumping jack mine. We were up one morning after stand down and we were all standing around having a cigarette and

having some breakfast, and there was about six or eight or ten of the M-14s scattered around the headquarters all over the place so one of the VC infiltrators had been around at night just dropping them all over the place. They would blow your ankle off, you would lose your foot. So we all just had to stand there while the anti-mine squad

- 26:00 from the battalion headquarters sorted them out, picked them up and got rid of them. That's just one example. Booby traps, yeah. That one that nearly got me was a 105 mm artillery round that didn't explode when it hit the ground and then it was booby trapped again and detonated by the ARVN signaller. So it went off and at close range they are very deadly. I never come across many panji pits or anything like that. That's the ones with the spikes in the bottom, didn't see too many of those because we were in the mountains most of the time.
- 26:30 We were on the Laos border and obviously that's close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and obviously they weren't going to booby trap along there too much, get their own people sort of thing, apart from other reasons. Yeah. Mainly around civilised area, the coastal region, that's where all of the booby traps were. Outside villages or inside villages. You have only got to have a soldier grab a bag of rice bag or something and chung. That sort of thing, that's they way it goes. So you are very careful of what you grab and what you pull and what you push and what you prod.

- 27:00 Something like that.

Almost sounds like a song.

Exactly.

Bernie, we kind of took a left hand, but what were the other types of ops you were doing in terms of design I guess?

All right. The basic operation we did, the Americans had a very good sensor, and intelligence set-up they put out, they would drop these things from aircraft and plant them in the ground

- 27:30 and they had these sensor devices they could tell if there was activity in the areas so once that happened or their spies or whatever or the turncoats [chieu hois] from the NVA or the VC, they would tell us there was a large element in the area and we went in there and checked it out. That was basically the way it worked. There was a lot of guess work in it because the mountain area was so huge and so big on the western area of I Corps there, huge mountains. Above the clouds in some area, that's how high they were. The clouds were below us in some operations, but anyway.
- 28:00 So you know you have got that and you have where there is a clearing so you have got to follow the ridge lines, and all of the NVA did was just build big bunkers two sides of the ridgeline and just delay you, slow you down all of the time. And you would have to take out each bunker one by one, and they were good solid bunkers, big timber two or three foot diameter of timber, huge bunkers, set-up with a machine gun and Chinese claymore mines. So you would have to deploy, attack it from the flank or whatever. Knock it out, by the time the next one would come up in a couple of hundred metres, this would go on all day and night you know all day mainly, not night time we would stop for night time. So that's was a problem.

- 28:30 **A hundred metres apart?**

Yeah a hundred metres, two hundred metres just to slow you down. They also used to build watch towers in the trees, where I was there was a lot of heavy jungle and big trees and they would build these watch towers, up there, probably for communication purposes mainly to speak on the radio back north or south or whatever. Mainly north, and obviously they could see us coming for a long way off and they could see helicopters coming so they could warn their own people, see what they used to do with helicopters if they were flying down a valley they would get two machine guns on both flanks and fire into a cone there, choppers have got to go through it

- 29:00 and even the fighters have got to go through it., they have shot down fighters that way too. A 12.7 mm machine gun round is pretty big, about that round and that long. Big round, solid about that big. Not quite as thick as that thick as that one over there yeah. If it hit somewhere in a plane well in a chopper particularly it is going to do a lot of damage so you had to make sure you flew high in the valley if you could. You can't see anything of course you're too high. So you have got to fly low, and the poor old FAC he has got to fly low so that he can see what he is doing, so he is vulnerable too.
- 29:30 I have got a lot of admiration for the forward air control people especially the US Air Force in I Corps, they lost quite a few too, lost quite a few pilots. Heaviest attrition rate of all of the air force next to the fighter pilots who flew over North Vietnam. The FACs got a bit of a hammering because of the very nature of their job.

And how in your experience were the Australians received by the South Vietnamese as opposed to the Americans or?

- 30:00 Very well liked. When I first got to my battalion the bloke was asking me about a bloke that had been there three or four years in advance, I knew most of them, I knew the three preceding me. I said, "Oh they're all still alive and well etc." There and that, had a bit of a chat but yeah the Vietnamese liked the Australians. We weren't so brash and over the top. Americans were very brash when they were talking, and they are over the top a bit. The Australian soldier is not that way he just does his job and does it to

the best of his ability.

- 30:30 The Yanks wanted to change everything today instead of tomorrow, you have got to work on things you know, but they want to get in there and do it now. Do it their way. It was only one way, their way, there are lots of ways of doing things basically, you haven't got to be over the top. But yeah the Australians well we came under, our advisor in the Training Team came under the auspice of the US Army, they ran the whole advisory effort and I belonged to US Army Advisory Team 1 which happened to be around Da Nang there.
- 31:00 Which was our team, normally headed by a colonel and about forty advisors or whatever. All ranks from corporal up to captain, major. Yeah we got along with the American's there, back in regiment or battalion, we lived in their accommodation, ate in their mess hall, paid a certain amount. I used to get back into Da Nang perhaps once every thirty or forty days or more, or less, depends on how operations went. And in my particular area we had a major and a warrant officer in Da Nang who were supposed to look after
- 31:30 the administration of all of the advisors in I Corps. And the same in IV Corps, had a major and a warrant officer in a place called Can Tho which is the capital and they looked after all of the advisors around the IV Corps area. Initially when we first got there we were welcomed with open arms, but toward the end the first thing people say when you come in was, "When are you leaving?" Things that were decidedly not friendly you know?

32:00 **Who was that from?**

That was the Australian warrant officer and the Australian major that made you unwelcome. I don't know why, because we were upsetting their little system they had going. The major worked at the American headquarters there and the warrant officer did all of the administration, but it became decidedly uncomfortable so most of us would just go in there and get our pay and go over to the American bases, go to American barracks for the night or whatever. Or Marine base you know.

And what was it that got uncomfortable for them do you think?

Well we used to expect a bit of looking after and they weren't giving it they were looking after themselves.

- 32:30 I mean they had to provide our beer for instance, our Fosters or VB [Victoria Bitter], one or two cartons a month I think we got, our replacement greens, and that was all too much for them. You know and a couple in particular, I got really annoyed. One day I sent my sergeant to get my beer for me and the Australian warrant officer told the American sergeant, "Tell Captain McGurgan to come and get his own beer." And so I was in there later and I got right up him and I went and saw the major and said, "This is not good enough." And the major had to stick with his warrant officer of course I couldn't win, but that was the sort of thing that was happening.
- 33:00 There was no need for that. And they wonder why people didn't go there towards the end of 1970, into Da Nang. We had two accommodation areas there for the warrant officers and the officers and towards the end I never went in there I went elsewhere, went with the Marines over at Marble Mountain or with my FAC from the USAF, the air force at Da Nang airbase. Which was, the American Air Force lived in really salubrious accommodation when they go to war. Same as the Australian Air Force. There is
- 33:30 an old saying and I must tell you this. "Stars"; the Australian Navy navigates by the stars, the Australian Army sees by the stars, and the Australian Air Force counts the stars on their hotel/ motels. Something like that. But anyhow, I made a comment to them, I said, "You blokes live comfortably." They had air conditioned offices, air conditioned rooms, air conditioned operation centres. Everything was air-conditioned. The buildings were probably brand new,
- 34:00 the food was salubrious. For a big base they had probably a couple of hundred Vietnamese women running around doing the cooking, the cleaning, the ironing, washing up and cleaning boots. And that was another security risk of course a problem., but that's what they did. That's the way they did it, they Yanks liked doing that, they used the locals, they had their own brothels.

They were on base?

Yeah they were on base. Huge brothels and they were looked after by the American doctors. They even had pizza bars run by Filipinos.

- 34:30 Filipinos liked pizza bars so they ran them. So you have got your brothels, your pizza bars, you have got your movie house and you have got your accommodation, whatever you want. So it is pretty well set up yeah.

Why leave home?

Well yeah except for the odd mortar coming in or whatever. That's the American case of big bases of course down in IV Corps it was much the same expect on a smaller scale. What had happened by the time I got there, the Vietnamese had taken over the American large bases. The 7th ARVN Division

- 35:00 had take over Dong Tam base which was the ex-American 9th Infantry Division base, and down at Bac Lieu the 18th ARVN Division took over from another American division. I can't remember the name of it.

So they just occupied, you know and when I say divisional area Dong Tam was a mile by mile, bitumen road around the outskirts or border, and then bitumen road intersections in the middle, big berm about six foot high. Strong points and machine guns all along the perimeters, on the high ground or berm. Well set up.

- 35:30 All the VC and the NVA they would go out a half a mile lob in mortars and we would go out and chase them away and come back in again. And this would go on night after night. But they didn't do much damage, killed a couple of soldiers occasionally but other than that. And they would come back a month later and do the same thing again, it was a different kind of war down there. The main method of travel in the Delta of course is by road. Water ways everywhere, rivers, canals, estuaries, everything; so we occasionally used sampans.
- 36:00 The American set-up was called the Riverine Force or Brown Water Navy which was half American and half Vietnamese, American boats, navy boats. Little boats, like little motor torpedo boats with big guns on them, machine guns and mortar guns also. Half manned by Vietnamese they handed them over to the Vietnamese in the end. They used them to patrol the rivers and canals but they were still very dangerous because all you have got to do is wait on the bank somewhere in hiding and hit them with RPGs and then things start going, but yeah that's the way they operated. The other thing was down there our SAS operated down there with what's called
- 36:30 called the SEALs, the sea air and land troopers of the American Navy, they were very good soldiers. So our SAS worked with them at two places, Dong Tam and the other place was right down the bottom called Nam Can or Solid Anchor that's right, Solid Anchor. Nam Can was the Vietnamese name but Solid Anchor was the nickname given to it. And they operated out of there in teams of five, ten, fifteen, twenty whatever and went on a mission. And similarly they sent blokes up to Phuoc Tuy Province in III Corps up to our
- 37:00 SAS and they would work with them, not many people know that. There were SAS operating there from Dong Tam and Nam Cann, the whole of 1970 probably up to 1971 down in IV Corps.

Bit of an obvious question but for clarity, out in the field working with the battalion commanders but who is just below you in terms of working with them ?

No one. There was only myself and the two other advisors,

- 37:30 there was normally a team of four, but in my case we only had three so the three of us worked out of headquarters, if there was four of us you could put two with a forward rifle company and two with Battalion headquarters but after that there was nobody. I report back to my regiment, senior advisor regiment, who was the colonel, Lieutenant Colonel Bacon by radio, that's the only connection I have got. And the battalion commander controls the whole battalion basically it is his battalion so I just advise you know? Yeah. So if anything happens, in the end I had a thing called secure voice capability which encrypted VHF [Very High Frequency]
- 38:00 communication. I could talk to him and no one else could hear except him and I, so it was a pretty good piece of gear.
- Specifically designed for that?**
- Yes well so the enemy couldn't listen in, as they did one time. You have got to have the same security setting and the same equipment. And the equipment was very top secret then, you had to have top secret clearance to use it. The American were pretty unrealistic at times but I had clearance so I could use it.
- 38:30 You just punch in a code for the day and they punch in the same one at regiment and you can talk to one another. Plus it has got better range and is much clearer yeah.

And so without that code and without gear you couldn't?

Well if you're talking on a normal radio anyone can hear what you're saying you know? Pick up your frequency it is pretty simple to listen in.

Fantastic we're going to have to pause there to change tapes.

Okay.

Tape 6

- 00:30 **Bernie did any of the mining procedures that you learnt at Mount Isa and Townsville, with the engineering mob, did any of them help you actually in Vietnam?**
- Yeah. The mine fields, yeah mine field obstacles I passed a bit of knowledge on there, because engineers specialise in that in the Australian Army,
- 01:00 they actually lay the mine field and it has got to be laid a special way. But the problem in Vietnam was

that the French had been there before us and some of these minefields had French mines in them, others had American and some Vietnamese mines in them. So there was a combination and nobody really knew where the hell what mines were where and what sort of layout. So the solution there was obviously don't go in there and put a new mine field in front of it. They have got barbed wire on their extremities, so you put a new minefield out the front and you know what you have got in your minefield and leave it there, but you don't go anywhere near the old

- 01:30 minefields it is very dangerous. Because if nobody had any record of where everything was the VC would go in there and move things around or take things and leave gaps and you wouldn't know where you were, so it was very dangerous minefields in Vietnam. And I imagine to this day there are still people wandering around being blown up by old mines in the ground. Especially the buffalo, they go wandering around with their big feet and stick it in the ground they will soon lose it.

You mentioned something before that I thought was very interesting, the US Marines going in and protecting villages and using mines in

- 02:00 **some instances?**

Yeah the idea is you make a fortified village, you have got a big berm for a start, then you put a moat in front of that then you put a minefield in front of that, then you put wire around it, so then you have got all of these obstacles so for people to attack you they have to go through it. But I mean at night time you can't see what is going on so people can actually sneak in there and cut the wire and make a clearance through the minefield if they were good enough and do it that way yeah. That's the purpose of minefields and wires, to slow them down so

- 02:30 you can shoot them. Yeah this is the whole concept of minefields and wires to have a machine gun to fire on them, that's the whole idea to slow people down so you can shoot them. And if you make a minefield that hasn't got good fire coverage from machine guns or some sort of direct weapon then you are in trouble because they just get their way through it eventually and not be fired at and then attack you, so the basic principle is that you must have fire to bear on minefields. Can be indirect or direct it doesn't matter, direct is better in our situation,

- 03:00 indirect fire would be artillery and mortars from somewhere else, ones who are protecting the minefield yeah. But that knocks your minefield around too much, artillery and mortars that blows everything up. Machine gun fire is the best, that is the idea of it.

So you can understand then mines being left in Vietnam after the war because they were used as safeguards for villages?

But they are a two edged weapon, it doesn't matter who stands on then they go off, that's the problem with mines and booby traps.

Yet it is still a big part of warfare isn't it?

- 03:30 Of course it is, I see the UN [United Nations], once again the puerile UN has issued an edict banning armies from using mine warfare. That's ridiculous, how can you fight a war if the other side is pouring mines all over the place and you are not allowed to that's rubbish you know, quite absurd. Mine warfare is a legitimate part of war, you have just got to be aware of it and deal with it. Unfortunately people lose arms, legs whatever, get killed, they are pretty mean mothers these

- 04:00 little mines they had.

You would have taught that as part of teaching the South Vietnamese?

Well I knew a lot about it because I was taught by the engineers back in peace time Australia. Engineering is part of the engineer responsibility and the assault pioneers in battalions, they handle that sort of thing. So I knew a bit about that yeah. I knew a bit about digging weapon pits and sand bagging

- 04:30 that sort of stuff, basic infantry stuff again but engineers do well so they know about that. Digging CPs [Command Posts] that's the command post for battalion headquarters in the ground. There has got to be a special entrance door, zig zaggy and all of that sort of stuff, stop people lobbing grenades down there and all of that sort of stuff. Yeah the engineering side of it came out. We didn't get any chance to use our knowledge of bridging because the American Army uses what's called the Seabees. They're construction battalions, navy

- 05:00 construction battalions and they do all of that, they replace bridges, and they set up big base camps and put on all of the articulation like water and sewerage and roads. In fact a lot of these big bases had sewerage on would you believe and water and electricity of course, I think it was only thirty-two volts or whatever, American. Still electricity, because I remember well that Akai tape recorder there behind you , you can't see it, I remember doing some recording back in the base one time and the generator went down and on the way

- 05:30 back it went woo, and all of these funny noises came out as the power wet off, so that bugged that tape for a while.

But you could use a shaver? What do you call them electric shaver?

It was all blades those days, or didn't shave at all I think. Depends where you are I think. The reason you shave is just to keep morale up and make sure that everything is normal rather than abnormal, that's the reason you shave in the Australian Army.

06:00 Probably too to prevent disease, mites and things might get in your beard, that's why you don't have beards and long hair, makes it easier for mischievous little bugs and spiders or whatever to get in there. Who knows? That's the way you are supposed to keep personal hygiene, as the Australian Army teaches it that's the reason. No I did not see too many electric shavers, they weren't in vogue those days. They were probably in the PX, the PX is the American supermarket. Each base had a huge one,

06:30 you could buy whatever you wanted, tape recorders, electrical gear, cookers, whatever you name it. Booze, certain booze, but they were like a giant supermarket for all of the soldiers and they were very attractive because everything was so cheap. That Akai cost me through the PX cost me about three hundred green then in those days, and it was about six hundred outside. And what they do they ship it fresh from Japan, in fact it came to me on a helicopter when I was in the field, and I said, "No take it back give it to someone up there back in base." Unbelievable.

07:00 Huge box, and they were going to deliver it to me out in the field, I couldn't believe that.

Where would you plug it in?

That's right, what could I do with it? I finally got it back in the base though, got it picked up there.

Something I was going to ask before did you watch any videos or films about the Vietnamese people before you went overseas?

No, as part of the intelligence language course they give you a briefing on their habits and customs and they give you some books to read. I have still got mine.

07:30 I have got two language books, they give you two language books with common phrases, one is a big thick one, still got it in there. "How are you going? Are you all right? What's your name? Where do you live?" basic civvy stuff. And the other one is on military stuff, "Hands up, fire, lay down." Infantry, engineers or whatever, there are two books there.

08:00 The Americans had a, from north to south in South Vietnam the Americans had a complete TV channel set-up you could watch American TV. Every night, every day look at the casualties and where all of the action was. And radio, beautiful FM radio, it was the first time I heard good stereo actually. In Saigon, when I arrived there I stayed one night in the adjutants room, he is the adjutant of the Training Team, Dave Rowe, and he played, he sent this

08:30 thing off, FM stereo, it is AFVN, Armed Forces Vietnam Network and American Forces Vietnam TV Station. And the music was absolutely beautiful you know, stereo booming out. Dave had this one roomed apartment in the centre of Saigon and there was a laneway and a little Vietnamese guard there and he is supposed to keep out the VC if they attack and in the bathroom he has got this bloody great sledge hammer. And I said, "What is that for?"

