

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Dale Rothwell (Peter) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 2nd October 2003

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1071>

### Tape 1

00:39 **So Peter, if we could start off by you giving us a summary of your life from the start to the present day?**

I am Dale; I've got a nickname Peter, which I picked up in the army. I was born in 1932 in Kogarah in New South Wales. I was one of the sons of

01:00 Florence and Richard. I have three other [siblings]; an elder brother and two younger sisters. Richard was a World War I soldier. He was in the trenches when he was in his teens. He was badly wounded in 1917 and sadly, died from his wounds in 1942. When he died I

01:30 was roughly 10 years old. The family were impoverished. My mother received a very small widow's pension and I can recall him being laid out - in those days people who died were laid out in the house - and a minister kneeling at the foot

02:00 of the bed where my father was laid out, saying, "Don't worry, Mrs Rothwell, the Lord will provide." We basically starved. We weren't hungry, we starved, and because of the lack of a safety net in those days we were institutionalised, placed in an orphanage and that's where

02:30 I spent a considerable period of my early life. After the institutionalisation - which I didn't mind really, it was part of a maturation process. I learned a lot of values and some of them, there's a fair bit of religious indoctrination, but if a god does exist

03:00 I'd turn my back completely on whatever the image or the work of God was. From there I went to a Boys On Farm Scheme in the central west of New South Wales. I was only very young and it was virtually slave labour. We were very fairly treated, reasonably well fed, but worked virtually from very early

03:30 morning until dusk. The work itself was hard work, but interesting because I learned a lot of practical skills. At that time, having an interest in the military, I joined the local Citizens' Military Force Unit which was the New South Wales Mounted Rifles and eventually from there I enlisted in the Australian,

04:00 the regular army. After doing my basic training, I went to Korea and Japan. I was there for two years and in that period of time I rose from just a private soldier to a corporal. Came back to Australia in 1956 and later obtained the rank of sergeant and went to Malaya,

04:30 and in that interim period I married my first wife (I've been married twice), Rhonda, and from that marriage there were two children: Kurt and Lisa. Towards the end of my tour in Malaya I was commissioned as an officer and then

05:00 continued my military career as an officer. I was commissioned as a lieutenant and after a number of postings in Australia I attained the rank of captain and went to the war in Vietnam, second in command of a company to start with, and later commanded a rifle company. I returned in 19-; that tour of duty

05:30 was 1965, '66. I returned back to Australia, held a couple of staff appointments as a captain and returned to Vietnam in 1968 and did a tour there. Did a minor staff job to start with, with a unit called the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, and later went to the central highlands in Vietnam attached to the US Special Forces,

06:00 the Green Berets, and I spent six months with that unit. Returned to Australia and in 1969 took up a number of appointments in army postings. I left the army in 1975 and went into the hotel business for five years. During that

06:30 period of time I sadly had divorced my first wife and after a period of some years, I met my current wife, Denise. And Denise came as a package; Eloise was three years of age, but I am not the natural father of Eloise. From

07:00 the hotel business I pursued a number of endeavours. I sailed into the Pacific Ocean for a few months as the unticketed mate on a schooner, and later Denise and I travelled with Eloise for about six months. We did a world trip and we saw a fair bit of the world. I have been retired

07:30 for a lot of years. I've done work with veterans. I'm now aged 71 and enjoying life very much.

**Well thank you very much, Peter. That was a fabulous summary. We've got a very clear picture now of where you've been and where you're coming from. So what we might do now is we'll go right back to the beginning. Some of this might seem a bit repetitive but it's**

08:00 **good that we get these answers as answers on their own. So if we could take you back to telling us - oh, but before we do, we have to turn off a clock. Okay, so Peter, if you could tell us again when and where you were born?**

I was - that's rolling?

**Yeah.**

I was born in Kogarah, New South Wales, in 1932; Kogarah being a suburb of Sydney.

**What was Kogarah like back then?**

Well,

08:30 going back to 1932, [the] age of realisation is obviously about three, [by] today's standards it was mainly an Anglo community, the food was very basic and there was a lot of poverty about. The entertainment was the

09:00 pictures on Saturday night as I grew up towards the age of 10, and the radio. And with the radio, I think the radio stimulates mental images and that early stimulation of listening to radio I think was part of the

09:30 maturation process that took me to writing poetry basically.

**What can you tell me about your father?**

I can't. My father died when I was 10 years of age. He was a sign writer, and apprentice sign writer before he went to the First World War, and later did a rehabilitation course and trained as a commercial artist. He'd

10:00 been badly wounded in the wrist and right arm and because of that, whatever the problem was, he suffered a great deal of pain and I can't ever recall him being well. There was a fair bit of happiness in the home but father wasn't well. I've never been a great sportsman,

10:30 but as a young child I can't recall him ever kicking a football around or playing cricket with us or anything else, and very sadly he died when I was 10.

**What was his personality like?**

He was a tall man, quite reserved, and that's about all I can really remember and unfortunately I haven't got any photographs

11:00 of him. But he was my father and I think that the loss of a father at 10 years of age is pretty severe.

**What can you tell me about your mother?**

Mother was a pretty wild one. She came from a middle class family but had been treated not particularly well by my

11:30 father's mother. And I think that there was always the impression when I was young that Florence, my mother, wasn't good enough for Richard, my father, and I can recall this: there was some problems in the family. But my mother was an artistic

12:00 woman and I think she married when she was very young and I think that possibly, she had four children, and I think that she hadn't lived the life that, because of, not the burden of the children but the fact that she just had so much work to do with the kids.

12:30 Then when we were institutionalised I lost complete track of my Mother and my elder brother and my elder sister and my younger sister, and in 1985 I received a letter from a Sydney solicitor

13:00 and apparently my Mother was alive. She was living in Scotland and she wanted to find her children, but that's another story.

**We might talk about that when we get to that point in your life because it sounds like a very interesting story. So how old, I mean you mentioned that your mother was from a middle class family. What**

13:30 **can you tell me about her personality?**

As I said, she was an artistic woman. When I said, "she was wild." she was. I think she had troubles at times in controlling her anger. We were never belted around as children, it was normal discipline, but I've got some images way back there in my early childhood of my Mother being quite angry at times,

14:00 but she was incredibly saddened when my father died.

**I mean clearly the death of your father had an impact on you and your family. Could you verbalise what those impacts were?**

It destroyed the family because even though there was a safety net of sorts there, there just wasn't enough money for my mother

14:30 to keep the four children together as a family unit, and I think with incredible sorrow and reluctance she allowed her children, which I was one, to be institutionalised, and this was born out very much by the - she was well in her '80s; there was a gap there of many, many years from when I was age

15:00 10, about 44 years I think it was, and then I met my mother. I went to Scotland where she was living and I met her, and that was quite an experience.

**So where were you institutionalised?**

At Mackay Homes at Homebush in Sydney.

**And what had happened to your brother and sisters?**

My brother,

15:30 for a period of time (he was quite a bit older than I was) he was in Mackay Homes too and there was another orphanage nearby and that's where my elder sister and my youngest sister were placed, but as time went on my elder brother,

16:00 whose name was Charlie, he went off as a young teenager to work and I lost track of him and then I used to see my sisters occasionally and then eventually when I went to Boys On Farms I lost track of them too. But since then, by the reunification with my mother through the Sydney solicitor, I traced

16:30 my elder brother and my two sisters and then they had all married with children and it was quite an indifferent meeting when we got together again. My mother had married incredibly well in Scotland. Her second husband had died some 10 years before and he was quite a wealthy man and

17:00 there was a sizeable estate in Scotland which I ended up being involved in the liquidation of, and when the liquidation occurred, the will stated the estate would be left to the four children. So I was adamant, I watched with the solicitor

17:30 who had power of attorney over her affairs, I ensured that every penny after tax was put into a lump and equally divided among the four children of which I was one.

**Tell me more about the orphanage?**

The orphanage was boys and girls of different ages and the discipline wasn't severe but it was strict.

18:00 We slept in dormitories. They were the days when every week you lined up for castor oil, you had a nit inspection every week. You lined up again and you sat down and your hair was combed out with a nit comb. They were the days when

18:30 if one person got some sort of croup or impetigo, which was a skin rash, or one of the ailments, whooping cough, everyone got them. It seemed to spread right through the place. The food was reasonable but it wasn't really adequate enough.

**What sort of food did you eat?**

Well, it was basic. Bread and butter pudding

19:00 was one of the specials 'cause it was cheap to manufacture. I can recall on the Sunday lunch was the leftovers from the race meetings, and it used to come into the orphanage in large cardboard boxes - and this is the food that the privileged people

19:30 had access to at the race meetings and the leftovers were donated to the charitable institutions, of which Mackay Homes was one - and I can recall stale sandwiches on Sunday. It was religious, quite a lot of religious teachings, but

20:00 I'd lost my faith when I was 10 and I really have never recovered from that.

**What was your faith before then?**

Church of England. Even though on my father's side they were Roman Catholics but my mother was Church of England; I was christened into the Church of England faith.

**Tell me about**

20:30 **losing your faith at such a young age?**

Well, I think that when you've got a minister, as I said earlier, telling you, "the Lord will provide." as a young child you say, "Who the hell is God anyway? What is this all about?" Now if the Lord had provided in some way, if we'd been well fed and

21:00 well clothed, maybe then I would've thought, "Maybe God, a god does exist." but when you starve and you virtually - I didn't have a pair of shoes until I was 11 years of age. They were provided by the orphanage. If provision is made when you're a child, if you're given something and

21:30 it's supposed to be there by the faith of God, maybe your faith is solidifying, but when nothing happens you virtually say, "Stuff it, what's this religious shit all about?"

**Tell me about that period between your father dying and going to the orphanage? I mean you mentioned you starved, but describe to me what actually happened?**

Well there basically wasn't any food in the house

22:00 and in those days, well before supermarkets, you used to go to the corner grocery shop and my mother had run up credit there so we couldn't get any credit, or she couldn't get any credit there. Even at the butcher's, you'd go along with threepence, which is virtually nothing today and get threepennyworth of the worst meat you could find.

22:30 So I was going to a local school at the time, primary school, at age 10. Never took any lunch. Didn't have anything to make the lunch with. So didn't have any shoes. I'm not crying poor mouth here, but just a fact of life, and there was quite a bit of ragging went on in those days. You'd get teased because you didn't have any shoes. The kids would be there having their lunch

23:00 and I didn't have any lunch, and I'm a bit of a fighter, so I wouldn't take anything like that, and I think from those experiences I developed quite a hard shell.

**So these were still the Depression years, weren't they?**

I beg your pardon?

**These were still the Depression years?**

The tail end of the Depression, yes. I think the worst of the Depression had gone; 1928. So we're looking, now

23:30 when I was 10, it was the early days of the Second World War. Everything was rationed; I don't think many people went hungry but we definitely did.

**What do you recall of the outbreak of World War II?**

I can recall my father basically being on his death bed and my mother; he'd received a notice,

24:00 he'd been a First World War soldier and he received a notice from the government not drafting him, but asking him would he serve again, and I can recall that. Even though the war had started in 1939 I can recall at Homebush,

24:30 when I first got to this place, we used to walk to school, there was a band leading a march and there were young men in uniform with rifles at the slope. They were marching down the street. That's in the very early war years. I can recall later at the orphanage when the

25:00 Japanese submarines got into Sydney Harbour, and I think they sunk a ferry and did some other damage, and there was a drill in the orphanage where everybody got under the tables. Fortunately nothing much came of that. I can recall the rationing and so forth.

25:30 **So you mentioned that your father had been a World War I Veteran. What can you recall of what he said or what other men who'd come back from World War I, what their experiences had been?**

Well, Claude, his elder

26:00 brother, I'm sorry, no, his second elder brother, he was my Uncle Claude and he was a huge man and he was also serving in the Second World War and he came to the house on one or two occasions to see Richard, who was very, very ill, and I recall asking him (he was in uniform, he had World

26:30 War I ribbons on) in a quiet moment what he did in the war, and he wouldn't talk about it. But he had enlisted in 1915 and he survived the whole war in the trenches on the Western Front. I was intrigued with my father being a soldier in the First [World] War but they wouldn't talk about the war

27:00 at all. I recall sitting with my father and holding his hand and just rubbing where his wound had healed and asking him, "What was it like when you got hit?" He wouldn't say anything.

**What exactly was his wound?**

He was machine-gunned up through the wrist and up the forearm.

27:30 The thing that actually killed him, I think the wound had healed but he was getting such pain from whatever the problem was, and there was a medication, Bex, which - I don't know what it had in it, but it was like to relieve pain and I think he became addicted to this stuff and he eventually died from kidney

28:00 failure. That was I think the reason for his death. When I say that he died from his wounds, indirectly he did but it was the medication he was taking I think that killed him. He was only a very young man; he was only in his early 40's.

**Getting back to the orphanage, describe a typical day in the orphanage?**

We'd wake up in the morning obviously,

28:30 get dressed, go down to breakfast, which was in a communal setting. The puffed wheat was always on the table. There wasn't any other food except toast and jam; no butter. I have never been able to look at puffed wheat ever since those

29:00 days. That was the breakfast. You go back to the dormitory, get, well you were dressed when you went down there, very adamant that you brushed your teeth. Then you lined up, got a cut lunch which was obviously bread and something in it, no fruit

29:30 of any sort, and walked to school, and at the end of the day when you came back from school, you walked back home, there was a period of communal homework. I was still pretty young so I didn't really get involved in very much homework but the elder children there went to a room and did their homework, and then it was the evening meal,

30:00 whatever it consisted of, and then you could sit around and listen to the radio for a while and then you went to bed in a dormitory situation, and one of the radio serials in those days was the Green Hornet, and the Green Hornet was a character that drove around and killed the baddies

30:30 in this little car and because you don't go to sleep immediately I used to have mental fantasies that I was the Green Hornet and that virtually took me through the night until I went to sleep.

**What were the people like who ran the orphanage?**

31:00 I recall a man named Mr Mac Stocker; Mac Stocker was his name, and you had jobs and one of my jobs was to clean the shoes, and this Mac Stocker was a huge man. I don't know how he fitted into the administration of the orphanage, but I used to get all the staff's shoes to polish

31:30 and he used to give me a lolly when I'd finished the job, two or three lollies, and I used to make sure I did a good job because I was pretty keen to get those lollies. The matron was, I don't know, for some reason matrons in orphanages are generally big women with large breasts and I think that was the matron, and

32:00 it created a mother image, and then there were people around the place who were domestics and who did this and cleaned that and so forth. Cooks out the back who prepared the food. Things were pretty strict but there was no harsh discipline at all. There was no beating of the children or any of that sort of nonsense.

**What about affection? Was that ever shown to you?**

No, none at all.

32:30 You'd get mothered probably a little bit by the big matron with the big breasts but she mainly looked after the small children, particularly little girls. I think she used to mother little girls quite a bit.

**During this time, I mean you did mention that you lost contact with your mother during this time, was there ever a time when she was able to visit or you were able to visit home?**

33:00 No. I think Florence decided to cut and run. I think it was a part of her life that she wanted to put behind her. I'm quite sure she still loved her children, but it was all too much for her, and -

**So the moment you went into the orphanage was the last time you saw your mother?**

Until the 1980's, yes.

33:30 **That's a very challenging thing I guess, to know that you have a mother who couldn't or didn't want to see you?**

I didn't know.

**Yeah.**

I didn't know. In the later part of my life I didn't know whether she had died or, I had no idea but I was quite, not amazed, but very perplexed when I got this letter from the solicitor saying that she was still living

34:00 and she was living in Scotland, in Edinburgh.

**How do you think losing your father at such a young age and losing your mother also, affected you as a person?**

I think it toughens you up because you stand by yourself, and in doing that I think you create a shell around yourself. I

34:30 did, anyway. Where, plus the fact that there was a defence mechanism at work I think, and this defence mechanism worked pretty well in the military, which is an institution, so the transfer from one institution to another wasn't particularly difficult. For me it wasn't anyway.

**What do you recall of your schooling?**

35:00 Pretty basic. I learnt to read at a very early age. I went to kindergarten when I was four years of age. I learnt to read very quickly, I learnt to spell very quickly, but as far as numbers are concerned, a complete blank out. My ability with numbers was hopeless and virtually

35:30 I could never understand algebra, I could never understand geometry, even though I learned to navigate a boat later on in my life, mainly with the help of calculators, but pretty basic and later on there was a requirement when I got commissioned as an officer to have a certain education standard which I'd gotten through military schooling,

36:00 not the basic public schooling as a child.

**When did you leave school?**

I left school in 1947. In those days they had an intermediate, which was just a high school certificate. I got that, but I think only just.

**So you mentioned that you went**

36:30 **to, or you started on this, the 'Boys On Farm Scheme'. Can you tell me a bit more about that scheme?**

Well it was designed to teach; they weren't apprenticeships, but to teach young men farming skills. And the farm owners, or cockies as they were called, would get

37:00 young men or young boys basically from Sydney to work on their farms. And it was one hell of a change to go from a city boy to become a country boy, and I started off, I was hopeless. I couldn't ride a horse; I taught myself or George Hoy, whose property I

37:30 was on, he taught me how to ride a horse. He said, "Show the horse who's boss, son." So he tosses young Rothwell up on the back of a horse and kicks the bloody horse in the ribs and off the horse goes, and me clinging around its neck, without a saddle on it mind you. But I learned pretty quickly. When I say I was hopeless to start with, I really was. I learned how to muster sheep,

38:00 cattle. Also, the first place I was on was wheat and sheep. Learned how to drive a tractor, learned how to plant using a combine, learned how to harvest, all that stuff, learned how to sew bags over a period of a few years. So I ended up with quite a few practical skills when I'd finished.

**How enjoyable**

38:30 **was the work?**

A challenge, quite a challenge. You virtually became one of their family and it was a challenge learning things. I was in my early teens and you get a lot of satisfaction when you can do things.

**Now you mentioned before in your summary that it was essentially**

39:00 **slave labour.**

Well, when you're 15, it was slave labour as far as I was concerned. Not slave as in someone lashing you, but George saying (my name was Dale in those days), "Dale, get over there and get a hold of that bloody crow-bar. Come over here and we'll put the strainer in." The strainer post being the large post

39:30 at the end of a fence, and then I'd jump on the end of the crow-bar and crow-bar this thing out in the summer, and George would always find time to do something else, but I was on the end of a crow-bar when we were working in the scrub felling trees, I'd be on the end of a cross-cut saw, and George, he was a

40:00 much older man but pretty powerful, and you're virtually hanging on to this cross-cut saw, and these men who work these properties and own them, they were pretty tough people. So a day's work to them

was a day's work from early in the morning to just before dark at night.

**Okay, we'll continue on the next tape. We've just finished our first one.**

## Tape 2

00:32 **Okay, so we were talking about the Boys On Farm Scheme. Who was that scheme run by?**

It was run by the Church of England organisation in Sydney, and it wasn't part of the orphanage program, or the orphanage that I was with, but it was connected in some way, and I think it was York Street, I can't remember, Clarence

01:00 Street in Sydney; I was interviewed - I think I was about, goodness, 16 or so - by a man and he said, "Would you like to go and work on a farm?" And all this sort of stuff, and that's how it happened.

**And how did you come to join the militia?**

The fellow on an adjoining farm, one of his sons was in

01:30 the New South Wales Mounted Rifles and he was a bit older than I was. I used to go to town once a week to Peak Hill, Saturday night. Anyway I knew this young bloke, so he was telling me about the Citizen's Military Forces and he asked me if I'd like to come along and join. So I did, and

02:00 that gave me an introduction to the army.

**And what was it like?**

We used to parade once a week in Peak Hill. A fellow warrant officer came from Orange and held a parade in Peak Hill and we did an annual camp of two weeks every year and the biggest mistake I made, I think in my life, was that

02:30 I put my age up slightly to go into the CMF [Citizen's Military Force]. I should've put my age up and gone into the regular army because when I got into the regular army I realised that I disliked it, what I was doing.

**You just liked the CMF?**

I liked the CMF but the regular army was a different ball game.

**Sorry, I don't quite understand why you shouldn't have put up your age?**

Well I was only 17 and you had to be 18

03:00 to go into the CMF. So I put my age up to go into the Citizen's Military Forces, but being 18 I could've gone straight into the regular army, which means I could've gone to the occupation of Japan and later on the Korean War started, I would've gotten in early in Korea but I didn't. But you make mistakes in life.

**So for how long were you a part of the Boys**

03:30 **On Farm Scheme?**

I was there from age 16 for about two and a half, three years, until I was 19.

**And during this time what did you do for fun or entertainment?**

There wasn't any. I had a radio that I hooked up. I didn't live with the family in the house. I had a tin shed away from the main house. It had a bed there, a corrugated roof,

04:00 a large open fire place and a water tank. Socially I was just classed as a farm labourer and in the late '40's, early, particularly late '40's, all due respect to the Aborigines, there were the blacks on the Bogan

04:30 and my social strata was about equal to them, being a farm labourer; the blacks on the Bogan and the farm labourers. And in the town itself of Peak Hill they didn't want to know you. There were the cockies [graziers], their children and a social strata and then there were the townies.

05:00 The townies didn't want to know the labourers because they were classed as low class. They didn't have anything to do with the blacks anyway. And the sons and daughters of the cockies, they thought that they were a part of a strata up. It didn't give me a complex but it may have in some ways.

**Did you have much interaction with the family?**

05:30 Not a great deal, no. I thought really they were quite stupid people. The radio I set up I used to constantly listen to. The ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] had a worldwide program; I'd tune

into that and I had a fair idea of what was going on in the world. They didn't. So in conversing with them there was only the mundane day to day things

06:00 that happened on the farm. As far as the world was concerned I don't think they knew it existed. So to answer your question, no, I didn't have a great deal to do with them.

**I mean it sounds like you were a thinker and someone who was interested in the world. How frustrating was it for you being on the farm at this time?**

It was frustrating but I felt, 'What does the

06:30 future hold for me? Are you going to be a labourer all your life?' Even though I was a farm labourer, and while I was there I got interested in wool classing and I did a correspondence course with the Sydney Technical College and I learnt, I did the practical work in the shearing shed when they used to only shear once a year, classing the wool. I learned to class wool, mainly

07:00 by observation and also from the theory that I got from the technical college. So I had a bit of an ambition there to become a wool classer, but I think with the interest I developed in the military, the military won. I did not complete that course. But yeah, I was on a learning curve, I wanted to learn

07:30 so many things. So there was quite a restriction, but I was learning a lot of things, practical things, and I carried them on in later life, all these years later. I can do all sorts of things with timber and weld and all that sort of stuff.

**Now you mentioned that your social status at the time was on a par with the Aboriginals. What interaction did you have**

08:00 **with the Aboriginal people at this time?**

They had some Aboriginals occasionally, when George, who was the owner of property, this particular property - I worked on a couple of properties - but he used to get Aboriginal labour out if we had a lot of fencing to do, just on day labour. The reason he got the Aboriginals is because they were cheap labour. They'd come out. I got on with them quite well.

08:30 They lived on the Bogan, a lot of them in humpies. I went down there a couple of times because from working with the Aboriginals on the property, I got to know them. They were really decent people and I got invited to their shacks. They were just shacks, but their lifestyle was horrendous. Sadly they lived like pigs, but they were decent people a lot of them, but they were caught in

09:00 the social vortex of where they were. They couldn't break out of it.

**What examples of racism did you see?**

Well the hoi polloi or the squatters just looked upon the Aboriginal people as hands and feet, labour, "Come out and put in so many fence posts. We'll pay you whatever

09:30 we've agreed on and that's that." They really wouldn't have anything to do with the blacks apart from - I wouldn't say it was exploitation, but it probably was in relation to the money they were not paid for their labour. I personally got on with them quite well, because probably on the social strata I was one of them.

**What about**

10:00 **mates during this time?**

I had a friend of mine from the CMF, militia, he ran the local projection box in the theatre. I got to know him pretty well, and I was never a projectionist but I used to go up there in the projection box and he showed me how to work all the equipment. So I found that quite interesting.

10:30 I tried to join the local tennis club but they were not interested. This is the Peak Hill Tennis Club; I applied for membership and just didn't hear anymore about it. It was discrimination to a fair point, but it was -

**Sounds like a bunch of snobs.**

Unfortunately, that's true, they were.

**What movies**

11:00 **were you helping to project?**

Black and white, not much in technicolour; cowboys and all that sort of stuff, and in those days there were some, even though it was post-war there were still a number of propaganda films that were made in the United States that were screened.

**And what were those propaganda**

11:30 **films?**

'They Were Expendable' was one of the navy things I remember, about the US Navy. I think it was about a destroyer. I can't remember now, but they were designed to feed the war effort basically in the United States and in Britain and there were the early rank, some of the early rank movies came out.

12:00 I've never been a - I used to be a great movie buff then, but these days I'm not.

**What were the movie Rank Films?**

Pardon?

**What were the movie Rank Films?**

I remember Jean Simmons, 'Great Expectations', that sort of stuff. Jean Simmons was only a young girl.

**So how was it that you came to enlist in the regular army?**

12:30 It was just one of those, I look upon life as chapters, and for some, I was very young, I decided I'd learned enough on this farm. I'd put up with this discrimination socially and I decided that I might get into, I noticed that when I'd gone to these CMF camps they were pretty well fed and even though the food on the farm was reasonable,

13:00 I liked the comradeship that I picked up in the Citizen's Military Forces and I thought, "This will do me for a lifestyle." so I enlisted in the regular army.