09:00 and he said, "Well if the VC come down that lane way there and start shooting through the hallways I have got to get out so that hammer knocks a hole in the back wall and we come out in this market and run off. All right, "Fair enough." I said, "If you get the wall down in time with a bloody sledge hammer."

He would have to be fast.

Very fast. The walls were typical Vietnamese made walls you know. That was at a place called The Buis it was named after the first American advisor killed over there

09:30 and it was the first stop for all of the officer advisors going over there. The food there wasn't bad but it was all American, the American eating area was on the top floor, second top floor I should say, the top floor was a barbeque area, cookout area. You could go up there after dark and drink red wine or whiskey or whatever your preference was and you could see all of the action going on around Saigon. See bloody fighters putting in huge strikes and napalm going off

10:00 and tracer going everywhere. Pretty impressive the first night to look out there and see all of this action going on. You think "Hell! I wonder what they're doing?" It was all on around the airport particularly, that's where they always used to attack and try to get the aircraft.

Like watching fireworks?

Yeah exactly, only more impressive you know, and never stops, all night.

Were you ever close to the napalm dropping?

Yeah very. We had this other operation just near Hill 55 actually just about five miles

10:30 from it. We were doing advance to contact across this area we were given. Not a cordon and search but an advance, I can't think of what the other word was now. And advance and contact basically, to flush them out and into them. And we stopped the night before at this road intersection, T intersection, and the battalion commander, the CO decided to change the direction of our advance again, turn ninety degrees, bloody lucky we did because we took off

11:00 again towards this was big huge Chinese/Vietnamese cemetery. The Chinese were also big in that area at one time, and there was all these graves there, and there was a NVA company there and they were facing the direction we would have come along if we hadn't changed our direction. Where they were at ninety degrees, so most of their weapons were to counter coming up this road and we came upon them from the flank. And we over ran them in about ten minutes at the most, killed about eighty. Myself included in the middle of it, firing and carrying on. It was the headquarter company that made the main assault actually, and a NVA platoon went off into this swampy area next to the river.

11:30 And we couldn't find them because they all got into the reeds and ducked down, hiding there. They had a pre-destined withdrawal route of course so we called in napalm, dropped in napalm over the whole area, we got about ten bodies that way come floating up and we sent a platoon to drag the bodies in and have a look at them and check them out, and they come under fire, there was still some alive there. So we pulled them back out again, put another napalm strike in and that got the lot of them because they couldn't breathe anymore, there was no air, I don't know how they were breathing they must have been using straws or some sort of breathing devices

12:00 in the end we got the lot of them. And we killed something like more than eighty, captured something like forty or fifty different weapons, it was a huge victory in about half an hour all over, excellent. And that was NVA too right in the middle of the VC area, when I say VC, the VC were normally stronger in the eastern areas of the province and the NVA back toward the border areas, and they came down on their infiltration route.

And you said they were NVA?

These were NVA.

12:30 What they would do they would send down certain NVA specialists and mix with the VC and give them tips on how to set-up better booby traps and better mines and do this and that. And another reason why there was more NVA in the area down there was because after Tet 1968, which was a huge defeat for the NVA and the VC they lost two or three hundred thousand troops in January, February, March 1968. They lost that many soldiers that they were decimated, so all of the VC in the local hamlet and rural areas had to be replaced by NVA soldiers.

13:00 Who came from the north and pretended to be local inhabitants, that's why they were in the areas down there, the VC had all been killed during that offensive. They lost thousands and thousands. The Battle of Hue was a prime example, that was January, February 1968, the NVA there lost five battalions straight out.

That's nearly five thousand men.

Well more than that, with support people, five battalions is a regiment plus. So you know yeah. And they were pushed out by the ARVN 1st

13:30 Division and the American Marines. But they had to fight for twenty or thirty days around the citadel which is the centre of Hue on the Perfumed River there, one of the big old established buildings. And they did a lot of damage there getting them out, but that was the way it had to be. Yeah the NVA were foolish doing that but anyway that's the way they wanted it. Here I read a report the other day that Giap [General Giap - NVA officer] himself said we were done, but at that stage Johnson [Lyndon Johnson - US President] started pulling American troops out and stopped bombing North Vietnam,

14:00 so that saved the day for them, otherwise they would have been in more serious trouble. That was the start of the American withdrawal 1968, 1969. They started withdrawing from Vietnam would you believe, in limited numbers. Just after Tet when the Vietnamese were supposed to take charge again progressively up to 1970.

When you were working with the Americans training and advising the Vietnamese and the Montagnards and

I didn't actually get mixed up with Montagnards no.

14:30 **When you were teaching them about weapons and so forth were there any ethnic groups races I should say that were actually better learners?**

Up north they were all Vietnamese, down south they were all Vietnamese still but you had a couple of races intertwined there, you had remnants of the French, French Vietnamese, and you had some Cambodians wandering around in the Vietnamese Army that lived in the local area. No there was no races. I don't

15:00 believe I picked up any signs that the Vietnamese were racist, they were racist in that they had different religious groups yes. They didn't get on too well. Buddhism, Cao Dai and Taoism, I can't think of the rest of them but you had about five different groups over there and Christianity is a very minor group. The monks were a special group by themselves, they were always in trouble with the government because they were demonstrating and carrying on. Do you remember the monks setting themselves on fire and doing this and doing that? Well that went on for years.

15:30 Against the Saigon regime you know. The Vietnamese don't like the Chinese I know that and I don't

think they have got much time for the Cambodians either but as regards to Laos, because the Mekong River it goes all the way up into Laos and to the north-west and the Laos people to this day still sail down there and into the China Sea and the same with the Cambodians they do the same thing on the other river down through the South of Vietnam. I can't think of the name of it now, the other one that is parallel to the Mekong, the Bassac I think.

- 16:00 The Mekong is a huge river you fly over it on the China Sea side and there is a big brown stain about twenty miles out from the mouth, its pure water, fresh water coming down from the mountains along the Mekong. And every year it floods the growing plains for the rice and drops this new alluvial soil there for them so that's why it is so rich in nutrients for all of the rice growing.

Was it a beautiful place to look at?

Yeah if there wasn't a war going on it is a beautiful place.

- 16:30 Except for the dirty habits of the Vietnamese and their various hygiene habits.

I didn't mean like as a tourist destination I mean there is so much other than what is going on there, in the beautiful countryside?

Very picturesque. Especially up north around Da Nang, Hoi An that's a nice area, down south there is a lot of nice things you can do and see. Yeah it would have been a nice country if there was no war, but you know probably once you

- 17:00 have seen as I have, I now have got no real interest in going back there to see that. People picking rice and planting rice is just everywhere, they have got to do that to live, otherwise they can't live. I mean you have got the ridiculous situation where they gave them all brand new tractors, down in IV Corps, CIA and the CORDS people gave them all new tractors, but all they used the tractors for was to drive down the highway, transport the people from the village back to where they were planting the rice and get off the tractor and use the buffalo to plough the bloody fields, unbelievable. But that's the way they thought you see. And I guess the tractors would have got bogged somewhere in the fields

- 17:30 because they were very muddy, slippery and wet sort of thing. But they used them as a bus sort of thing, up and down and carting stuff back at night time, that was okay putting their rice on the little tray behind. But for transport up and down for the workers I thought that was ridiculous using the tractors for that. Mad.

They didn't want to change their ways?

No they didn't want to change their ways, they are very stabilised in what they want to do, and they are very loyal in their little hamlet area. They're very, the half a dozens families

- 18:00 really combine together in their own little area, they have got their own little area to plant their rice and pick their rice and go to the toilet where they do. They have actually got toilets some of them, but most just use the fields or whatever. There is a, I guess the family may be blood related or something or intermarried and it just all stretches out.

Did you see Bernie any racism between the white Americans and the black Americans in your time in Vietnam?

Well yeah not between them.

- 18:30 1970 was a bad time for the American Negro, they were trying to force their freedom thing into the American Army. So you would go to Da Nang airport which was a big airport and there would be all the Americans lined up and there would be fist hitting and meeting and they would say hello and all of that garbage, that would go on for hours, and then the American system itself probably stirred it up because they always searched them thoroughly to make sure no drugs and no money on them when they left the country. If you went on R and R [Rest and Recreation Leave] you were only allowed to carry a thousand green.

- 19:00 And no drugs of course, so I went on R and R in September 70 to Hong Kong to meet one of my Australian girlfriends, fiancé then actually, and I had five thousand green on me, which I didn't declare and I was just let straight on the plane, young captain you know. Australian white captain, didn't even get searched but the American Negroes all got searched and searched their pockets before they got on the plane. That was the sort of system they had going. Even the American white soldiers had to be searched too for drugs. They didn't muck around they treated them both the same,

- 19:30 but the Negroes obviously objected, they used to slow things down with their fist clapping and their singing and carrying on. And of course Jimmy Hendrix was top of the line over there and along with Credence Clearwater Revival (CCR), they were the songs of the day it was all good stuff. I remember down in the Delta one day we got mortared, and all of the bunkers in the Delta are all above ground, you can't dig because the water level is so high. So you have got these bunkers that are rectangle on the outside

- 20:00 but they have got sloping walls. And what they do is, these walls are made of huge timber and it is sand bagged all of the way up. And then on the roof the same. So you have got all sand bag and steel and wood work around to protect you. And you go inside this, you go in the main door, and there is the main room of the bunker in there and it will hold about thirty people I suppose. Anyway I staggered in there

one of these nights and the lights were out so I am just sitting there and there is all of these people smoking and I couldn't see any, all I could see was the cigarette glow,

20:30 and no white faces see? So the light came on after about ten minutes when the mortar barrage ceased. And they were all Negroes all sitting there looking at me. And I thought Jesus!. And there was about ten of them all sitting around this square shaped bottom of this bunker. And I didn't say anything and one of them said, "Who are you?" and I said, "I am the Australian advisor with so and so." "Oh you're an Aussie?" "Yeah." So it was all forgiven then, they thought I was an American because I had American uniform on. Yeah

21:00 there was obviously a bit of friction between the officer corps and the black soldiers but it depends how you handle them I guess. As I said I had an American sergeant and a white lieutenant up north, and there was no friction there. I must admit the lieutenant he is dead now, he over drugged himself and killed himself in America back home. Bit sad really. Mike Boyer his name was. He was a product of their call up scheme and commissioned that way. They have got an

21:30 OCS over there also Officer Candidate School they call it, but he got on the drugs and killed himself. The sergeant I understand he became a chopper pilot in the US Army, stayed in, I haven't heard of him since then. Willy Fuller his name was, nice bloke He was mad, used to cart his goddamn cassette player with him. Put his earphones on so he wouldn't make any noise of course. He would wander around the bush with this in his backpack somewhere, well not actually wandering around, but at night time when we bivouacked up or harboured up he would put the earphones on

22:00 he would play it to himself before he went to bed. But he was that way inclined, he was a bit of a bopper you know, that sort of rubbish.

We have heard a few stories that the black Americans actually liked the Australians?

Yeah they do, they were very keen to come to Sydney. They reckoned Sydney was the top of their R and R destinations. See they only had a few places they could go, they could go to Taipei, Singapore, Hong Kong or Australia or back home, that was basically it.

22:30 Taipei was a favourite because there was lots of nubile young Chinese women there. And the green dollar was very high compared to the Taiwanese dollar but Sydney was the other big choice yeah. You wander around Kings Cross during the war years and there was thousand of Negroes there loving the place. You know you had the Crazy Horseshoe, I can't remember the other ones. In other words hang outs where all of the girls were. Not only Australian girls but lots of other girls too.

Well that's

23:00 **what I was going to ask you about. You said you had some R and R in September 70, now that's, you can go out of the country right?**

Yeah you can go home normally, if you are married or if you have got a girlfriend home in Australia that's where most of them went.

So you met your fiancé at that time?

She lived in Townsville and I met her in Hong Kong.

You met her in Hong Kong before you had R and R?

Sorry I had met her in Australia. My eventual wife in the end Leslie Smith, she had gone to Canada to work in Ontario for a couple of years, so I drifted apart from her and I met Rosemary Myers who was a Townsville girl

23:30 and got engaged to her in late 69 and I said to her, "I will meet you in Hong Kong on R and R next year." So I met her there, didn't see much of Hong Kong but we had a good time. What else? I came back and was going to get married to her, and I was a bit dubious about everything and called it off and then six months later I married this other girl who had come back from Canada by then, and I lie, I also saw her in Vietnam. A couple of time, went down and saw her, three times actually. So we renewed our acquaintance

24:00 and got talking and were still pretty keen on one another still. Yeah she divorced me in 1967 and is now married to an old Brigadier. Who is eighty-four and is now dying of pancreatic cancer. So I hope she, no I won't say that, I won't say bad luck. That's her problem, they live over at Swan Road in Taringa, he is very rich but he is going to die very shortly. Eighty-four and you can't cure pancreatic cancer

24:30 **Was she a nurse did you say Bernie?**

She was a nurse, very qualified nurse. She made lieutenant colonel in her nursing corps. We had some good years together. But I was drinking too much and smoking too much and fighting too much. And then she decided to leave me. I don't know what the problem was. I never beat her up or anything like that. But I was carrying on a bit I suppose, I was drinking to excess. That was just an after curse of the war for most people who participated.

25:00 **I would like to talk about that in fact I would like to talk about meeting your wife in Vietnam, but first can you tell me if alcohol was a problem in the bases in Vietnam for the Aussies?**

Which base are you talking about?

Where you were in Da Nang?

No. We weren't in the base, our headquarters in Da Nang was just a little walled fortified old French compound. Had a main administration building, a mess out the back for eating and drinking,

25:30 and then accommodations for the warrant officers, covered about two or three normal house blocks there. And then around the corner was the officer one, guarded also by the Vietnamese, where you could sleep. That was our sort of compound. Well of course you would come in from the bush, you have been on operations for two or three weeks and you would be pretty thirsty and you want to relax and settle down and that was a great place to get drunk, have a meal and go to bed and wake up and go back to your regiment. And the big thing about it was that it was a place to meet fellow Australian advisors and talk to them and see what is going on .and I made some very good

26:00 friends up there, I have still got them to this day you know. But yeah it was a common meeting place and I think the reason why the admin [administration] people got so annoyed was, that we were all talking war and they are all sitting back in Da Nang doing all boring admin and not being involved in the war. They were a bit jealous probably, we would get extra money of course no we didn't get extra money they got the same as us. So I tell a lie there, we got a huge allowance of a hundred and thirty dollars a month to buy Vietnamese food because we had to buy our own food most times. But if you paid into the American system,

26:30 when I went on operations you could eat either Vietnamese all of the time for nothing, a bit of American rations stuff if you took it with you, and a bit of Australian stuff if you could get a hold of it. And some of the American rations are nice ,they are very good. The cocktail is beautiful, just like fruit salad. Little round green can about that high. Similar to the stuff you buy in the supermarkets these days, a little one man can of cocktail they call it, which is fruit salad. Had nice juice in it. Some of their tinned stuff was all right. And I had the Australian stuff sometimes, rarely because it was very hard to get.

27:00 And the rest was American fresh food back in the American mess hall on Hill 55, and Vietnamese food in the bush you know. My battalion commander was very prone to Coca Cola he loved it. KC Cola actually it was a different brand but it was very nice, and he would do anything for Cola in the bush you know. And we used to get fresh drinks brought out into the field, beer included, but American crap you know. Budweiser,Paps and Schlitz and what was the other one?

27:30 **Miller?**

Miller and some other one yeah. Like soda water it really is hopeless.

I have heard some stories that some Americans were actually hooked on drugs, heroin and stuff, did you come across that?

No I never, I have been on a lot of American bases and I never saw drugs, people on drugs or affected by drugs. Affected by beer or booze yes. It happened

28:00 I know. But I have been on some huge bases and I never saw people taking drugs even the American Air Force, no taking drugs. Where they would do that, they would go out on leave, into some local town or some local city and go into some dingy backyard with a prostitute and get on drugs there, that sort of stuff. Admittedly it probably happened on base too but very undercover you wouldn't see it openly no, it was frowned upon. You can't have a crazy drugged bloody soldier running around with a loaded M-16 he will kill some of his own people you know?

28:30 I guess it happened but I never saw it once.

But the alcohol do you think,

Well it was so easy to get.

Everybody was hooked to a certain extent so that when they got home there was a problem do you think?

I think so yes very much so. In my little team we used to get what was called an SP pack which was a special provisions pack for American rifle Companies which was say a hundred men. And we would get shaving stuff,

29:00 actual shaving sticks, you know the brush and everything. And we would get all of this tobacco, we would get all of this tobacco. Cartons of Salem, Peter Stuyvesant, Benson & Hedges and Camel, full cartons, dozens of them. To provide a hundred men and we had that between three of us. So I had chewing tobacco I must have had about a quarter of a ton, not quite, but kilograms of chewing tobacco which we wouldn't use, the Vietnamese wouldn't touch it either so we used to throw it out. The Americans loved it, some of the Americans, chewing tobacco is really disgusting, it really is. Anyhow,

29:30 in those days I was a smoker so I loved it. We had these huge Benson and Hedges cigarettes about that long in those big packets, a carton of those all for nothing .and then if I went to the PX or the Australian place when I was down south, I think XXXX beer was about ten cents and a carton of cigarettes was about fifteen, so you know. I don't know if you realise we didn't have real money over there it was called MPC, Military Payment Certificates [or Currency], American money. And that substituted for dollars to

stop the black market. And every so often they would have a change and change over the MPC to another MPC,

30:00 and so everyone caught out with old MPC was bugged, because the green dollar was favoured as the enemy could use it you see? The MPC is a good idea they do it in most places that they go into in a big way. It is just to stop the black market and the profiteering and all of those sorts of things .and the day, every time a new change over came in you would get all of these women hanging around the fence of the base trying to give it to a friend to change to the new MPC, because once it is gone, midnight tonight, the old MPC that they used today is no good tomorrow. You have got have the new stuff and throw the rest away if you haven't changed it over.

30:30 So some of these women might be holding ten thousand dollars worth of MPC you know from all of the Marines visiting their premises and doing whatever they were doing you know. But that's how they operated.

Were you aware of any black market profiteering going on?

Oh yeah. That's where a lot of these, as I say from six hundred thousand Americans, three hundred thousand would be in big bases, a lot of them stores people they would be heavily involved making money. And I know some Australians got involved too, I don't know any personally

31:00 but I know it was happening. Things like air conditioning units to go in walls and roofs would disappear. Things like that, it was big money, because there was so much coming in they couldn't keep track of it. The Americans just poured all of this in and say if you were in charge of the warehouse you could sell it for a hundred bucks when it was worth a thousand and the second bloke could either keep it and sell it for something else. And vehicles and so on. There was a racket there, pretty hard to control. That's a big thing going on and you can't control it.

31:30 **So can you tell us Bernie how you met your wife?**

I first met my wife in 1967 whilst I was doing that SME [?]course I was telling you about the long officers course. And I got into a fight out at Parramatta, myself and a couple of mates, got taken out to hospital, ended up in her hospital which was 2 Military Hospital at Ingleburn. And my mate was pretty bad, he got knocked out and broken nose and they took him away to the operating theatre, and I was sitting there with all of this blood over me and she

32:00 came on there and she was the duty sister in charge on duty she said, "Second lieutenant go and wash your face." And I said, "Yes ma'am." She was only a second lieutenant too. I went to wash my face and that's how I met her, I started taking her out immediately after that all of 67. Then she went to Canada, and then when I got to Vietnam I found out she had arrived the day of my birthday (29th April 1970) in country. I arrived in March and she arrived on April 29 that following month. And so I made a point of, we had a big parade in September at Vung Tau when they handed over another

32:30 citation to the unit we had a parade and so that's when I went and saw her for a week and we just renewed our acquaintance. Then I went, another time I got put in hospital for a nose operation, bugged my nose, infection or something. So I got put in hospital, so I saw her for another week. And then I was going home I saw her a couple of days before I left . And I said I was getting married and, "See you later." But that wasn't the truth and then when I came back I broke it off with this other girl my fiancé, and then got married to her that following December of 1971

33:00 71.

Was that other fiancé that you met in Hong Kong was she really upset?

No. We sort of came to, I don't know what happened we came to a mutual agreement, she didn't want to get married either. I think she must have realised that I might have been seeing my other girlfriend over there, I didn't tell her of course. We are still good friends actually, she never got married would you believe, to this day unfortunately, she was a very nice girl too. She was a nurse also, worked at Prince Henry in Sydney.

33:30 **Did you ever think well you could have married her?**

I could have yeah. I mean you can't change what's done. and we lived happily from 19 71 to 1985, that's fourteen years, then we got divorced in 1987 and she married this other bloke.

So much older than you.

Oh yeah he is mad, she is a year younger than me and he is eighty-four but he is a millionaire. I should add also that he

34:00 was the commander of her area in Vietnam. He was a colonel then. That's where she got to meet him I think way back. I was a bit foolish I think towards the end. I think she was seeing him without my knowing and she did it to sort of protect herself I guess. But I was a bit of a fool and I trusted her, she had this job of wandering around Australia with her nursing career, checking all of the military

34:30 hospitals out around Australia. And I think there was a bit of hanky panky going on then. But not to worry it is all past.

But you mentioned that you had a son?

By her.

Do you see him?

Did you see the girl leave this morning? That's his girlfriend. The idea is that Amya and her mother and my son will look after my house when we go around Australia next year. That's the idea of them being here now you know, they have arrived four months too early but you know. Not to worry they're here so we'll look after them.

Did your son go into the service as well?

No. He has got bad eyes unfortunately they probably restrict him somewhat.

35:00 You know there is a lot of furore with this Agent Orange [defoliant used in Vietnam] creating problems for veterans having children. Well my wife and I were both over there, and I was in a really bad area and so was she. But he seems to be okay, there is nothing wrong with him except he is short sighted that's all. What the medical term for that is I don't know, that's why he wears those glasses. That's his only handicap, he wouldn't have got into the army no, not with that. He has really got to what can I say, get up close to things to read it.

35:30 That's a bit of a downfall if you're in the scrub and you can't see. Otherwise I would have liked to see him in the army yeah.

Were you there when they were spraying this agent... the ?

Defoliants?

Defoliants on the men?

Yeah I used to walk through those areas no problems. But I don't think that was the problem, I think the amount was the problem. I got this map the other day and it shows you

36:00 the millions of gallons, how much they put in certain areas, and it is astounding I tell you. One area had six millions gallons poured on it, defoliant, out of those aircraft that fly it you know. Up north in I I Corps, and where the Australian Task Force was located wasn't too clean either, it was quite heavy. And it lists all of the areas, the whole of Vietnam, how much was sprayed in each area and it is astounding. Eleven million gallons of the stuff, millions of this 2,4-D, 2,4,5-T and Dioxin or whatever that was mixed with it. The whole lot.

36:30 Very bad.

What about you, do you feel like that has had an affect on your health?

No I don't think so I would have had it by now. I have had a few problems but not from that. I stopped smoking when I came back, about 1974 I gave smoking away completely. I think it has affected certain people yeah. I think some people are more susceptible to those problems than others too that's the other problem. I don't think I have had any affects; I have got no problems from that at all. My problems are

37:00 the year I was born and what year it is now, age that is. I have had a few kidney problems and a few gall bladder problems and a few head problems. But I am all over that now. Got my gall bladder removed, psychiatrist sorted me out, still seeing him. He wanted me to go on medication but it is too mind bending, like Prozac, nasty stuff, makes you a bit of a zombie but I am off that now.

37:30 **Did you find that hard getting off that?**

Yeah because its habit forming. I do take Zylprim, my body builds up too much uric acid and as a result I get kidney stones so that stops that. And I had a few nasty operations with kidney stones, very painful believe me. And I have experienced the euphoria of morphine, that's good tucker that.

38:00 I often wondered why opium and morphine takers are so skinny, you lose your taste for food you can't taste. Did you know that?

No.

If you're on morphine, straight morphine injection in the stomach you can't taste a bloody thing, you can look at a bloody vegetable and eat it and taste a breakfast cereal, same taste. No taste, you loose complete sense of taste, remarkable. So if you're in hospital on morphine for three or four days you lose a bit of weight because you can't taste your bloody food and don't want to eat it.

38:30 **You beauty.**

Yeah it works and opium is the same, I don't know why, same thing. I guess you can't smell either, I didn't notice that. But I noticed the food taste, can't taste a bloody thing. And I wondered why this beaut looking food was all tasting the same, bland, when I came off morphine I was right, tasted everything again.

Bernie do you remember what the fight was about that you went to hospital for when you met

your wife that first time?

No we used to drink a lot in those days too.

39:00 Yeah I remember what it was about, one of the blokes had a girlfriend there and she obviously had another suitor there trying to win her, and that's how it developed. There was only four of us and there was a about ten of them and it was a pretty rough dive in Parramatta too. The cops came and everything and we just got in our cars and went but one guy was pretty badly hurt. I think he lost partially sight in one eye. We didn't have much show because we were pretty boozed well they weren't and there was four of us and many

39:30 more of them, one of those things that happens.

Did you have, show leadership qualities as a child and in your teenage years that enabled you to lead in the army?

Probably being the eldest child I would have developed that anyway, my brother is two years younger, eighteen months younger. And my two sisters are probably two or three years behind that. It probably helped yeah, I was sort of a king pin. I made it so

40:00 with the kids that is, not with Mum and Dad. That helped a bit, but I don't know whether leadership is inherited. You are not born with leadership I think you have got to be trained to do it, that's my opinion anyway. And that's what this Portsea Course does is teach you that, how to lead. Then you lead by example and by whatever you do. And once you join a regular army unit you obviously can't go getting drunk with the diggers and carrying on and chasing on with them, there is no fraternisation whatsoever, you're an officer and they are diggers. You can have a beer occasionally.

40:30 That's fine but you can't go out partying with them and everything, different social scene, and that's why the officers mess, sergeants mess, diggers mess once again is so important., you had the isolation of the three groups of the army and there was no mixing and that way the officers respect the warrant officers and vice versa and the diggers vice versa again. That's how it works, that's the respect up and down the military system.

All right I will stop there and just change...

Tape 7

00:30 **Okay Bernie before we broke for lunch you mentioned girlfriends I just wanted to clarify,**

Yeah well you know.

Part of the whole war thing.

As a young bloke you probably need a woman every so often and I mean when you go on operation you come so close to death so often, life tends to get very basic I suppose, so all you want to do when you go back on leave and pick your pay up is get drunk,

01:00 get laid and go back to work again, that's the basic premise and yeah most of the advisors, well I was single so I had an excuse, but I don't know about the married men maybe they didn't have an excuse but yeah I met a nice girl very attractive Vietnamese in Da Nang but then her CIA boyfriend arrived back one day on his Harley so that was the end of that. I don't know where he sprung from but he was a weirdo so I didn't want to hang around there. And she was getting a bit, the average going price was about five dollars and she was wanting ten and twenty dollars you know.

01:30 That's green American, good money for one night you know. And they'd feed you and look after you. And that's lasted about two months I suppose, three months I saw her. And then the next girl I met she was not so attractive but she was okay, she had a bit of French in her, French Vietnamese, I remember her name, Lee was her name, she followed me around like a, well she followed me around full stop. I moved a couple of times in IV Corps

02:00 and she followed me most places and set up a little house somewhere you know. I didn't stay there at all but I went and saw her most times. I have got photos of both of them actually. I didn't get too involved with many other women. It was the done thing. My boss was John Paul Vann, I don't know whether you have heard of him or not. John Paul Vann?

I was going to ask you about him.

You know him, heard of him have you?

No I haven't actually.

02:30 He was an interesting officer he is now dead unfortunately. But he was originally a company commander with an American Army battalion over there in 1965, he then became an advisor, then he went back with the US Army 7th Infantry division this time as a battalion commander. And then his last job when I knew him during 1970 he was IV Corps senior advisor. Little short fellow but very gung ho,

get up and go you know. Anyway he was very

03:00 friendly with the Vietnamese general in IV Corps, and after working there for three months both of them got moved up to II corps. John Paul Vann had two wives, he had one in Saigon and one in Can Tho so he had two going at the same time, which they obviously didn't know about. And he had a wife back in the states too, which I shouldn't say too much about because I am not going for slander here, but yeah he enjoyed himself to the full, that was the typical sort of set up.

03:30 And most of the American officers had full time girlfriends. I don't know about the Australian majors, the one in Da Nang was pretty clean. The one in Can Tho was reasonably clean, but he had a couple of house girls there that I think maybe played with him occasionally and made with him or the warrant officer or whatever. John Paul Vann went to II corps, and about a -year later, 1972 it was then he was flying from Pleiku to Kontum

04:00 late afternoon, new pilot, new chopper, and they crashed into a graveyard and both got killed. It was a Montagnard graveyard. And they had to pay to get his body out because the local VC grabbed him and weren't going to give it, they had to pay a ridiculous amount of money and got the body back and he is now buried in Arlington Cemetery which is the place for American war heroes which is quite fitting I suppose. He was up in Vietnam for ten years, maybe a couple of months missing,

04:30 but it was a long time. He was doing the best he could. Unfortunately he made a lot of enemies in the American regime at the time and in their newspapers over there he was always fighting their way of doing things, saying, "You have got to do it this way, blah, blah." But he was a very fine soldier, good officer..

They actually negotiated with the VC to get his body back?

Yeah the local VC captured it, I am not sure what happened but they had to pay X amount of piastres [Vietnamese currency] which I think in those days it would have been

05:00 about five hundred or six hundred piastres to the dollar to get his body back, and the watch and the boots and everything that was on him and the chopper. A bit sad but that's the way he ended.

But having a regular girlfriend was that more common than accessing the local brothel or?

Well if you wanted to keep clean I guess it was, because the Vietnamese weren't protected against venereal disease so it was very bad.

05:30 The brothels on base were clean the ones outside weren't. Most American bases had huge amounts of brothels in and around the adjoining town There must have been, conservative estimates about three hundred thousand prostitutes in Vietnam at one stage, because that was the only way to make a decent living. You couldn't make piastress working in an office. You could make a few Americans dollars as a house girl, house maid, cleaning and ironing gear sort of thing. But the good money was in the prostitutes. You think of twenty dollars, and she had six blokes for the night,

06:00 one hundred and twenty American green. MPC same thing, for one nights work, that's two years wages or whatever It was good money and that's why they did it.

And with such high turnover I think we were talking to you at lunch time about the way the girls would clean themselves?

Yeah well the only experience I have had is they have some solution in a bucket and they squat over a bucket and use their finger and insert the stuff into them and they use a circular motion and clean all of the sperm out I guess. I am not to sure. That's the way I think it works.

06:30 But I don't know what the solution was that they put in there in the first place some sort of anti-sperm potion. For want of a better word. That was the only way I think I knew, none of them used prophylactics or anything like that. Wet checks or frangers [condoms], never heard of. VD [Venereal Disease] was a big problem up there and syphilis too. But all of the brothels I knew were always checked out by

07:00 American doctors and all of the girls kept clean. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to work there, they had to be inspected once a week I think, it was pretty heavy.

Did many of them get pregnant?

Some did, a couple I knew got pregnant but most didn't, so something was working. Maybe it was the Eurasian sperm and the Asiatic didn't mix or something I don't know. Of course a lot of them got pregnant because look today you have got Negroid/Vietnamese, you have got French/Vietnamese,

07:30 you have probably got Australian/Vietnamese ,and the problem for the poor little buggers is that they are probably teenagers now maybe older, they would be, and they are frowned upon by the rest of the Vietnamese society, they don't like them. They call them, they have got a special word, Moccas I think, I can't remember now. But it means a bastard in between no particular race, and they are disowned by their friends and family and everything you know it is sad. That's where you get all of these young wanderers around present day Saigon still begging on the streets can't get work.

08:00 And they are the result of Vietnamese and occupying soldiers you know.

So they are still ostracised?

They would be nearly thirty years of age now some of them at least. And there would be quite a few of them. I know myself I saw some fuzzy haired little Vietnamese running around and they don't have fuzzy hair they have all got straight hair sort of thing.

And apart from the

08:30 **difference in hygiene, how did you actually find them the local Vietnamese?**

Yeah Asiatics are a funny race, they tend to show a lot of bravado, but they are like you and me they feel fear; they feel everything we feel but they tend to put on a face and say that nothing affects them. That's rubbish it does affect them of course it does. And they have got this, what is the word that Kipling used? The aloofness or the

09:00 I can't remember now, the stand backish the inscrutable Asiatic face, that sort of image. It's there sure it is but the Vietnamese are like the Chinese once again, they don't like to lose face, that's for starters, that's a big thing. And I guess rank is very serious too, their army structure and their hamlet structure. The headman of the village is the headman, the old wizened grey haired and grey bearded man

09:30 down to the fifteen year old working in the field you know. There is a structure there too, so they are pretty keen on that sort of thing. Just the same as our society really. What can I say? The things they teach in their school are non-existent, schools are basic, teachers aren't competent, well they weren't when I was there anyway because they all got knocked off by the VC, If they showed and support for the Saigon people they got knocked

10:00 off. So there was a lack of teachers, a lack of nurses, lack of experienced head people to lead them, and I think it is that way to this day because they all got killed. I was going to mention before I think they had a program called the Phoenix Program in the whole of Vietnam, and what it was designed to root out the VCI, which was the Viet Cong Infrastructure in the villages, and knock them off, terminate them, kill them. That's what they did. And I think

10:30 the records show that the Americans knocked off about thirty or forty thousand of the VCI, but in turn the VC knocked off about eighty-eight thousand local peasants because of the same thing, and eye for an eye you know. So as I said if they wanted to make sure the village would stay on their side they would go and knock the village leader off and stick his head on a cross out the front or hang him off a tree whatever and do the same with the doctor or the dentist or the nurse or whatever in the village. That was intimidation, so you wouldn't go out the next day and say, "I don't like the VC." They would do the same to you. So you would just go

11:00 shut up and do it you know, behave yourself I guess. Once again it is whoever has got the power in the area at the time, whoever is in charge. . But then the people are probably a very nice race except for their personal hygiene habits. But they're Asiatics, I don't have much time for Asiatics, compared to our style of living they are very different. Some people would be horrified how they carry on, how they till the fields

11:30 in primitive conditions. And you will find that most of the rice growers are all mad smokers male and female. And chew betel juice, they get all of the pink crap all over their teeth and gums from the betel juice, that's pretty shocking that. Indelible stain in the mouth, yuk!