**And what do you recall of your enlistment?**

It was pretty basic. You went along, had a medical, psychological test and you're in.

**Where did you enlist?**

I enlisted

13:30 in Sydney, and I think at Rushcutter's Bay, and then went and did my basic training at Kapooka near Wagga. Recruit training it's called.

**So what can you recall of your recruit training at Kapooka?**

Oh well, it was pretty tough training. I didn't have any great trouble accepting the discipline because I'd been institutionalised for quite a few years,

14:00 and as far as taking orders were concerned you just did what you were told, and in relation to keeping your boots clean I'd gone through the boot-cleaning period as a young kid cleaning the staff's shoes. So looking after my personal equipment and discipline and doing what I was told without being subservient, I found that I fitted in pretty well.

**What**

14:30 **was your opinion of the instructors and the training that you underwent?**

Most of the instructors - the Korean War had been going a little while. A number of them had served in Korea. The officers were primarily Second World War officers who hadn't left the army, who stayed on in the army. I thought some of them were quite dull from my observations, but

15:00 the instruction was I think pretty good.

**You mentioned that Korean War had been going on for a while. What was your understanding of what the Korean War was all about?**

Basically the north had attacked the south. Eventually the north was backed up by the Chinese. It was

15:30 very much early Cold War days. The Americans had basically supported Syngman Rhee who was the Prime Minister of South Korea and it was just aggression from the north that the Americans intended to establish this so called

16:00 democracy in South Korea, and of course they took in the early part of the war after the initial attack from the north, the UN [United Nations] Forces which Australia was part of, they beat the North Koreans, moved through past the 38th Parallel to the north towards the Yalu River and then in came the

16:30 communists, Chinese, and beat them very severely back to the 38th Parallel and then the fluid state of the war then became static, trench warfare very similar to the First World War and the Western Front, and that continued on until 19 July 1953 when an armistice was declared and you had the division of north and south which remains today.

17:00 **What was your understanding of communism at that time?**

I'd studied to some degree the overtaking of the Tsar in the turn of the century in 1900,

17:30 the suppression initially prior to 1900 of the serfdom was pretty much in vogue in Russia and towards the end of the First World War, when the rebellion occurred from the masses against

- 18:00 the Tsar and the monarchy, and then from that as is well known, the Tsar and his family were assassinated and Stalin eventually came into power as a dictator and then reconstructed the whole of the Soviet Union; collective farms, nationalised completely the industry
- 18:30 and on and on it all went. To answer the question, on the face value of the supposed equality of the working class, there's never been equality of the working class at all. It might look good on paper and propaganda but basically the working class throughout the centuries have been suppressed and taken advantage of and would
- 19:00 continue to do so. In the Soviet Union you had a ruling class with the Tsar and the monarchy but the communist party, to be a card carrier, they became the new ruling class. So the people were still basically subjected to tyranny and suppression, completely in control.

19:30 Particularly they didn't have any political freedom.

**What was your personal opinion of communism at that time?**

In relation to the military

20:00 side of it, it's a strange phenomenon, the military. I served in Korea, I served in Malaya, I served in Korea at Malaya and Vietnam. The military, to survive, stays apolitical. You are not given any indoctrination

20:30 or training or lectures, information on the political scene within the military itself. It seems to stay completely oblivious. This might sound a stupid thing to say, but if you line 20 soldiers up who went to Korea, they would know they were going there but as far as you saying they were fighting communism, it would just be

21:00 black words on white paper. You are going there to fight communism. In relation to the pros and the cons of communism and the pros and cons of the political scene per se, they would not know. Maybe the officers would, but the soldiers, no. You went there, you did your job and as far as you were concerned the blokes, the people shooting at you, be it Malaya,

21:30 Korea or Vietnam, they were the enemy. The big word: the enemy. The reason why the enemy was shooting at you, you didn't question why. We weren't automatons, you were free thinkers but if you wanted any information you had to find it out yourself.

**So getting back to your training, how long did you spend doing your recruitment**

22:00 **training?**

It was about six weeks, and then from recruit training you do what is called corps training which is - it depends where you're allocated; I was allocated to infantry and that was done at a place called Green Hills near Holsworthy, and from there you were drafted to Korea.

**Could you give us an overview of the corps training at Green Hill?**

22:30 The instructors were primarily World War II or people who'd just come back from Korea. As the people being trained there, the infantry, were going to reinforce in Korea the (UNCLEAR) was primarily the training, apart from the army have got individual and collective training. The individual training is learning how to fire

23:00 a weapon, learning how to camouflage yourself, minor tactics to a degree, knowing all the personal stuff, how to throw hand grenades, all the skills. And the collective training is when you work as a team and in working as a team you then get into minor tactics, and in the minor tactics they were primarily designed for trench warfare, and the trench warfare being patrolling at night out from a trench

23:30 system, learning how to dig bunkers, reinforce bunkers, throw grenades from bunkers, work, if you got head on patrol and night, knowing how to react. That's individual patrolling. And then on a larger basis if you were involved in an infantry company attack, you were not taught company infantry tactics,

24:00 you'd only be taught them up to a section, which is 10-man level as part of a 30-man group. So I call that focus. When you're a soldier you focus on your ability to fire a weapon, camouflage yourself, how to move, get behind hard cover, soft cover when you get fired at, all that sort of stuff, and then to work as a team. But your focus is only up to about working with

24:30 up to 10 men, and later on if you became a sergeant the focus would get wider or you'd work a platoon level which is 30 men. So the focus is quite limited really.

**How realistic was the training?**

Quite realistic. One of the problems that are faced, we faced (I was only a very young man)

25:00 were the safety factors. That if you're doing a simulated attack with ball ammunition (that's live ammunition on a range), and they had some sort of enemy machine-gun firing not at you but down the

flanks, the

25:30 safety factors had to be very, very stringent because the worst thing that could happen in training is have one of your people get killed. So there was quite an incredible transition from training to actual warfare itself and bridging that gap is very, very difficult. When you get into the field and you get shot at it's very, very different to the training. They can only take it to a certain point in training.

26:00 **How prepared did you feel at the completion of your training for what was to come?**

They called it 'the shit hitting the fan'. Excuse my profanity. If the shit hit the fan I'd know what to do at that level, the focus, which was only working as a rifleman in a 10-man group. I thought that I'd been adequately trained.

26:30 **Now you talked a bit about team work, or you mentioned briefly that teamwork was an important part of your training. Can you just describe why teamwork was important?**

Well teamwork's very important because the people rely on each other in war and

27:00 you've always got a mate. If you get hit you know that someone's going to drag you away from the firing line. That if you do a very low level of manoeuvre; I was very lucky in the army because I was a rifleman. I carried a machine-gun for a while. I then became what's called a section 2IC [second in command], I ran the machine-guns. Later became a section commander where I commanded 10 men. I later became, as an officer,

27:30 a platoon commander where I commanded 30 men. Later I became a company commander where I commanded 120 men. So as it went up the ladder the focus got greater and greater and greater and the teamwork is vital because everybody is basically protecting everybody else, and if you do a simple manoeuvre, such as putting a machine-gun down to fire at the enemy, then

28:00 you've got a flank with a rifle group towards the enemy to try and outflank them or do whatever you do. Everyone's, you want to make sure that when the section commander calls for the machine-gun to fire, it fires, or when the rifle group move, the rifle group move in conjunction with the machine-gun, and this all starts off way back when you're on a parade ground taking orders. It's just instant reaction to an order.

28:30 Not stupidity, because the Australian soldier is very unique. If he's given a stupid order he generally won't react to it. If he's got faith in his command, even it be a corporal or lieutenant or even a major down the line of focus, that he knows he's being looked after and he's being led properly, but if he's given stupid orders quite

29:00 often he may do what he's told but he won't react as well as he could because he knows that there's faulty judgement. This is quite unique with the Australians because the average Australian soldier is really a thinking person, and you survive by teamwork at all these different levels.

**Now what happened when you completed your corps training?**

29:30 This is a very sad thing to say. I was to get on a bus. I'd gone through recruit training with 30 people. I'd done my corps training with the same - most of them; we lost a couple on the way. We'd completed everything, had all our inoculations and I was to get on the bus the following day to go to Japan and go to Korea, and that morning -

30:00 the day before - we'd went on a bit of a physical training thing. We were jumping trenches and I jumped a trench, fell backwards and broke my right arm. Completely broke it, snapped it, and that was the end of that. So I lost all my friends. And by the time they set my arm, went out to Concord

30:30 Military Hospital, put me in plaster, I was so angry, not to be gung ho but because I'd lost my friends. Then I took the plaster off, I got into a fight, I broke the bloody arm a second time punching someone in the head, and again it snowballed. So instead of

31:00 a period of a couple of months to get my arm fixed up, it took about six months.

**Who did you fight?**

It was just one of those brawls in a pub that happens with other soldiers. Anyway, I won't go into all that. That was a long time ago. But anyway from there I was posted to an infantry battalion in Australia and eventually went with that battalion to Korea at a later time.

31:30 I made new friends, but it's quite interesting when you join the army and you're all civilians basically and you bond. There's quite a bonding, so I lost that bonding, but you know, that's the way it goes.

**It sounds like you were quite close to a lot of these fellow soldiers?**

It becomes a bit of a tribal thing.

**Did they become like family?**

Yeah, surrogate family. I think that's

32:00 what the military became in the end, very much a surrogate family to me because of my background of losing my mother and father and so forth. I think that the army became a family. Yeah, it very much is family and it's a culture all by itself. The military is a culture.

**So you joined this new battalion. What was that**

32:30 **battalion?**

That was the 1st Battalion [1RAR] at Enoggera in Queensland.

**And what happened next?**

Well the war had finished in July 1953 and by the time I got to Korea in 1954, the shooting side of the war had finished.

**How disappointing was that for you?**

Very disappointing.

**Why?**

Because

33:00 I think indirectly I'd wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and his brother Claude and also to some lesser or more degree, probably Charlie. Charlie was my hero but I'd never met him because he was dead well before I was born, but yeah.

33:30 **Why was he your hero?**

'Cause he was a young man, he was a sergeant in a bombing section. He used to go out and bomb the enemy trenches and being a sergeant he would've been in command of a bombing team, just an image I had of soldiering in the trenches, and Korea was very much a trench war, and I missed it.

34:00 And just one of those things, but probably on the plus side it probably wasn't my time because a number of my friends got killed in Korea, but you know, you take your chances.

**So what happened? The war had finished, what happened next?**

We landed in Seoul and we went

34:30 up by train to the demilitarised zone and at this stage the war, as I said, had finished and there was between the north and the south, the Chinese were on one side on this, and the United Nations was on the other. We originally landed, went up by train to this place near the Samashon Valley and we were offloaded, set up the battalion

35:00 in a series of very small valleys. Each infantry company was in a different valley and we acclimatised because it was coming onto winter.

**What does acclimatising involve?**

Primarily getting used to the cold. We were issued with a lot of British equipment, parkas and boots, all that

35:30 sort of stuff, and it was starting to freeze. It was starting to get very, very cold, and particularly patrolling into the demilitarised zone at night in the winter. It was absolutely terrible cold; it's freezing, everything froze.

**Now before we go on with your time in Korea, how did you get from Australia to Korea?**

By troop ship. The HMAS New Australia was the troop ship from

36:00 Brisbane.

**And what was the trip like?**

Good, enjoyed it. There was an Italian crew on the ship, the food was excellent, there were boxing matches, there was physical activity, they were firing weapons off the ship. It was really a very, very pleasant trip.

**When you arrived in Korea what was your first impression of the landscape?**

Just hills from one end of

36:30 the country to the other. The people were peasants, the place was filthy and it stunk, and that's basically what it was. Didn't impress me one bit, and there [was a] large American force there. There were other UN people, French Vandoos, Canadians but predominantly Americans and we were part of the British Commonwealth Division.

- 37:00 **Now you mentioned that you were up near the border in the valley, or was that...**
- No, we were located in a valley near [the] rear of the 38th Parallel. So on one side you had the Chinese - that's in North Korea - and South Korea, the most military extremity was the 38th Parallel and the demilitarised zone was in between.
- Now is that what was called the**
- 37:30 **Kansas Line?**
- Yes, yes.
- Why was it called the Kansas Line?**
- We just give it a name. When the war became static, when the Chinese pushed the UN back south there was a front line and behind the front line was a reserve position
- 38:00 and that was called the Kansas Line. The whole idea being if the Chinese infiltrated the line or isolated different pockets of it, the UN force itself, the front line part of the UN force would pull back to, it's called a tactical withdrawal, back to the static fortifications which were the Kansas Line.
- 38:30 Now when the war finished in July of 1953, the front line positions were swallowed up and became the demilitarised zone and the Kansas Line became the front line which was the reserve line, and this was in pretty bad repair. It was in disrepair, primarily bunkers and wire and all that sort of stuff, and part of the job that we had,
- 39:00 we were only one of the battalions of the brigade of the division, was to repair the Kansas Line. So visualise there were all these bunkers and fortifications facing the Chinese. Behind that we had a tented encampment in the valleys. We were basically, we partly lived there while our forces were, some of them were up there rebuilding the
- 39:30 Kansas Line. Now the Kansas Line wasn't manned completely and fully, but we lived in these tented areas, and if the balloon went up we'd be moved quickly and occupy the Kansas Line and take on the Chinese. That was the scenario.
- Okay, well we'll continue that on the next tape.**

## Tape 3

- 00:31 **Peter, you referred to 'the balloon going up'. In what sense was this?**
- Just a military term. If the hostilities recommenced where the Chinese attacked the United Nations across the demilitarised zone: that was the balloon going up. The Kansas Line was very
- 01:00 lightly manned, but the exercise basically was that we were in a position to immediately man the Kansas Line should hostilities commence and it would be on again.
- So what were you doing on a day to day basis at this time?**
- We were going up to the Kansas Line. All the defence supplies were there, the large timber resources,
- 01:30 not chain saws, but saws, and we were rebuilding the bunkers and also out in front of the bunker positions which were sited across the valley - the demilitarised zone was virtually one long valley, it changed in different parts - eye-balling the Chinese. But there was also quite intense wire fortifications in front and there was also quite extensive
- 02:00 minefields. So because of the weather and terrain there was constant refurbishment of the wire and the minefields themselves.
- How extreme were the conditions?**
- Freezing. Later when we moved to a new location it was in the summer time. I was there for a total of two years so I saw a couple of winters and a couple of summers,
- 02:30 but the Imjim-Gang, which was a very large river in the summer, was very fast flowing and in the winter it was frozen solid and you could drive a tank or an armed vehicle across it. If at night when you were on sentry,
- 03:00 if you weren't rugged up properly with all this special gear on, you'd freeze, and if you put a wet towel out somewhere, supposedly to dry in the wind, it would just freeze.
- You referred to this special gear, what was this special gear?**
- It was called cold wet weather gear, British manufacture, excellent equipment. So from

- 03:30 a state of nakedness you would put on a string vest which was just a vest made of string, and then a flannel undershirt and a pair of long john trouser things. Then you'd put a woollen shirt over that, a combat pair of trousers, a combat
- 04:00 jacket on, and then a parka, a huge parka over that, and the idea of the string vest was to allow your body heat to circulate. On your feet you had cold wet weather boots which are very heavily soled and in them you had nylon inners to allow your feet to breath, and then you obviously put your
- 04:30 equipment over all this stuff.

**What did the equipment consist of?**

Basic pouches in patrol order; basic pouches where you kept your ammunition. Would you believe a water bottle? But you didn't need a water bottle in the winter, and if you do any long marching you'd have a pack on top of that.

**And what about arms? What sort of arms would you carry?**

We carried, in those days we had the Lee Enfield .303 rifle

- 05:00 which had been used in the First World War, the Second World War and it was still the infantry's basic, bolt-action weapon, carried 10 rounds in a magazine. The machine-gun was a Bren gun which was a light machine-gun, magazine-fed, been developed for the Second World War and we had the biggest machine-guns in the
- 05:30 machine-gun platoon. And the light weapon: the 9 millimetre Owen gun. We had the Owen guns which were left over from the Second World War. So it was primarily all Second World War stuff.

**And if you were carrying a weapon, what would that weapon be most of the time?**

Where would it be?

**No, no. Would you be carrying a Lee Enfield for instance most of the time yourself?**

Yes,

- 06:00 I was a rifleman in those days, and later on I became a section commander so I carried an Owen gun.

**Did you ever have cause to fire the rifle in Korea?**

No. What we did do, we got into some terrible trouble. I took a patrol down into the demilitarised zone and when you went down to the demilitarised zone

- 06:30 you took ammunition with you but when you came back up to your position the ammunition was counted, and we were a bunch of scallywags. There were about 10 in this patrol, so we went down there and we had radio communication and one of the blokes said, "Let's take a few pot shots at the Chinese." over a great distance of course, and I was a corporal, I was in charge of this mob, and I said, "Come on, we can't do that, bugger this." So
- 07:00 we went through these bunkers. It was the old position that had been the front line during the actual hostilities, so there was a fair bit of ammunition lying around, which was corroded and virtually useless. We went through this place and we found a line of .303 ammunition pristine; loaded up and banged off towards the Chinese, and there was a hell of a to-do over that. The company commander
- 07:30 could hear the firing and he thought we were in trouble you see. We had a radio and we made out eventually the Chinese were firing at us, which was a stupid thing to do. But anyway, that's the only time apart from exercise; we did a lot of live firing exercises in Korea, but as far as hostile fire, no, apart from that one incident.

**Did the company commander discover that the Chinese hadn't been firing at you?**

Oh, he sure did.

- 08:00 **And what happened?**

Well, I thought we were going to get charged over this but they couldn't prove anything. After we'd finished firing I got all the fellows to clean their rifles and pull them through so you couldn't smell if there'd been any cordite smell in the barrels. Smart thing I suppose.

**Very shrewd.**

The soldiers lied their heads off. They said, "Oh no, we weren't firing." but that's just a little bit of trivia, that one.

**And do you think the commander completely believed**

- 08:30 **you?**

Of course he didn't. What could he do about it?

**Did the Chinese fire back at all?**

No. It was over a hell of a distance. You could barely see the Chinese positions. We just banged away in the general direction, which means the rounds would've fallen really short and I think it would be pretty difficult for the Chinese to even hear the

09:00 rounds being fired. But it was mainly frustration for a lot of us. We were sick of this. We were soldiers; we wanted to get into a war. It's a crazy thing to say, but we were.

**How long had you been there by the time all this...?**

We'd been there about 15 months. I did two separate - the tour was for 12 months but I couldn't see any reason to go back to Australia. I didn't have anything really back here so I just re-elected to stay

09:30 another year. So I did two years.

**Just getting back to the conditions, how frequently was there snow?**

For about roughly six months. You got the change from, you got the autumn change from the summer. The summer was very, very hot and steamy and even there were cases of malaria, would you believe, in Korea in the summer. There was a malarial mosquito there and we took malarial

10:00 suppressives all the time in the summer, and then you got this gradual change very similar to any change in the Northern Hemisphere and then it became absolutely freezing. There wasn't a great deal of snow, but it was the wind chill factor. The wind just froze every damn thing around the place.

**What temperature did it get down to?**

I don't know, I'm not too big on temperatures but it was well below, and

10:30 you just had to function normally and get on with the job.

**Now you mentioned doing repairs on forts and other aspects of the front line including mines. How much of your time was devoted to that kind of activity?**

I'd say during the two years that I was there, there were periods of exercise where you

11:00 spent maybe a month manning the line itself. So during that time there wasn't any repair work went on, but generally speaking we would spend doing the different phases, we might spend three or four weeks repairing the line, going up in work parties, rewiring the front of the positions. An exercise would come along where the brigade (the battalion was part

11:30 of the brigade) would do an exercise which was simulating the actual war recommencing and that phase might go on for say three or four weeks and then you'd go back to repairing the line.

**Can you be a bit more specific about what an exercise consisted of?**

It was mainly - I was speaking earlier about focus. Now my focus in those days was about section level, my

12:00 focus was looking after my 10 soldiers and being part of a platoon and part of a company. The exercises on a much higher level were there to exercise the command of the battalion as part of the brigade, the brigade is part of the division. All their communications, vehicle movements, sectors that they'd move into and that sort of thing, but at our very low level

12:30 of section we would move from A to B, move up into the line, stay there for three or four nights, move back, move up, do all that sort of stuff. Plus the fact we did a lot of live firing exercises. We actually simulated, it wasn't arranged, but simulated working in our sections with platoons firing, but that was mainly into a re-entrant where

13:00 it was quite safe to.

**I'm not familiar with that term, re-entrant. Could you explain that please?**

It's just a valley, that's all, a valley with a re-entrant; you've got a mountain range and you've got the spine of the range itself and then off it you would have smaller spurs and between the spurs would be a re-entrant or a...

**Like small valleys?**

Yeah, small valleys, yeah, but blind. Up one end you'd just strike the main spine of the

13:30 ridge.

**So I imagine that doing these exercises would've to a certain extent removed this level of frustration you were talking about?**

Kept you busy, yes, yes, and we knew that, to use that term 'the balloon went up' again, if we were committed we were pretty well prepared for it.

**Was there ever a point in time where you thought the balloon might go up?**

Oh yes. Whereas you weren't fed

14:00 the - we didn't get any political talks on the political atmosphere whatsoever, but there was Radio America and there was also an in-country radio, I think it was called the Commonwealth Radio in those days, where you were fed news and what was going on politically. So I would say there wasn't any direct lecturing or indoctrination but if you kept your ear open you'd

14:30 get some pretty rough idea of what was going on. Yes, there was a number of times when the possibility of the war recommencing...

**Was this during the period of negotiations?**

No, this is post the armistice and then... post the armistice in July '53. I think, it's a long, long time ago now,

15:00 but there was quite a bit of political manoeuvring going on between the Chinese and Koreans and South Korea and all that sort of stuff.

**Did you have much interaction with the South Koreans at all?**

Yes. They had, they call them 'KATCOMs [Korean Augmentation to Commonwealth]', which is Korean Commonwealth soldiers.

15:30 We had Koreans from the Korean Army who were actually in our company just like our soldiers, and I recall a fellow who was in my section named Pak Inchol, who was only a young bloke, and we treated him well. They didn't get paid very much, the Koreans, so we always made sure he had a beer, cigarettes and all that sort of stuff.

16:00 And if we take the clock back to Vietnam, they had a Korean Brigade there. I was involved in something to do with the Koreans and in 1968 I looked at this fellow. He was an officer and I said, "I know you." I mean quite often to a Caucasian all Asians look the same,

16:30 but not Pak Inchol, and it was Pak Inchol. He was a captain, I couldn't believe it.

**What was so distinctive about him?**

I don't know. It just sort of, he was just, I just knew him. I'd had so much to do with Pak Inchol and there he was as a captain. He was a bit younger than I was, but there he was, a smart young, not young but older, and he spoke very good English and we had a great old chin wag over the

17:00 days in Korea.

**Would you have regarded him as a mate during the time?**

Oh yes, very much so. We adopted them. We got on very, very well with them. On a wider basis the Korean Army was very much at that stage, I don't think their morale was particularly good. They were ill-equipped, going back to Korea, and they were not particularly well-led. But

17:30 in Vietnam they were the crack soldiers. They were unbelievable soldiers, and in relation to action against the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong, North Vietcong wouldn't come near them. They were real tigers.

**We should get back to this later actually. I'm tempted to go into that now, but we'll remember to get back to them later. How**

18:00 **well trained were they at the time of the Korean War?**

Not particularly well trained at all. They weren't particularly well led and they'd suffered some very severe reverses where they'd been pretty well beaten on more than one occasion by the North Koreans.

**And of course it had been less than a decade since the Koreans had been under Japanese occupation,**

That's correct, yes.

**and of course many of them had been guards in POW [prisoner of war] camps**

18:30 **and things like that. So were there any kind of resonances or flow on effects from that era?**

I don't really know. I do know that the country was very, very primitive, which must've reflected in the Korean Army because they took a lot of their soldiers from obviously villages... If you - I can recall

19:00 driving as part of a - some troop vehicles and there was a fellow, they used to cut the brush from the hills and use it as firewood because most of the trees had been chopped down during the Japanese occupation, and there was a man with a large A frame and it looked as if he had a real load on his back and he was moving

19:30 from A to B over some miles with this huge load shuffling along the side of the road. We went by vehicle to where we had to go and came back. I saw this fellow shuffling along, and when we came back to our base camp area, he was still on the road. He'd made some distance. They were very tough people and very, very hard people. So I think their problem basically in

20:00 those days was the leadership in the army.

**When you say their own conditions were primitive, can you give an example of that?**

Well, for example the small villages, they had the heating for the house, the house was hand-hewn floor boards and under the hose they had some sort of ducting system where

20:30 they burnt brushwood in the winter and the hot air would flow under the house to heat the floor up. They slept on the floor. Now in the winter the rivers froze over, so they'd cut blocks of ice out of the river itself and by using

21:00 straw, they'd dig a pit and they'd lay the blocks of ice covered in straw, quite deep pits, into these pits. They'd cover them over and they'd use that ice in the summer time. It would've deteriorated to a degree, but they primarily lived on rice. They were peasants, very much peasants. I don't think the country had seen a change for many,

21:30 many - for some centuries. The cities were filthy, overcrowded, not very impressive at all. Of course it's all changed now.

**What did you do for R&R [rest and recreation leave]?**

There was some in-country R&R in Korea, but I wasn't interested in that, but during my two year period we got two lots of leave. You got seven day R&R and I think it was a two week R

22:00 &R and you could go to Tokyo or to Kure down in the south.

**So what did you chose?**

I went to Tokyo because... plus they had what's called a Tokyo Guard which is a real bonus, but apart from getting four R&R's

22:30 I also got two Tokyo Guards which was guarding the embassy. Wasn't actually the embassy, it was an Australian guard guarding the headquarters. It was mainly a ceremonial thing, and that went for three weeks. So I got a couple of those in Tokyo, a place called Ibasu, so I was pretty lucky. What did I do? I saw a fair bit of the country. I developed a friendship with

23:00 a little Japanese lady. She wasn't a whore, she came from a family and the interesting thing, there were beer hall girls in those days, but when you look at the time frame, the war had finished in 1945, the economy was pretty depressed. We're talking about the early '50's and a large number of the - because

23:30 there was a large occupation force in Japan, you had beer halls right through the place. That's in Tokyo and also in Kure and places like that. And working not as prostitutes, but working in these places were bar girls and their job was to get the soldier in and get him to buy drinks. In some cases the soldiers ran off with them and in some cases they didn't.

**24:00 So what would happen once you entered one of those beer halls? Could you describe the procedure that would take place?**

Well, one of the little Japanese ladies would latch on to you and sit you down and she'd say, "Buy me a drink." Well of course she got lolly water, you paid full price and you got a drink, whatever you were drinking. Quite exorbitant prices but it was a sort of a real razzamatazz place. It was -

24:30 the soldiers being tribal got together in these bars and just had a good time as young men do. I mean we were only 18 and 19 or 20 or something, only young fellows.

**You say razzamatazz place, what does that mean?**

Well, there'd be a band there, there'd be noise, there'd be people jumping up on the tables, people intoxicated, and running it all in very

25:00 managerial style would be the mama-san. She ran the girls and on top of that you would have in the Asian system a businessman who probably owned three or four beer halls. So he'd be the apex of the pyramid and the bottom would be the broad base and the mama-sans all working for him and the girls working for the mama-san and

25:30 a lot of the girls supporting their families from the money that they made there.

**Do you know if any of the girls might've said, "Well, I'm available." in another context?**

Oh, they were available, but some of them weren't. I mean there were, seeded through this place were just whore houses, to use the American terminology, and if a fellow wanted any sexual pleasure they were just whores. I mean it's as simple as that.

- 26:00 But in the beer halls themselves it was not unusual to find a young woman who was there only for one reason, to support a family, and as far as the sexual side of things went it was a no-no, and from a number of these liaisons and friendships,
- 26:30 a number of Australians married these girls and some of the marriages were very, very successful. Recently a friend of mine died, served in Vietnam with. I knew him way back in those days and he'd married one of these girls, brought her out to Australia, had two boys, Boys
- 27:00 eventually university educated, very respectable family. She was a lovely woman. So that was one of the very success stories.

**One of the veterans we spoke to a few days [ago] referred to a certain type of Japanese prostitute as being, or calling herself a 'cherry girl'. Did you ever hear of that expression at all?**

Yeah, yeah.

**What did a cherry girl do?**

Well a cherry girl meant

- 27:30 basically that she still retained her virginity and she would say, "I'm a cherry girl." In other words it was hands off in relation to any sexual favours and that was that, and they would also refer to cherry boys. When you look at the sexual deprivation - the '50's we're talking about, and Australia was a very, very closed society, it wasn't as open as it is now -

- 28:00 it would not be unusual for [a] 19 year old to be a cherry boy.

**A 19 year old Japanese?**

No, a 19 year old Australian soldier, not to have had sex in his life, and the girls had some way of picking the cherry boy out. She would say, "You're a cherry boy." and that sort of thing. So the term was used both ways.

- 28:30 **I imagine that then the woman would make some kind of offer to the cherry boy?**

Quite often, I don't know. I think they might've been favoured to some degree. I don't know.

**Now to what extent was there a problem with sexually transmitted diseases among the troops?**

Part of military education was a lot of lectures in relation to venereal disease

- 29:00 and the - I don't know about syphilis, but there was a strand of gonorrhoea that was very, very virile and quite often the antibiotics in those days did not have a great deal of effect upon it. I would say most soldiers were well educated in

- 29:30 venereal disease and the consequences of it.

**So what happened to a soldier that developed a venereal disease?**

Obviously he would be treated. He wasn't victimised in any way. He would be treated and cautioned against getting it again. There were all sorts, I mean there were prophylactic centres in leave areas so

- 30:00 if an individual wanted to use precautions of some sort they were always available. The biggest problem with venereal disease was not so much the social stigma but the fact that you would lose the soldier and apart from the treatment that he would receive - the average sort of gonorrhoea

- 30:30 would be pretty well treated quickly, but it was the non-specific urethritis which was a post venereal disease problem where he'd still be off duty, he'd still be being treated, and in some cases it might take two weeks for him to get rid of the actual gonorrhoea itself, but he might have

- 31:00 this non-specific urethritis which was part [of] the venereal complaint. So he'd be out of action for six weeks. Now if it becomes prevalent half of your battalion could be out of action, which is not on.

**A bit of a disaster I'd imagine.**

Disastrous, so that's why the education was really pounded into soldiers, and to the best of my knowledge

- 31:30 in my battalion particularly there wasn't a lot of it. Most young fellows were very sensible in relation to sexual activity.

**Now speaking to one of the other veterans he drew [a] distinction between the attitude of the Japanese towards the Australians and the Americans in Kure on one hand and Tokyo on the other hand. He said that in Kure they were a bit more kind of circumspect and withdrawn towards the Australians, whereas in Tokyo they were a lot more entrepreneurial.**

32:00 **What sense did you have of the attitude of the average Japanese person towards people who after all had been their enemies only just a few years before?**

In Kure, which was virtually provincial, to a lesser degree than Tokyo, which was a huge city, I think in the street there was the normal Asian

32:30 blank face, but once you got to know a family, and I did get to know a Japanese family, I found they were very friendly people and I was very interested in their customs. I can recall my girlfriend's name was Sumio Sato-san and she lived in Shibuya, which is like a suburb,

33:00 and she didn't want to fraternise with Australians to start with because it was a stigma. Anyway I got to know her and I got to know her family and she said that they lived in Shibuya and, "You must come out" - she spoke a bit of English - "to the house and meet my mother and father." So they were a bit non-plussed

33:30 as to our customs you see. So I went out there and I stayed the night. Now for the evening meal they're sitting down having this absolutely beautiful Japanese food which I was eyeing off, and they thought that because I was a European, or Caucasian, they'd especially gone out and got some English bread, sliced it up, buttered it and I got a plate of that. Now I didn't say anything, and then when it came to sleeping

34:00 time they slept on a tami mat, which is a Japanese mat and it's got little futons, which is a sort of a bedspread thing, and my place to sleep was between the mother and the father on the floor with the futon over me, and they had blocks of wood for pillows. They sort of put their head back on a block of wood and they gave me a block of wood and I couldn't handle that.

34:30 **How did you sleep that night?**

I didn't. But no, Sumio was a lovely girl.

**How had you met her in the first place?**

Well she was an under-manager. The Tokyo Guard was at Ibasu, as I said earlier, and I was on the guard for three weeks so I had a fair bit of time, and there was a beer hall down the road

35:00 and she was sort of, she wasn't the manager, which they call the mama-san, but she was the bookkeeper and she ran the books you see, and she was sitting up behind this little desk and I eyed her off. I've got a photograph of her somewhere upstairs. She was a lovely little thing. So, she was 18 or 19 or something, might've been older than that, and I gave her the eye treatment; no response. So as I was

35:30 there for three weeks I worked on this and that's how I got to know her. She wouldn't come, no way she'd go out for coffee, tea or anything with me. It was a no-no. She was management and I don't know whether she indicated she was a class above the ladies working the drinks, but I think she was. She was sort of under-manager.

**So how did you get through?**

It's quite amazing. I spoke a few words,

36:00 this and that, and then she could see I had some interest and then worked on the eyeball treatment and then eventually she went out and had a meal with me in a restaurant and that's how it sort of developed. It was hands off, I can assure you, at that stage.

**So for how long did you know her?**

For about two years, and we corresponded.

36:30 When I got back to Australia we corresponded for some time and then unfortunately it just sort of, time overtook it all. I've often wondered whatever became of her, but it was just a little romantic interlude in my youth. She was a lovely girl.

**And clearly she and the family overcame this stigma?**

Oh yes, they did.

**This reluctance to get involved with...**

That's right, yeah.

37:00 The thing that I found overall in Japan, particularly in Tokyo, not so much Kure which was a provincial place, is you could feel the whole populous appear to be attempting to get over the war, moving, sort of getting themselves together as a nation to get on with it, with making Japan great again. There seemed to be

37:30 this vibe I picked up right through the place. They were recovering from the war.

**I imagine there was a lot of infrastructure rebuilding going at the time?**

There was, yes.

**But how were you able to sense this vibe?**

Well I walked down an alley one day and right at a low level there was a fellow pulling flat pieces of iron, whatever files are

38:00 made of, maybe wrought iron, with a punch, and he had an anvil and a punch and he was manufacturing files, just punching, perfect, punching this material and hand making files and I thought, "My God, have a look at that!" And when they were rebuilding parts of the railway I noticed down in Hiroshima, I was down there at one stage on

38:30 a sight-seeing trip, that the fettlers digging the ground to put the rails or the blue metal down were all working in unison, probably 20 of them spaced well apart, and they were singing. 'Bang!' singing and 'bang!' singing and 'bang!' and it's just, the country just had this vibration. It was really starting to move somewhere.

**It had probably been there before the war.**

I'm sure

39:00 it would have been. I think that the atomic bomb, I spoke to a number of people who could speak a bit of English about that. They would never get over it in my opinion. It was just an horrendous thing to have happen to them, apart from losing thousands of people that died. But Hiroshima was rebuilt.

39:30 We're talking about the early '50's, they'd rebuilt the damn place. I didn't get to Nagasaki but Hiroshima was rebuilt.

**We'll continue that on the next tape.**

## Tape 4

00:36 **Just to continue along this theme of what the atomic bombs had meant for Japan, can you be more specific about what sense you had about how absolutely catastrophic it had been for them?**

Particularly down in Kure

01:00 they had places called taxi dances and I was down there for a week or so, and you went into this place and you got a ticket and the girls weren't prostitutes. You'd dance with, just dancing (UNCLEAR) and it was only a friendship. I got speaking to some

01:30 young people my age who spoke reasonable English, and I sort of spoke about Hiroshima and they had relatives that had been burnt, some killed, others burnt badly and they were sort of still quite horrified within that generational, family

02:00 group, that the Americans had done this to them. And I tried to explain to them, well look the World War II, the Japanese incursion into World War II was probably started would you believe by the Americans because of the sanctions they placed on Japan, and sort of explain all this, but I said, "From America's

02:30 viewpoint, to invade your homeland they estimated they would have lost a million American soldiers, and they did tell the government before they dropped the bombs that they were going to do it. So you were virtually victims of not only the Americans but also your own Nisa Pashito Government at the time." It was difficult to get through because their thinking is very different.

**What did they come back with once you'd said that?**

03:00 Nothing really. Nothing constructive.

**The relatives that had been burnt, had they survived?**

Some of them had and as I understand it the Americans had established aid, hospitalisation facilities for those that had been or still badly burnt from the bombs. But it was,

03:30 the thing that I was searching for was payback, you know, but did they think they would get back at America in some way one day for what they'd done to their homeland.

**So you were asking, you were sounding them out on whether they had any form of payback in mind?**

Yes, and I couldn't get through to them. I just couldn't get

04:00 any feedback from what I was saying.

**So you didn't get that question?**

No, I didn't get the hate piece where they were angry and hated Americans, but they realised I think that to reconstruct their country it could only be done with American aid. It couldn't be done any other way. This was engineered as we know by General MacArthur because when MacArthur went very early in the occupation

04:30 of Japan, and established himself as virtually the military emperor, he waited for the Japanese emperor to come to him. He didn't go to him, and that then started to breakdown this godlike figure of the emperor being immortal, and this worship they had toward the emperor, Hirohito. So the old

05:00 General MacArthur hand was pretty smart in what he did. They started to breakdown Japan towards the democracy that it's become.

**It sounds like with these people that you're referring to having talked to that they were still in a state of shock?**

Yeah, I think so. There was still a fair degree of shock there but not as great as it would have been

05:30 just say a year or so after the actual bomb was dropped, but most of them appeared to be, they wanted to get on with their lives. And again these vibes I picked up right through the place and the country, like a wounded serpent getting up and getting on with it.

**Did you see any signs of wounded or burnt people in**

06:00 **the street?**

No, I did not. It was only verbal.

**It was only verbal. So it was second-hand information. Now, back to Korea. I believe at a certain point you got your second stripe?**

Yeah, I did. I became a corporal.

**When did that happen?**

I went down to a battle school called Uijongbu, which was back from the Kansas Line.

06:30 Certain people were selected to attend and while I was there I did reasonably well I think and I got promoted; got my second hook. Big plus for me.

**Did this mean anything in terms of the number of men you commanded?**

No, well I'd been lance corporal in command of the machine-gun so now I assumed command of 10 men, an infantry

07:00 section, so it was a big plus.

**How long was that before you returned to Australia, or how long after that did you return to Australia?**

About a year; I returned in 1956.

**What happened when you did return to Australia?**

I stayed with the battalion. The battalion was brought back. The battalion spent two years there and was individually reinforced. I went back to a place called Enoggera and just continued with the normal peacetime

07:30 soldiering, schools, training and that was 1956, and later on I went as an instructor, I got promoted to sergeant in 1959 and I went to a jungle warfare school at Canungra: Jungle Training Centre it was called then. And I was

08:00 one of the instructors there with what they call a demonstration platoon and I spent some time there, and then after that we went to Malaya. During that period of time I met Rhonda, my first wife.

**Before Rhonda had there been people you'd been dating or writing to?**

No, not really. I'd had a couple of casual girlfriends but it was a very closed society in Australia in those days.

**In what way?**

08:30 No sex at all. Sex meant marriage, or marriage meant sex, one way or the other, and you've got pretty high testosterone levels when you're sort of in your 20's.

**It must've been pretty frustrating at times?**

Well that's the way it was. There were thousands of young men who were frustrated. But Rhonda came from a decent family and we got on quite well together and I thought it was about time that, maybe I better you know, get married and have a family,

09:00 which I did have.

**And that was in '59 was it?**

Yeah, I married in '59 and Rhonda and I went to Malaya with the battalion and we rented a house on Penang Island and I was most of the time away in the jungle in northern Malaya, up towards the Thai border. That's where the operations were done against the communist

09:30 terrorists. That's where the whole thing went on.

**Just before we get into that, and I want to get into that in a moment, can you tell us a little bit even in summarising form about your activities as an instructor at Canungra?**

We had - I say 'instructor' with tongue in cheek. I was in charge; I was the platoon sergeant of what is called a demonstration platoon, and the demonstration platoon there were to provide 'enemy'.

10:00 They had a young platoon commander, I was a platoon sergeant, about 30 odd young men and we did demonstrations as enemy for the classes that came through there; acted as enemy, did all different things. So the instructing side of it, I actually instructed the soldiers together with the officer on what they should do in relation to

10:30 different exercises. That was it basically, but I wasn't instructing courses that came through there.

**So demonstration basically meant acting or role-playing as the enemy?**

Yeah, role-play, that's right.

**And so your role, your duty I presume was instructing the role-players in what to do?**

That's right, yes. The school set the scenario and you'd act it out.

**And if we're talking about an enemy at this time, what kind of enemy did you have in mind?**

Well

11:00 the Australian Army had moved from the career type trench warfare training, which is called open warfare, to jungle warfare. Would be '56 or '57 initial commitment to Malaya. So the whole thing had changed and the tactics that we used

11:30 in the jungles of New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, they reverted back to those, and the tactics used by the Australians were copied from the Japanese.

**Seriously?**

When the Australian troops initially met the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail the Australian troops, apart from the militia which came from Australia, they'd

12:00 come from the Middle East where they were exercising and practising and actually using open warfare tactics. When the battalions got into New Guinea and met the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail, which was a very narrow frontage, the Japanese were having them for breakfast. They were beating the hell out of them, and the tactics of outflanking and all that sort of stuff that was

12:30 used were the tactics the Japanese had learnt in China, their pre-war small wars. So the Australians copied the Japanese to counter them. A lot of their, at very low levels, they had section level, platoon level and the doctrine was then taken back to Australia and used in the same place. This

13:00 jungle warfare centre was set up at Canungra in the Second World War and it was reactivated about 1956 or '57, post Korea. So you had the whole change of the doctrine, training of Australia soldiers. So that sort of closed the loop there.

**What were some of the main things they learnt from the Japanese that they put into practice?**

The deployment of, on

13:30 the narrow front when you got fired at, at say section level, was holding the enemy, keep their heads down with machine-gun fire and then manoeuvre your rifle groups reasonably close in to the right and left flank. Plus the Japanese techniques of ambushing and also the other thing that came

14:00 into play was the British Army had been in Malaya fighting the communist terrorists from the very early '50's. So a lot of the techniques that the British used were also practised and taken in as part of the doctrine of the Australian Army. So you had two things working, you had the lessons learnt, the doctrine from the Second World War, jungle fighting

14:30 revamped post Korea, and then you had the lessons learnt in Malaya by the British. So the Australian Army took all of this stuff and developed their own jungle doctrine from it.

**You mentioned the Japanese style of ambushing. What was that?**

The Japanese style of ambushing,

- 15:00 depending on the size that you're ambushing against, but basically was to get the enemy who were coming down a track or a trail or a road or whatever into the ambush area, which is called a killing ground, and once they're in the killing ground then you hammer them as hard as you can and then bang, you
- 15:30 break the ambush quickly and don't get caught yourself. That was one of the techniques that they used.
- This is all very valuable stuff. Thanks for sharing that with us. I hadn't realised this evolution which absorbed both British influences as well as Japanese influences.**
- Oh yes.
- That's fantastic. Now what was your understanding of what had been going on in Malaya?**
- 16:00 As I understood it you had the Japanese incursion into Malaya itself and that region. You had the...
- Sorry, you mentioned the Japanese incursion?**
- Yeah, when they came down the Malay Peninsula to Singapore.
- Sorry, I'll just get you to say that again so that I'm not cutting across you.**
- The Japanese came down
- 16:30 from the Malay Peninsula to Singapore and caused the surrender there and then spread out into the adjoining islands as part of this Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere it was called. It was a complete misnomer that the Japanese intended to invade Australia. That in my opinion is not
- 17:00 correct. They set up this outer Co-Prosperity Sphere which took in New Guinea and the reason they wanted Port Moresby initially was to use it as a port for them to commence their next phase of operations. The next phase of operations may have been the invasion of Australia, but initially it wasn't part of that plan.
- 17:30 Now during the Japanese occupation in the Pacific Islands the indigenous population was set up as guerrilla forces and they were resupplied by the British and Australians with arms, ammunition and so forth. Now when the war finished,
- 18:00 as there was a change occurring in that whole area, where you'd had the colonisation by the Dutch and the British of the Dutch East Indies to start with, all they were doing was milking the natural resources out of these areas, the rubber, the tin, and were completely exploiting the indigenous people, and then at the end of the war
- 18:30 independence was occurring with your Sukarnos and all these other people who came up, and then there was starting a reversal against the British 'colonial yoke' as it was called. Eventually the Dutch got out and you had the evolution of an independent Malaya, but to get rid of the British and get rid of
- 19:00 the Dutch, particularly the British, you had the clandestine units that had been formed to fight the Japanese, became independent movements and they became communist. They were branded as communist movements, but in point of fact they were independence movements to get rid of their colonial masters.
- So communism was just a convenient bit of propaganda?**
- 19:30 Plus the fact that they were being obviously to some degree coerced by the Soviet Union as part of the Cold War, but they were basically in my estimation, they weren't fed arms, ammunition by the Soviet Union but they may have received some financial support too,
- 20:00 so you've got the paradox. One moment they're on the side of the allies, during the Japanese occupation fighting the Japanese; the war finishes, the Japanese depart and then the British and Dutch try to come in to re-establish their colonial possessions, and then you've got these movements. They've got arms, they've got ammunition, they've got leadership so they want to get rid of the British and the Dutch,
- 20:30 which they do, and that's what was basically happening in Malaya. Now they called themselves an 'independence 'Merdeka' movement', which was self-determination for Malaya, or Malaysia as it is now called, and this eventually happened in 1961 I think, 'Merdeka', where they got their independence and they broke their ties, didn't
- 21:00 completely break their ties, but the British left although the British influence was there, and one of the big pluses about the British influence was that all the utilities such as their post office, their water, their sewerage and all that stuff, the British had this up. So that was a big plus for the British, plus the British had milked the rubber and the tin and all the other natural resources out of the place. That's how I saw it.
- So what was happening by the time you got there?**
- 21:30 The implementation of the Thompson Plan as it was called, which was in the early '50's, was to isolate

all of the villages. I mean the communist insurgents, I say 'communist insurgents'. The insurgents had to be fed, housed and supplied,

22:00 so they lived in the villages. So the Thompson Plan was to isolate; all the villages would be isolated. They'd be barb-wired right around. Everybody would carry an identification card. When they went out into the fields at night, to work, they would go out through a controlled

22:30 checkpoint, show their passes, go out in their paddy fields and do what they did. They'd all be counted out and they'd all be counted back in at night, and that night the whole place would be secure and guarded by British or Malay troops. So virtually anything moving at night between village A and village B would be shot.

**So what was your**

23:00 **role in relation to the Thompson Plan?**

We got there in 1959 and the back of the insurgent movement had just about been broken. They'd been starved out of the villages, they'd been identified, a large number of them had been killed. The leader of the movement was a

23:30 fellow named Ching Ping, he was a Chinese Malay nationalist. He had led the insurgent movement for many many years. With Merdeka (or independence) just around the corner it was virtually a fait accompli. The British were giving them independence, even though they were fighting

24:00 for it the independence was coming. So their cause, what was their cause? I think to keep face Ching Ping moved up towards the Thai border and his following had dissipated to only a handful of people, and there were black and white areas. The black areas being areas that were no go, that were communist

24:30 or terrorist controlled or you were open to terrorism from the, in other words you'd drive down the road in a truck and you'd get blown off the road. The white areas were areas that were under British or Malay military control. By the time my battalion got there most of the areas were white. There

25:00 were very few black areas left. Ching Ping and his followers had moved. He'd gone up to the border of Thailand and there was some movement between the Thai border in northern Malaya down to the villages, not much. So our job was to patrol and control the area between the villages and the border. Actually the Perak River, north of that from a place called Grik,

25:30 and the battalion patrolled and ambushed right up to the Thai border from that area over a period of two years.

**Patrolled and ambushed?**

Yeah. The operations would take 30 days. We were trucked from - the companies were in all different locations. We were at place called Kuala Kangsa (the battalion headquarters was there),

26:00 and about nine hours by vehicle through a white area and some minor black areas we'd moved to a place called Grik and at Grik we'd go up the Perak River against the current in long boats, and these were large boats that would take about 20 men with huge outboards on the back. Malays contracted for these.

26:30 You'd go up the river, it would take a day to get up to our base. We had a base established up on the Perak, the base being just an area in the jungle, a couple of radio masts and we operated out of there in patrolling groups. I was a sergeant then, I had a patrol. The sergeants and officers were given, they did not operate as platoons, we operated as patrols, about 15 men, 12 men, that

27:00 sort of thing, and we patrolled up 30 days to the Thai border. I was in Charlie Company; [at] Charlie Company Base we had a large ration base with all our rations and ammunition and so forth. You'd carry eight days which was about the max, you couldn't carry any more per man. You'd patrol up

27:30 towards the border and the country has got grain. All of the ridges and mountains, virtually up towards the Thai border is very mountainous, but the landform is that the, from that mountain chain along that Thai border, the lesser mountain

28:00 spurs move down towards the Perak. Virtually that's why there's a river there obviously. Now it's easy in the jungle. If you want to travel through the jungle you pick up the spurs and travel on the high ground. Makes sense, but we had to cross grain. Which instead of going up the spurs, that's where the bad guys wouldn't be, up there. If they had a camp they wouldn't be up in the ridges. They'd be down close to the

28:30 water, close to creeks and streams hidden in there in one of these valleys or re-entrants as they call them. So you cross grain the stuff which was incredible work in this mountainous country going across the grain.

**So across the grain meant up and down hills?**

Up and down all the time. The, after you ran close to your eight days rations you'd get what's called

- 29:00 an air drop. Now because of the atmospheric conditions you could only communicate with the base in the evening and use Morse code. So we'd Morse code our requirements back to the base on the Perak. They would then send the request back to Grik.
- 29:30 Grik would then send the request to the British. The British airbase, I can't remember where it was now, but wherever that was. So it worked like this. You'd put the request in and you'd request an air drop. Now because of the huge mountainous terrain, there's a huge canopy. Quite often in the middle of the day it would be quite dark in the jungle. We carried
- 30:00 a large plastic balloon which was wrapped up and you'd put carbide, dry carbide. So you'd put the carbide in under the balloon, create a gas by adding water to it, and that would inflate the balloon, and then you'd let the balloon up on a string up through the canopy. Above the canopy would be a big orange balloon. Now
- 30:30 we carried plastic explosives and detonators in the patrol. So we requested the air drop. The first thing that would come over would be a light aircraft and we'd give them a grid reference but you were never quite sure where you were in the jungle at times. They'd see the balloon. The aircraft, the Belvedere or whatever it was, no, it was a helicopter, whatever the aircraft was would air drop on the balloon by
- 31:00 parachute and of course the parachutes used to get hung up in the trees and then we'd blow the trees down.