Bernie a bit of a gruesome question but I have to ask because we're a war archive and just

12:00 **to help us get a bit of an idea of some of the battle in Vietnam is there some action, an operation that you went through that stands out as particularly horrible in terms of what you were forced to experience?**

Well yeah I will tell you one small example. One of my last operations up in I Corps we discovered this hole in the hill from one side to the other, entrance on one side and on

12:30 the other side of the ridge line there was a hole coming out. And what it was was a big NVA hospital in fact, and so we sent troops around to the other side to stop the NVA escaping, just as the blokes on the other side secured the entrance on the other side they had contact with this NVA mob withdrawing, but anyway we captured a doctor and a nurse inside A male doctor and female nurse and she was a good looking North Vietnamese of course. And I said to the battalion commander. "They will be good value make sure they get back to regiment safe." He said, "Yes Dai Uy." Dai Uy is captain. And

13:00 I wondered why he said that real quick, "Yes Dai Uy." because he normally gets into a bit of a discussion about what intelligence value they would be and blah, blah. And he just said, "Yes Dai Uy." Anyway I just got on with and forgot about it. Carried on with what we had to do, put this stuff inside to stop people going in there and using it again, some sort of CS [tear] gas stuff to make it uninhabitable and then seal both ends, blow both ends in. I had to wait for the EOD team to come out from Da Nang, that's the Explosive Ordnance Disposal team, big Negro sergeant.

13:30 Bought all of these explosives out and detonators and so on, and so then sealed the place up and I

discovered later that the doctor had made it back and the nurse hadn't. I know what happened to the nurse, she got raped and killed, left somewhere, probably raped by the Binh Si, cut her throat and left her somewhere, she never got back and the doctor did. It was a bit of a waste because she was pretty intelligent, when I listened to the conversation they were having and they questioned her before she went off in the chopper

14:00 supposedly, and that's when I left she didn't make it back. I guess that's one of the penalties of war, if you're a female in the war that's what happens to you. It's pretty basic. And that's why I can't understand some females wanting to join the infantry corps in the Australian Army, they are utterly mad. And it is physically hard. But above all you have got the example of the Iraq War, the last lot of American girls that got lost, remember that? A couple of them got raped, and in the first war they definitely got raped. And I can't understand them saying they accept that experience and that's that.

14:30 But I mean to be raped by a foreign soldier is pretty bloody horrible I imagine for a female. And here they are wanting to put themselves in this position, but that's not this point, the point being that that it will happen. I suppose blokes get raped too but not to the same degree as a woman, that's just my personal thoughts on the matter. And as I said the Ho Chi Minh Trail was manned by women, lots of women and also they had many female soldiers in the Viet Cong units, lots of village women.

15:00 I never heard of any NVA female regular soldier, they were all males, but the VC had them obviously because they were in the villages, workers by day and VC women at night. And I know our Australian soldiers ambushed a few of them one night and killed a few wandering around the Task Force area. But you know if women want to fight in the army good luck to them. In that situation. But I think an Asiatic woman is a different

15:30 kettle of fish to an Australian or American woman.

In what way?

Oh not used to the hardships you know. Vietnam women are very basic, they are hard workers, they are used to the pitfalls of crop failures and down to earth living. We're too pampered in our society, western society. British women too, British women and Australian women, they are no comparison to say an Iraqi woman or a Vietnamese women, used to the high and lows of life

16:00 and a very hard life as a result of it. The Iraqi women lately over there demonstrating and carrying on, and the Palestinian women in Jerusalem for Christ's sakes. They're shockers some of them, bad as the men. But that once again is religion of course.

I just wanted to go back to the

16:30 **operation we talked about earlier, the three dayer, can I just clarify the name of that op?**

Thuong Duc it was.

Yes I thought so I just wanted to clarify.

What it was Thuong Duc was a little hamlet occupied by the American Special Forces in the earlier days and it had two rivers coming down to a Y junction, and a large single river all the way going towards Da Nang, and it was a valley, a huge valley on both sides and huge mountains out towards the west, north and north west so it was an actual track or path if you wanted to come in from the west.

17:00 It was an actual access route, not many people, probably a couple of hundred mostly Vietnamese peasants that's Thuong Duc town and Thuong Duc is the district it is in and then in the huge mountains to the north, bloody great mountains, high mountains, that's where all of the action took place, that's where the NVA used to hang out. And then infiltrate towards Da Nang and do nasty things with mortars and rockets down there. They would fire these huge rockets,

17:30 a Russian 122 mm rocket or Chinese rocket about five foot long and fire and land them in the middle of the airstrip there and kill a couple of American soldiers at the air strip or even Da Nang city, but mainly the airstrip. That's where they came from, that area, that direction, North West of Da Nang a sort of natural way to come in the same area as a place called the A Shau Valley just to the North which was the next province to the north that was a bad infiltration area too.

18:00 **And so did you come as part of the ops to land at obviously a really bad time?**

Well that's a good question but obviously our intelligence was pretty faulty. And we didn't know they were there and they didn't know we were coming. Normally you know if there is somebody around when you land, they start firing at you, if they don't start firing on you you're pretty right. But this one they were caught right in the middle of moving and that was the unfortunate part about it. So they knew we were there,

18:30 we knew they were there because they were firing on us, and all hell broke loose as a result, yeah it was pretty hectic. That's the worst one I have been in, we could have lost a lot more people, including myself.

Well with the casualties you lost that's almost a fifth of the casualties in all of the casualties Vietnam?

Sorry?

Well you lost how many?

South Vietnamese.

Oh okay sorry, sorry. It was combined Australian and South Vietnamese casualties?

No. Australia actually lost over there only five hundred and four.

- 19:00 The Americans lost something like fifty eight thousand and of those thirteen and a half were Marines. But the figures I gave you were South Vietnamese only. I think, I don't really know how many South Vietnamese were lost, I am talking about North Vietnamese, they lost a million and a half soldiers dead. One point three I think it was, and two hundred thousand civilians, and another eight hundred thousand wounded and another two hundred thousand captured. And that's the North Vietnamese only. They are huge figures
- 19:30 if you extrapolate that, it worked out I think they lost ten percent of their population of North Vietnam dead, if you take that across to America that would have been something like twenty-two million out of two hundred and twenty million people, huge figure. That's what North Vietnam lost, not including South Vietnam. South Vietnam lost another two million, that would have been a pretty high percentage of their population too. So all up they lost a huge amount of man power, and all in the bracket of ten to about twenty-five thirty,
- 20:00 that's their future generations. That's why now if you go over there I daresay you wouldn't see too many men aged thirty through to sixty. Its all gone, they have probably got thirty year olds but that age group that I am talking about then it has all been decimated it is really sad. And the number of wounded there was astronomical. The number of people you see wandering around with one arm, one leg, or no arm. I went to the ARVN hospital there in Da Nang,
- 20:30 each regiment has got its own hospital and each battalion has got its own wing or ward. And I wandered into this and this was a bit of a shock to the system I tell you. You have got this bed with no mattress, just a spongy sort of a spring affair with a cloth over it. And you have got two or three Vietnamese to each bed all with one limb missing, or with both limbs missing. And underneath the bed are their wives and families cooking all of their tucker.
- 21:00 No hygiene, toilet was a big bucket, they would drag them down to use the toilet, drag them back. The wives had to provide the food otherwise they starved. There were no drugs to help them. I ended up getting quite a bit of gear for them, I knew a Gunnery Sergeant Murphy from the Marines at Marble Mountain. His sole job for his last year in Vietnam was to run a fourteen lane bowling alley, great job he had, and he was a warrant officer gunnery in the Marines and he got me all of these drugs which were very hard to get anyway.
- 21:30 Bandages and drugs and ointments, all medical stuff, two truckloads, and we sent them over there about two weeks later and the doctor really appreciated it. One doctor to look after all of these patients.

How many patients were there?

There would have been twenty, thirty beds up both sides and the minimum was two to a bed. That was the only place they could sleep.

With no morphine what was the sound like?

A lot of agony, groans and everything

- 22:00 carrying on yeah. And the smell the smell was shocking. Smelt like dead people everywhere, it was shocking. And then the sewerage smell on top of that. There was maybe one bulb per ten beds so you could see to walk around, night time was quite dark. I didn't see it real dark but I know what it would be like. Shocking. And then they had like they own little cooking fires under their bed, put the water on to boil it and make a drink or something. They took a bit of food for their husbands. If
- 22:30 that never happened the poor buggers would starve. I don't know what happened to them. We actually took in, we actually got about four or five boxes of apples and four or five boxes of Fanta and KC Cola and we gave one apple and one drink to every soldier there. And they loved it you know, they ate the apple very slowly I didn't see too many eat actually, they just took it very slowly. Anyway they got an apple and a drink each, that was their present from the advisors you know. Much as it was. That was pretty disgusting though.
- 23:00 Compared to what we are used to back here you know, disgusting. Even our army hospital over there at Vung Tau had all of the modern facilities, but the Vietnamese hospital. And I don't know whether you were aware we had civilian doctors and nurses working in hospitals over there?

Civilian hospitals?

Two hospitals in Melbourne, the Royal Melbourne and I can't think of the other one [Prince Alfred?] , they sent civil medical teams over there, and they served mainly in III and IV Corps.

- 23:30 They worked in already set up hospitals and helped the Vietnamese. Manned by voluntary doctors, sisters, anaesthetists, surgeons, the whole lot, the whole gambit. And I think there was about two or three hundred eventually went over there, assisted over a three or four year span, yeah. I actually ran into one one day in the middle of the day down in IV Corps I was chatting to this sister, but no matter who you were they would help you. So you could be a VC shot somewhere the night before by the local RF or PF and get in and get fixed up by this Australian
- 24:00 doctor and sent back out again. That would happen I suppose, in the extreme, but they did a good job. And once again our government doesn't reward them. They don't get any medals or compensation. I don't know why the tropics affects women but it affects their menstrual cycle badly. I don't know why, it is a fact.

Sorry what affects it?

The tropics. Tropical climates affect women's

- 24:30 reproductive system. And they have never had any come back at all, they haven't been given medals they haven't been given any compensation at all, they are still fighting today. And they went over there voluntarily you know, we were sent there. We were looked after but these poor buggers didn't come under the military umbrella, and quite a few of them have got serious problems, some of the women have got real serious problems. But you know, they will probably die in the next couple of years and no one will hear. We also had aid workers you know.

- 25:00 Entertainers and aid workers. Aid workers being they were like the American doughnut dollies. They would go over there to entertain and sing and assist the concert groups yeah, one of them actually got killed, got shot up in Da Nang, not while I was there.

If I can just take you back to Thuong Duc, I mean you mentioned before the constant gun fire through the night and not being able to see anything I was wondering if you can kind of put us in the picture of what you

- 25:30 **hear with the bugles and the whistles of a night raid and just put us in the picture of what that would have been like?**

Well yeah you're right, the first you got of it was the forward pits out the front would probably observe movement, or the sentries were out there and they picked up movement, something was happening, so you automatically fire your artillery DFs, that's defensive fire, into where you think they are. If that doesn't stop it, well you have got big trouble. Then you hear the bugles, then you have got to get flares up so you can see what you are doing and what they are doing,

- 26:00 then you have got to get the Stinger doing his thing, then you have got to get the gunships, you can use gunships at night too which I did, but you have got to be able to see what you are doing, you have got to have flares up. It is very dicey if the flares go out and the gunships are flying, all hell would break loose and you're killing your own people. But you know you can use them and the Stinger is the best thing, they can see where they were firing basically. There was no mistaking their attacking you know. You have got rounds coming through the place, you have got bugles blowing, you can hear them. On top, well you can hear them obviously when the artillery is not firing and landing close to you, it's very noisy anyhow, but before that they have got to get their lines

- 26:30 set up to move them forward. To do that you have got people there and spread them out. And once that happens you can see them, if you don't see them you can hear them. So our early warning people would let us know so everybody stands too. See at night you stand down and there are only certain M60 machine guns manned. And the rest of the unit stands down and have a sleep, then when you stand to everyone has got to man their weapon pits, you have got weapon pits all over the place. And what they have got to do to get at us is to go through all of

- 27:00 these weapon pits which are strategically placed so that you have got good interlocking fire coming from all flanks to stop them, it is just massive fire power that stops them basically. And they're in the open they're advancing on you, if you have got wire obstacles out that helps just to slow them down to kill them. Artillery is the best though.

Did their tactic of noise with the bugle work as a tactic in terms of confusing your ranks at all?

Well their bugles

- 27:30 are used for orders, they have got certain calls or certain blows that tell them what to do. The bugle call is to get them to move forward I think, to keep them in the line. And the more noise they make behind obviously the more threatening it appears to those that they are trying to attack. It is pretty scary I will admit when that happens, and whistles they have got whistles too. I should have mentioned this before, they always walk their mortars in, their mortar fire goes in before they attack and that progressively just moves over you, and that gets

- 28:00 you down. And by the time you poke your head out again ready to fire back they are attacking you assaulting you, and that's how they worked yeah. And their mortars are pretty deadly weapons. The 122's and the 82's and they can fire them very accurately and lots of them. Direct drop with them basically from another hill, basically land on top of you. Sometimes they explode in the trees, mostly on the ground and you have got shrapnel everywhere you could get your head blown off so you have got to

get down. But yeah that is the basic precursor to

28:30 an attack so that you know what is going to happen. The other thing that happened was we had to get our casualties out and the minute one of my advisors or myself appeared on the Landing Zone, LZ, they're observers in day time could see us and they opened up fire with mortars again. And at night time the chopper would come in and they would aim on the noise of the helicopter and once again they opened up with mortars onto the landing zone, so it was pretty hairy. You had to get the bodies onto the choppers as quick as you could, live bodies, dead bodies, otherwise you are in real trouble,

29:00 as soon as they take off you are off, back in your weapon pit somewhere. So that was not a good place to be at during a helicopter evacuation or re-supply because you're likely to get knocked off very smartly.

And what about just coping with the fear of it all, were there moments that were particularly...?

Yeah I had a couple of moments thinking what the hell am I doing here? Sure did, but once you get involved you stop worrying about it, but that's what happens, and you have got to direct things on the radio

29:30 and talk to the CO and the artillery people and you get very busy and you have got people around you. You get too involved and time just flies. But yeah at one stage I sat up there one time when they were attacking and I thought God what am I doing here? You know because we are going to get over run here, and it did look like that very close. And I thought to myself maybe I should pray to my God if I have one now.

What could you see around you?

This was daytime now and I could see them coming.

30:00 A hundred blokes stretched out in a line attacking us and doing the same thing on the next hill. I mean you know, the teaching is you have got a unit there, you have got to be three times superior at least in numbers to attack. But they were eight. In Australia we are taught you attack a company with a battalion and a company would attack a platoon. But you never attack company on company or battalion on battalion because you need the reserve force, supporting fire force etc. But with a regiment plus,

30:30 maybe two regiments they could do the lot numbers wise quite easily. We couldn't stop them because they had so many soldiers, and the amount of fire power coming in was incredible it really was.

So what in your training could prepare you or back you up in that sort of circumstance?

Oh just the training itself, nothing else. Just your training and your competency and making sure you have done everything you can to counteract the attack you know. Artillery, mortars, gunships, F-4's and Stingers we had our own mortars I should have added. Artillery

31:00 was the best one, day or night you could fire that. And our air support, our Phantoms that dropped napalm or bombs whatever you wanted, and our long range artillery because that probably, the 105 mm artillery shell we use in the Australian Army still, the American eight inch is probably twice as big and it has got twice the deadly effect. It has probably got a danger area of five hundred metres square or something. Five hundred metre circle you know, maybe not quite that big maybe four hundred. And the 105 mm has got about two hundred. So every round of heavy stuff that hits there or two is equivalent

31:30 to about five or six 105's and that's the difference. And I must admit the old eight inch artillery shell going through the night sky sounds like a bloody great steam train going through the air and shakes the ground, it actually shakes the ground upon detonation. When it goes off, that's from a hundred metres away, it is very impressive let's say. So you get down in your fox hole and put your hard hat on. Hope for the best, you have got to stay alert though that is the main thing.

And were there any fellows in the field that you saw that didn't deal with it terribly well?

No you had no choice, you can't go anywhere because you are surrounded. You can't go anywhere for a start. We had a bad start to that operation because this mad lieutenant, Marine Corps, I must add, he was in charge of our FO party Forward Observer from the US Marines. See the Marines have got a way of calling for fire support for our battalion, the American

32:30 Army has got another way and the Vietnamese have got another way if they could reach us, which they couldn't so we relied on the Marines. And with the Marines you have got to give all of the co-ordinates like grid reference, twenty rounds what ever you want to say, "Fire now." You have got to give an officers initials and he was an officer this young bloke he was a second lieutenant so he would give his initials. You have got to give two officers initials, so you have got to give Bravo Mike Golf for me and I forget what

33:00 he was, Julia Foxtrot or something like that. Anyway he used to wander around, he spoke fluent Vietnamese and he would wander around with his rifle during the low periods and he would sit on people's weapon pits and talk to them see? So this particular day he is there talking to my lieutenant, and he has got his legs hanging over the top, and suddenly this mortar barrage comes in and he was a bit slow getting up to move, he just sat there, and then decided get up. And there was a bloody great chunk of shrapnel went through his thigh, and Mike Boyer and I were sitting in the bottom of the pit

and all of this blood came

33:30 gushing in and I thought Shit! So we pulled him in. he had a hole probably as big as a fist in the side of his thigh. Missed his artery, don't know how. So I stuck this, we had this immediate first aid dressing which was a roll, it was a bandage thing, whacked that in and put bandages around real quick and it stopped bleeding. And I said, "We have saved your life, now we have got to get you out of here." So we got him out to the LZ and of course they start mortaring us again, and he is hobbling and carrying on. And a chopper came within about twenty minutes, half an hour.