**You'd blow the trees down?**

Blow the trees down; huge trees, but use plastic explosives to blow the trees down.

**Weren't you concerned about giving your position away?**

No, it didn't matter. The rations were more important than that, and that's how the resupply worked.

- 31:30 If we couldn't get the trees down we didn't eat.

**Were there any particular incidents that stand out in your mind?**

Yeah, one in particular, it was a real survival one that we did, the battalion set up a series of ambushes just below the Thai

- 32:00 border probably roughly about five, six, seven, eight miles apart and they helicoptered them in to the different ambush locations. The ambushes were put down and then we did what's called a battalion sweep. What was left of the battalion - because a fair few of them were up in ambush - we swept from probably two or three miles apart,
- 32:30 we were dropped off and we swept up following the grain this time, not cross graining, up towards the ambushes. It took 10 days I think was the sweep that was going to take place. So nothing happened, we didn't get anybody. But I, with my patrol, about 10 men in it, got up to the ambush position
- 33:00 and we carried eight days. We were pretty light on for rations. We were going to get a resupply at a place called Fort Rekum. Fort Rekum was just a hole in the jungle. It was a resupply point and that was a day's march from where we were, a day and a half, where the ambush was. Now we didn't sweep anybody into the ambushes, and because the troops had been
- 33:30 sitting in the ambush for days, they obviously ate most of their rations. So they said, I came up to this particular ambush position I had to go to. They said, "Have you got any rations?" I said, "Well I've got a few things left but I'm getting resupplied tomorrow." So I asked the blokes, I mean the control of the rations is an individual thing. You get issued with them and what you eat is your business. They tossed some stuff towards the old MH at the ambush and then we stayed there the night.
- 34:00 I thought, "Now I've got a day and a half to get back to Fort Rekum." I'd been navigating in Malaya for, not 18 months, about 17 months. I thought - this is how stupid I was - I got the map out and one of the problems in Malaya was that when the maps were made they were, you get cloud cover because they were done from aerial photographs.
- 34:30 They do aerial sweeps over the terrain backwards and forwards and from that they make the maps, topographical maps. So if you came across an area that had a lot of cloud on the map would just be a big white round spot, and would you believe Fort Rekum was in the middle of this big white spot. So where the ambush was all the contour lines and everything else was on the map. So it was a straight compass bearing
- 35:00 that, you can't take a straight compass bearing in the jungle, not over the distance I had to go, a day and a half or something. So you leg it, what's called leg, but it was one of those just impossible, very difficult thing to do. Anyway to get to the point, we started off, this leg, that leg, this leg, that leg and I'm actually making a map as I went and I've got one of my blokes checking
- 35:30 what I'm doing. Creek junction there, yeah, we've gone so, and measuring the distance by steps, a laborious business. So we get up to where Fort Rekum, couldn't find Fort Rekum. Did a box, what they call a box search. Couldn't find Fort Rekum, and I thought. "Dear God, can't find Fort Rekum." We

haven't got any rations, we've got nothing. We've got a few Mars bars I think. So

36:00 they're all looking at me, the big white leader Rothwell. "Where are we, Sergeant?" And I said, "I'm stuffed if I know. I don't know where I am. I've got absolutely no idea. I don't know." I couldn't back track. I could've back tracked I suppose, but by that time the ambush would've been, they would've gone. So I thought, "Well, there's only one thing to do." We came from the

36:30 Perak River which is long; many, many miles it covers. "I'm north of that; keep my compass south, I've got to strike the Perak." Six days later we did.

**What sort of condition were you in by then?**

Oh, all right. No rations.

**No rations?**

Nothing.

**You'd been living on Mars bars for six days?**

I didn't have any Mars bars. They went the first day.

37:00 But to bring out, when the position appeared to be hopeless I got all my blokes in, about 10 of them. I said, "Righto, open your packs. What have we got here in rations?" A couple of odd tins came out. I said, "Okay." and I split the stuff up and then a couple of nights later we,

37:30 there's a terrific bloody fight going on in the middle of the, like you go into a harbour at night in a circle and you put a sentry on and these two blokes really smashing each other to bloody pieces, and one of them had woken up and seen his mate hadn't told anybody he had this tin of food and he's scoffing this stuff by himself at night,

38:00 and his mate was so upset he started to hammer him. Anyway to get to the point, we got down to the Perak in pretty sad shape about six or seven days later and picked up a special air service patrol. They were patrolling in boats up and down the Perak at odd times. Got a fix as to where we were. Even though the map was quite well marked I didn't have any idea

38:30 what part of the Perak I was on. They said, "Have you got any idea where the Charlie Company base is?" I said, "Yeah, it's up there." Up I went and there I was. That was a pretty harrowing experience that, because in that circumstance you never toss the towel in. I had to get every one of those men, which I did do, plus myself.

**That's a good point to finish up on.**

## Tape 5

00:35 **Just before we finish recording on the last tape you were talking about leadership and the importance of leadership when you were a soldier in Malaya in particular. Can you talk a bit more about leadership?**

I think one of the most important

01:00 attributes of leadership is to lead by example. If you're in command of something and things get hard the worst thing you can do is drop the bundle yourself. You've got to be not egotistical, not pushy, you've got to be there. You've got to let your subordinates see that you're part of the team and that you're doing it just as hard as they are. There are no privileges in the army as far as I'm concerned.

01:30 I came from the ranks, probably the hard way, but when I became an officer if we were eating in the field, if the troops were eating, the officers ate last, and if there wasn't enough food the officers went without. It didn't happen but the most important people to look after are your soldiers.

**Now that experience that you were talking about before you essentially got lost for**

02:00 **six days, how were the men towards you about you essentially getting them lost?**

Well the point I made initially with them is that I was at fault. I was completely honest, I said, "I'm stuffed if I know where we are. It's my problem, but I'll get you out of this." and I did as I said on the tape.

02:30 I think I did the right thing. I got them in, the little bit of food that was left which wasn't much, I divided up among the troops and told them precisely where we were going and roughly how long it would take to get there and there wouldn't be any food on the way. They accepted this and there wasn't any animosity towards me because I'd been very honest with them. If I'd have blamed someone else

03:00 or put blame on something that they knew wasn't relevant I think I would've had trouble. I think with

soldiers you've got to be dead honest. I think honesty won me through.

**Was there a, did you feel you had to build up their trust in you again?**

No, not really. I did subsequently patrolling from there and they just accepted the fact that everything was normal. I do think

03:30 that if any fault lay anywhere it was probably, I should've been more cautious map reading plus the fact that when you're navigating in jungle and you've got a map but there's no contour lines or spot heights or any references to go by, it's incredibly difficult when you're trying to pinpoint a small part in the jungle called

04:00 Fort Reklam as opposed to moving down to a large objective such as the Perak River; even though the map was available I didn't need the map. I just kept following the land, the lay of the land and I knew that eventually I would hit the river.

**During your experience as a soldier who did you have as an**

04:30 **example of a good leader?**

Well there were a number of them. No one in particular, but I found that the quiet unassuming types who knew the soldiering business were the people I looked up to. People that

05:00 had too much mouth, spoke too much, were loud and blustery, I wouldn't wear them. I think when I was doing my corps training at Green Hills there was a fellow there who was the OC [Officer Commanding] named Archie Dennis and he'd just come back from Korea. He was a major; he won a Military Cross in Korea

05:30 and we were out doing an exercise as part of our training and they were firing what is called two inch mortar flares out of a two inch mortar and this weapon, it either fires high explosive or flares, and the fellow that was operating the mortar

06:00 was one of Arch Dennis's soldiers from the Korean War and he stupidly put his hand over the muzzle of the mortar and it was manually operated with a rotating clicking system. Put a flare down, put his hand over the top and let it fly. Well I was near this and he lost his hand and all Arch Dennis looked down, he said, "You've lost your

06:30 hand you stupid bastard, now get rid of him." Now that was probably very harsh but I could just see Arch Dennis in command in Korea. If men were getting killed around he would've adopted probably and did adopt a similar modus operandi of doing things. Therefore he wouldn't condone stupidity, and one of the things

07:00 I found later on when I commanded troops in Vietnam I wouldn't condone stupidity either. So maybe I was probably using Arch Dennis as an example.

**Okay. Getting back to Malaya, before we finish Malaya, what training were you doing there?**

There was a possibility that the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment was my battalion.

07:30 There was a chance, they were part of the South East Asia Strategic Reserve. They were the reserve battalion and there was a possibility with the trouble in Laos at the time, we're going back to 1959, '60, '61, that the Australian forces would be involved, or maybe involved in Laos. This is the

08:00 problem of the plan of SEASR it was called. So part of our training even though we were in the jungle most of the time patrolling in small groups, we did do I think two battalion exercises away from the Perak River and away from, in jungle, but terrain similar to Laos and were we deployed to Laos we would've had

08:30 a bit of a rehearsal in Malaya. We were doing primarily what is called limited war training but operating as companies as part of a battalion in a conventional war concept.

**Now you mentioned before that Malaya was particularly hard on the men physically and operationally. Can**

09:00 **you expand on that for us?**

The terrain we were operating in was up towards the Thai border as I've said a number of times. It was incredibly mountainous and we cross grained. In other words searched up, searched the valleys and searched the top of the ridges. So it was constantly moving down the valleys, up the ridges, down the ridges, up the valleys and up the hills. It was just carrying, initially

09:30 until you ate it out, eight days rations, and it was just incredibly hard work, but all young men, all fit and any of the soft types had been weeded out early in the peace. So we were pretty core people.

**You just said 'soft types'; how would they be weeded out?**

The fact that they can't keep up. They complain or they weren't physically able.

10:00 In an infantry battalion there's a number of sedentary jobs back in headquarters or back in quartermaster's stores where these people would've been put to work, but you can't work operationally with any weak links particularly when you're doing physical stuff such as moving over terrain. You can't carry people or carry their weapons. They've got to be self-sufficient.

10:30 **So okay, so what actually did happen after Malaya?**

A commissioning course that had been last conducted in 1953 was going to be re-activated. The officer factories in the army at that time were the Royal Military College and the Officer Cadet School but

11:00 the military decided they wanted officers with experience or experienced older officers. So they commenced this commissioning course. The criteria was that you had to be of the rank of sergeant or warrant officer. I was a sergeant at the time. I applied for the course and didn't have the necessary complete education

11:30 qualifications. The interview, I put the application in to the headquarters, I went out on an operation. I didn't expect to hear much more about it, and a radio message came through that they wanted me back at the battalion headquarters at Kuala Kangsa where the battalion was. So I marched out a couple of days to an airstrip, got flown out in an Auster

12:00 aircraft back to Grik and by vehicle from Grik back to Kuala Kangsa and from there went to Singapore. There were three sergeants from the battalion who applied and the three of us went down to be interviewed by a brigadier named Bleachmore who was the commander of the Far East Land Forces.

12:30 I went in for the interview, had an argument with him about whether I had the necessary ability to gain the necessary qualifications and I thought, "Well, I've blown that." I went back to my battalion, went back to Grik, back to the airstrip, back into the jungle and a week later a

13:00 radio message came across the Morse: I was to go back to battalion headquarters, I'd been accepted for the course.

**So what exactly did you say to the brigadier?**

I indicated to him, I went into intelligence and all this sort of stuff about how could he measure my abilities when he didn't know me, even though other people had written reports? I think a thing that

13:30 may have given me a plus on the battalion, from recommendation to do the course was that about a month prior to this I was operating with my patrol up on the Malay Thai border and we discovered the largest communist terrorist camp that had ever been found in Malaya, and luckily it was not manned. They'd gone,

14:00 but it was a huge camp. So maybe I got a bit of a plus for that, but I went to the course. I eventually ended up in Australia and I was heading towards the end of my two year tour with the battalion, and I found it was a six weeks course. There was one other fellow there from the battalion. The other fellow hadn't been selected.

14:30 I found there were 350 sergeants and warrant officers who applied, they had selected 34 and seven were commissioned at the end of the course. The others, there was a wastage factor during the six weeks course, so I was lucky. I got commissioned as an officer and it opened quite a large door for me.

**I imagine**

15:00 **there was a bit of hard work involved as well as luck?**

Oh yeah, just a bit.

**Yeah. Now I believe Rhonda and the kids were with you in Malaya?**

They were.

**So can you talk a bit about how often you'd get to see her and the kids?**

They lived on Penang. At this stage, I might've made a mistake earlier, the children, Rhonda was pregnant with our first

15:30 child during Malaya. My son hadn't been born at this stage. So there was pregnant Rhonda towards the end of the tour. They lived in furnished accommodation on Penang with the other wives, in separate houses of course, and we did 30 day operations so I would see her probably once every six weeks to two months

16:00 and that was for probably four days and then I'd be back out in the jungle again.

**How was that on your marriage?**

It wasn't brilliant and she was only a young lady and we hadn't been married that long. We were married in 1959 which was about the time we went to Malaya, but she was, they had a social

16:30 group among the ladies and they all seemed to get on pretty well. The separation was just part of military life.

**Was it hard for Rhonda to understand military life?**

Yes, that's one of the reasons why some years later on after we had two children, the marriage didn't work, because I was career orientated and rightly so, I put a hell of a lot of

17:00 work into it, and Rhonda was not, didn't like military life at all, and that's because, even during the Vietnam phase I was never there. I together with thousands of other people. It takes a very strong woman to handle a service career, or a husband who's got a service career, mainly due to the separation.

**Yeah, it**

17:30 **seems from the people that we've spoken to the wives either loved it or hated it.**

Yes, yes, yes.

**And I think in some cases the absence of the husband was sometimes a good thing.**

It probably was, yes.

**So what happened once you returned to Australia after Malaya?**

I got commissioned into another battalion, the 3rd Battalion, and I was there for a short period of time as a

18:00 lieutenant, and then, this is in Queensland, I was posted back to Sydney to the Infantry Centre as an instructor running the, only as a lieutenant but one of four in a depot company it was called, training people who came from recruit training to corps training. Similar to the training I was speaking about

18:30 that I'd done all those years before with Arch Dennis in Green Hills. I was at Infantry Centre for roughly two and a half years. When I finished there I had an airborne platoon at the, Williamtown, a demonstration platoon. I was a military parachutist, not a particularly good one, but I'm a parachutist and I went

19:00 up to Williamtown to command the airborne platoon. I was there for a period of time until I had a pretty serious parachuting accident. Well I thought it was serious, I couldn't walk for a while, and anyway I was no good there on crutches so I was re posted back to the 1st Battalion, my battalion.

**Before we go back to the 1st Battalion, tell us what happened**

19:30 **at Williamtown?**

I just got a landing, we were jumping out of C130's. Primarily they're a ramp exit or you can use them as a double door exit and we were using what they call T10 parachutes which don't oscillate very much, but they're American parachutes, very good. And I just had a bad landing. As I was

20:00 coming down towards the ground you adopt what's called the parachuting position, pull down on your risers and you roll. I just got a wind gust that lifted the canopy up and dumped me unfortunately on my backside and one leg. So that's what happened.

**Was there a broken leg?**

No, no.

**No?**

Just badly bruised and a cartilage problem and a few other little problems.

**So with the airborne...**

Platoon.

**- platoon, what were you**

20:30 **doing with them during this time?**

They were used in the, as a showpiece for the Australian Army for demonstration parachuting. They would go to an air show and do a parachute drop. There were about 30 odd people and they were up at the airbase at Williamtown. We were a display, a parachuting demonstration unit for the Australian Army.

21:00 Good job, it really was.

**What was good about it?**

Well the thing I liked about it was that it was an autonomous command. I had command of my own small command and we lived with the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] and their standard of messing and

general upkeep was a little bit better than the army, but it was a change. But the autonomy of command was the thing I liked, where I was my own

21:30 boss for my own soldiers.

**So what happened next after you left there?**

I got an early temporary captaincy and I went back to my battalion, the 1st Battalion, that I'd served in Korea and Malaya with, and I was second in command of one of the infantry companies, and

22:00 later on as a captain I commanded the company and trained the company for Vietnam. Or trained the company and then the company went to Vietnam in 1965.

**What was involved in that training?**

It was primarily jungle training. Some of it was done at Canungra. Normal basic skills,

22:30 weapon handling and we didn't know that we were going to Vietnam at that stage, but it was patrolling and the sort of work that we had done in Malaya with a slight difference.

**What was the slight difference?**

Well, the slight difference being that the communications technology had gotten better. The military transportation was much better, such as

23:00 the - in Malaya we were using British helicopters which were not particularly safe in relation to landing. We exercised with the new (then) Iroquois helicopter for insertions. We learnt the techniques of using gun ships which are not used in Malaya, and we also

23:30 learnt the technique of close air support where you've got troops on the ground and you're using either jet aircraft or high ordinance bombs or whatever to neutralise the target. So, plus the fact that we also concentrated on the use of artillery a lot more than Malaya because in Malaya we did not use artillery at all. They were the differences.

**You mentioned gun ships?**

That's

24:00 the gun ship being a utility helicopter with a M60 machine-gun either side of it. They've got a gunner either side of it and they're used to prepare landing zones or to neutralise the enemy. If you're in heavy contact they can by swooping over the target in twos or threes in a pattern, they can bring M60 machine

24:30 gun fire onto the ground. They've also got another, they're a modified troop-carrying helicopter but they also have a Cobra gun ship, as they were called, which is a complete weapons platform. We didn't have any in Australia but we just lectured on how they operated when we got to Vietnam. When we got to Vietnam

25:00 we used the Cobras.

**So where were you when you heard that Australia was involved in the Vietnam War?**

In 1962 we had our first advisor sent to Vietnam. I was commissioned in '61 so it was a year after I was commissioned, and we got period

25:30 reports on what they reported. This is the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam, and what they were doing as advisers, so in the military publications it came out. You learnt what was going on as far as the Australian commitment was concerned. Politically, picked it up from the news.

**What was your understanding of the Vietnam War?**

Well it was 'a war of liberation',

26:00 a nationalist war; we shouldn't have been there in my opinion but when you're in the military you're apolitical, you've got a job to do.

**Was that your opinion at the time?**

Yes, it still is, but it's changed in hindsight since I've left the military, but I think that Ho Chi Minh at the Geneva Accords was very badly

26:30 done by, that it was American imperialism at its very best, and in my opinion this domino theory is pure nonsense, or was and is still pure nonsense. Eisenhower in 1952 or so spoke about the domino effect, about one country in South East Asia falling and the rest falling like dominoes. I don't believe that. I think what you had going on in South

27:00 East Asia was the transformation from the end of the Second World War where the colonial powers were leaving because the independence movements were pushing them out where the people wanted,

different countries, Indonesia, Malaya and to some degree Indo-china wanted autonomy and wanted to run their own affairs.

27:30 Personally I don't think we should've been there.

**So even though you were supposed to be apolitical at this time, was this something that you would talk about with your fellow soldiers?**

No, no.

**And this was an opinion you held at that time?**

Yes. The best thing to do is shut your mouth because it's within the

28:00 military culture, particularly as an officer, if you start voicing your political opinion which is against the government's policy of the day, you're likely to find yourself in trouble. And once in Vietnam, had I spoken out about the American involvement, I would've been sent home.

**How hard was it to continue to do your job when you had opposite opinions**

28:30 **of what you were doing?**

Not difficult because you exercise a profession, you're military trained and you're putting into practice what you've been taught and the only way to survive in war is to regard the enemy as the enemy, full stop. They're the enemy.

29:00 If they were koala bears they were koala bears. This might sound black and white and very objective as opposed to subjective thinking but there's no other way to do it in my opinion. They're the enemy, they're shooting at you and you do the best to protect your own soldiers' lives and win the day. That's the way you survive.

**Now what do you recall of your farewell from Australia to Vietnam?**

The which?

**What do you recall of your farewell from Australia?**

29:30 We left Australia like a pack of mongrel dogs, that's what I think. The battalion was told it was going to Vietnam. We did all the preparation. We were to tell our wives - we weren't to tell our wives, which was absolutely ridiculous - initially that we weren't going anywhere; we were going on an exercise,

30:00 and eventually the time came when we could tell our wives we were going to Vietnam. We were, the battalion was, an advance party was sent up by air to Vietnam, Saigon. The main body (I was in the main body) moved by 707. We were trucked out to Richmond Air Base

30:30 and the 707 just loaded us up and off we went, and later on what's called the sea tail of the battalion went by HMAS Sydney. There were no farewells, there was nothing because it wasn't politically correct to do it.

**What was the political climate in regards to opinions about the Vietnam War**

31:00 **at that time?**

I think there was a fair bit of animosity, disagreement, but in war the litmus test is body bags. There were no body bags coming back because we hadn't been there long enough to have people killed.

31:30 The body bags plus the introduction - not in my time in Vietnam, the first tour anyway - the introduction of National Service. We were regular troops, we had a job to do and as far as we were concerned that was the way it was, but I think there wasn't a groundswell of adverse opinion similar to the groundswell that came later on

32:00 when the bodies started to come back and young National Service, young men were being conscripted to serve in Vietnam.

**Yeah, we might go into your opinions about that a bit later,**

Okay.

**- 'cause that would've happened on your second tour, around that time?**

Yes, that's right.

**Yeah, okay. So you mentioned the 707. Describe the trip and your arrival in Vietnam?**

Well we stopped and refuelled, went through

32:30 Darwin, had a stop there and had a stop in Manila, refuelling again I think, and we rear-landed. It was incredibly oppressive, like walking into a tropical furnace when you get off the aircraft. We landed Tan Son Nhut, we were de-bussed, put into trucks and taken out to the defensive position at

33:00 the air base at Bien Hoa. The defensive position hadn't been dug yet, but we had to dig it. The battalion had to dig itself in. It was just another Asian country as far as I was concerned.

**Now a lot of the men, Vietnam guys that we've spoken to talk about how they weren't allowed to wear their uniforms on the plane trip over. Was that the case with you?**

That didn't apply to us, but that would've applied to the advisors from 1962 that went up

33:30 early in the piece. They had to change into their uniforms when they got off the aircraft I think, but before that they were in civilian clothes, yes.

**Okay. So you mentioned it was just another Asian country but what was your first impression?**

The oppressive heat, how uncomfortable it was. Plus the American presence

34:00 and obviously the presence of the Vietnamese troops, which appeared to me to be sitting all over the place not doing much at all. As we drove through certain parts; it's only a very short trip from Tan Son Nhut to Bien Hoa where we were.

34:30 **So you mentioned that you had to dig in. Can you talk me through what was involved in, sorry, where were you again?**

We were at Bien Hoa.

**Bien Hoa. Can you talk us through what was involved in digging in at Bien Hoa?**

We were one of the battalions, the 173rd Airborne Brigade separate, which was an American Airborne Brigade which had come from Guam. They only had two infantry battalions and

35:00 the 1st Battalion became their 3rd Battalion. The advance party had gone up earlier by air to Saigon. They'd been given an area. The brigade was deployed around the Bien Hoa airbase to protect it, and also to use the Bien Hoa airbase as a base for operations. We were allocated an area of ground; that is, the 1st Battalion.

35:30 The advance party had gone up earlier and they'd pegged it out. They'd done a reconnaissance. The operations officer was in charge of the advance party, he'd done a reconnaissance of the area and worked out the fields of fire, where the weapons should go, where, sorry, where the company should go, where the battalion headquarters should go, what they called a defensive locality. So

36:00 when we got to Bien Hoa we got off the trucks, moved into our allocated company area and dug our trenches and dug our companies in and started the patrol out almost immediately to protect our front. Protection of the front was out to enemy mortar range, whatever it was.

**And what was your particular role in**

36:30 **this instance?**

I was the second in command of Delta Company. I trained the company but a major had been posted in, which was pretty normal, to command the company. I reverted to second in command and my job was to understudy what he was doing and assist primarily with the administration of the company, commonly called second in command or executive officer.

**So who was your commander at this time?**

A fellow named Harper, Brian Harper. He's dead now

37:00 by the way.

**Was he a man that you, I mean you mentioned that you were an understudy, was he a suitable teacher?**

No.

**In what ways?**

I had trained Delta Company for 10 months. Back in Australia I handed over the company to him and he said, "Let's get one thing right,

37:30 Captain Rothwell, I don't want to go to Vietnam." That's exactly what he said to me. Here we are, earmarked to go to Vietnam, I handed the infantry company of soldiers over to him and he says, "I don't want to go to Vietnam." So immediately the rapport and respect wasn't there.

**Why didn't he want to go to Vietnam?**

He had a cushy job in Victoria Barracks.

38:00 He lived in the Eastern Suburbs and he was a Royal Military College graduate, and a commanding officer of a battalion and he had had a severe difference of opinion some years before in Korea, and - I should probably have referred to him just as the company commander but I used his name once so I'll

use it again. Harper, as a young lieutenant, had done the wrong

38:30 thing, did not take advice in patrolling out from the company in Korea and he got a number of his soldiers stupidly killed. So this was known within the officer circles and it was known by the commanding officer and the thing I couldn't work out was

39:00 that normally when a battalion is from the directorate of infantry, when a battalion is officered, the CO is always consulted: "Would you like Major so and so or so and so" to command one of his companies. I don't know what happened there. I don't know what it was all about, but I was loaded with a company commander who didn't want to be there.