34:00 We got him out he lived he lost a lot of blood. Blood everywhere, Christ it came out and it missed the artery. It missed the artery. He was an interesting bloke. But then I had to get his artillery party down to live with me because they had no officer and when they wanted to call in fire they had to give an officer's initial as long as it is a white man's initials like me or the looe [lieutenant], I don't know whether it would work for the Vietnamese officer or not, you had to

34:30 have one of the advisors do it, so I moved them back with me and we were pretty right then. We arranged the artillery support for the operation for the two days or whatever it was and then they came back the next time. He lived, the young Marine officer as when they came back I saw one of his party the second time and they said, "He is okay." But he was put on a ship and sent home. The Americans worked these naval ships, big hospital ships that would come and pick up all of the badly wounded that can't fly but have got to get back home. Put them on these ships and sail home or to Hawaii away they go great

35:00 straight home, hard way to get home I suppose half killed. But yeah and then if they were really bad they used to fly them in these big jet transporters the really bad ones that had to get home ASAP [As Soon As Possible] sort of thing.

Did you ever lose nay mates while you were over there Bernie?

Not, well when I arrived there about two weeks after I arrived there an American advisor got killed. In another battalion, you see there were four battalions in my regiment, so I

35:30 was in the first battalion, he was in the third or second and then I had another Australian in the third and another Australian in the fourth and all of the rest were American Marines and US Army. His name was Bill, can't think now but anyhow, he was about to go home, but he was foolishly out trying to find an LZ [Landing Zone] to land some choppers, in front of his Vietnamese with a Vietnamese rifle company and he walked into a claymore mine, set-up booby trap. Didn't kill him instantly, put a few holes in him,

36:00 and he died in the chopper about five minutes later. White, Bill White was his name, very young too about my age. About to go home and got himself killed. That was the only fatality among the advisors, we lost a few Vietnamese but that wasn't so bad I guess. Compared to the advisors, they got very morose for a while, they take it to heart the old Americans, when some of their own gets killed, they react more than say the Australians would if one of our blokes got killed.

36:30 Still the same but they seem to suffer more or blame themselves more, this sort of thing.

In what way, how would they?

They weren't gay and happy, they normally have a bit of a banter around the breakfast table or the dinner table at night back in the regiment and they were all moping around and carrying on, only lasted about two or three days you know. They have got a thing, lot of them probably didn't like the Vietnamese too much, they called them 'slants' and 'gooks' and all of this sort of stuff, but that's just what they are like the Americans, they are like that all of the time.

37:00 I think if they were Japanese they would call them slants anyhow, Vietnamese they call them slants. So they had a bit of a thing about Asiatic races, I am not sure why. They thought we were great they loved Australians. But most of the people I met didn't have a high opinion of the Vietnamese, they didn't hate them, some liked them, some didn't like them. I guess maybe it is the case in every case I don't know but some liked them some didn't.

37:30 Do you think part of that was the confusion between knowing who was friend or foe?

I think it was probably more so the Americans because of the casualties they were suffering, there was people being killed every week, wounded every week, sent home every week. And they had some horrendous casualties, fifty-eight thousand dead is pretty big, it was twice as big as our Australian Army that existed then. So it is a lot of soldiers and they had something like three or four hundred thousand wounded. That's even worse, not serious wounded but people lost ankles blown off by a mine or

38:00 lost an arm, or bad wound to the torso this sort of thing, quite serious wounds. Thousands.

Were there things you picked up operating in the jungle that your training didn't prepare you for?

No not really, you know, if you did proper training back here you cover all contingencies but they were shockers in the field some of the Vietnamese.

38:30 Remember I told you about all of the shitting going on all of the time, well when you get in the

mountains it is ever worse because they have got to shit on a clear space which is going to be on a track somewhere, they won't shit in a bush because it will go on a tree or something and get on their uniform or something, get on their gear. So they go and find a clear space somewhere and have a crap, so every morning you move out you have got to walk off track for a couple of hundred metres up the side before you get out of the range of all of the craps along the track. I actually trained them at one stage to dig a hole and use lime powder or whatever to keep the blowflies out and that worked for a while but then they just fell back into their old habits. They don't even bury it they just crap where they want to. Whereas the Australian soldier would dig a hole

39:00 and bury it for Gods sake, not the Vietnamese, just crap everywhere.

I guess they figure they are just putting out fertiliser?

That's right exactly, make the jungle grow better or the trees grow better. Its disgusting to think about. And it spreads disease because the bloody flies fly on it and fly to your food. It is not very hygienic at all. That's basic training of being a soldier. That and a few other little things, their eating habits are pretty disgusting too the things they eat. I guess I can put up with snails but not dog.

39:30 I have eaten snails I have eaten those eggs that I was talking about, I mean that's tucker there, but not bloody old bow wow. For God's sakes, Christ.

Okay we have got to pause it.

Tape 8

00:30 **Something I meant to ask you before Bernie was why was Wally leaving was his time up?**

No. normally advisors did six or seven months in the field but then went back to a less demanding job. But in our case, Wally and I we went from, by instance he is coming down to see me in December from up north to say hello. We went from one demanding battalion job to a demanding RF/PF [Regional force Popular Force] and ARVN training job.

01:00 Or operational job in the Delta, so we didn't go from one warlike job to a peaceful job no. The battalion job was pretty hectic and horrendous and lots of fighting. And we had the same. Not quite as hectic, but the same sort of situation down in the Delta. What we did in the end, we were training ARVN platoon leaders and squad leaders, that's the regular army. South Vietnamese Army, and the RF/PF officers and squad leaders on

01:30 night ambushing. So we put them through, two weeks of training and then we would go out and do two real life ambushes with them, actual live ones.

Now can you, Chris and I were just talking about a second ago, for the archive they would like some information about the ambushing, can you tell us what the strategies were that were involved with night ambushing?

Okay it was a straight out Australian method of ambushing. You go out and do a reconnaissance days ahead by chopper or by ground, chopper is usually the best, just fly over it or fly to where the site is and check out that there is no

02:00 water and it is a good position and there is a couple of tracks joined and there is a wooded area and you can sit up there and watch the two tracks coming towards you. Where the people would be coming along because there is all water elsewhere. So you pick a site and plan on that. Now the Australian method of ambushing is you go in by whatever you can. By whatever means. And the last bit to move into the actual ambush site you have actually got to set up a firm base. You normally got into that by foot, say you come in by trucks about a mile away then you walk from there to where the firm base is set up. Or you come in by chopper to where the trucks would be and

02:30 walk from where the choppers drop you off, so that you don't give away where you are going. They don't know you're coming, unless they hear you walking which is pretty hard if it is on last light and you are walking a long a dark track somewhere, you're pretty right. So you set-up a firm base, and from there you set up your ambush site. But you have got to have a firm base set-up so that you can run back to it in case you get ambushed yourself. So you set-up your firm base, go to your ambush site you put up what is called a killing zone, a killing area where the machine guns and claymores interlock into an area where you can

03:00 break them up with machine guns. You put up claymore mines to blast them when they get into the killing zone, like about ten claymore mines., and you have cut off groups, when they run to the flanks you cut them off so they can't run back that way. And they can't run backwards, because you normally place your ambush where there is no access to the rear. They can't run that way so you have got them trapped and that is basically the ambush. It is basically a matter of one foot on the ground all of the time while the other foot is moving, and then that's on the ground and this other mob can do something else. By that I

03:30 mean, the ambush starts there they're on the ground, if you wish to you can move your secure base

back here somewhere else, we don't normally do that but what I am saying is in the ambush party itself too the machine gun party stay on the machine guns the whole time while the other groups go and clear the area, make sure there is no one left alive, check the bodies for information, clear the ambush where all of the deadies are and that is basically it. And then withdrawing is the same. You withdraw from the

04:00 ambush site back into your firm base. Firm base you walk out to where you are going to be picked up by trucks and buses, that is basically it. There are tactics on the ambush site itself, who goes where, where the commander is, where the machine guns are, where the cordon people are to block off people running back down the track, either out or back in again. And basic search of the bodies, if you get them there, you have got to have one bloke pointing his weapon at the enemy bloke in case he is alive still, and the other bloke searches him. You quickly search the bodies because you don't know if that element might be a lead element for another larger element.

04:30 You have got to be very careful there. And you have only got thirty or forty or fifty blokes out there you are a pretty small unit and if a larger element comes along you are in trouble. That's basically it in a nutshell. So what we do is put them through shooting on the rifle range, make sure they can shoot straight. Which most of them can by this stage they have been shooting so long. Grenade practice, how to throw grenades, you can also use grenades at the ambush site throwing grenades if you want to. Our tactics of moving across paddy fields. The Vietnamese they like to

05:00 keep their feet dry see? So they stay on the little paddy bunds, that's the little bunds around the paddy fields about that high so you're moving in that direction they will go sideways, go there, go back this way, like a big centipede gone wrong you know, going sideways, it is not the way to move, if you want to move reasonably protected, you have got to have flank protection and forward and rear protection at all times, so you move in a certain formatio, either out ahead or whatever, dictated by the ground see? So that's taught exactly the same way that the Australian Army teaches it. The only disadvantage

05:30 in water, of course if you are splashing around in water they are going to hear you, but it is only shallow water so just go slowly and you won't make so much noise. You have got to have artillery support in case you have got to withdraw unexpectedly. You have DFs again laid down to cut off anyone chasing you, and if you have got to get out in a hurry you have got to have some rendezvous to go to where you're back up pick up people can come and pick you up, whether it be chopper, APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers] or whatever. So that training goes on. Then you actually take them on a dry run in the day time on a dry run in formation somewhere.

06:00 And show them what we mean by doing it this way and how we move through the ambush, from the firm base etc. Do it on the board and the Vietnamese interpreter explains it to them. You tell him in English and he tells them in Vietnamese, you go through two or three days of lectures, and then do a couple of practice runs and away you go. And those blokes have been fighting war for a while so most of them know what they are doing. Some of them don't they couldn't care less, but they pick up a few tricks off us. The Vietnamese are very casual

06:30 they're supposedly not frightened of being shot, which is rubbish of course but that's what I mean that's the image they try to put across, not quite, what can I say they don't accept the fact that they might be killed but deep down I think they do.

What about, I mean in the Second World War the Japanese never gave up I mean men would have to go in and literally get them out. Did you find that the same with the NVA and the VC?

No we never

07:00 had mass units dug in and fight to the bitter end because the NVA in certain areas don't want to make continual contact, once you make contact with them they want to withdraw quickly because they know we well bring in choppers gunships, Stingers we will bring in everything. Air Force Phantoms or Marine Phantoms or whatever, so they will delay you as long as possible and then withdraw to main force as quickly as they can, if they can. And then that little force that they occupy here with, they'll bug out too. And this goes on

07:30 and on and on. So what you do is put someone up there to try and stop there, put a couple more battalions around where you think they will withdraw, that's called a cordon and search, not really a cordon and search. A cordon and search is really a cordon of the village and search of it. Advance to contact it basically is, but you can also use other elements to come in from other areas to be in the area that you push them back into. It is advance you make contact and push them back, there is a word for it,

08:00 I can't think now. Lost mind. My long term memory cells are failing me again. But yeah, basically the same principle that the Australian Army works on, exactly the same. What you want to do is catch him block him and then kill him, that's what you are going to do.

How would you be guaranteed when you are doing the reccie that it is a good place to ambush, I mean what if they don't come along?

Well you have got to, we had certain warrant officers set-up, they worked in the US Army

08:30 intelligence centres, and their job was to work out where the maximum Viet Cong NVA activity was, in IV Corps this is a bit different up north. But yeah in IV Corps yeah they could tell where VC were increasing their night activities, in other words people were seen moving into certain areas carrying things. And we have got our own spies in there, and they were obviously building up to something and

so you would go into an area with a lot of activity. In other words you would prevent them, the VC using the night to their advantage,

09:00 in IV Corps they would move stores from one area to another, guns, ammunition, soldiers or whatever. They used the night to their advantage. So if you set-up an ambush on one of the trails they used, that's how you would get them. You have got to make sure the trail is going to be used, yeah sure that helps. But that's what you do is wait for them, and if they come wandering along then you have got them. And it happens; it happened very smartly you know. But you have got to make sure you are not compromised before you go in, in other words you don't tell too many people, but that has dangers too of course, if you don't tell too many people you are going, too many friendlies you end up getting artillery fire on yourself because they pick up

09:30 movement on their sensors, once again, they think it is bloody enemy and it is us. Happened to us one night, we got hit by our own artillery we were very lucky.

Was it Australians or Americans?

No South Vietnamese artillery. But once again they were using the Vietnamese sensors which are movement detectors. See these movement detectors are okay as long as it is not bloody buffalo or animals or dogs or whatever. They can't distinguish between them and us, it is all movement. But they picked up movement from us and I had already told the Vietnamese people where we were going to be, I told the

10:00 Americans who were supposed to tell the Vietnamese but they didn't. So once they picked up movement they thought there was enemy out there. We were lucky in that when we got to where we were supposed to go there was water, two foot of water, too deep, couldn't do it so we had started moving out anyway, and we had only gone about a hundred metres and all of this artillery came in behind us. And artillery on water is frightening. It seems to splatter further, the shrapnel, and it whizzes past, it goes ping. Like that, very scary, so we took off and went where we wanted to go, this road and down the other side and we were right, very lucky.

10:30 Yeah at this stage myself and the two other warrant officers got up the front so we were very lucky, but the elements at the rear elements took off I tell you got out of there in a hurry. And it was night time, pitch black couldn't see a bloody thing but you could hear this splash, splash, splash.

So when you went out with the blokes that you trained for ambushing, did you find a real difference in the men from doing say the dummy runs to the real thing?

Well it is very hard to say because I can't see the whole, say there would be fifty blokes in a big long line,

11:00 it is hard to see what is happening back because you can't see that far. And you have got to rely on the Vietnamese NCOs down there to make sure that they are doing the right thing. But yeah you can in a situation where you're moving that way and the back is still over here on the flank somewhere and you see one another and you don't know who they are. You can actually have a contact that way with your own people, that is very dangerous. The Vietnamese are a bit sluggish. When I was up north in fact this is a prime example,

11:30 I used to deploy these combined US Marine and Vietnamese little ambush parties of about ten or fifteen each. About half a dozen Vietnamese and the about half a dozen Marines in it and they would have this little area to look after and that was their area, we were protecting this highway (Highway 4) actually. That was their little area to protect or guard. Anyway come eight o'clock all of the Vietnamese would put up their hammocks and go to sleep. Bamboo poles and then leave the Marines there by themselves. So I went and saw the battalion commander about this and told him because I could see it with my

12:00 starlight scope, check them out for a distance and I could see that they were all asleep and I told the battalion commander, "Not good you know, they have got to stay awake too." Because as it was the next night, some of these Vietnamese in a little area were moving around to make their beds again and the Marines opened fire because they thought they were VC. So in the end we had to make sure everyone was awake, it was only for one night, and no one went to sleep and there was no conflict then, everyone was fine. They were all supposed to be observing any activity on their little side of the highway. It was only about

12:30 fifty or a hundred metres off the side of the road on both flanks of the road all of the way for about half a mile. Because they were coming in and putting all of these pressure mines in there. But yeah these things happen see?

Actually Bernie did you see this frequently? Because I have heard quite a few stories about friendly fire that occurred on behalf of Americans.

Well friendly fire covers a few nasties you know, it could be artillery it could be small arms it could be anything you know. Artillery is the easiest thing in the world to put on friendly forces. If your map reading is out and you

13:00 are out by a thousand metres, and a bloody great eight inch round comes in well it is going to decimate your forces. You have got to be very spot on with map reading and navigation. And the way to do that if you have got any doubts at all, it gives it away a bit of course in the day time to use a smoke round. One

artillery shell fire with smoke and wherever it lands you quickly take a bearing on it with your compass, back to where you reckon you are, and if it was on that compass line you're safe, you're pretty right you know.

- 13:30 You can work out definitely where you are, that's called orientation yeah. But mostly the artillery the FO, that's the forward observer they're pretty good map readers. Now days our bloody Australian FOs and artillery people have a GPS [Global Positioning Systems] that's just goes 'zot'. And supposedly it is right, and it probably it is. But they have got troubles when the batteries are flat, that's the only problem.

Well hopefully they're taught the basics of navigation?

Well it is a skill that is hard to maintain unless you practice you know, that's what I am saying.

- 14:00 But yeah that's one way. Friendly fire, of course you get people walking through friendly ambushes, that's has happened a couple of times. Not to me personally but a couple of my warrant officers, some other friendly group walked through the ambush, and that is very dangerous because it only takes one nervous Binh Si on the ambush site itself to fire it, fire one of those claymores and you have got lots of people dead. But luckily they let them go through very luckily. And the same thing happened with tanks
- 14:30 I have heard people being in an ambush somewhere, particularly in an Australian area and all of these tanks have chundered through, our own tanks in the middle of the night with their search lights on. I mean you are not going to attack a tank blasting through the reeds but they have gone through ambushes yeah. Probably fighter ground support too is very dangerous., I was going to tell you about that napalm yeah, I didn't mention that did I? That swamp when we chased those NVA into the swamp? When I put the napalm down the Binh Si they think it is like a day at Flemington Race course they all get on the higher ground and cheer and so on.
- 15:00 And in comes the jet and they always run across your front like that if you put them the other way you run the risk of overshoot you know so you put them across the flank. Now this bloody Phantom came in with this bloody napalm thing on it, but the napalm canister it bounced back sideways and it landed, there was still napalm burning in it, it landed amongst the Binh Si over here and set fire to the grass, and the grass started firing up. And all the Binh Si go, "Oh." And all ran off back into their holes. And this bloody great bush fire breaks out. It was all dry grass of course.
- 15:30 That's why everything was burning, that was quite comical at times. Our battalion commander was jumping up and down with his stick beating people telling them to go and put the fire out, yeah that was quite humorous. When the napalm came too close to friendlies.

Can I ask you why the South Vietnamese were called Binh Si?

Binh Si just Vietnamese for private or enlisted man.

Oh it is a Vietnamese word.

Binh Si, two words. I should call them, it is

- 16:00 just private, private soldier.

Also did you get R and C [Rest Leave in Country] while you were over there?

Well I suppose the week we had, we had to go to a parade and receive that second citation that was probably classified as R and C that was a full week, yeah. That was a good break, excellent break. But all we did was get drunk and march on the parade ground. Yeah General Abrams was the general then, this is September 70 and he had to present the citation to us and he had been pretty crook. And where the parade ground was in Vung Tau was down near the beach

- 16:30 area and the hospital and headquarters was up here on the higher ground past the dunes. And Abrams arrived with a huge escort you know, bloody Vietnamese escort and American escort and choppers flying overhead, he is the senior general in Vietnam there he has got to be protected he gets on the dais there and we march past and give a salute and just as we are marching around to form up to be presented with the citation he carks it, falls over unconscious and they rush in and cart him off. That's the end of the parade we've had enough, so we march off and they rush in and cart him off to the hospital and my ex-wife tells me
- 17:00 that the doctors and senior officers up there were falling over themselves trying to get him to revive. And there were military police running around and security guards and the doctors are trying to revive him and they are saying, "Is he dead?" "No he has just had a dizzy spell he will be right." And they finally revived him and he was all right but he had been in the sun a bit long and had a bit of a turn and fallen over. Yeah that was in the middle of the parade.

Where were you actually sent to get that commendation?

Vung Tau, the Australian support area the logistics area for

- 17:30 the task force in III Corps. It is right on the beach front, on the peninsula, Cape St Jacques it is actually called, it would be south east of Saigon. And then Nui Dat is a bit further north, probably about ten

miles I think, north east of Vung Tau. So Saigon is here north west of Vung Tau

18:00 Nui Dat up here and Vung Tau down here and there is the coast.

Were you aware at that time Bernie of the university demonstrations going on back in Sydney and in Australia?

No never saw it on TV and I didn't know. The only thing I saw I got a couple of letters from my fiancé then and she said there is a few demonstrations down south .the first I knew about it was when I came home in March 71 and it was still happening on TV. And the worst thing I ever saw in my life, it was about the middle of that year, I saw Jim Cairns

18:30 standing on the steps of Sydney Town Hall with his arm around a North Vietnamese delegation, in the middle of 71 it was. There is Jim Cairns the future deputy prime minister with his arms around this North Vietnamese delegation at a time when we are still fighting them. They were killing us and we were killing them and here he is in Sydney Town with his arms around the bastards you know? That's how, what can I say the Labor party I have got no respect for the Labor party whatsoever.

I think Chris will probably have a deeper chat with you about

19:00 **all of that kind of stuff on our last tape. The other thing though that really got a lot of guys,**

Sorry before you say, Cairns also, this is all of the propaganda on the war and Cairns used the name of a dead national serviceman without getting the national serviceman's families permission and said, "This man is one of the baby killers in Vietnam." Did you know that? He used this dead national serviceman's name and said, "Private Bloggs was one of the

19:30 baby killers in Vietnam." And he hasn't apologised for that to this day, same bloke Jim Cairns. He has got a lot to answer for, he led the moratorium I understand in 1970 when I was away. Big demonstration in Melbourne apparently and he was one of the big leaders up the front. He is a mongrel.

It was so unfair that the soldiers were copping the flak for government policy?

Exactly. That's one of the reasons I never marched in any of the Welcome Home Parades. It was all too much too bloody

20:00 late simple as that. They had three parades I think, eventually in 1987, 1989 and 1985. I never went to any of them, one in Sydney, one in Canberra, another one in Canberra. I never had anything to do with any of them.

Another reason to hate Canberra?

The big one was Sydney.

Actually I think Chris on our last tape will talk about coming home. Were you aware of the 'punch a postie' campaign that was going on?

Yeah. I knew it was going on, because well mail is very

20:30 important when you are fighting a war, when you are a soldier over in a foreign country fighting a war .We were very lucky you see because we could use the American system. They couldn't stop that.

What do you mean? Australian mail going through the American system?

Yeah I could either send my mail through the Australian postal system free back to Australia, which is through Vung Tau and Saigon. Or I could go through America, San Francisco APO and it would come in as normal air mail from America. Different system so they wouldn't know unless they looked at it you know. APO

21:00 96349 San Francisco. And you put down, on the top you put Australian advisor with the American forces and it goes straight through, free. Beautiful and that would get back to my fiancé in Townsville, it was quicker actually, quicker than Australian mail. Going all the way to America and back to Townsville that way was quicker than going through the Australian system which hardly ever got there on time. They must have put it on a bloody carrier pigeon you know, had to have a rest every five hundred miles.

What about her letters back to you?

Yep no problems.

21:30 received everything that I know of.

Well how did you cotton onto that deal?

Well it was a system we could use, we got sponsored through the Americans so as I said before we came under the auspices of the American Army for all admin purposes and their mail was much more, what can I say, gratifying and quicker.

Were you aware of any blokes there in the army not receiving their mail from Australia?

No not really.

Or the people in Australia not receiving their mail?

22:00 I just know mail was being delayed. I mean soldiers waiting and they love for their mail to come in it's their way of finding out what was going on at home, there was no other means of finding out. And if that is stopped well it upsets the soldiers greatly, upset me greatly if it did happen to me, if it did happen to me. It didn't happen to me. But I understand it happened to the Australians down in the Task Force yes. That wasn't the only thing, I recall vividly reading about in the army newspaper, we used to get a newspaper on occasion that used to keep us up on the news.

22:30 They had some tanks ready to go from Sydney wharves there and they wouldn't load them. Not only that they removed certain items of equipment from the Centurions [Centurion Tanks] like special spanners for special nuts, and all of this special equipment that you need on a tank, and they knocked it off. So when these tanks got to Vietnam, unless they were checked over thoroughly, they would be out on operation and suddenly need something and they couldn't find it because it wasn't there.

Are you talking about the wharfies [wharf labourers]?

Yes the wharfies in Sydney and Melbourne. In the end they brought

23:00 in the Jeparit and one of the other supply ships which was now being run by the Australian Navy. Loaded with Australian soldiers, and loaded the tanks on and got around it that way, got around the wharfies. But that wasn't the only thing. There was lots of other things being tampered with too, pieces of equipment disappearing, radio equipment off the tanks again. And all of these things that could cost a bloody life. If something was missing and didn't work when they needed it, if they hadn't have checked it out. Well they would have checked things out obviously, but sometimes you wouldn't check out what is called CES

23:30 which is a complete equipment schedule. Which is all of the bits and pieces that go with the tanks, I mean there is tons of things. Spare bits of this and that. Special tools and equipment to handle the repairs on it, and if you have got to take something off and you haven't got the right spanner for it you are in deep trouble. The tank is defenceless you know. Or it is stuck somewhere and can't move, blown track. They put Australian soldiers lives at risk. And the other thing was, we had a thing called the Karl Gustaff which is an anti-tank rocket.

24:00 It is an eighty-eight millimetre rocket fired out of a tube. Swedish maker as the name suggest. The wharfies once again banished re-supply rounds for that because it didn't come from Australia. It had to come to Australia from Sweden, and then be sent to Vietnam and they banished that because a foreign weapon, some bloody excuse they gave and so we didn't have

24:30 spare rounds for the Karl Gustaff. We ran out and that was very serious too. People's lives in danger from that again, if you wanted to use it you had no rounds to put in it.

Could you get any rounds for that from the Americans?

No because they didn't use that system, they used different rocket launchers. I am pretty sure it was the Karl Gustaff from Sweden or Switzerland and there was a hell of a stoppage because of the wharfies again. All of the customs, import export, and these are fellow Australians.

I heard a story that the Australian had to end up asking the

25:00 **Americans for ammunition because they weren't getting the correct amount from Australia, the wharfies wouldn't actually take it off the...?**

Probably true. We were lucky there also because the Americans used 7.62 mm, did they use nine mil? No they must have. They used 7.62 mm which we could use, they also had 5.56 mm which we could also use. And their current pistol was a 45, not a nine mil, so the nine mil ones missed out but the other ones were okay. So we used 7.62 mm in the machine guns which was good.

25:30 7.62 mm in the SLR which was good, and 5.56 mm the M16 which was good. There is the thing too, Australia paid for every round that we got off the Americans. We and New Zealand, beside America obviously were the only nations to pay for our way through Vietnam, cost us something like I think two hundred million was the figure quoted somewhere. Two hundred million dollars over that main 1965 to 1972 period when the main forces were there, to provide for all of our ammunition,

26:00 weapons, food etcetera. We were the only nation to pay for all of that in Vietnam. The Koreans on the other hand wouldn't go unless the American re-armed them. So the South Koreans that went there as a division, quite big, had to be re-armed by the Americans with M16's, M14's all of the American stuff, on condition that they served in Vietnam which they did, that cost America a lot of money. I mean twenty thousand Korean soldiers had to be rearmed by the American system,

26:30 is a bit outlay. But everything we did over there we paid for., petrol, gasoline the whole lot.

Bernie did we end up using the rifles from the dead North Vietnamese?

No they just used them as trophies, that is very dangerous doing that. If you use an enemy weapon and it is night time, the sound gives you away for a start, different sound, somebody else might think you're enemy and zap you, so you never do that .

27:00 The only people that did do that were a mob called the PRU, Provincial Reconnaissance Units and they pretended they were VC and they carried all VC weapons, and a few of our Australian advisors were involved in that and they were all in black uniforms. At night time, and they obviously used the right weapons you know. What they would do was sneak up and pretend they were VC and they would meet an advance group of VC coming towards them and then lay into them. With the VC weapons we got, that happened.

27:30 But no not in normal circumstances. In fact most of the weapons were collected and the Americans would send them home, I don't know what they would do with them, trade them, arm them. An AK-47 was a very attractive piece of barter equipment. That's an AK-47 basic assault rifle.

Are they the Russian Kalashnikovs? is that...?

Yes that's it.

Did you get one?

No we couldn't bring them home but I know Americans did. They would ship them home. Put it in big connexes and everything to go out. They used these big connex steel containers you see today.

28:00 up here on the river there, near the bridge I actually lived in one of those for a while, underground. Quite comfortable. You are well protected with all of the dirt and steel around you, pretty hard to get shrapnel kill from artillery by that. Interesting. But they would put stuff in that and ship it off. We brought a few home official reasons for demonstrations in various messes mounted on boards and you say, "This is the weapon used in Vietnam blah blah." And there is a lot of those around the country, they are made

28:30 innocuous first, they couldn't be fired. They were presented to various messes around Australia. In fact one of the best small arms museum in Australia is up the Infantry Centre in Singleton in New South Wales, one of the best, even beats the police one in Sydney. Much more detailed and much more variety of weapons. Obviously weapons would have gone there for that you know Russian pistols, AKs [Kalashnikov assault rifle], SKSs [Siminov assault rifle], RPDs [Light Machine Gun] would make it. Portable stuff. Not the big stuff, yeah and it was sent down there.

29:00 **Actually I remember watching a documentary about the Kalashnikovs having some sort of noise when you took it off safety? And then you could tell it was them.**

The firing sound is a give away. You know an M-16 makes certain noises but AK-47 makes a different noise altogether, so you can usually tell at night time. Plus they fire a green tracer. So what you know is you have got green tracer flicking around in front of you there is enemy around, dead give away. They never used red tracer, we used red they used green.

29:30 So at night time it is very handy to know that.

So what year exactly did you move for engineers over to infantry?

I came home, I tried to transfer over there but they knocked me back and said, "No we have trained you too much you have got to stay engineers." This is in Vietnam. I made an application but they wouldn't do it. Came back to Australia to 18th Field Squadron Townsville again, my old unit. And half way through the year back to the application and it was approved.

30:00 So in December 1971 I transferred through and got married, and I joined 2 RAR [2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment] which is also in Townsville in December of 1971, transferred through to there.

And did the officer think you were crazy?

No. In fact my company commander was my mate from Vietnam, Warren Gunder I was with in the Training Team. Wally Sheppard became the mortar officer, Harry Lovelock who trained me in Canungra was the 2IC of 2 RAR, also about six of the warrant officers I worked with in Vietnam were also in the battalion, so it was all like old homecoming week.

30:30 People do that, another bloke, Bill McLaughlin, followed my suit about two years later, did exactly the same thing transferred over from artillery to infantry.

But then you stayed in infantry right up unit you left the army is that right?

Yes.

Did you find that a more rewarding experience?

Initially yes, but in those days we had nine battalions and then Gough Whitlam got in in 1972 cut it back to six. So then positions in battalions became hard to get an I ended up doing more staff type work. I didn't

31:00 like that but that's just the problem of getting older and more senior in the army you end up pushing a desk somewhere you know. Which is a pain, not my criteria and I don't like it. That's why I hate Canberra you know, it is full of pen pushers down there, and there are too many civvies. You know I can't believe that Australian Defence Force of thirty thousand needs a fifteen thousand defence force

civil bureaucracy. Fifteen thousand civvies, in Canberra most of them.

I think that may

31:30 **happen with all kinds of bureaucracies.**

But not fifteen thousand.

No, that is an extreme amount.

That's half the size of the regular army, and here we have, and their senior jobs, the problem down there is, say you have got army, navy air force, combined headquarters there, say you have got a senior general one from each of the services, you have got three equivalents from the civvies side. So when you have a blanket vote, it will either be three all, or four or five to one or two. One way normally civvies win the day.

32:00 Because there in fighting between the army, navy, air force too, they mightn't like what army is doing here, they think they are losing out on something or money so they side with the civvies and it is four to two, or five to one. You can't win., that's exactly what happens. And it is quite simple when you have a sit back and have a look at all of this. The bloke that I blame for all of this is Sir Arthur Tange, he was the defence secretary and he was the mongrel that started out sourcing and getting rid of army messes. Joining us together to have communal messes. And I mean we're losing all of our traditions from the British Army that way.

32:30 And the austerity of the officers' mess, because it is a combined mess you have got all sorts of officers coming in and out the same as the warrant officers. They're all losing, the food standard has gone downhill because of civvies outsourcing, no where near the standard that I was used to in my day. When we had our own cooks and our own rations and we made our own meals. Beautiful meals. Now when we go to Canungra. We have a Training Team get together at Canungra, each year on our birthday. And the Queensland association goes there,

33:00 we used to pay twenty-five dollars for a nice meal. Now you get less equivalent and less standard for thirty-five dollars, so we go to the RSL [Returned Services League] at Canungra now and have a meal there. But on the gorge road up the back of Canungra we have got our own memorial, it is called the CanNha which means home, Can NhaUc Dai Loi, which means "home of the advisor" in Vietnamese. And it is a beautiful grotto, we have got a grotto of trees, and a little Korean -hut about as wide as this with three walls

33:30 and a roof and on the back wall is all marble and in beautiful white printing are all of the names of the Training Team, nine hundred and forty names ,with asterisk next to the ones that were killed in action. In fact the ones that were killed have got permanent trees there with plaques to nominate that they were killed in Vietnam. They have got the avenue of KIAs and actually there are four advisors that have died back here that have got their ashes interred up there. So it is a very sacred place you know.

Where is this exactly Bernie?

At Canungra itself. Canungra Army training ground. Canungra used to be called JTC [Jungle Training Centre], it is now called something else.

34:00 But it is the army training area there and up in the hills to the back we have got a beautiful area there. It will never be lost, it has always been commonwealth land and we have got our own little area there, beautiful. We have a big ceremony every July birthday ,we have the three flags, the American, the South Vietnamese and the Australian, we have the padre officiate. The cadets from around here do everything for us hold ground and all of the military stuff and about a hundred, two hundred people turn up every year, it is really great.

34:30 **When did you learn you were coming home?**

Well most times it is twelve months so you assume. It will be around about twelve months to the day, in other words a week either side of the twelve month period that's when you will be going home yeah.

So were you counting down the days on a calendar or something?

Yeah we had, the big thing when I was there was one of the female actresses from America by the name of, she was in that movie with the two old buggers. Anne Margaret. What they did they made a

35:00 figure out of her and then they had numbers, sort of like a jigsaw puzzle. So if you had time you used to colour in what day it was, day one day two and you would leave it in your locker and progressively coloured and the last couple of numbers were all around the groin area.

Three sixty-three, three sixty-four,

And when you got to three sixty-five all around the pubic area of poor old Anne Margaret you see, which I thought was pretty appropriate. When I think about it. And then once

35:30 you got to three sixty-five you knew you were going home, it was filled out.

On that note did you think the year there was, when you look back now was it well spent?

My feelings are you can't get any better than the real thing, that's what I was trained for and what I did. In that, satisfaction yes. And it was good for me as a young officer because it helped quick promotion, well a reasonably quick promotion yes.

36:00 and good experience and not many captains of my age, I think I was twenty-five when I left, what year was it 70? Just turned twenty-six next month actually when I went over there, and I was advising the captain commanding officer of six hundred to eight hundred soldiers. So it was a fairly responsible job. You soon got up to it, and learned quickly. Not many people my age had that experience in the army I will tell you that now. A couple of

36:30 others did the same thing, that was towards the end when it was all over, pulling out rapidly the Americans that is. Most of the officer before me had been older type officers like senior officers, senior captains, some even majors some even higher and they had been in the army a long while.

Can you tell us about your last day in Vietnam?

Oh Jesus, I can tell you about the last couple of days?

Yes.