**Okay, well we'll continue that on the next tape.**

## Tape 6

00:32 **So Peter, we were talking about Harper. Could you go on with what you were saying about him?**

Well, when we, after we dug in and started the patrolling exercise, Brigadier General Williamson, who was the brigade commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, he was a Southern Baptist. He made it very clear to everyone that, "Fightin' and drinkin' don't

01:00 mix." That's what he said, which means that the soldiers couldn't get a drink, and in an infantry battalion you have, it's commonly called the batman, it's a misnomer but he's virtually a servant of types, and the reason you've got him is not because he's going to be a servant

01:30 to you 'cause you're lazy, but in the field, particularly when you've been marching all day or operating all day with a company or a platoon or whatever, you've got a report to write, you've got radio reports to put in, and if you stop say for instance at 6.00 o'clock in the evening right on last light you haven't got time to cook a meal, you haven't got time to do anything,

02:00 or open a tin or do anything. So it's just advisable to have an orderly who can do it for you because you're so damn busy, or put up your tent for example or your poncho or something. It's only a small thing but you're really very committed to what you do. Well, it's the orderly who's in and out of the officer's tent who is part of the grapevine to the soldiers. So

02:30 Harper was a wardrobe drinker and he'd booze on in his tent and the orderly would know this, or did know this, and he'd go out and say - it's back to leading by example - "We can't get a drink, why should Harper be drinking?" That was part of the, I started off sharing a tent with Harper and I don't mind a beer on

03:00 a hot day, but as far as I was concerned if the soldiers don't drink I don't drink. And I couldn't communicate with him. I couldn't talk to him; he didn't talk to the soldiers, so I ended up getting a tent myself. This is after we dug in and we lived in bunkers to start with and then we moved back after we patrolled out and secured the area, we put tentage up which was way behind the

03:30 defensive position in the company areas. Later on the rule was changed about drinking and the 'company boozers', they were only just sheds, but where the soldiers could drink when they weren't on operations, but communication-wise I couldn't talk to Harper, he didn't talk to the troops

04:00 and the morale in the company started to go down, and in war you've got to keep your finger right on morale with soldiers.

**How did this low morale display itself amongst the men?**

Soldiers wanted transfers out of the company. They complained that some of the, they wanted to see the company commander.

04:30 The company commander wouldn't see them because some of them had, not marital troubles, but they had problems in letters. They got letters from their loved ones, they had this problem and that problem and all that sort of business, but it was a non-communication scene as far as I could see. So I worked a system out with the company sergeant major and the platoon sergeants where I became a de-facto commander. Not operationally, that was still Harper's job, but as far as the welfare in the company was concerned. So behind the scenes

05:00 you had this going on, the communication between the soldiers, the senior NCOs, the company sergeant major and me.

**So what was involved in helping to look after the welfare of the men?**

Well, there's a channel to, for instance if they've got severe matrimonial problems you've got the chaplain, the chaplains of both denominations

- 05:30 both Catholic and Protestant. So it's a matter of getting the soldiers to the chaplain. The chaplain has got his net. He listens to what the soldier's got to say and then back in Australia you've got his counterpart, another military chaplain there. So he's in communication with the military chaplain there. The military chaplain goes and sees the wife, tries to sort the problem. That's how the system works in relation to
- 06:00 morale. Soldiers get scared in war; everyone gets a bit scared sometimes. You've got to handle troops pretty delicately. On one operation a soldier came to me, I was actually in command of the company at this stage. They'd gotten rid of Harper, he'd gone to another job in the battalion, and the soldier said, "I'm not going on any more operations."
- 06:30 He didn't want to see his platoon commander. He wanted to see me. I said, "Well, what's the problem?" He said, "I'm scared." I said, "How many men are in this company?" He said, "About 120." I said, "Well there's 120 scared people here." Anyway I could've taken disciplinary action. I don't work like that. I said, "What do you want to do?" And he said, "I don't want to go on any more operations." I said, "Well, what would you like to do?" He said, "Can I work in the kitchen?" 'Cause we,
- 07:00 even though we had hard rations in the field we used to feed fresh occasionally from the base and get the food helicoptered out to the troops. I said, "Okay." Working in the kitchen is dixie bashing, you know, cleaning up and all that sort of stuff. Now I knew damn well that when they got the company boozers in he'd be one out. So when the troops came back from operations if they weren't on sentry
- 07:30 duty or weren't involved, there was as much beer as they could drink providing there wasn't any stupidity like firing weapons or throwing hand grenades in the middle of the night, and so it was a great release valve for them. So after this operation that this fellow didn't go on, when he came back, of course he went over to the boozers for a drink and his mates were all there talking about what happened. He was left out.
- 08:00 He joined them the next operation. He came back and said, "I don't want to work in the kitchen anymore." I said, "What do you want to do?" He said, "I want to go back to the blokes." "Okay, go on, off you go." That was that problem solved. That's the sort of things, the problems that you come up with.

**How much of a release, or how important was alcohol?**

Very important, very important. I don't know, I've probably been a bit derogatory about speaking about Harper and his boozing problem.

- 08:30 That was his problem. We had very strict guidelines: never would you take booze on operations. Not that they could, but if they got access to it, and there was absolutely no drinking on operations whatsoever. Those that go on sentry duty or on patrolling out from the company base, no, no booze, but
- 09:00 in their leisure time, yes, very important. They could get as blind as they liked as far as I was concerned providing they didn't do any stupid things, and then they would be controlled by their NCOs. They were all mates having a drink, like mates having a drink at the pub. I think it was very important, a great relief valve.

**Now you hear about the fact that a lot of Americans had indulged**

- 09:30 **in other forms of drugs. Was that prevalent amongst any of the Australians?**

Never, not to my knowledge. I was, '65, '66 our battalion was there. Unknown, unheard of, and I think I had pretty close touch with my soldiers. No, no drugs of any sort, except I suppose alcohol is a drug, tobacco is a drug.

**Socially acceptable.**

- 10:00 Pardon? Yeah, I think socially acceptable, yeah.

**Socially acceptable ones, yeah. So you've mentioned the Americans on various occasions. What interaction did you have with the Americans in Vietnam?**

I had a lot to do with them in the second tour of duty. In the first tour,

**That's okay.**

- not a great deal.

- 10:30 We were relatively autonomous as an infantry battalion. Our close air support was provided by the Americans, our helicopter support provided by the Americans, and early in the piece our artillery support; in '65, we used American artillery. Later on an Australia battery went up there and they provided artillery support. Not a great deal, not on that. The second tour a lot, but not on the

- 11:00 first tour, no.

**Okay, well we'll talk about that on the second tour, yeah. So, can you talk us through your first patrol in Vietnam or your first significant patrol?**

Oh yeah. The early patrolling I was not involved in because we only patrolled out,

- 11:30 it's called a tactical area of responsibility. If you could visualise the tactical lines: the trenches where the soldiers were, then wire in front of that and then the distance probably 4,000 metres or 5,000 metres out from there which was the known range of the Viet Cong. Not NVA [North Vietnamese Army] at this, not North Vietnamese at this stage, only Viet Cong,
- 12:00 medium mortar range. We patrolled out there, the reason for that obviously is that so that the area was safe in front of the battalion. Had we not patrolled out there they could've come in and used their mortars to mortar the battalion. So they were sort of, they were very short day and night patrolling. We started to do the longer range patrolling
- 12:30 across a river called the Song Dong Nai into, not jungle but savannah type country, and there were some Viet Cong operating in these areas but not many. So we did not, we had sporadic clashes with the enemy. It was hit and run. They'd fire a few shots and run away. Nothing early
- 13:00 in the piece of any major significance, but what it did do to us, it settled the soldiers in. You wouldn't want to get into a very heavy engagement early in the piece.

**What was it like being under fire for the first time?**

I can only speak for the soldiers because as an officer commanding

- 13:30 a company you are protected by your soldiers. So it's your soldiers who are getting shot at, not you as the commander, even though you're quite close to where it's happening. It was an entirely different story when I was in command of Montagnard troops, but in that '65, '66 tour, I can only speak for the soldiers. Their reactions, because of the stringent safety precautions in Australia
- 14:00 they were not used to firing their weapons at other people. Firing at targets, yes, and as far as getting shot at was concerned, you just can't simulate this in training. The hardest thing that we found initially was to get, when the enemy fired at say the leading section
- 14:30 or the leading platoon, was to get them off their arse, get them up and get them moving, and this leads to the Australian soldiers, and that's the reason why they've got a thing called a contact drill which is a set procedure that happens immediately you get shot at, so you haven't got time to really, to go to ground and think about it. You do it automatically, and that started to work effectively initially.
- 15:00 The soldiers were going through a learning curve initially.

**So would you be with the platoon when they went out?**

Initially we patrolled by companies. The short in range patrol into the tactical area of responsibility was only done by sections, 10, or maybe platoons, but when we started patrolling

- 15:30 we were patrolling by companies. So I would have three platoons, there's one platoon up, probably one on either flank and myself in the centre with a small company headquarters.

**So could you talk us through how that would actually work, how the structure of those three platoons would work in a patrol situation?**

Yeah, well initially from battalion

- 16:00 headquarters you're given a patrolling area that's got boundaries, and the boundaries are established and the boundaries are normally where possible artificial, say for instance a road - natural, I'm sorry; a road, that's artificial, or natural such as a creek line or something else because on your left or your right flank some distance out you would have other companies patrolling.
- 16:30 So you didn't want to have a patrol clash. So you'd initially have what's called company orders or operational briefing and you'd brief your three platoon commanders. This is the three officers who are commanding your platoons, as to what the overall objective was. First of all, the limitations of the tactical area that you were moving through.
- 17:00 The objective of what intelligence told you may or may not be there, and the time to move. Whether the artillery was in support. Whether gun ships were in support. Whether guns ships and artillery were in support and give them an axis of advance which is only a line on the map, so you're all moving on the
- 17:30 same axis. The leading platoon would be obviously leading, it's called the point or leading platoon and the company commander would be in the centre along that line of movement, and then you'd have the flanks, right and left flanks, and where possible when moving as a company, depending upon the terrain there would be visual contact.
- 18:00 For instance the flank of one platoon would be watching the flank of the headquarters and the forward element of the headquarters would be watching the tail end of the leading platoon, so that you're moving together and when you get into contact, depending upon whether or not it comes from the flank, from the rear or from the front, the platoon would go into what's called an immediate contact drill and do something about it, and then inform
- 18:30 the company commander who would be myself or previously Harper, and then you start to, when you

find out what enemy or what's going on you can then manoeuvre your company accordingly. It might be just a section action. It might develop into a platoon action. The whole thing might develop into a company action, but it's a matter of playing it by ear as it goes.

**Okay, so Peter you were talking about command and what was involved being the leader of the command. If you could continue?**

That's virtually where you're patrolling out and the enemy is unknown, as opposed to a deliberate attack on something which is where you've got a potentially known quantity

- 19:30 that you're going to attack, so you can put a set piece attack together. I had the opportunity to do this at a place called Chin Duc - Duc Hanh on Operation New Life. It was the twin villages of Chin Duc and Duc Hanh near the delta out from Saigon, but not actually in the delta, near the delta, and the objective of the operation
- 20:00 was to deny the rice harvest to the Viet Cong. So the twin villages of, Chin Duc and Duc Han were astride a communication route and an ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] Brigade was to move down into a lower part of the province
- 20:30 and these two villages had to be cleared of the enemy to allow them to move down in their vehicles. The battalion, it was virtually a battalion operation and I was given the task of Delta Company being the company to assault the place. I did
- 21:00 a day's aerial reconnaissance. I got up in a helicopter with my platoon commanders, there were three of them, and had a good look at this place, the villages, from height, and there wasn't anything in the villages. I couldn't see anybody, dogs, cats, people or anything. Apparently they were hiding in there, and I'd gone up to the
- 21:30 province chief's, it was in a province and the province chief was a captain in the Vietnamese Army and this was a place called Vozu which was a smaller village where the provincial headquarters was, and it was after I got there with my company sergeant major, a fellow named Ron Pincott, who was a pretty hard head and damn good soldier, and he'd done a year in Vietnam
- 22:00 as an adviser in '62 so he knew, he could speak a bit of Vietnamese. So we went into this province headquarters, it was during siesta. They observe the French habit of having a siesta every day. This is usually from about noon until two o'clock; a couple of hours. We landed there about one o'clock and there was a
- 22:30 sleepy guard on the gate and he just waved us through and we walked into this place. In front of the province chief's headquarters there was a, it must've been his bodyguard asleep on a hammock, half asleep anyway, and Pincott said what we were there for, to see the province chief, and this fellow very rudely told us to come back an hour from then. So
- 23:00 Pincott just upset him out of this hammock he was in. The fellow ended up on the floor and he booted him in the arse and he said, "Go and get the province chief." So about 10 minutes later we're sitting down with the province chief with tea, cakes and the lot, and the province chief was a military fellow and we told him what we were there for: we were going to do an attack on Chin Duc - Duc Hanh. We wanted to know
- 23:30 who was there, what they were and what the defences were and all the rest of it, and, "Oh." he said, "Don't go near Chin Duc - Duc Hanh; very bad, very bad. You will all get killed." And he went on and on, and Pincott gave me one look and said, "Come on boss, get of here. This bloke's not going to tell us anything." So we left. Anyway when I did the reconnaissance, the two
- 24:00 villages had a barbed wire fence right around them and there was a gate at one end and a gate at the other end and it looked pretty heavily fortified to me, but it had been set up primarily on the Thompson Plan in Malaya. They call them fortified villages, but I noticed on the south western part
- 24:30 of the village where the fence was, the fence had been lifted up to allow the people to go out into the jungle fringe and get timber or whatever they got from the forest. So I said, "That's where I'll break into this place." because it didn't appear to be very heavily fortified. So in a
- 25:00 deliberate attack such as this, all your battalion commanders tell you is what the objective is, what your supporting companies are going to do, that's the companies say in reserve and in support of the attacking company, and you get a bit of intelligence. Well there was no intelligence because they didn't know what was in the place. They knew that the enemy were in there. So I thought this over and I thought, "Now when's the best time to hit this place? Well,
- 25:30 just after first light, just when they're starting to scratch themselves into the daylight." So to cut a long story short, we got into a position the night before quite close to this place and I briefed the soldiers on what we were going to do and the platoon commanders, briefed them altogether, and I thought maybe we'll have a pretty hard fight when we get into this place. Anyway,
- 26:00 I had artillery in direct support and I didn't know whether the fence was booby trapped or not. That's a risk you have to take. So I got the company up at about 03.00 in the morning. I got them to brew up. We

were in a pretty safe area a fair distance away from this place. I got them to brew up, have tea and all that sort of stuff, and we made the approach move to what's called the start line, just

26:30 this side of the village where the fence was, and then just when it got light enough in we went. Got through the fence without any trouble and I had my leading platoon, I had one platoon up and two back. The platoon in front, my headquarters and a platoon on either flank. We all got through under the gate all right,

27:00 I'm sorry, through the fence, and then the orders I gave the platoon commanders, anything that moves, shoot it. I don't give a stuff what it is, dogs, cats, men, anything, brass them up. Anyway,

**Would that have included women and children as well?**

I'll get onto that.

**Okay.**

I knew that there were women and children there too. But when I done the aerial reconnaissance I noticed,

27:30 it was pretty hard to see a lot of it, even though I had binoculars, but they had bunkers under the houses or the huts which indicated that's where they probably would be, the civilians, and the enemy, the Viet Cong, because it was a Viet Cong controlled village, they'd be above ground to do something about anybody that came into the place. That was only a 'guesstimate'.

28:00 Anyway, we got into, when I say we swept into this, we got in there pretty quietly and we went to ground, I got them to ground, and I heard some firing from the leading platoon, and what had happened, one of the enemy, Viet Cong, or a young man, let's put it that way, who had a weapon in his hand came out of one of the huts and just had a leak, stretched himself, was

28:30 the last stretch he had on earth. He got brassed up where he stood and then it was on. The machine-gun, a couple of machine guns opened up from one of the flanks firing at my people. The machine-gun was assaulted, two machine-guns were assaulted and knocked out and then we swept further up into the village. A fair bit of firing went on, and we stopped, the leading

29:00 platoon stopped. I pulled the other platoons up because I didn't want to get flanked by the enemy and Jim Bourke who was a leading platoon commander, he said, "They all seem to be running up towards the top of the village." This is the enemy, and I silently registered with the artillery, I call a silent registration of targets, where all the data is on the guns but they don't fire them, but you call for the targets by numbers and then you walk the artillery,

29:30 and I said to Jim, "I'll get target." he knew the numbers of the targets, "I'll get the battery to fire that target" - whatever target it was - "and you walk it and you follow the enemy with the artillery fire." which he did do. 'Bang! Bang!' the artillery fire went, came over, and the first target was registered, what's called actively registered and then he walked the artillery ahead

30:00 and amongst the enemy running up into this other village. A fair bit of firing went on from then on. We cleared the place and it was quite, I think quite tragic although the more these things happened, a poor old man who was probably a grandfather, he had his kids and his family under

30:30 the hut in the bunker, he came up and poked his head up to see what was going on and he got shot straight through the head, which is very sad. I didn't know about this till later on. When we got up to the top of the village, the enemy, those that hadn't been killed had run into the other twin hamlet, Duc Hanh. We were in Chin Duc

31:00 and they'd run into Duc Hanh, run up that way. So as far as I was concerned my job was done. I'd cleared - this took about three hours altogether - the village where the road came though and then all the people, all the families started to come out from under the huts and would you believe that they were all waving South Vietnamese flags. It was quite, absolutely,

31:30 I thought it was absolutely terrible. You have these poor people, whether they'd been badly treated by the Viet Cong I don't damn well know, but they were having two bob each way. One minute it's an enemy controlled village controlled by the Viet Cong and the next minute, God knows where they got these flags from, but they come out with these little South Vietnamese flags and they're waving them, and there's no way that any of the villagers were molested or

32:00 knocked around at all. We got to the top of the village and I had a Vietnamese, an Australian linguist and all the Vietnamese are jabbering away and jabbering away. I stopped the soldiers 'cause they were pretty worn out, and we hadn't taken any casualties whatsoever. None wounded, none killed, and

32:30 I said, "We want to get a bit of intel [intelligence] out of these people, can you go and find the village headman? Not the province chief, but the bloke who ran the village." So we eventually located him and spoke to him and he said, "Last night the enemy came, the Viet Cong came into our village and they were going to ambush the

33:00 enemy." which was us, as we came through the gates, and he took me up with McAuley, the linguist, and

showed me this huge L shaped ambush dug in, that had we come through the gate we'd have been slaughtered. So I rested the soldiers. This thing had started at first light. It was getting mid afternoon and we were all

33:30 pretty tired. So I opened a few tins and they had tea, and then two helicopters came in, bright shiny helicopters with Vietnamese markings on them, and there was a medal ceremony going I found out, 'cause my linguist went up and listened in. It was all in Vietnamese,

34:00 and a Vietnamese general was pinning medals on the brigade commander and his staff officers who had just successfully attacked the village of Chin Duc - Duc Hanh and cleared it of the Viet Cong. Interesting.

**Very interesting. So clearly they'd told a lie.**

Of course, but that was the nature

34:30 of the war. When the machine guns started to, early in the piece started to knock, it didn't hit any of my soldiers but they were taking enemy fire, there was a fellow named Shagger Carnes, who was the platoon sergeant, Jim Bourke's platoon sergeant, who was absolutely one of the roughest soldiers, excellent soldier but as rough as guts, Korean veteran, and

35:00 when the enemy machine-guns opened up on the advancing troops, or machine-gun at this stage, only one of them, he got one of the, he got the leading, even though he wasn't in command of the platoon he got the, he was close to where the machine-gun was and got one of the leading platoon's machine-gunners to bring fire to bear on the enemy, and an M60

35:30 and the gun stopped. It wouldn't work. So he had a self-loading rifle that was doctored to fire on automatic. He'd engineered this himself which [was] highly illegal. So he charged into this, where this machine-gun was and killed the lot of them, the lot of them with his self-loading rifle. I put him for a Military Medal, which he got. So that at least was a big plus out of that action.

36:00 I put the leading platoon commander, Jimmy Bourke, up for a Military Cross. He got nothing, and Jim later on in our tour was put up for a second Military Cross rescuing some of his soldiers from a hell of a fire fight and Jim got shot through the head. He didn't die, he survived, but that was sort of just

36:30 a little mention on decorations of the wars.

**Now you mentioned before that there were women and children in the village. What had happened to them?**

They were under the buildings, under the huts. There were trenches dug under there or bunkers and they were hiding in there, but my primary thought was I had a job to do.

37:00 I had to attack the place and clear it which I did do, but my utmost thought was my soldiers. I didn't want to get any of them killed or wounded and I was lucky enough not to.

**What about civilian casualties?**

Only one person, the poor old man who poked his head up. That's the only one that got killed.

**Is that something you reflect on after?**

No, not at all. I don't give it a second thought

37:30 because the axiom there was 'my soldiers or them'. My soldiers came first and it's sad. I do feel sad about the fact that this old man got killed, but that's unfortunately, in my opinion, just the fortune of war because earlier in the piece

38:00 I had one of my machine-gunners, Kerry Finucane, who, the company was taking sniper fire and he was a machine-gunner in the leading platoon. He was a machine-gunner in the leading section and he was second in command, lance corporal. I'd been a lance corporal many years before. Was in control of the gun and

38:30 they were getting fired at, took a couple of rounds of sniper fire and the section commander in the forward section, this is the section that Coxson [?] and Kerry were in, reported back that a woman dressed in black pyjamas had run across their front and because it was a woman, Coxson said

39:00 to Kerry (apparently Kerry was going to brass the woman up), "We don't shoot women." and then as he said, "We don't shoot women." Coxson got a round straight between the eyes and blew his brains back over Kerry, the machine-gunner, and

39:30 Kerry Finucane is now nearly 60 years of age and he's a basket case. He wasn't a basket case. He did his job, he finished his tour, but he's, as a person it destroyed him. Just the fact that his mate Coxson was killed next to him. So

40:00 there's some things that soldiers get over quickly and some things they don't.

Well, we'll continue onto the next tape.

## Tape 7

00:33 **Who had fired the shot that had killed this soldier in the action you've just described?**

You're speaking about Finucane, oh Coxon, when Coxon was killed?

**Yes. When Coxon was killed.**

The enemy sniper.

**An enemy sniper, so it wasn't a Vietnamese woman.**

No, but she was part of the group. And, they in the movement

01:00 through the jungle or the scrub, they startled these people, even though there had been sniper activity, they just came across them, this happened quite often. And this woman jumped up and ran off like a startled rabbit and she ran across the front of the machine gunner and she really should have been brassed up. But she wasn't, and anyway,

01:30 whether it had anything really to do with Coxon getting a round through the head, who knows.

**Now there was another significant death and that was of Bill Naylor. Could you tell us what happened on that occasion?**

Yeah, Bill Naylor was the signals operator for one of the platoons. And, it was a very, very quiet day and we hadn't had any contact whatsoever.

02:00 It was open terrain and the platoons were well spread out, it was early afternoon, and we didn't discover the Russian sniper rifles but one of the other companies had located a cache of Russian sniper rifles still in their packing grease and still brand new and, there was just

02:30 one shot, one shot, nothing else, and it went, the round went through the back of - Billy Naylor had the radio set in his pack and it just went straight through the radio set and straight through him. Didn't kill him instantly but he was dusted off, which is medically evacuated, and died. And

03:00 he wasn't given a state funeral, but the funeral cortege went through the City of Sydney for Billy.

**Why was that?**

I don't know, we were in Vietnam, I got no idea.

**He was the first soldier killed in your company wasn't he?**

Yeah, in the battalion.

**In the battalion.**

In the battalion, in the Australian involvement there. Not in the war because there had been an advisory group there in '62 but during

03:30 our tour and we were the beginning of the commitment, the larger commitment, Billy was the first killed.

**What effect did that have on the battalion?**

Difficult to say, it had, it had some effect, because the companies were virtually family groups, which they were,

04:00 even though they were part of a battalion, the companies A, B, C, D support companies, admin [administration] companies were family groups, were just tribal family groups, and within our tribe, Billy was one of our people and he - a sense of loss, particularly from his mates, in that platoon.

04:30 But the reaction among the people, probably when you see people killed like that - well I didn't actually see this actual thing I was in the centre of the company - you probably say, "Well any of us can get it." And because of that I think that the, whatever the veneer is that you put around yourself, 'it's him not me',

05:00 makes you get up and continue on with what you got to do. This veneer is an interesting thing, that, during my, both of my tours in Vietnam, I knew that any time I could, at certain times I could probably buy it, but when I looked at casualties, people wounded, people killed, bodies, I just thought, the veneer mechanism kicked in

05:30 and I still felt vulnerable, but I didn't, there was none of this hysterics, no breaking down, nothing and

that applied to most soldiers, you don't get people screaming their heads off, you don't get people carrying on like idiots because their mates had been killed. They just accept the fact that he's dead, and hope to Christ that it's not them next time.

### **I imagine that people, and perhaps yourself**

06:00 **included, started to reflect on motions of fate and predestination, predetermination.**

Faith?

**Fate.**

Oh fate, oh yeah fate, very much so.