I had this all of this MPC I wanted to get rid of and piastres,

37:00 piastre is the Vietnamese, five hundred piastres note was worth about a dollar. I had pockets full of the stuff and wanted to get rid of it. And I was foolish and went by myself, you get big trouble if you wander around by yourself because you get accosted by all of these Vietnamese women trying to race you off and get into your pants and get your money off you. I shrugged that off and I ended up at this bar somewhere I had a meal somewhere and I got separated from who I was with and I was by myself. Unarmed, I had handed in all of my weapons, I had no weapons you know.

37:30 Normally you go armed. Anyway having a quiet beer and I decided to get rid of my piastres by throwing it up in the air and telling the local Vietnamese, "Beacoup piastres." Which means "much money", so I started doing this and I had this little crowd around me, all of these kids and a couple of grumpy old buggers, throwing all of this piastres. And just at this stage an old mate of mine and his mate came around the corner, two captains, and here is McGurgan standing on this table throwing all of this piastres around, they dragged me down and Bryan Easter said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I am getting rid of all of my piastres." I was drunk of course and they carted me off luckily.

38:00 so I went and had a couple of beers somewhere else and got safely back to where I was staying and I think the next night I went home. The next day was very subdued because I was very hung over and I had no money left because I had thrown it all away.

Literally.

I still had a few MPCs which I gave to someone else. Had a few beers on my tab at the bar and I said, "I will pay tonight." Because I wasn't going to be there and they didn't say anything they just said, "Oh yeah right oh." And by five o'clock I flew out that was the last I saw of it. So the last day, the last night I had no clue and then the last day I was probably

38:30 the very last day I said to myself, "It is going to be great to get home, see my fiancé. Get married and settle back into where there is no noise." That's the big thing noise was the killer. The bloody noise of the place, combat noises and aeroplane noises and bus noises and truck noises twice as bad and this road out here now, which is pretty bad, and I was happy to get away from that. That was my main thought and good to be alive still without any parts shot off me.

39:00 **Why was it so bad you throwing the piastress away was it because you were pulling attention to yourself and didn't have a weapon on you?**

No well I was being a bit foolish because someone could have knocked me over and got all of my money you know. But there was no way I was going to get rid of them, I couldn't spend them that night. Where I was they only accepted MPC and I had all of these piastress. See the funny thing is you could have piastres, Vietnamese currency, I had a little lieutenant in IV Corps, my interpreter,

39:30 I would send him down to buy food, bread and crab and eggs, and he would spend about three hundred piastres, which was equivalent to about half a dollar but if I sent one of the Americans down that I knew or someone else with MPC it would cost them about ten dollars. Ripped off, but the Vietnamese paid the Vietnamese price whereas the American paid American see? That's was the big difference. So I couldn't spend the piastres, I couldn't spend it that night and you couldn't buy beer or anything, unless you went down to one of the dingy Vietnamese stores and that

40:00 was pretty stupid, you wouldn't do that because it was very dangerous., at least I was staying in the American places but I was on the street out the front., it was a café actually where I was throwing all of this piastres away yeah. I must have given away five thousand piastres, which is bugged all you know. Its probably a thousand piastres is probably two dollars, maybe twenty dollars I gave away.

It is a nice story though.

I know,

Tape 9

00:30 Okay Bernie you are going to tell us about your last two ambushes?

Yes my last two operational ambushes in IV Corps. We normally had interpreters of the rank of sergeant, they were Vietnamese regular soldiers. One was Sergeant Fong he was Chinese Vietnamese and Sergeant Binh a Vietnamese But I also had an expert interpreter in a lieutenant,

01:00 Thieu Uy Nhun his name was. He was a little lieutenant. ARVN regular soldier, who had a very good looking wife I might add, Vietnamese wife, very attractive, one of the better ones I have seen. Anyway he was meant to be my liaison officer but I ended up using him as an interpreter. So he used to come on all of the ambushes with us. So this particular ambush, the first one, yeah this first one that we went out together on was about probably January maybe February 71

01:30 and we are out there in this position, observing this track where we decided enemy should be coming along. And we happened to glance around about nine ten o'clock and we saw this glow on the horizon, it was on fire and we thought what the hell is that? So I told this looney take a squad of ten or twelve blokes and go and check it out for me. So he takes a radio and off he goes. And about half an hour later he says, "Dai Uy we have captured two VC." And I said, "Very good Thieu Uy we will come over there."

02:00 So we moved the ambush site which you should not do but I did, because there was obviously nothing around by this stage., we would have heard the noise and carrying on when Thieu Uy Nhun went over there to check the fire out. And we went across over the back now and about three or four hundred metres away I suppose there was a depression where this dam used to be but there was no water in it, it was all hollow. And down the bottom was this huge cooking fire and huge vat, and here are these two old Vietnamese. The old man would have been seventy-five not out, and the bird about sixty not out, very old the both of them. And he has got them all tied up see, and he said, "Oh Dai Uy VC, VC." And I

02:30 said, "Well why do you say that?" and he said, "Well I questioned them about what they were doing and they said cooking rice and they had this huge vat." And I said, "Well who are they cooking rice for?" and he said, "Their immediate family." And I said, "That vat would feed about eighty people." Because it was huge. And he said, "Oh I think cooking for VC, waiting for VC to come." We had better not hang around here too long. So anyway we tipped all of the rice out. Or gave some of it to the local soldiers, got rid of the vat and put the fire out and sat

03:00 there until the next morning, and we took them back to camp and said, "Here you are two VC captured." To the Vietnamese and they took them away for interrogation, never knowing what would happen to them and that was fine. And the last one was about three weeks four weeks later, different area and we are observing this track. There is this river, and there is a pagoda which is a church, and there is a track leading to the pagoda and another track coming down onto this main track leading to the pagoda. And we were up here observing this track which leads to the pagoda you see. So about midnight we are sitting there and suddenly; about midnight these two -dark clad figures come

03:30 cycling furiously down the paddy bund straight into the pagoda in black gear, and by the time we reacted they were gone into the pagoda see? And I said, "Thieu Uy we can't really assault that and take them out." And he said, "Dai Uy I fix." So he said, "We should call artillery." So he called the South Vietnamese artillery down and there were 105 mm rounds bouncing all around this pagoda, probably about twenty rounds all up. And then they stopped and he said, "Okay we'll go and search." So we waited until first light to search, we found the

04:00 two bikes that the VC were riding but no VC. What they had done was gone straight through the pagoda, down to the canal and into a sampan and off they went. (UNCLEAR) but the old church was a shambles. When the 105mm shrapnel comes off off concrete it strips things, it makes holes and pock marks and stuff, and one side of the church was pretty devastated there was a hole in the roof. And I said, "Oh I don't know about this Thieu Uy." And he said, "Don't worry about it Dai Uy. Don't worry." So we went back to base and put in the after action report that we had captured two VC bikes. So on the last two operational ambushes I captured two

04:30 VC bikes and two VC suspects and all of this rice but the next day Thieu Uy Nhun got posted, banished to the Cambodian border somewhere because the local district chief was a devout religious man supposedly, and we had wrecked this church with the artillery fire. And his wife was banished with him. And I never saw him again poor bugger, but I found out later that the district chief was on the take, so I think they paid him

05:00 to say, "Well get rid of this young bloke he tried to kill some local VC in the church last night" or whatever. But that was the end of him poor old Thieu Uy Nhun but he was a good little officer, but his best claim to fame was that he used to, one thing the Vietnamese do really well is cook bread, they learned that off the French, and they make these long sticks, French type sticks and they cook them up. And he would go and get a few of these in the morning, fresh ones, and he would have all of these fried eggs and stick them on the sticks and we would have that for breakfast, it was absolutely beautiful.

Good tucker. Fresh tucker too.

05:30 I don't know where the eggs came from because I never saw any eggs or WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s around there, but anyway he got them somewhere. So that was him, I made pretty good friends with him but unfortunately I was never to see him again.

Do you have any other good friends out of the South Vietnamese Army?

Well he was one of them, probably the other one would have been my battalion commander up north, Dai Uy later Thieu Uy [Major] Thanh he was a good friend, yeah he liked me. He and I had an understanding I could talk to him and say what I wanted to say no problem, and he the same. So we were good friends, but once again as soon as I left a new Australian advisor came and I never saw him again.

06:00 I stand corrected, I found out he is in America and I got onto him, I spoke to him. But I will tell you what happened to him poor bugger. In 1975 when the North Vietnamese took over he was taken along with four hundred thousand ex-Vietnamese soldier and civilians that were serving Saigon and stuck in re-education camps read concentration camps, in other words do as I tell you. Otherwise you won't get out of here. Sixteen years later he was released, after being tortured and beaten and told to say that the Americans were

06:30 mongrels and communist north was the way to go, the whole gambit. Broken man and he escaped to America. In 1991 I suppose, and sixteen years later, 1991 he escaped to America, he didn't take his wife she stayed in Da Nang. And the reason I got back onto him, one of my tax office fellow workers married a female Vietnamese and she went to Da Nang and found him,

07:00 and found the wife, the wife told her the address in America. And I rang him up and I was chatting away there. But he wasn't very co-operative, he knew who I was but I think he thought it was the North Vietnamese again testing him out. But he is an old man now, in his eighties or nineties you know. So I didn't get much sense out of him, He is in America, living there I hope he does well. But he is a broken man you know, because they tortured him and broke him. And he is a very frightened man, I was talking to him in Vietnamese and English both, well

07:30 American, but he was very reticent in coming forward so I think he has been knocked around a bit, so that's what has happened to him. He was a good man. But other than that I didn't make any other permanent long going relationships. Most of them would be dead after the take over, if they still stood up for their principles. They would have been knocked off and thousands would have been shot later in these re-education camps. Very sad.

And what kind of condition were you in when you left?

08:00 Oh not very good, I was run down, I had picked up dysentery two months before, twice I got that. And there is no record on my medical documents, because we were in the American system there is no record of my having dysentery twice. I kept on getting these huge ulcers on the back of my neck and my bum would you believe, that was very painful, like ulcers and they had to be lanced. Don't bloody tickle I tell you. Without a bit of a painkiller.

08:30 And you only had to have something rub on them and it was really tender, so that was bad. I think I had about three or four weeks off, and these ulcers still kept on coming and that was because I was run down on poor food and poor diet I guess and my immune system was run right down. I was very light. I went to Vietnam about eighty kilos and I probably came home about seventy. And I am now ninety-three.

09:00 **That's not too bad.**

Well not too bad but I have had a good life, eating good food and no problems, so I am back to well over my normal, I used to be eighty-five fighting fit you know, somewhere there, now I am ninety-three see? Good food, good beer, good living.

Um,

Let me finish on that. I feel a bit sorry for people like me, not me in particular because I got my claims through, but other people who have got diseases and were wounded, it is not recorded on their

09:30 personal medical documents because of the system we worked under. So in the end they were fighting DVA, that's the Department of Veterans Affairs, for compensation and TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated] status etcetera which is worth getting, and having trouble because they haven't got the medical evidence. So they have got to go out of their way and get doctors to check them out and blah, blah, which takes time, and most of the time some of these blokes are much older than myself As I told you before I was very young, most of the warrant officers were older than me in the team. And most of them are dying now, they are all in their late seventies early eighties and they are just

10:00 keeling over like flies. Because they would have most likely died probably at that age anyhow but now they have these other things that are affecting them you know. And they can't get any compensation and that is very wrong.

But was there any way, would it have been registered in your reports with the American

system?

Yes but I mean under the American system my medical records are probably rotting in some warehouse in some American storehouse. You wouldn't know. What should have happened was that those medical documents should have been all got together at the end and put in your file because your Australian file is in Saigon. And you're in Da Nang, eight hundred kilometres to the north or down south

10:30 in the bottom of Vietnam at Bac Lieu or something like that which is two hundred kilometres south.. No way they were all going to be together you know. Just that the system as such was too big, too unwieldy. And that was the unfortunate part about that. And I in fact had to give evidence for a couple of claims a while back because I personally was involved with these warrant officers and I knew what happened to them. So I told the DVA, "Yeah he had dysentery. This other bloke had something else. I can vouch I made sure he got to the doctor and had it seen to."

11:00 Back in the base and he had it, and that way these blokes got their foot in the door and now they are on a satisfactory TPI claim. I was probably fortunate I stopped working in 2000 and I was TPI, war service and everything within a month. Which was good. Because of my back, I have got compacted disks in my back as a result of the explosion throwing me into the river, bugged my back up. And I have also had a few problems with, I have got skin cancers, I have got a faulty liver and kidneys.

11:30 kidneys and gall bladder, I have got a eroded oesophagus from drinking and smoking too much, that's the problem with drinking it erodes your oesophagus which is your muscle up here. Top of your stomach. That can turn to cancer quite easily but it hasn't thank goodness so far. But you know I am not too bad now, I am nearly sixty I can still get around quite well, everything is under control so I am happy.

12:00 **And what about, you mentioned earlier seeing a psychiatrist is that related to?**

Yeah. I was having a bad run, after I got out of the army in 1987 I went and lived by myself up near Cairns, south east of Cairns out on the peninsula which is near the Yarrabah aboriginal reservation. And I was there by myself drinking too much and carrying on with a mate of mine and I decided to get away from there because I was going to kill myself you know, not physically but by doing too much drinking.

12:30 Drinking like mad, I had just got divorced and I was all upset about that and my wife getting custody. I mean she got custody of Michael and sticks him straight into Nudgee College, full time boarder. I mean that wasn't the plan at all. If I had have known that I probably would have brought that up in court and probably would have got custody, and I wouldn't have got out of the army I would have stayed. As it was I wanted to get away from her. And I decided to go to Victoria at the end of 1989. Middle of 89 some time there, stayed there for five or six months, sat for a public service exam and came up here

13:00 and bought this place in December and started in the public service in 1990. And I stayed there ten years at the tax office and that was that. But I did have a lot of problems there, I was having a lot of sick leave for various reasons. And that's when I started seeing a psychiatrist. Would have been 91, 92 those were the bad years, I was still drinking too much. Psychiatrist got me off the grog and gave me these pills to take and that slowed me down for a while

13:30 and that was good. I still go and see him occasionally, he is a good man. I have sort of got over that problem yeah. I had a hate on against various governments at one stage, and against the Labor party in particular and against women in general. After I got divorced and she married the other bugger unbelievable. But it did hurt of course it did.

And tell us about the government hate?

14:00 Well because of Whitlam he took power in December 72 and immediately he got there he said, "We shall bring all of our fellows home from Vietnam." And the only fellows left were thirty Training Team blokes, so that was a lot of bullshit. Everyone had been brought home by the previous Liberal/ National government under Billy McMahon [Sir William McMahon, Prime Minister of Australia]. So Whitlam was a bit of a liar for a start and I didn't like that. And then he suddenly, early 1973, disbanded three battalions. Straight off. We had nine battalions because of

14:30 Vietnam and he said, "No we'll amalgamate three of them with another three and make six." And so that meant that I as a senior captain then, junior major, had limited opportunities to go to a battalion to get future employment there. I had to go elsewhere, I went as a senior captain but then after that I got put into all of these weird postings outside, not battalions. Administration areas, support areas, and all sorts of stuff I was upset about. And there was no room. Because as a major you have

15:00 six battalions worth of majors, thirty-six majors from the infantry corps and you probably had about two hundred and thirty-six. So to get one of those jobs in the battalion you had to be very good and know someone. Which is why I didn't get back into a battalion. Which is my whole reason for transferring at the start, I was happy I was in infantry corps but I wasn't happy about what happened postings wise after. And then the other reason was my wife. We always had to get postings together, which we normally got and that restricted my availability to certain jobs again.

15:30 And Canberra was the last straw back in 1984, posted down there with my then wife. And then doing that demoralising job in Russell offices down there and going nowhere fast. And doing all of this research and no one takes any notice and it is either canned or not. Canberra I hate, I really don't like

the place it is good for a young family, the facilities are excellent. Best in Australia, best roads, it is a great place to live for a young family, it is. But other than that

16:00 I wouldn't go there for quids. I pass through there that's all. It is freezing in winter. Bloody freezing.

Bernie did anything come up because of your experiences in Vietnam that affected you later on?

How do you mean come up?

Just with seeing a psych [psychiatrist] or drinking or that I guess because of what you went through in Vietnam?

I think it was a direct result of it.

16:30 I was a good drinker before I went there, most army officers are. They do a lot of drinking, we socialise a lot, and you like your wine, which gives me gout now, all of that sort of stuff. But I think I drank more when I came home from Vietnam, and probably because of the government too because they were doing all of these things to the army in particular and I objected strongly to what they were doing. They were screwing the defence force, the army in particular. Particularly Whitlam.

17:00 Probably like the police force too, they are all heavy drinkers, substance abusers. Same as the army, smoking and drinking it is just a way of life I guess. The psychiatrist was good, he was ex-army so he knew what he was talking about and he worked at Greenslopes [Hospital] too. I never got into hospital because of it, but I have certainly cut back I only drink on a Wednesday night now when I play darts. Other than that I might have a beer occasionally or a whiskey occasionally but I hardly drink which is good. I can sink a dozen stubbies on a Wednesday night, no problem

17:30 that's it. The rest of the week is alcohol free and I think I have overcome the tendency to drink madly which is good. And I quit on smoking and I never got into the drugs or anything like that so it is good. Why would you inject a bloody foreign drug into your body? Maniacs. If you want to get a euphoria go and have a hit of beer or whiskey or whatever it will have the same bloody effect. Won't kill you as quickly.

18:00 Yeah you know I have a lot of mates who are affected by Vietnam, same sort of things. But mostly now most of them that are my age are mostly over it. I think I mentioned earlier that the OCS graduates who died and Mike Kelly who died but yeah. Most of us are still alive out of the sixty graduates, probably forty-five or fifty are still alive.

That's pretty good.

But we're not all married still, we're divorced and a few other natural things that happen when you're get older.