### **How much did you dwell on fate following?**

Oh, going back earlier into this interview, I often wondered why did I fall back into that trench and break my right arm. I was on my way to the war in Korea, I didn't get there, some of my friends, not a lot of them but a number of them were killed. So,

06:30 later on in a mobile strike force, I came close to getting killed a couple of times, but I think, that I don't believe in this, in the label, 'if it's got your name on it it'll get you', or do I, I don't know. But the thing that where fate kicks in for me is, if people are killed by stupidity,

07:00 if their commanders are stupid, it's not fate so much if soldiers are killed, just stupidity. If they're killed from within their own group, say an accidental discharge of a weapon, or artillery fire in the wrong place, that to me is stupidity or mismanagement. If the enemy kill you, maybe that is fate because you can't control the enemy, you don't know what they're going to do.

### **But you can certainly make moves to save yourself,**

07:30 **which is where personal initiative kicks in.**

Oh yeah. Yes that's right, of course you react, it's a, quite often the dice are loaded you know.

### **Now, the 173 Airborne Brigade comes into this story at some point, how do they enter your story?**

They were initially committed to Vietnam

08:00 on what's called, the Americans called TDY, which is Temporary Duty; they were the airborne reaction force from Guam. They were initially only intended to come to Vietnam for 90 days. They were short of one battalion, A battalion, they got three battalions in brigade, the first and the second of the five oh third, and, 173rd Airborne Brigade.

08:30 And when they were committed on this TDY, the Australian battalion, First Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, was earmarked to become their third battalion, that's how we fitted into the picture and we became an integral battalion of the brigade in Vietnam at that time, in '65. Even though we had a fair bit of autonomy as an Australian battalion.

09:00 **Now what happened when you finished this first tour?**

I returned to Australia obviously and I got a staff job, in a task force as a captain and, I'd done an advisors' course about 1962, before '63,

09:30 before the Australian larger commitment occurred. And I did the advisors' course and, got, not a particularly good report. Because I had a, I for some strange reason must rub people at times up the wrong way because there's a bloke called 'Target Ass' McKenzie who was the major, he'd been shot in the ass in Korea and he was the boss,

10:00 and I had an argument with him, I was only a lieutenant at the time, argued with him about how to put an ambush in, and, I didn't get a particularly good report. Anyway, I probably should have gone as an advisor to Vietnam in 1963, but because of the report, I didn't and I ended up eventually going with the 1st Battalion and I wanted to pick

10:30 up, I wanted to do, I wanted to go with the Australian Army Training Team as an advisor so I went to the Director of Infantry who controlled all the officer postings, and his name was David Thompson, and he called me by my first name, "Peter," he said, "You've got no chance in hell of going back to Vietnam, there's a lot of people before you, now that we're committed. If the war's still

11:00 going" - this was 1966, '67 - "in 1970 you'll probably go back as a company commander, as a major." And I said, "For Christ's sake, I've just, as a captain I've commanded a company in bloody action, I don't want to go back there as a major or as a company commander, I've done that." Oh yeah, so I go the old brush off; off I went. Then a fellow called Tony Danilenko

11:30 who was not a friend of mine, I didn't know him, but he was a captain and he was killed in Vietnam with the Training Team in special forces and they wanted a captain to replace Danilenko. And, there's plenty of captains in the Australian army but at that point in time I was the only one that had done the

advisors' course. A lot of people were doing it but they hadn't completed the course. So Thompson

12:00 rang up my brigadier, Brigadier Morrow who I'd served in Malaya with when he was a lieutenant colonel, and he said, "Do you still want to go back to Vietnam?" I said, "Of course I do." He said, "Well, they can't find a replacement for Danilenko. You sure you want to go back to Vietnam?" I said, "Yes." So he spoke to David Thompson, and

12:30 two weeks later I'm in Vietnam, that's how fast it all was.

**Very rapid.**

I was pretty lucky really.

**Now where was your first marriage up to at this point?**

It was still together but only just. And my wife objected strongly, and I don't blame her for one moment, going back to the war, but I had the bit between my teeth and

13:00 I went.

**In retrospect was it the right decision for the marriage itself?**

Definitely not. It destroyed the marriage. When I came back after that tour, that was finished, the marriage was virtually, it tottered on for a little while longer and then it dissolved.

**While you were away were you writing to her at all?**

Oh yes, constantly, yes.

**Did you ever have a sense of what the main issues were for her, what her main problems**

13:30 **were?**

I was probably very one-eyed and selfish in hindsight, because she was a good woman, she was a good wife, I had two small children, but, some strange reason the war came first. It wasn't so much the career, because promotion-wise, being commissioned from the ranks, you've got an expectancy of promotion to major which I attained; your chance of promotion beyond that is very limited.

14:00 Because the positions are taken up by the other people from the Royal Military College, they become the generals in the army, not the soldiers who come through the ranks. The army's not big enough, so I, it wasn't, I wasn't chasing promotion, providing I passed my promotion exams which I did, kept my nose clean, and did my job, I'd attain majority. So for some reason

14:30 it was the war, I just enjoyed in a very macabre way what I did.

**What was it about the war that you wanted to get back to?**

I've often asked myself that question, but it wasn't power, power's got nothing to do with it, but I used to enjoy being on the edge. Flying around on helicopters and doing assaults.

15:00 And, just on the edge, it gave me some adrenalin kick, I don't know what it was. And I'm not a very adventurous person, I'm probably the worst parachutist in the Australian Army, jumping out of an aeroplane is a bit of a kick, but it's just the, whatever it is, I don't know, I find it very hard to put my finger on. It's the professional way that one, you've got the toys to start with, in the Australian Army you haven't got the toys,

15:30 up there you had gun ships, you had artillery, you had the whole shooting match and it was, it was a challenge to do an operation, similar to that attack at Chin Duk - Duk Han. I had a lot of luck there, I could have gotten my soldiers killed or wounded, but when I got out of it in one piece, and they all got out of it in one piece with not one of them getting injured, that gave me a lot of satisfaction. So maybe I did it the right way.

16:00 **Before you went to Vietnam, how much did you know about the Australian Army Training Team?**

Not a great deal. I'd done that advisors' course, where you get a bit of an insight into what they do.

**Did we cover that earlier, did we cover the advisors' course?**

I said that I had done the advisors' course and got a bad report.

**And got a bad report.**

Yeah from "Target Ass" McKenzie, yeah.

**What did the advisors' course**

16:30 **consist of?**

Pretty much all the bread and butter stuff of tactically ambushing, all the jungle stuff that I'd been

doing for some years. How to get on with the Vietnamese, there was some linguistic aspect to it, I'm hopeless at languages, so it went straight over my head. How to handle the Americans,

17:00 sort of a social aspect of it. But, it was just basically infantry stuff as far as I was concerned, because, at the course, it wasn't predominantly, even though the advisors' course was infantry work, you got people from all the other corps. You got them from service corps, transportation, artillery, armour and they, a lot of the infantry stuff was new to them;

17:30 it wasn't new to me, it was just a repetition. I'm not being smart about it but Target Ass didn't know what he was talking about it, he didn't know much about jungle ambushes, that's why the clash occurred.

#### **What was the clash?**

Oh it was over putting a linear ambush in. I won't give you all the detail of it, but there's a right way and a wrong way to do it, and in the training aspect, I put the linear ambush down the way I had done it in Malaya,

18:00 and he sort of started to pull me to pieces. He hadn't been to Malaya. I said, "What do you know about ambushing? Obviously nothing, Sir." He didn't take that well; undermining his authority, that's how the military system works.

#### **Why did you want to join the AATTV [Australian Army Training Team Vietnam]?**

Well the autonomy of command is what I wanted, I'd had a bit of this in the airborne platoon, but from what I could gather,

18:30 with the training team, you were virtually, in most cases, your own boss within reason and some of the jobs are very interesting.

#### **What happened when you got to Vietnam?**

Oh I only took, I took my summer polyesters here, I took some of my field gear that I'd had in Vietnam on the previous tour,

19:00 expecting to go into the field. And a fellow named Murray Metherall, who was the adjutant (I hadn't met him before, he was education corps would you believe) and he said, "You're the new adjutant." and I said, "I don't think so." Which is the administrator in Saigon and, also did tours around of the advisors, toured around the countryside

19:30 doing the administration the advisors wanted plus individual Australian advisors and paying them once a month. And I thought, "This is not for me." anyway, I fronted up to the Free World headquarters and a fellow named Lieutenant Colonel Ray Bernard, hell of a good bloke, he explained, I said, I didn't know him,

20:00 and he said, "I want you to be my adjutant." And I said, "All due respect sir, I don't want to be your adjutant or anyone's adjutant, I want to get into the field, that's what I came here for." "Oh," he said, "You know all the old warrant officers, this and that, and you know, I'm not quite sure at times what they're doing and what goes on and I want someone to get around them every so often and speak to them and find out what their problems are and report it back to me." He said, "Murray's a hell of a good bloke and a competent

20:30 staff officer, he can't talk to the warrant officers because he's an education corps bloke, you know." I said, "Well you're the boss, so..." He said, "Look, if you'll help me for five months, you can have any posting you want in the country." I said, "Well that's fair enough. I only want to go to the mobile strike force anyway, which I think you would have sent me wouldn't you?" He said, "Yes I would have sent you there." So I made most of it,

21:00 I had a very good chief clerk in the headquarters, only a small unit, he did a lot of the administrative stuff. And, it turned out a big plus for me because I used to go away on what they called Cut Orders, I could go anywhere in Vietnam I wanted by all the internal military airflights to visit the 150 odd people, whatever they were scattered all over Vietnam, Australian warrant officers. So, I went to all

21:30 the different units and I'd go on operations with them, different, I had operations at the Delta, operations up in the north up near the demilitarised zone and I had a hell of a time. And I, also got a very good look at the war, I hadn't seen this before, because during the first tour we were pretty much tailored into an Australian battalion, very strictly controlled, I didn't have this flexibility. And I saw, just,

22:00 I saw the war at its best. Wherever I went.

#### **What were your main impressions of the war at its best?**

That first of all, the impression I got was, there were too many people sitting in huge defensive enclaves, the South Vietnamese army, and American units; the coordination was between a lot of these different areas, was

22:30 incredibly poor. That the enemy were coming in in large numbers, which everyone knew about, from the

North, down the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam, from Hanoi, bringing all their supplies and all their weapons and their troops and everything else and the real, the hardest thing the American units found was to find the enemy, not in small groups, they wanted to get a large battle going in different areas. They wanted to catch them on the

23:00 ground and they couldn't do this. And the other thing that came out pretty clearly was how hopeless it all was, because there was no control of the civil population. The civil population were all identified with identification cards but there was graft and corruption. The province chiefs had one hand in the enemy's pocket and the other hand in the Americans' pocket, because the Americans were giving them aid and money. The whole thing was incredibly corrupt right through.

23:30 **So if you felt it was so hopeless, what did this do for your will or desire to continue?**

My personal desire, I wanted to use the toys and exercise a profession. This brings up the, the apolitical, you see it all and you're say nothing, but had I complained about it, made a song and dance about the corruption and all of that sort of stuff, I'd have been sent home. Just like that.

**So you kept your nose very clean?**

24:00 Yeah. And you keep your mouth closed, yeah. And that applied to most, you learnt the name of the game. When I was there in 1965, I only visited Saigon a couple of times, in the troop billets in Saigon, on the front of the building there was a sign,

24:30 "You are billeted by the courtesy of Archie Cunze Captain United States Navy." He controlled all the billeting in Saigon. Archie was court-martialled two or three years later where he'd been paid some millions of dollars, by the South Vietnamese, in green currency, for corruption. The other thing that few people know about it,

25:00 that, the areas of ground on which the American units were billeted, where the, if they had a division on the ground, on their bases, they all paid rent to the South Vietnamese. The area that the Australian task force, which is about 250 acres at a place called Vung Tau, which was a pristine seaside resort.

25:30 The task force sat at Nui Dat which was inland, but where the logistics sat at the seaport of Vung Tau, they paid rent to the South Vietnamese government. All the defence stores that came into the country to build bunkers and all the stuff, a lot of it was siphoned off and to be given, not sold, to the Vietnamese contractors who were building the new hotels

26:00 to house this huge American invasion - there were literally thousands and thousands of Americans in Saigon, what they were doing God only knows. You also had these 'do gooders' from the state department in the United States with all these aid programs, help programs and god knows what on huge salaries, all feeding off the war.

**Were you ever tempted to say anything about this?**

26:30 No. What's the point? Shut your mouth.

**So at the end of this, what, five months, what was the next move for you?**

Well it was to go to the mobile strike force where I actually went to, yeah.

**Could you describe the process of joining the mobile strike force?**

Well I was posted there, as the company commander. I landed

27:00 at Pleiku, got off the aircraft with my gear, went up to the compound which is up on the top of the hill, got driven up there of course. And, it was an American colonel, I presented myself to the colonel who was the commander, he was sitting in a chair smoking a big cigar. And I saluted him and I said, "Captain Rothwell sir, reporting for duty." "Oh you're Captain Rothwell are you, I've heard about you,

27:30 I heard you were coming up here, okay, so welcome aboard." Didn't say anything else, "Get down," he said, "Would you like to go down to the G Shop? And I'll brief you on what's going on. I think your company's out in the field." So I went down to the G shop, which was an intelligence place, "Oh you're Captain Rothwell, I've heard about you," The same rigmarole but he wasn't smoking a cigar this bloke, he was a sergeant. He said, "Oh yeah, your company's out in the field, so you'll go out tomorrow on the resupply."

28:00 So, they gave me a billet, somewhere to sleep in the middle of this place; it was just a compound on a, it wasn't a hill, it was just a rise on the ground and this was the mobile strike force. There was a big tin shed in the middle of it which was called big Marties club which was a place where everyone drank and carried on, and surrounding that was a number of concrete billets and outside that

28:30 there was a trench system, barbed wire and all of that sort of stuff; that was the home of the mobile strike force.

**It's appropriate at this point for me to ask you what was the Mobile Strike Force?**

The mobile strike force was a, a group of Montagnard soldiers, who were recruited, trained and commanded

- 29:00 by US special forces, Green Berets. They were used as reaction force for A camps. Now the A camps consisted of, down the lower Cambodian border, there was a series of fortified camps along near the infiltration routes that came in from the Ho Chi Minh trail that fed into Vietnam, were all suppliers of the NVA and everything
- 29:30 that came down, they were manned by Montagnards, the Montagnard troops were recruited from the villages, put into these A camps as they were called and controlled and commanded by US special forces. These A camps were strung down the border, obviously on the South Vietnamese side. Should any of these become
- 30:00 under siege, where a large north Vietnamese unit attacked and tried to actually knock out the A camp, the mobile strike force, we were one of two, there was one at Da Nang and there was one at Pleiku, the Montagnards would be under command of special forces, would be air-loaded into C-130's
- 30:30 and air-dropped, outside, well away from where the NVA were, they'd concentrate and they'd counteract the NVA. Now that's basically what their role was.

**How was it that as a member of the training team you came to be doing this?**

There was, of the

- 31:00 roughly about 150 advisors in country at any one time, it might have been slightly less it might have been slightly more, but because of the, expertise, and I say this, I don't say this tongue in cheek, the expertise of the Australian Army in relation to jungle warfare, that they were pretty well sought after by American units, for use as advisors to advise special forces, or
- 31:30 South Vietnamese army, also to act as instructors at some of the in-country schools. The ARVN schools, military schools, so, an allocation of the training team was made to special forces, so many advisors, they were primarily warrant officers and captains.

**And who were the Montagnards?**

These were

- 32:00 the aboriginal people who lived down the Annamite Chain in central Vietnam, they were primitive hunter gatherers, living in villages and had been there for some centuries. They were short, stocky, very, very hard people, there were a number of, there is something like two million of them, roughly that and they were all of
- 32:30 different tribal groups. The Rahades, Cohos and, they were two of them the Rahades were the more intelligent and the Cohos were a bit darker and smaller. There were a number of these tribes, and the Americans would go out and recruit them for service, they were virtually mercenary soldiers. They were recruited, their families were told that should they be killed their bodies would be
- 33:00 returned to the village. And they were brought into places like Da Nang and Pleiku, and they were given basic training, learning how to fire a rifle and that sort of stuff, taught a little bit about field craft, not a lot. Airborne trained which is basically two days of ground training, take them up in a C-130 and throw them out. A couple of times so they became airborne
- 33:30 and they got the airborne patch. They were very proud of their airborne patch so they became pumped up mercenaries in the mobile strike force soldiers, basically.

**Why were the Montagnards so prized by the Americans?**

They weren't prized so much as it, first of all the Montagnards hated the Vietnamese, because the Vietnamese treated them very badly.

- 34:00 Instead of having 100 Americans killed they had 100 Montagnards killed, it's simple as that in my book.

**Was there anything about their fighting ability as well as the motivation that was...**

They were motivated primarily by money. They were reasonably well paid or paid a lot more than the South Vietnamese soldiers got. And they were all young kids, they were probably 16, 17, 18 years of age.

- 34:30 Some of them were older, I think it was a bit of an adventure. They, I don't think they were particularly good soldiers in comparison to American or Australian soldiers but they were soldiers and they did a pretty good job, and by leadership they performed pretty well.

**Once you got there, what was your role?**

Command of a company of 120 of them.

- 35:00 I landed, I met Judge, Colonel Judge, I said the fellow with the cigar, on day one, overnighted there, went out on a helicopter to the, position where the company was - the company was out, part of the company was out on an ambush under Australian warrant officers called Johnny Grafton, who had been

in the special air service and I also knew him from Malaya.

- 35:30 I landed on top of this hill, all the rations and stuff were tossed out, the outgoing company commander said, "You're the new company commander?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "How do you do, I'm off. Thank Christ I'm leaving this f-ing, f-ing, f-ing place." He jumped on the helicopter and he left, and then I'm the new, all the Montagnards are there looking at me as if to say, "Who's this?" The radio,
- 36:00 there was a radio operator there, an American, I don't wear any rank in the field at all, I don't put it up and so I showed him my face, I said, "What's going on?" And he ignored me, and I said, "What's going on?" and he was listening to a transistor radio, and I picked up the bloody transistor radio up and booted it as far as I could. And I said, "I'm Captain Rothwell, I'm in command of this bloody company, who are you?" "Oh yes Sir, yes Sir,
- 36:30 no Sir, three bags full sir." I pulled him into gear and then I said, "What's going on?" He said, "Oh Sergeant Grafton," - actually Warrant Officer Grafton, he was a temporary warrant officer but a sergeant, stated his rank and he said, "Oh he's out on an ambush." I said, "How long's he been out there?" He said, "Oh he went out last night." I said, "What's his call sign?" So he gave me his call sign. I said, "Get him on the air."
- 37:00 I was getting a bit upset at this stage with this donkey and he said, "Johnny Grafton." He couldn't speak in what they call clear but he heard I was coming, he knew me from Malaya. I said, "What are you doing down there?" He said, "Oh I put this ambush in and I've been here all night, I've had no, nothing's come into the ambush. What I'll do then, I'll come off the, I'll get, pick up these people..." there were three platoons on the hill;
- 37:30 he said, "I'll pick up the three platoons and I'll move down to you and pick you up, and we'll move on." So, I asked him, it was raining, it was a pretty wet day, and, we got off the hill and I thought (now, because it had been raining, the tracks that the, from the hill, he had a platoon, they'd still be visible), be damn careful
- 38:00 I didn't get bloody ambushed going down the same track. So I thought, "I'll go off the hill in a different direction." which I did do, told Grafton what I was doing, that I wasn't going to follow his same track out, and, I got down off the hill and ran into a great pile of booby traps. The leading platoon ran into, they were called, they were booby traps with tricom grenades instantaneous
- 38:30 fuses, and what they do, they string them up on a sapling, so they bend the sapling over, and, attach it to, you got one sapling in the ground, they tie the grenade to that, bend another sapling over, tie the safely pin to that, so that if you move, if you move the, move one of the saplings, the pin will get off
- 39:00 and it'll instantly detonate. And I got into a pile of this stuff and, nobody got killed but a number of the people in the leading platoon got wounded and fell to the ground and so forth, so I got a dust off in and, got them dusted off.

**Can I just pause you there because we have to change tapes.**

## Tape 8

- 00:33 **So after this particular incident there was a dust off [medical evacuation]?**
- Yes the, wounded were dusted off but any security we had was gone because of the movement of the helicopters, and the ambush was completely gone because nobody had come into it. So I
- 01:00 got, Cheesey Grafton was his name, Cheesey on the blower and told him what had happened and we were coming down to his position. So, getting them dusted off took about 40 minutes, nobody was killed, but a couple of them was knocked around pretty badly including one of the Americans, who was the leader of the forward platoon. And it was open country, reasonably open
- 01:30 savannah type stuff with large clumps of bamboo, and intelligence, if it was worth a damn, indicated that there were trail watchers in that particular area. And the North Vietnamese at night would come down the Ho Chi Minh trail, which was a multitude of trails, and come in on one of these access routes
- 02:00 to move into South Vietnam. And because they didn't know the countryside or the terrain where the villages were which they fed off, they had trail watchers there as guides. So we estimated that's the reason why Grafton was ambushing and I got down, I was talking to Grafton on the radio because the Montagnards get very jumpy and I didn't want to get
- 02:30 close to his ambush and have the Montagnards shoot us up. Anyway I must have been, oh, 300 metres from the ambush and I'm talking to Grafton, I'm saying, "Can you hear us, can you hear us now?" He said, "Yeah, I think I can hear you coming." And as I was talking to him, I had my head in a map, looking at a map like this and I had my radio man there, this is the bloke I'd booted his transistor to buggery.
- 03:00 I got the bloody set in my hand like this, talking to Grafton and a burst of AK [AK 47 rifle] fire came, I

don't know, it was just a burst, it knocked the poor old radio man over, and knocked a couple of Montagnards that were nearby over. And I went to ground, and I thought, "Christ!" And I wasn't hit and then I looked back over to where the fire had come from, glanced like this,

03:30 from the ground, I was on the damn ground, and I saw this black pyjama shape shoot out of the bamboo and take off. I got hold of the radio set and I said, "Grafton!" or what his call sign is, "Did you hear those shots?" He said, "Yeah." "We just been fired at, the bloke's gone off in such and such a direction." Grafton said, "I'll get the bastard." So all I heard from where I was, Grafton carried a, called an under and over, it was an M-16

04:00 with an M-79 attachment underneath. It's so you can fire it as a rifle or you can put these grenades into it and shoot these grenades up. So all I heard was this 'plop, bang, plop, bang, plop, bang, plop, bang', and then quite a large volume of small arms fire. And Grafton had located the movement of this bloke; he'd jumped out of the ambush, located his movement and dropped these M-79's in front of him,

04:30 kept dropping them to confuse him and when he got near him he killed him. That was my introduction to Mike Force. And I then got the - unbeknown to me, the Montagnards would go on strike. I didn't know about this, I hadn't been briefed on this, so I picked Grafton, picked the ambush up,

05:00 and the other three platoons had picked up all the rations, so they had the share of rations for the platoon, so all that was sorted out, then it was getting towards later afternoon. And I thought, "Well I better move out of here." and I put them up into a harbour on one of these, some low hill somewhere, up into a defensive position for the night. And then they wouldn't move and I said to Grafton, "What in the bloody hell is

05:30 going on?" He said, "They've gone on strike." I said, "What do you mean 'on strike'?" He said, "They're not going to do anything because they don't trust you." I said, "Well I've only been here five minutes." He said, "They're blaming you for the enemy shooting them up and all this sort of business and the booby traps and on and on they went." Blame me you see, they probably been used to the previous company commander. So I thought,

06:00 "Well, they're not..." "They're on strike and they want to get sent back to Pleiku." And I said, "Well they're not going anywhere, they're staying right here." So.

#### **How did you enforce that?**

Very simply: I said, "Give all your weapons in." They gave all their weapons in - they didn't want to give them up - I stock-piled all the weapons in the centre of the company. I said, "Righto, bring their bloody rations and packs and all their gear in"

06:30 and they came in. And I've got a counterpart who is a Montagnard called Jan. And he's the counterpart company commander, they had counterparts you see, and the reason they had counterparts was, that you had the command of the special forces commanded them, but you couldn't speak the language so Jan was a - we had our own

07:00 communication system, and they had also had a set of radios themselves, so if I gave an order, Jan would then, I'd tell the round eyes, the platoon commanders who were special forces, a company called 'round eyes', and then Jan would speak to the round eye counterparts who were Montagnards in the language so they'd all know what was going on you see. So,

07:30 I spoke to Jan, "Oh they go on strike, we all go back." I said, "Look," it all went on and on. "Get your weapons": got the weapons in, got the rations in, got the packs in; said, "Okay, boots off": all their gear off, except for their private parts. And they're looking at me like this, what have we got here? [I] thought, "Okay"; said, "Now order, one, two,

08:00 three." I counted the round eyes, two helicopters, three helicopters. Two helicopters for the weapons and the gear, and the rest for the round eyes, and Jan's like this, you know he's, he said, "What about us?" I said, "You're staying here." "You can't do that." I said, "I'm going to do it. Make your mind up, either do what you're told, you get your rifles and your gear back and your rations back and we continue on, or you stay in

08:30 the jungle by yourselves. You're not going anywhere. We'll leave, we're off." Oh big bluff; it worked. I wouldn't have done it, but I bluffed them, and that was my first win with them.

#### **How loyal were they after that?**

Quite good, not bad, they were testing me that's all. If I'd have backed down and sent them back to Pleiku, I wouldn't have been worth a damn from that day on.

#### **How many Montagnards were involved here?**

About 120 and they could have shot me where I stood, shot all of us.

09:00 **Now you mentioned Grafton. Was he your superior or was he...?**

No he was a warrant officer, he was one of the platoon commanders of the, when I took over the

company.

**So the 120 plus the round eyes were under your command at this stage?**

Yep the lot, yeah, the round eyes plus the Montagnards. Very sadly, Johnny was a first class soldier; he got killed in a parachuting accident when he came back to Australia. You wouldn't believe it.

**This is Grafton?**

Grafton, yeah, Johnny Grafton.

**Why was he called Cheesey?**

09:30 Don't ask me. I don't know why - oh no, it was photographs, he was big on photographs, that's right, "Cheese," he used to say, "Cheese now." And I'd known him from Malaya years before.

**So what was, from this point on, could you describe, walk us through what your day to day activities with the Montagnards actually?**

In the field, it cut itself into on operations and off operations.

10:00 On operations, we would get up before first light. I always got up before first light, all the soldiers got up before first light, just as it was breaking. We normally harbour on a hill somewhere, well elevated, and, they had different rations to us, they had an Asian ration, even though they got American rations as well, they cooked rice and needed a fair bit of water, so they carried a lot of water with them.

10:30 I'd always have a cup of tea, I couldn't do anything until I'd had a cup of tea, so we'd have tea and they didn't bother about that but the round eyes would have a coffee or tea, or something and, the, I'd bring in the standing patrols that I had out and we'd move. Always move just on first light, move off the feature where we were, or whatever we were going to do, we were going to ambush that night or whatever we were going to do the following night, we were going on patrol,

11:00 or do what we were going to do, and I'd move them until we struck water and we always made sure that had to rewater them about 11 o'clock, so about 11 o'clock they would water, and feed, we had to do the same. And then, go into a defensive position, no great consequence, for an hour or so after that and then we'd move again.

11:30 So move about one thirty or two o'clock. And we continue to move until the evening or do what we had to do, and then, go up into a harbour position for the night. Now, if I was going to ambush out or patrol out in small groups I'd stay up in the harbour position say for two or three days and patrol out, if could find out what the enemy were doing or ambush,

12:00 that's basically how it worked. Because of the remote areas we worked in, you generally got taken in by helicopter and got extracted by helicopter. We didn't do any marching back to Pleiku or anything still like that, it was quite remote places that we worked in. If we got into a fire fight and got anyone wounded, they were dusted off,

12:30 that sort of thing. Back at Pleiku, I had 120 Montagnards roughly on the post of strength but some of them would go on leave back to their villages and not come back so I had a roll which fluctuated between say 90, 120, it might go down to 70, it might go up to 80, it depended. But they were paid

13:00 every two weeks and were paid in piastres so I'd get [a] great big pile, thousands and thousands of piastres, which was the local currency, and pay them. Now, each 'round eye' had a body guard. I had four [three]: Boo, Lot, no Boo, Lot and Net and I paid them

13:30 extra money to look after me, the same with the other round eyes, because at night, you never knew what in the hell they'd do, I mean you might have a member of, you might have a Viet Cong amongst you, a sympathetic Montagnard Viet Cong in your company.

**I suppose this made your choice of guards particularly...?**

Oh yeah I had three, Boo, Lot and Net.

**So how did you choose those people?**

They

14:00 were, Net was a Coho, a little guy, and the others were Rahades. I got them, I had a long conversation with Jan, who was my counterpart and I said, "I want three trusty body guards." So at night I'd

14:30 get them to dig a big hole, a trench and I'd sleep on the poncho on the side, never took your boots off, all your gear on with my weapon close by and the radio under my body like this and, Boo, Lot and Net, they'd sleep on, three around me. And then if anything happened during the night, because the

15:00 Montagnards would fire at anything that moved, I'd roll into the hole below ground level and get the radio and find out what was going on. If something, it only happened on a few occasions where the, the Montagnards believed in ghosts and quite often they'd wake up and shoot, fire their weapons off or something, you never knew, they'd fire it into the company or fire it some damn where, so you never

knew where in the hell it was, the fire was going to come from.

**What sort of ghosts did they believe in?**

15:30 Oh they were a very superstitious - ancestral and ghosts and things like that, I could never get to the bottom of it. But they believed in ghosts and bad areas and bad vibes and; pretty primitive people. So, I don't know whether, one night I was, we were out, anyway, what they do

16:00 when we're not on operations, they were paid, and I had, it was called a slush fund, I'd get thousands and thousands of piastres, which were virtually worthless currency, pay them and there'd always be a pile of piastres over, so, I'd take whatever money was over, I'd go into the black market, change it for green dollars,

16:30 go down to the PX, a trailer load, if we had enough money, of beer, and they had a tin shed down where they lived and it was called the Montagnard Hilton, and, we'd ice all this beer down for them and just take it down there and they could drink it. And the sort of things, on one particular night there was a, I didn't hear the shot

17:00 but one of them ran up to me, it might have been Boo or Net or someone or other, "Dai Uy Rock, Dai Uy Rock!" (They used to call me Dai Uy Rock [translation dai uy = captain Rock=Rothwell) "Dai Uy Rock, come quick, come quick!" And went down to the Montagnard Hilton and they'd been playing Russian Roulette and there's one poor little Montagnard with his brains blown out and he's lying on the floor and the other bloke's got the revolving Smith and Wesson .38 with a revolving chamber, going like this, and I said, "What's going on here?" He said, "He's the bravest, he's the bravest."

17:30 **The dead guy was the bravest?**

The bloke lying down with his brains shot out had been doing the Russian Roulette trick. They were all betting on, you know, whether he'd get his head blown off or not and he spun it the wrong way, or not the wrong way but around up the thing. That's the sort of thing went on, it was mad house at times.

**In what way?**

18:00 Well a lot of the American special forces fellows were out of their trees and I was next to the mess hall, it was only a concrete building, I had a billet close to that. Quite early in the morning, at two o'clock or something this shot rings out, 'pow!' and, alarm bells go and all this sort of thing - it had an alarm system. And I ran, wrapped a towel - I slept naked - wrapped a towel around myself and ran into the bloody mess hall where the shot had come from.

18:30 And there's two American special forces blokes there. One's dead and the other one's got a magnum in his hand. Killed him, they were playing quick draw, quick draw with hair triggers, just drunk, acting the fool.

**You said, 'out of their trees'; in what sort of a way were they...?**

Complete sub-culture, they were sort of a; all the social norms were gone, they were animals.

19:00 **Okay so animals, how did this?**

Animalistic.

**Can you be more specific?**

Well there was such a high casualty rate among the Americans and Australians that, in this Big Marties place which was only just a tin shed, if you left, when you left the mike force,

19:30 you got a plaque, if you left alive you took it with you, if you didn't it'd go on the wall and I was only there seven months and in the time that I was there, the plaques would, in the place had moved from, they turned the corner, they were in front of the bar when I went there, and they were half

20:00 way up the next wall so the casualty rate was incredibly high, and the thing that kept a lot of these Americans going was that they wanted to portray the macho image. They had all strange names a lot of them, they had personal weapons, they were very brave people, a lot of them.

**What were some of the strange names?**

20:30 Fellow that shot his mate, he was known as Quick Draw, but, I can't remember his second name now but he was taken away and court-martialled and sent back to the United States, I don't know whether he got gaol or not, for killing his mate. Judge was Homer Judge, he was the CO but you didn't see much of him; smoked cigars and quite a strange character.

21:00 At one stage half way through my time at the mobile strike force, the CO's changed, and this CO was appointed to straighten the Mike force out. And, in this bar, where everyone sort of after operations got together in there, the place never closed, there was a very voluptuous Vietnamese

21:30 girl, her name was Tiger and Tiger was really something else to look at and the way, she was a bit rough but the way she behaved and she was the lady that, young, she'd be about 22 or something and anyway,

this particular night, Homer Judge had gone home, he'd gone back to America and Straight Leg Sherman, he was the new CO, he was going to straighten this mob out

22:00 you see. So there was an airbase quite close to the Mike force compound that used to get rocketed occasionally, by the enemy, they used to slam a couple of rockets in there and take off. Anyway the rocketing went on and when the rocketing occurred, the alarms, we had an alarm system, and everyone was supposed to go outside and stand to, basically, go into their offensive positions. And, nobody paid any attention to this,

22:30 under Homer Judge anyway. Anyway this, it's like any drinking place, this place is really starting to roar, it's about two o'clock in the morning, really wild, and, they had bat wing doors on the front of Big Marties and the doors opened, I was in there, we were carrying on a bit and have you, for some reason you get silence occur when

23:00 something happens and no one really knows what's going, and it's sort of, everything quietens down and everyone's looking at the new CO, and he's got everything on, he's got all his new webbing and his weapon and his tool helmet and all this stuff and he's looking in like this and then Tiger speaks up, she said, "Oh you," whatever she said to this bloke, "You're the new CO, what do you want, you want a drink colonel?" Colonel wasn't a

23:30 drinker, and he looked at her like this, so she was completely bemused to as what he wanted. So after a while, she stood on a table, didn't have anything underneath, she threw up her skirt and she said, "Well there's one other thing you want Colonel, it might be me." And of course, the following day you know, we were really, all the personal weapons were confiscated, we used to have women in the place from the village, they used to come up and spend the night there, they were all

24:00 sort of, banned and the whole place just completely became regimented. It changed quite considerably, a lot of the trouble makers there were posted out, it became very staid and very regimental. But it didn't work.

**How long before it reverted to form?**

Well, mysteriously Colonel Sherman was playing a night game of basketball and broke his leg, which wasn't quite true.

24:30 They got him and broke his leg I think, I don't know what happened but, he went and, they got another bloke in, I wouldn't say that it did revert back to the animal farm it was, but it was getting pretty close to my tour there, but it was a mad house. Quite strange.

**Where was this camp?**

Pleiku, just on the outskirts of Pleiku.

**Can you describe what it consisted off?**

There was a large

25:00 galvanised iron building in the centre of it which was the club: Big Martie. Big Martie had been an advisor there years before and had been killed somewhere and they named it after him. It was a series of concrete buildings with iron roofs, which were divided up into a combination. There was a shower block at one end, there was a large mess hall,

25:30 there was a trench system right around the place, defensive position bunkers. There was wire in front of that and there was a gate at the entrance, a large barbed wire gate, we had entrance to the place, that was it.

**You've used the term Mike Force. Can you explain what that actually referred to?**

Well mobile strike force was the

26:00 genetic name of it, but commonly called Mike, Mike force, you know, in a phonetic alphabet: alpha, mike, charlie, that sort of stuff. That's why they call it that.

**Oh okay, not named after an individual.**

No, just mobile strike force for simplicity, 'Mike force', as in the phonetic alphabet M for Mike.

**You've mentioned that you were going out on patrol and you were doing**

26:30 **you know the occasional raid but what was your brief, what had you been briefed to do to begin with?**

There wasn't any.

**So what did you understand you were supposed to do?**

Do what you liked. This might sound incredibly stupid but that's the fact of the matter. 'Cause I said initially to, all you got basically was an area of operations,

27:00 on a map, "Go out there and find the enemy," so reconnaissance in force basically was what it was. But specific orders that we get in the Australian Army just didn't exist. There is no coordination or appreciation of what the enemy were doing, there was no coordination between the different companies in relation to the, if you search

27:30 this area the enemy might do this, the enemy might do that, something else. You just went out and, it was a reconnaissance force in a given area, and the reason it was a given area, so you wouldn't have any patrol clashing, that's basically what it was.

**So were you answerable to anyone?**

Well I was answerable to the CO and he didn't seem to care much anyway.

28:00 When I completed an operation, I had to write an operation report and if anyone got killed, round eyes particularly, you had to write a pretty descriptive report of how they were killed, where they were killed, because there was always an inquiry into the death of anybody.

**Now there was an action that you've referred to as the Simpson action.**

28:30 **Can you tell us about that?**

When I left the mobile strike force, I had about, roughly three weeks before my 12 month tour was up and [the] commanding officer of the training team said, "Would you like to go to,

29:00 down to Nha Trang, to the special forces operational base to have a rest?" And I said, "Wouldn't be a bad idea." So I handed over my company to one of the warrant officers because they didn't have any captains there, and, they went out on an operation. Fellow's name was Peter Wilkes - unfortunately he's dead now, he died about a year ago - and

29:30 he was a warrant officer and a very competent bloke and I developed a friendship. The Big Marties club was a bit much for me most of the time, so a nearby airbase there was a base hospital and I developed a friendship there with a number of doctors, and people who worked there, they had a very nice dining room and, well not dining room, they had very good food and it was a

30:00 very quiet place, and Peter Wilkes had taken my company on this operation and I had a couple of days before I was to move to Nha Trang and I was over there, it was pretty late at night, it was about 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock and I was having farewell drinks with my friends. And two of my very best friends, Americans,

30:30 a fellow named Daniels who was a master sergeant and fellow named Seivers, Frank Seivers, was a captain and they were just really good friends. A helicopter came in and a dust off came in, because the bar was very close to the triage and there was a huge American lady who ran the

31:00 emergency part there, triage, she was a big major, a huge woman and she ran out, helicopter came with the dust off. And, there was a fellow pulled out of it with one of his hands blown off and part of his body badly damaged and she ran over and grabbed him from the corpsman who was in the helicopter and

31:30 he was suffering almost from, from cardiac arrest and she got hold of him and started thumping him up and down. And it wasn't having any effect and I was next to them so I grabbed hold of this bloke and helped and it was Daniels. And he died there on the spot, very sad.

32:00 So, that was my sort of farewell to, I went to Nha Trang and I was supposed to sit on the beach for three weeks, a fellow named Colonel Erins was the CO there, a hell of a nice bloke and I introduced myself when I went there and he said, "Oh you're that Australian bloke coming down here, I've been speaking to your commanding officer. You come down here for a bit of a rest." I said, "Yes sir, I'm pretty tired." "Oh you'll have a nice, you can sit in China beach and

32:30 all of that sort of stuff." And I'm not - very nicely set up place. And captains don't normally have much to do with colonels and when they're bird colonels they're pretty well up the ladder in the American system. And they had this beautiful big, it wasn't a beach, they had this beautiful restaurant built, and you could have breakfast, you could have eggs ten different ways if you that way fancied, cocktails; beautiful, absolutely beautiful place.

33:00 An American base, Special Forces, and I was having a drink and he said, "Come over here, Captain and have a drink with me." This was the old colonel. He said, "What are you having?" so I'm only a beer drinker so I had a beer and he said, "How'd you like to do a little job for me?" And I said, "What is it sir?" He said, "I give you Cut Orders, you've got two or three weeks, I know you're here for a rest, but

33:30 you don't look like the sort of fellow who needs a rest to me." And I said, "Well I think I do sir." And he said, "No, no." So he said, "I'll give you Cut Orders, I want someone to inspect all my A camps. And see, I want a report on what's going on. I get all this bloody information that comes back in here," - the Americans use the term 'BS', which is bullshit in our terminology - "all this BS from these commanders of these A camps, I don't know what to believe."

34:00 He said, "Will you do it for me?" I said, "Of course I will." So I went off and have the Cut Orders, started

right up the top near the demilitarised zone, started to go to all these different camps. Well one of the last ones I had to inspect, when I say inspect, it's look at the defences, look at the lay out, speak to the fellow in charge, look at the Vietnamese, the special forces, all that sort of stuff, and the fact that I was an Australian, means that I'd give him an unbiased report. So,

- 34:30 I got down to Ben Het which is, pretty well to the south and, I was getting a helicopter from Kwan Toon to Ben Het, and the bloke flying the helicopter said, "You can't, we can't go into Ben Het, it's closed." I said, "What do you mean it's closed?" He said, "It's getting artillery fire. You can't get in there, it's closed, you'll have to go back to Kwan Toon." And I looked out of the window of this thing and we're getting
- 35:00 pretty close to Ben Het and there's a fellow grading the road, an engineer American. I said, "It doesn't look too hot down there." He said, "No, that's not Ben Het." I said, "No, I know that, but it looks pretty peaceful, there's a grader down there grading the road." Oh, on and on, anyway I did a bit of a con job on him and he said, "Look, I'll take you into Ben Het, I'll get a report on the artillery shelling, armoured shelling to see if it's still going on. You get on the skid with your gear.
- 35:30 I'll just touch down, you jump off and I'll take off." So that's exactly what happened. So I did this, got out of it, and I went into a, near the LZ [Landing Zone] there was a bunker, and a round came in, 'Bang!', so it didn't come near me and I got into the bunker and the commander of the training team's there. And Lloyd, his name was,
- 36:00 I said, "G'day sir," "What are you?" he said, "I thought I sent you to Nha Trang." I said, "Yeah, but I got a little job for Colonel Erins I'm doing. What are you doing sir?" He said, "Oh I've come out to visit Simpson and his company." So I said, "When are you going out? You can't go out now because the place is being shelled." He said, "I know that, I probably get out tomorrow morning." So I said, "Well I'm here to inspect the A Camp. I can't get around and inspect the A camp
- 36:30 if it's being shelled; I'll come out with you, sir." He said, "Oh no." I said, "I'll come out with you, you don't know where, you know you need someone with you." So the following morning we went out to, to the hill which was about, 20 minutes away by helicopter out from Ben Het. And landed, got off, had to climb up a hill to get to where Simpson was.
- 37:00 Simpson was the warrant officer commanding a company, there was small battalion headquarters with a fellow called Captain Green and there was another company there, and there was one company somewhere else out from the feature, out from the location. And we only intended to be there for about an hour. Jock Kelly was there, one of the warrant officers and he was one of the company commanders;
- 37:30 there was Simpson's company, Kelly's company and a small headquarters under Captain Green who was a battalion commander, and the other, a couple of the other companies were out somewhere. Anyway, Captain Green spoke to Lloyd, debriefed him on what had been going on: there's been a pretty savage old action on the,
- 38:00 sixth of May '69 and a fellow called Gillet, one of our people had been killed in a pretty severe old action that Simpson had been involved in. And that was the first part of his Victoria Cross citation, which was the action where Mick Gillet got killed. Anyway, Jock Kelly said, "Do you want a brew?"
- 38:30 And I said, "Oh yeah I'll have a brew Jock." So he made some tea for me, sat around and chatted about nothing, so he said, "Well I got to go." He got his company together, he said, "Captain Green and I are going out patrolling out a couple of clicks to see if we can find this enemy Howitzer, there was only one of them or two, that were shelling Ben Het." So I said, "Okay,
- 39:00 I'm going back to Australia in a couple of weeks, I probably won't see you till I see you back in Australia." Anyway he took off and, it was about two o'clock in the afternoon or thereabouts, and I..

**Can I just stop you there.**

## **Tape 9**

00:33 **So we got to two o'clock in the afternoon.**

It was two o'clock in the afternoon and I said to Russ Lloyd, "Sir you better get onto the radio operator and get us a helicopter out of here." And, he said, "Oh you can do that." So I went over to the radio operator and I was starting to get a helicopter in, because I was quite concerned about, it had to come from Klun Tun,

01:00 it wouldn't come from Ben Het because that was being shelled, anyway that wasn't a base, anyway, it had to come from Klun Tun, which took a bit of, it probably took about 20 minutes or 30 minutes to get there. And, then, Kelly came up on the air, not to me but to the radio operator, and he said, "Green's just been killed, I'm shot to the shithouse,

01:30 I've been shot through one of my legs, I'm down behind a buttress tree and every time I move I get shot

- at." So this is about two kilometres away. So, I said, he wasn't speaking to me, he was talking to - "Can someone come and get me?" Well the only person to go and get him was Simpson and Simpson's company. So, Simpson,
- 02:00 was a real, a good soldier but a rough, rough bastard. Every second word was an F- word, he was a Second World War soldier, infantry. Brought up would you believe in very similar circumstances as what I was, orphanage, farm, all that sort of stuff. Anyway, he says, "Come on you F-ing so and so's" that's how he talked to the soldiers and talked the round eyes. "Come on,
- 02:30 we got to go and get Kelly." Now what had happened is that, on this, with this dual communication system, the Montagnards who had gone out, who were part of Kelly's company, they had told the Montagnards on their net what had happened and the Montagnards wouldn't move. They'd been speaking to
- 03:00 to the Montagnard counterpart to Simpson, and they wouldn't move, they didn't go on strike but they wouldn't move, and Simpson said, "Come on you F-ing so and so's, and so's." They wouldn't move, and, then Simpson was pretty short tempered so he tossed a couple of pretty severe words to a couple of the Americans, who were his platoon commanders and they wouldn't go either.
- 03:30 So, he said, "F- the lot of yous, I'll go down myself." And I said, "No you won't." I said, "I'm coming with you." And Lloyd, who's a battalion commander, he said, "I'll come too." We said, "Well you can't go Sir, because you're, we want someone in the rear we can talk to, get gun-ships, helicopters whatever we want." And I said, "I trust the Americans, but it's better if we talk one at one."
- 04:00 So after a fair bit of cajoling, now, I won't use this fellow's name, because I don't think it's on, but the medic, who Simpson's medic, wouldn't go, and we needed a medic because Kelly had been wounded. So, I got a bit angry with him, I had a car. .15 and I said, "If you don't get off your ass,
- 04:30 I'll shoot you where you stand." I mean things were getting pretty tight, and he looked like this and he got up and he got his medical bag. Anyway Simpson managed to get a few Montagnards together and off we went. And, we worked out a very simple code with Russ Lloyd, I gave, I didn't have a map, so I got a map from one of the round eyes that wouldn't go, I got hold of another map
- 05:00 for Lloyd. I had a bit of a conflag [discussion] with Simpson, because after all they were his troops, not mine and we marked the map up and we made what's called simple report lines, and, Kelly had given us a grid reference of where he was, rough grid reference, and these report lines were given nicknames such as koala, kangaroo, so that when
- 05:30 when we got to the point, without raving on with grid references and codes and things, I could just tell Lloyd we're at kangaroo now so he'd know where we were. Anyway, we got out, we left there about two o'clock or roughly that, we got out a kilometre down towards where Kelly was. It was pretty open jungle, but not particularly thick, not with much canopy at all. Anyway, halfway down there we come across
- 06:00 a track, that had been cut in under the canopy, it was mainly bamboo and we found a large hole where the, and some rope, some tyre marks, didn't find any shell casings, and some land lines, so what we estimated was going on, the NVA had a Howitzer and they'd fire a couple of rounds into Ben, probably one round for range, they had a land line, telephone line
- 06:30 to an observatory point overlooking Ben Het, they'd correct the artillery piece and then they'd fire for effect. Put two or three rounds for effect and then when the Tack Air, or friendly artillery fire came over, they'd push the gun back into the bunker. That's how they worked, that's what we worked out anyway. Anyway, we got down to roughly where we thought Kelly was and
- 07:00 Simpson was talking to Kelly, and Simpson's name was Ray, and I said, "Look Ray," I'd worked with him in a micro force before, I said, "Okay Ray, look, if you whip up and get Kelly, to save time," because we didn't know what in the hell the enemy were [and] a lot of the stuff was blown down from the friendly artillery fire that had come in trying to get the NVA Howitzer. I said, "I'll get down and I'll select a Lima Zulu" which is only a hole in the scrub.
- 07:30 In the mean time I'd cranked up a dust off, through Lloyd from Klon Tun. I said, "I've cranked the dust off up, they should come in, you whip up and" - we were just working together - "you get up and get a hold of Kelly, bring him back here and by that time the helicopter should be on station." So, he run off, and, I don't know what went on
- 08:00 but it's about 80 or 90 metres up to where Kelly was, he apparently found Kelly, I go the dust off cranked up, I could hear it in the distance, there was absolutely no enemy action whatsoever, all I heard from up where Kelly was, and I confirmed this with Kelly well after the event.
- 08:30 Simpson was the only person that carried a self-loading rifle, he wouldn't carry an Armalite, and he's got up to found Kelly, got the medic to pump some morphine into Kelly and he walked forward and got into the sitting position, and fired five or six or ten rounds in the general direction of where [he] thought the enemy could be. Now here you have a situation initially, where anything that moves in that killing ground was shot.

- 09:00 Green had been killed, he was lying dead close by, with his gut shot out, Kelly had been wounded initially in the legs. Anytime he moved he got shot at and took some gun shot wounds through the buttock. And then, an hour or so later or whatever it was, up comes the people to get a hold of Kelly and there's no enemy there. So,
- 09:30 anyway, continuing the story, I get the helicopter, could hear the helicopter in the distance, the helicopter came down, came, circled, and you throw smoke, it's only a simple way, and you'd throw smoke and they identified all that sort of stuff, just to get the helicopter and the pilot wanted to know are the any enemy there, well as far as I'm concerned there's none, we hadn't been shot at and we're here.
- 10:00 So they got, dragged Kelly back to me, he's in a pretty bad way, and the helicopter came down to the hover and I'd cleared a lot of the with my machete, cut some of the lower stuff down, and I got hold of one of the Montagnards who was with me, we got a hold of Kelly and we were lifting him up into the helicopter and the crewman was leaning out and then a machine-gunner, a heavy machine-gunner opened up from up on the hill somewhere,
- 10:30 and, the helicopter started to take rounds just above my head. The poor old fellow leaning out, in the dust off to get a hold of Kelly, he was shot through one of the arms, he had a flak jacket on but he got, copped a round through the arm and he went back into the helicopter. The helicopter, I think the term is pulled pitch to get out of the place, it wasn't badly damaged but the rounds were impacting into it. And, Kelly fell on top of me and the bloody thing got attacked
- 11:00 with an NVA squad. They came down off the hill, and I threw a few grenades and fired a few rounds in the general direction, it was a pretty swift little action.