Do you or many

18:30 **of your other mates from that time still have dreams or nightmares about wartime stuff?**

I don't really know now I have got over all of that and I imagine at my age most of the old blokes would have too, that's thirty years ago now. I am mostly over it, and I think they would be too because thirty years is a long time. Time does heal a lot of things. Your mind, your body, mostly your mind but it does heal.

19:00 **Were you having nightmares when you first came back or was it a period of absence?**

I couldn't get over it. I was picked up by a friend from Mascot in Sydney in a sports car, who was a national serviceman, actually Bob Everett, and he's tearing along, I stayed at the Coffee House in Kings Cross that big round thing up there, that's where I was booked in to meet my fiancé. And we're tearing up there from the airport and I thought he must have been going a hundred mile an hour. I was hanging on and we were screaming past all of these lights and flashing things and I thought it wasn't as noisy of course but we seemed to be doing a hundred mile and hour compared to thirty mile and hour which.

19:30 I think we should have been doing. But he wasn't really, I think he was doing about forty mile an hour. But yeah that affected me for a while, I couldn't get used to the rushing in cars, but the noise factor was good and things were peaceful. But I was a bit initially, loud noises used to startle me, they did, but I didn't go mad and throw myself down and take off, I used to stop and think what the hell was that? That way. And after a while you get used to it. It is a big change coming back from a heavy war scenario straight into a

20:00 peaceful scenario, it is a huge change. Yeah.

**And how did you find the difference between army life and then civvy street [civilian life]?
Actually coming out of the service?**

Huge difference I was lost for a couple of years there because the army had been my life and I didn't know what to do. I was getting around on a treadmill going nowhere. Huge change, and I probably should not have done all these things at the same time, I got divorced and I did the whole thing together

20:30 and that really affected it, worse. I got back on the booze and that's why I went and saw a psychiatrist again. And I was going really bad down here, and so I came and saw him down here and then everything was sort of under control. But yeah I did go downhill.

And for you Bernie what was the main difference or obstacle about civvy street?

Well I lost all of my mates, all of my mates that I had been to war with that I see regularly. In the army

21:00 no matter where you go you have got friends, mates. And that is universal in the defence force, navy is the same, air force is the same. And when you get out of the army you are just a number and they don't want to know about you anymore and you are suddenly isolated and you don't see any of your old mates. And you're stuck in a community. I went to an area that I had never been to before and bought some land there and put up a caravan, all that sort of rubbish. And the only bloke I knew was the next door neighbour who was an ex-army mate of mine, Stan Thornton . Other than that you lose contact with everybody.

21:30 Especially because what happened with my ex-wife was pretty hard, I didn't want that but it happened. Yeah I found it very devastating to say the least. I found it very hard to get over that, probably three to five years to get over that and get a job again.

And I guess going back a little bit further, you mentioned to Heather [interviewer] a little bit before, but I guess the detail of the moratorium and the reception in coming home from Vietnam?

Yeah that upset me too. I am very

22:00 lately a prolific letter writer to people about things that happened. I was annoyed at the Whitlam government they were hopeless, absolutely hopeless. And what happened was because of their financial restrictions, they cut back the training. We couldn't even go out to High Range from Townsville to do some training. We had limited resources, limited manpower and limited money for future training. To be a good battalion you have got to go out and train and practice in the bush and we couldn't do that.

22:30 We would do one big exercise a year and that's all we had money for. So things in the defence force started to be a bit tottery too because they were concentrating on the navy and the air force, getting new F111's and new frigates for the navy. And the army got left behind, a poor third cousin and that was bad. Bad for the morale in the army, bad for the officer corps. And they had a huge resignation rate. And the army can't afford to lose all of its senior and mid senior officers in one hit, because then you have got no leadership left. I was

23:00 amazed the other day I saw a parade down in Melbourne it was, and the amount of officers there that were wearing any sort of combat ribbons, very few. Well you know, I will get on that. I haven't mentioned the ribbons yet anyway. Basically I am very annoyed about what happened in Vietnam. I mentioned it before basically the awarding of valour medals was completely out of kilter, the RAAF were the most highly decorated defence force over there followed by the navy then the army.

23:30 Where in actual fact the army had a casualty rate of one in nineteen. The navy one in seventy something, the air force one in two hundred, a hundred and seventy-six or something like that. But that wasn't the point. The numbers on the ground were quite clear, the army had something like thirty thousand, the navy fourteen and the jolly old RAAF probably five. Maybe slightly higher figures than that but that is roughly the figures. So the less you had on the ground, and the less that got wounded, the more medals you got. That's ridiculous.

24:00 And now I see in East Timor there are three medals for doing three months over there. We got two medals for being in active combat situation in Vietnam. A Vietnamese medal and the other one. They get three for Timor. And did I mention about the second citation? I think I did earlier. What happened there, the Training Team received a citation for 1962 to 1969, there was a cut off period after 1969 and then no one else to get it, however in 1971, 1972 this other mob working for the Americans got it.

24:30 eThus for the period 1970 to 1971, we miss out on that. And they give this citation to the rest of them. And they didn't even do any combat operations, they were in a base training people to be good recruits, and that's what they did and we miss out. Ridiculous you know. And I think I mentioned Sub Lieutenant Andy Perry and his Silver Star, that was a shame, that was a sham actually by the government. But they made it hard for us to accept foreign decorations. As simple as that, I don't know why. Because Australian governments were always a very conservative government before Whitlam and he came in things got worse. So we had a

25:00 mass resignation rate and morale in the defence forces in the late 70's early 80's was very low. That's about the time I went to Canberra and then I got out myself you know. People left in droves and I don't blame them.

And what about the general public attitude towards Vietnam when you got back?

I never had any problems there, I never got mixed up with people saying, "Baby killers." And like this and if people asked I told them why I went there and what we did, and what a good job we did, and I had no sweat you

25:30 know. But I understand people in pubs getting stuck into diggers and this sort of thing, which was

ridiculous they were doing their job they were sent their by the government, the government is the one you should be throwing eggs at or throwing paint over and blasting or whatever, not the soldiers that were doing their jobs. That part of it was very unfortunate. That to me is just about next to treason it was bad. But only a certain few of the population did that, mainly from the Labor party supporters because they hated the army. I think in Australian the Liberal/Nationals had been in power for about

26:00 sixteen years or something. So it was a grand new adventure for them in 1972 to win power, which they did. And then got thrown out by Kerr [Sir John Kerr, Australian Governor General], that was the funniest thing, because Whitlam nominated Kerr for Governor General on the advice of the attorney general, and he nominated Kerr, you might have noticed on my commissioning out there, signed by Kerr and signed by Killen. That's a very rare one that.

26:30 Sir Jim Killen was the defence minister and Kerr was the governor general. So I have got the two K's who have signed it. So anyway Whitlam got sacked by Kerr and then Fraser got back in. He of the Memphis Pants episode [reference to an incident involving Mr. Fraser] got back in.

Did you ever experience or hear of any run ins with the World War II vets and the Vietnam guys? Not sort of getting along?

27:00 I have a bit of a problem with World War II blokes in that they think that Vietnam was all national service, well it wasn't. I went to a TPI get together under this Clark Review [government review of veterans' entitlements], Clark did a big review which was absolutely useless, one hundred and nine recommendations and none of them being acted on by the government at the moment. So it is a waste of money but anyway that is the way it is. But I went to a review meeting in Brisbane Town Hall and this Second World War guy insinuated that all of the Vietnam guys were national servicemen. That's crap I mean, so we had fifty-four thousand there,

27:30 thirty thousand regulars, or thirty-five thousand and the rest were nashos. that doesn't include the navy and the air force, it is just a furphy [false rumour]. So it was roughly a ratio of six to four. Four nashos for every six regulars. And they have a particular problem in that we only went for twelve months where as they fought the war for three years. But some of them fighting the war for three years might have been stuck on an air force base at the bottom of Butterworth or somewhere. Never had a shot fired at them, just refuelled the planes and away they went. Whereas the majority, well all of the Training Team and a lot of the

28:00 battalions went through some pretty hectic times over there with many contacts with the enemy. I am not saying they all did, but the Training Team did, most of the Training Team had action all of the time. And most of the battalions had pretty serious action too, like the Battle of the Coral, the battle of Long Tan and the Battle of Balmoral. Big fights with the exception of Long Tan. Reasonably big fights by Australian standards, so they had a lot of contacts. But the rest of the Australians bugger all. So you know what I am saying it is the same in both wars regardless of whether it is a year or three or four years. Depending on what you did and where you were.

28:30 And some of the Second World War blokes seem to think that we didn't really fight a real war it was only a skirmish over there, whereas World War II was a real war. And now I guess the same thing is happening as to Vietnam, they are saying, "Timor wasn't a real war, we had a real war in Vietnam." It just carries on. They were all wars and to a degree some more severe than others. But I am annoyed about the medal awards yeah. That's the government's fault.

29:00 **And I guess what are your feeling towards the current conflicts that Australia has been involved in?**

They are doing a fine job in Iraq and Afghanistan but they are only using the best SAS, that's the best soldiers we have got. In my day to be an SAS soldier you had to have six years infantry training, before you got into SAS. So they were well trained, that's the key to the whole thing. And they are senior NCOs, you get a few corporals but maybe sergeants and warrant officers in SAS and they are all experienced. And they are doing a great job, good

29:30 luck to them. Hell of a job over there in Iraq, sand everywhere. Their basic role is deep penetration observe and report. They don't want to make contact because that's not their job, you get five or six blokes and they get surrounded by fifty they are in trouble you know. But yeah that's their job to pick up information on what the enemy is doing. Afghanistan is the same, they were doing the same thing there. They were actually fighting a similar war, using FACs I think in the end they could talk direct to the jet fighters which we could never do in Vietnam because we didn't have the radio equipment, but these days they can they

30:00 don't have to go through a FAC and they can talk to the pilot sort of thing, talk to the aircraft they are using to put strikes in. Even to the big B-52 bombers they can talk to, which is a bit more advanced communication than we had. That's the same role. Just get the lay of them and try to wipe them out with bombs or whatever. Afghanistan is full of holes so people can hide everywhere. But yeah they did a fine job. And of course you have got to have Australian headquarters there to look after them. Excellent job, mainly because they are all well trained, professionals you know.

30:30 **And you felt that they were conflicts that were worthy?**

My word, Saddam needed to go I mean you have only got to look at what he did. How he knocked over

all of the swamp dwellers in the south, drained the rivers and then he gassed his own Kurds to the north. Kurds are a race belonging to Iraq and he gassed thousand of them, killed them. Whole villages just lying on the ground dead from gas attacks you know. They were Iraqi citizens, so he doesn't care who he kills you know he couldn't care less.

31:00 I think he might have syphilis actually, so I heard and I am glad we got the two sons, but he is a different kettle of fish, but he can't do much now. And I think it will settle down eventually in time. I mean it doesn't take very much to be a guerrilla in Iraq these days, just go along to the local shop and buy a weapon, sneak out and blow up an oil pipe somewhere. Attack someone or something. There is a lot of places to hide, a lot of people will hide you in their backyard or something because they're all Arabs, all Muslims. Well basically.

31:30 **You mentioned the SAS being over there, did you have much to do with the SAS in Vietnam?**

Yeah I mentioned before I came across them in IV Corps they used to work with the SEALs there. That's about it, no. I know what they did during 1970, late 1970 down in IV Corps. One of my OCS instructors, Major Ian "Trader" Teague was the squadron commander there in 1970 and I happened to run into him in Saigon in 1970 and we had a

32:00 bit of a chat. Ian Teague, he is a good soldier, he was Training Team early in the piece and then he went back to become an SAS squadron commander. Trader we used to call him because he used to have all of this stuff to trade with the cadets. But he was a good man. Other than that a couple I ran into in a place called Dong Tam which is where the SEALs operated out of, where I was also. Met them in the US Navy mess there one night. And I actually flew over the bottom place, Solid Anchor I can't think of the name of the place there but it is Solid Anchor it is the furthest south

32:30 Vietnamese military outpost in South Vietnam. Right down near the bottom of the mainland and I flew over there one time and it is all barren and it is all swamp land. Crocodiles and mud crabs and all of that sort of stuff, pretty barren area you can't do anything with it. And that was a pretty bad area for VC they loved it because they were coming in from Cambodia. Other than that I didn't have much to do with them no.

Another Vietnam vet I was talking to a couple of weeks ago gave me a statistic about the

33:00 **I don't know whether it was number of suicides but I guess deaths back at home after the Vietnam War, it was a little bit higher than casualties through the war ?**

It is higher than the average community rate. It is interesting that you say that because the American Special Forces from Afghanistan and Iraq are now having the same problem now back in the States and they think it is something to do with the anti-malaria tablets you are taking. Because when you go to these places that have various strains of malaria you have got to take all of these tablets

33:30 to prevent malaria, and plus in operations, they think it is something to do with that creating a bit of havoc on your body and things go haywire. Because at one Special Forces post in America ,three of them, one shot his wife, another killed his wife and another one attempted to. So three Special Forces blokes attempted to knock off their spouses for some reason when they got back, that was within two or three months of going back to the states which is a bit weird. And now the American military organization has set-up something, an investigation, to check all of this out. What's caused it, what has made all of these people go haywire.

34:00 **But given what you experienced face to face in Vietnam and what you know other people experienced you think it would be more something to do with the tablets medication not actually what they went through in battle?**

No, why would you want to go home and kill your wife because you went to Vietnam, I think it is some external influence and I think it is something to do with the medication. I know for a fact that in the Training Team we took two lots, we took a daily tablet which was a little white one that was okay,

34:30 and American one which was a weekly tablet which was a big pinkie orangey tablet. Used to make me sick actually. I used to have to cut it in half and take half one day and half the next otherwise I would get sick. But my ex-wife tells me a couple of Australians developed side effects from malaria tablets and it killed them at Vung Tau, task force people. Operational people out in the bush, taking these tablets and they were put in hospital with some mysterious wog and they died and that was because of the malaria tablets. The anti-malaria tablets. Affecting their system, it only affects certain people certain ways, and these people unfortunately wore it.

35:00 And one or two actually died from it. That's a pretty official source, she knew what was going on there, and she said the malaria medication killed them. Not in any great numbers, one or two I think it was. Over a six year period. So I think there has got to be something in this anti-malaria stuff, got to be. And the American military appears to think that way now too. They are going to investigate these American Special Forces blokes killing their wives and carrying on, they went berserk on the grog back home and went completely berserk for some reason.

35:30 Maybe they were drunk too you know, but then there has got to be a reason they are doing that. But they seem to think it is medication, and they injected all of the Iraqi people with injections before they went? God knows what was in that. Who knows? Well I suppose to counter nerve gasses or whatever some sort of gas.

Bernie you were saying before that if you know complications hadn't happened with your wife and you had known that your son was going to end up in a boarding

36:00 **school and things like that that you would have stayed in the army?**

Because then I could look after him properly. She told, it was bloody unfair the whole thing. In Canberra again, female counsellor for us both, female lawyer for her, female judge for me, male lawyer for me but I was outgunned by, and the initial counsellor carry on was a bloke that was a poofter I said, "I am not talking to you" told him to piss off. You have got to go to counselling or the family law court won't even look at you.

36:30 You have got to have counselling from the ACT counselling service or whatever it was called. So this sheila [woman] came around and she observes me looking after Michael a couple of nights a week and she observes my wife looking after him another couple of nights a week. And she wrote a report, that said, "Major McGurgan can look after his son quite competently, however his wife Lieutenant Colonel McGurgan can look after him better." Why would she say that? All I did was feed him and clothe him and send him to school, blah, blah. Leslie obviously got in her ear you know, and she has done a psychology course and all of that sort of stuff.

37:00 I mean good and better it was a big decision I suppose, or well and better. So the old judge said that she is definitely more mature looking at things and as I wasn't persisting in fighting on much longer she awarded custody to Leslie, that was her name. And then immediately after that she got posted to Brisbane and I got out of the army and went up north and she whacked him into bloody Nudgee boarding school for God's sake where he spent the remainder of his schooling days in the

37:30 senior class and the junior class. And graduated about 1992, 1994 somewhere there. Then he went straight to university at Armidale, UNE [University of New England] did a science degree and now he is in Canberra.

Bernie we have just got a few minutes left and I just wanted to back up by, I mean you had a long career in the service and I guess I wonder what you feel in retrospect

38:00 **it actually offered you or what was the best of it for you as a person?**

I guess the mates, the big thing about the army is the mates you make. They're lifelong mates, a couple of them are dead now but I have still got some very good mates ex-army. The friendship, camaraderie and lifestyle were excellent you know, it was an excellent way of life. I still remained friends with my school mates from civvie days out of Victoria and northern Victoria there. I have got a friend, Ian Scarffe, out here now that I went to school with in Bendigo

38:30 he and I are still good mates. The difference being you only do, most army people only do twenty, twenty-five years and they're out because it takes its toll and you get sick of being pushed around and moved every two years and it upsets family and all of that. Very disrupting the army life that way, family social life. But you make some very good mates as I said I would do it again tomorrow. I cannot believe that people can sit in the tax office

39:00 or federal bureaucracies and sit behind the same desk for thirty-five years you know without moving. That is soul destroying, how can you do that? You would go balmy you would. They do it, that's the public service you see. I saw both ways of life and I couldn't do it. I didn't mind the public service for the short time I was in it in Victoria, I enjoyed that that was quite nice. But you know the defence force to me is the "ants pants",

39:30 or the army is the ants pants, yeah I would do it again tomorrow. I have got no regrets except that I got divorced and I don't know what caused that really, probably the army had something to do with it and Vietnam is something to do with it, but I am happy now. Reasonably so and in reasonable condition of body and mind and I hope to stay that way. Going around Australia next year.

Okay

INTERVIEW ENDS