**Was the helicopter attacked?**

The helicopter initially was hit.

**Yes but when you say 'it' was hit by the NVA squad, what was?**

No it was hit by the machine-gunner. The heavy machine-gun up the hill had targeted the helicopter, and fired at the helicopter,

- 11:30 hitting the fuselage, wounding the crewman, who was leaning out to receive Kelly, Kelly fell back on top of me because the helicopter took off without Kelly and then the NVA attacked the LZ, a squad did, roughly a squad. And then, when, Homburg was the medic's name, I won't worry about his name, Homburg and Simpson had, when they delivered
- 12:00 Kelly to me, they'd gone off down the track, I don't know what for but they must have gone over there just to cover the ground or something. There wasn't any enemy there, but they were there all right. And, when I didn't get hit, threw a few grenades in the direction of the enemy, it wasn't a great distance, fired my armalite at them and grabbed Kelly and started to drag him back down the track, back towards where Simpson and Homburg was to get away from the damn thing. And I expected to be rushed,
- 12:30 but we weren't. And I carried with my gear and I got a couple of Montagnards to cut a couple of poles and a couple of saplings and we shoved Kelly on the stretcher and, started to beetle down the way we'd come. And, the, it was pretty, I expected the enemy to follow
- 13:00 us up to the, luckily they didn't, and then it was dark and raining at this stage, and I thought, "Christ al-bloody-mighty! How are we going to get out of this?" Because Kelly was very badly wounded, we'd tried to get a dust off in, that had gone and so, all due respect to Simpson, limp, I'm not getting anything out of him, it's his company,
- 13:30 he'd gone limp, together with Homburg, they wouldn't do anything. Zero.

**When you say gone limp, what do you mean?**

No reaction, they'd had enough.

**They'd had enough?**

Had enough of something. I'm the one who said, "Look let's get a couple of poles cut and get Kelly into the stretcher." No reaction. Simpson and Homburg are there with me. He's the medic, Simpson's the bloody company commander.

**What had happened to them?**

- 14:00 They just lost it.

**In what way?**

Non operative.

**They'd gone into some sort of shut down?**

They were in shock of some sort, I don't know what it was. They were just, zero is what I called them.

**So what happened next?**

The only thing I could work out to do, was to take, I dragged my map out, I had to be careful, it was dark I couldn't see my map.

- 14:30 I had a flashlight, shielded, I didn't know where the damn enemy was. And, got a very quick bearing from the map, as to where we'd come from off the hill, where we'd initially landed to come in, and, I couldn't be bothered about report lines or if we'd come down a bit of a zigzag route to get there, just put the thing on, it's a Prismatic compass, just took the bearing with an illuminated face,
- 15:00 and sort of went on what they call a straight bearing. Come hell or bloody high water, low hills or anything. And, just by a lot of luck and dead reckoning, the group, a few Montagnards, Kelly, another fellow that was there, whose name I can't recall, who was with Kelly, one of Kelly's platoon leaders when Kelly got hit,
- 15:30 and Homburg and Simpson and as luck would have it, I said to Simpson, "Look I think this is the hill that we came off," this was about probably 40 or 50 minutes later. And, I said, "How in Christ's name can we get up the hill?" Because you can't carry a stretcher up the hill,
- 16:00 so with Simpson's self-loading rifle, we got Kelly to, we both held the rifle in front of us, it's a long rifle, sat Kelly on it like a seat and he put his arms around each of our necks and he had one good leg, and so he virtually propelled himself, helped us to get him up the hill and would you believe it was the right hill. And when we got up there that was where Lloyd was.
- 16:30 And I'd had enough, I said, "Stuff the lot of yous, I've had enough of this." I'd been through a bit so I just said, "Well he's back here Colonel," and I just grabbed hold of a, grabbed my gear, pulled my poncho out, rolled myself up and went to sleep in a shell hole. And I understand later that night that they dusted Kelly off. They got a dust off into that position and dusted him off.

17:00 **You'd had enough, what had got under your skin the most?**

I just, I had a job to do, I, it really wasn't my job to even go out there in the first place, but I did it because someone had to do it and I'm quite sure that Simpson would have gone by himself, he's that sort of a person, but when, whatever had happened on the sixth of May, I think it had taken a lot out of Simmo

- 17:30 and, that he, he'd only had enough, but he'd had enough at the wrong time, when things were really tough in my book. Without being ego stroking, I really thought I'd had enough when we got through the job, which was to get Kelly back.

**Obviously you saved the situation?**

A lot of people don't think so.

**Why not?**

Because Simpson got a Victoria Cross.

- 18:00 I mean, there's, horses for courses, I don't want to go into awards, decorations, or Victoria Crosses, but read the citation, which I don't intend to go into now, but I can assure you, it didn't happen that way.

**So this was the second event for which, which was it, an accumulation of, obviously merit points, in**

18:30 **somebody's view, which earned Simpson the Victoria Cross?**

Yep. It was all on the say so of the medic, who I'd had to push out, virtually barrel point to get him to go anyway, so it was a fair bit of spin.

**Now you at some point got a Military Medal.**

No, no, I got a Mentioned in Dispatches.

**Sorry, you got a Mentioned in Dispatches. What was that, was that connected to with this particular action?**

Yes it was, but it's wrong, it didn't happen that way.

- 19:00 When I was advised of it, I soon told the, I was serving in the army at the time as an officer, a major, I said, "I don't want it, it's wrong."

**Why?**

Because it was wrong.

**The citation was wrong.**

Yes. Didn't happen like that.

**So the citation was an interpretation of what had happened on the...**

It was an outline of what happened, but not the truth.

19:30 And I didn't, you may think, or somebody may think, the way I'm speaking, that it was sour grapes in relation to an individual getting a Victoria Cross which is the top of the valour line and a rifle getting a Mentioned in Dispatches, which is the bottom of the line, but that's not the case.

**So did you ever have a chance to talk to Simpson about what actually happened?**

He wouldn't talk about it.

20:00 Simpson left the army, Simpson left the army pretty soon after that, and, he went back to Japan, he was - never get me wrong, Simpson was a fine soldier. In many ways, he won a Distinguished Conduct

20:30 Medal before that in a previous tour with a training team, but, he did not, when the VC [Victoria Cross] was announced, the Queen awarded it to him in an investiture, he's, I don't think he ever wore it, not to my knowledge, he would not talk about it. He would not, anybody wanted to write a story on his VC he wouldn't go to the press, he wouldn't be interviewed

21:00 he wouldn't do anything.

**Why do you think that was?**

Because he knew in his heart that it was wrong, but what could he do about it?

**Did you ever try to talk to him about it?**

I thought it would be better not to. Had he been a loud mouth about it, I would have, but the fact that he wasn't, he's a very humble man in many ways, and I think he got an incredible shock that, when he found out that he'd been awarded a

21:30 Victoria Cross but he didn't capitalise on it in any way.

**Are you aware of where the information came from for your citation for the Mentioned in Dispatches?**

I've got an idea it may have come from - Lloyd was listening out on the radio and monitoring the radio conversations and I think that maybe that's where part of it came from,

22:00 and Homburg might have said something, I don't know, but Homburg got a US Silver Star on the first, on the sixth of May he got a US Silver Star for that, and he got a US Silver Star for the 11th of May which was the second part of the VC citation which I've related the action.

**22:30 Can you talk about the impact of war on you long term?**

I think in the long term, I think in the military, I was in the army 25 years regular service and five years reserve service, I don't know how many thousands of meals I ate, how many hundreds of parades I went on, how many hours I spent in the (UNCLEAR), all the different ranks that I had. I've served in

23:00 Korea, which was not of any great consequence, I served in Malaya which was not of any great consequence, but, Vietnam was a very different experience and I think because of Vietnam, I was placed by the nature of the job that I did, into very dangerous situations, where I should have been killed on a couple of occasions, but wasn't, that

23:30 the circumstances surrounding these actions, are so vividly impressed upon my brain that they will never go away and providing I've got my mental faculties, till the day I die, the impressions are there. They, I would never embellish them in any way,

24:00 it would serve absolutely no purpose what so ever. They happened, they're factual and they're there, and, in reference to the Simpson Victoria Cross, I've told the second part of the action related to the citation the way it happened according to my observations, I was not present on the sixth of May when Mick Gill

24:30 was killed, which is the first part of the Simpson Victoria Cross. But I would say knowing the calibre of a man like Simpson that it happened exactly as the citation said it does. That is the first part of it, and, he was a very fine soldier, but I don't think that possibly the man, had won a Distinguished Conduct Medal earlier on a previous tour in Vietnam.

25:00 Whether the action on the sixth of May warranted a Victoria Cross, it may not have but with the embellishment of the action - Simpson had nothing to do with the embellishment of the action whatsoever, it was written by somebody else - that that probably put him over the line to make the citation worthy of a Victoria Cross, and I say the citation.

**Thank you for explaining that,**

25:30 **that's very well put and thank you for talking about the impact of the war because that's one of the most vivid articulations I've heard.**

Yes, yes.

**Just moving back slightly to your time with the Montagnards, are there any other specific stand out events, be they dramatic events or routine events that happened to you that you'd like to mention about that period?**

Probably

26:00 at one stage I was under operational command of an American line unit doing the reconnaissance for them, and with my Montagnard company and I'd just like to illustrate the power of a general. Even though he was a one star, he was a brigade commander, not, a bit older than I was, or quite a bit older I'd say and he called me "Son."

26:30 And he said, "Son, if any time you're out there doing reconnaissance for me and my outfit, if you want anything, you just get me on that horn and I'll get it for you." So the operation commenced, and I was doing the reconnaissance and the Montagnards drink a lot of water, because, particularly with their food they

27:00 boil up rice and they need a lot of water, so on this particular day they call it picking the blue line. Off your map you tend to pick a blue line which indicates that it's got water in it. It was the dry season, and there wasn't any water there and we, looked around and looked around. They did without water, following day, another blue line, no water. They had to have water.

27:30 And so I got in, it was getting late in the afternoon and I got in, by communication to the, the maintenance unit that was supplying the water to the brigade which I thought was the right thing to do and I got the answer back, "We're not flying any more missions today, you can't get any water, you can't get anything, we're shutting down."

28:00 So I had the, had the call sign of the general, I explained the situation to him, half an hour later, there was enough water in my position to have a bath in. It's the power of the American generals, you know.

**It's pretty good.**

Very, very good and so it should be.

**But during the break before, we were talking about the incidents of extreme action [during] your time with the Montagnards,**

28:30 **and you said it was a relatively quiet period, can you just give us a bit of a statement about that?**

It was the post Tet [Offensive] and I think the NVA had taken, even though they created the offensive, they'd really been hammered, particularly around Hue and some of those areas in the Tet offensive. And I think that they were,

29:00 they were taking time to regroup and the areas that we operated in, with the Montagnards, was primarily the, infiltration route in from the Ho Chi Minh trail, there was obviously a lot of stuff still coming down the trail but not in large volumes. And the NVA command were very wary about concentrating any of their

29:30 troops in large groups. And because of that it was relatively quiet and not a lot went on, but I do recall when I'd previously worked with the first battalion in 1965, '66,

30:00 I did not have an opportunity to use the toys (the toys being tack air, gun ships, cobras all of that sort of stuff, plus heavy artillery) and I had to learn how to use the toys and on the initial operations that I did with the mobile strike force, they used an individual called a Forward Air Controller, a FAC.

30:30 And he would fly around above the company, and when you called for artillery, if it was in range, from one of the fire support bases, he would direct, you'd give him, where the enemy were and he'd direct the artillery onto the target. I had the same FAC, his call sign was 'Sheriff eight zero'. I used to talk to Sheriff eight zero quite often but I'd never met the man. And he would fly above

31:00 me, if I used artillery, if I wanted artillery, I'd give him the target and he'd use it. And then he'd say, "Well I'm flying off, going to refuel I'll be back in four zero," or whatever the period was, then he'd come back. So I thought to myself, "I'll have to meet this guy." So the mobile strike force was near the airbase at Pleiku and I made arrangements to go over to the airbase mess and meet

31:30 the FAC. I expected to find a bushy-tailed, shiny-butted young lieutenant and I looked around the place and I couldn't see any people of this age and there was a huge man, a bird colonel, sitting in the corner and I said, "Is anybody here Sheriff eight zero?" And he said, "Yeah, I'm Sheriff

32:00 eight zero." And I said, "Good God. What are you doing flying bloody bird dogs?" And he was about 55, he said, "Well, Peter," he said, "I was flying SAC, I was a commander in Strategic Air Command, flying

B-52's and in command of a flight. I just got sick as hell of doing these missions, of flying these B-52's out of Guam,

32:30 we never saw the ground that we dropped these bombs, and I'm just about to retire and the highers asked me, 'What would you like your last assignment to be?' 'I want to get into Nam, and fly bird dogs.'" So, here he was jockeying this little single-engined aircraft around the place, having the time of his life and he'd been a jet jock in the tail end of World War II, a jet jock in Korea, and a

33:00 strategic air command, flight pilot and also a flight commander in, over Vietnam. So they've got some incredible people in the American services.

**Quite extraordinary by the sounds of it.**

He was one of them, yeah.

**What would you say was your main achievement during your time with the Montagnards?**

I don't think I achieved much at all, to be quite honest with you. I

33:30 was so disappointed, or alarmed when I took over my company and when Johnny Grafton was in the ambush position that how poorly and badly trained they were that when that operation was completed, I had them pulled out of operations and I retrained them over a period of, the longest period I give, I go three weeks to re-train my company

34:00 and I think if I achieved anything, even though it was only a short period of three weeks, I think that I started getting them performing much, much better than they did initially, and I think they became operationally sound. So if I achieved anything in that period of time with the Montagnards, I think I may have achieved something there and I developed some quite strong friendships with these people.

34:30 And in the last few years, the last year in fact, I've been writing and communicating with one of the Montagnards, Hayley was his nick-name, he wasn't my counterpart but he was one of the counterparts, and he was still living in the highlands and having a pretty hard

35:00 time of it so we got some money together, and sent him a fair bit to help him through the hard times, so the bonds are still there.

**What was it like coming back to Australia?**

Difficult. Difficult.

**In what way?**

I was pretty close to -

35:30 I was in the field, in the Simpson VC action and a week or so later I'm back in Australia with my wife and two children. The transition was so very swift and, attempting to - we weren't living in married quarters then, I'd previously bought a house at Castle Hill in Sydney

36:00 and my wife and two kids were living there. I just found it very, very difficult to adjust after that period, the second tour there. I was to be posted as an instructor to the Jungle Training Centre in Queensland and because my wife was a severe asthmatic, the tropical climate there was too severe for her, even though Canungra is elevated.

36:30 And I was promoted to major, which I didn't mind, and I was posted to a Citizen Military Force unit in Sydney, and, as the GSO2 [General Staff Officer Grade 2] operations. It was such a shambles, this unit, and such a mess, and a brigadier who was running it all,

37:00 who was hopeless and useless, and behind closed doors I came close to strangling him. Not strangle but grabbed him by the throat and tossed him against the wall and told him he was an idiot.

**Did you actually do that?**

Yes I did. I should have been court-martialled probably but I wasn't, probably some of my anger was coming out there, whatever it was.

37:30 That, it was only a façade and the thing that, the thing that really upset me was the fact that I'd never commanded national servicemen in Vietnam, but a lot of national servicemen who were fine young Australian men were dying there and getting wounded. And by some bloody loop hole,

38:00 if they came into the 20 year bracket, instead of having their names put into the lottery system, they could opt to serve a period of time in the Citizens' Military Forces, which was an absolute and utter joke. When I got there I found that they were turning up to parades in civilian clothes, they weren't in uniform. A lot of them were being paid and they weren't even there, all this sort of stuff went on and over a period of some months

38:30 it was evident to me that it was a joke and the fellow that should have fixed it up was the brigadier but he was incompetent and useless anyway. So.

**So how did you resolve the situation?**

A summary was taken to court-martial me and I had

39:00 a very fine officer, Colin East, who was the Chief of Staff of the division, and he ...

**Can we just stop it there and we'll pick it up on the**

## Tape 10

00:32 **You were mentioning the name Colin East.**

Yes Colin East was a soldier from the Second World War. When I say he was a friend of mine, he was a good friend even though he was a colonel and I was a captain, a major at that stage. And he was part of the - there was a large retail store, similar to David Jones in Queensland: Macdonald and East.

01:00 He was one of the sons of East. He went to the Middle East as a very young man, 18 or 19, he was a sergeant, he got very severely wounded by the shell fire, and before he got wounded he was commissioned and was hospitalised for some couple of years. Overcame his wounds and went back and served in New Guinea as an officer.

01:30 He was a Chief of Staff so even though he was a colonel; he had indirect control over the brigadier even though the brigadier answered to the divisional commander. And, he didn't tell me what he had done, but he must have contacted Artis, and he said, he indicated to Artis, "If you press for a summary of evidence for a court martial on Rothwell,

02:00 I'll blow you out of the bloody ground, by exposing what a bloody charade you've got over there with all..." - on and on and on and on. I think he did that.

**Artis being the brigadier.**

Yeah. He said, "You skewer Rothwell and I'll skewer you." Anyway, he called me over to the headquarters and

02:30 I thought I was in deep trouble but so what, I'd been through a bit more than worrying about bloody CMF brigadiers. Anyway, somehow he said, "Come in Rothwell, shut the door." "Yes sir," I saluted him, he said, "Peter, you know they're fucking idiots, and so do I but you never handle them like that, you know got that, got that?" I said, "Yes sir."

03:00 He said, "Now, Paddy Outridge [is] looking for a major training out at Scheyville, he knows you, do you want to go there?" I said, "Of course I do." So I was re-posted from the terrible job I had, out to Scheyville, which was the officer factory for the National Service Officers, who were officering the Vietnam War and I spent

03:30 just two absolutely glorious professional years there working for Outridge, who is a very fine man. I started off running one of the wings and ended up, the major training there, virtually the training sidekick, as a commanding officer, who was competent, was a full colonel. But it was a magic job and incredibly worthwhile.

**How long did you remain with the army after that?**

I went

04:00 from there to, they wanted somebody to run the training unit, it's called a 'Methods of Instruction unit' for the Australian Army and a fellow named Jerry O'Day, who I knew pretty well from the Infantry Centre,

04:30 he was also a Second World War fellow, full colonel, he worked for the director of infantry training and he wanted a hands on practical sort of person to run this unit, which was responsible for the training of, the doctrine and the training of the Australian army. But he wanted an administrator. Basically

05:00 what I had under command, I had a number of psychologists, education people, all that sort of stuff. Well those sort of people who were military academics and he wanted someone to control them and run the organisation. So he'd give me the directives, the directives would come down from the directorate of military training, through him. He'd give me certain tasks to do, and what he wanted the

05:30 Australian Army to, they were changing over from, to, performance objectives, I won't go into all of that but that was a new concept and they wanted to introduce to all the army schools and I was the administrator and the academics did all of the hack work and produced the information for me, and they did the lecturing at the military school,

06:00 and I just kept control of them. Which was a pretty rewarding job. I did a lot of travelling, I travelled around Australia a number of times, they sent me off to do a course at the university for six weeks, so it

was a pretty good job. I went from there to training command in the city as a G2, a staff officer, who was a nothing job.

06:30 I was sitting in a chair and doing nothing, it was a crazy sort of a job. There wasn't a great deal to do, where as I'd been incredibly vigorous in my previous job, here I was, a GSO2 in this training command with not a lot of work, so I'd done 20 plus years and I thought, "Now is the time to go." I was going to work in civilian clothes,

07:00 I'd done most things I wanted to do in the army, I'd commanded troops in action and I'd had a number of pretty good staff jobs and I thought, "Time to go." So, I resigned.

**In what year was that?**

That was 1975.

07:30 I'd always wanted to go into business and I ended up going into the hotel business.

**And so we covered the sort of outline of that earlier on. I just wanted to ask you, you spoke about how strongly the war has remained with you over the years. Do you dream about the war?**

The number of frustration dreams

08:00 for some years, went on, when Denise and I, we've been married 20 odd years now, when we were first married, at night I used to toss around a lot and grind my teeth and have nightmares about different things and I was never really quite sure what the problems were. I had a recurring dream that I had a weapon in my hand,

08:30 but it was in pieces, I'm not saying the enemy were trying to run me down but there was a threat and I just couldn't get this weapon together and when I got it together I couldn't find the ammunition and when I found the ammunition, it was the wrong calibre and then I'd wake up in a hell of a sweat and, you know that sort of thing. Slowly that dissipated.

09:00 I've done a few stupid things; there were two Lebanese who ran the take away food shop next to where I'm living now and I didn't have a great deal to do with them, a fellow and his son. And he regarded the public street in front of his shop as his own domain and the side street

09:30 as his own domain, because his customers used to park in front of the shop and it's not restricted parking at all, and the side street he used for his deliveries, down at Kingsclear, he had a side entrance to his business and I'd been out to some military function somewhere and I came back pretty late at night and Denise was asleep and she woke up and she was crying and I said, "What's wrong?" And she said - Christophi was the fellow's name -

10:00 and she said, "I was abused and accosted by Mr Christophi yesterday afternoon, when you weren't here, late in the afternoon. I had the car parked in Kingsclear and I went to get in the car and drive out, he came out of his shop from the back of it and he threatened me, he abused me and wouldn't let me out of the car,

10:30 raving on about the fact that you shouldn't park there and all of this sort of stuff." So, I didn't do anything about this, an old Golok, which is a machete that long, I used to have in the front garden to pull, not many weeds grow there but I used to have it shoved in there, so the following morning I wake up pretty early I rang up the Redfern Police Station, explain the situation, "Oh we can't do anything about this."

11:00 So I said, "Okay, that the way it works does it?" Christophi opened till about eight o'clock, took my Golok in there behind my back, I said, "Mr Christophi, I want to speak to you." I was quite matter of fact about it. "Did you abuse my wife last night, why did you do that?" "Oh no, not me, I didn't abuse your wife." I said, "You're a lying bastard, you did. I don't disbelieve my wife, why did you do it?"

11:30 And he started to cringe like a mongrel dog, so I pulled the machete out and went for his head and missed him by a fraction of a bloody inch, he pulled his head back and he ran in the cool room - he had a cool room in the back of the place - and his son, a large teenager about 19 or so, he hid behind the drink dispenser, so I took a couple of swipes at whatever was around and demolished the shop and left, and knowing quite well that the baddies

12:00 would be down soon to pick me up. The constabulary came, so I got myself rearranged, put the machete on the table, came into the house, and said, "Okay," they all came down, they had their pistols out. Madman with a machete probably. I said, "Oh you want to speak to me now? What's your name, Senior Constable so and so," as cool as a cucumber. He said, "Oh, yes,

12:30 are you the man..." "Yep, I'm the bloke." He said, "I don't want to do this but you got to come with me." I said, "Okay. Do you want the machete?" "Oh yes we got to use that." Off we went, put in a cell, finger printed and all that sort of stuff, charged with assault. Thing got to court some time later on and nothing could

13:00 be proven, there were no witnesses, and I wasn't charged with assaulting Christophi, I was charged

with assaulting the son. Which was incredible, so, anyway, I got off with, I got a couple of good references, military references and so forth, I got off with a bond and then I got a bill for 20,000 dollars. Which was a victim's compensation

13:30 to Christophi, senior. I got a bill for 20,000 dollars from the bloody courts. And I said, "You got it wrong. If you read the transcripts from Newtown court, Redfern court, you'll find out that the charge is assaulting Con, or whatever his name was, the son."

14:00 The fellow said, "That's not true. You assaulted and caused mental -" whatever the term was, 'mental damage' or 'mental bloody anguish' "- to Con Christophi, the proprietor of the shop." I said, "Go and read the transcript." Which they did do and they said, "You're quite right." And I said, "Now will you kindly send me a letter

14:30 completely null and voiding this 20,000 dollar bill." So out of that Christophi got 20,000 bucks. He was paid 20,000 dollars compensation for mental anguish caused by me.

**Who paid him?**

Whatever the compensation mob is, he got 20,000 dollars out of that, now where's the justice out of all of this? I did a stupid thing, I must admit, to go in there

15:00 to a man's place of business with a bloody machete behind my back, it was a stupid thing to do.

**Where do you think this had come from?**

Oh it was just aggression, it was part of the post traumatic stress aspect from the war I'm sure in some ways and it was a stupid thing to do.

**Now in the early '70's, you wrote a couple of poems about your war experiences.**

Yes.

**Would you, now say we stop for a moment and if you want to get your glasses.**

15:30 As a result of my Vietnam experiences, I do have occasional flash-backs. And, I was sitting in the train, going somewhere in 1970, early 1973, and I was reading a Newsweek, not of any great consequence, just reading the

16:00 book and I had a flash-back to the war and the incident occurred during the, helicopters in the military parlance, either hot insertions, which I suppose, a slightly sexual connotation, but that's where the helicopters are taking the troops in, land, and they get shot at or they get shot at on the way in,

16:30 and that's called a hot insertion, you can have a cold insertion where you go in and there's nothing there, even though in most cases, the insertion is LZ's are prepared by artillery or aerial bombardment. I had my troops on the helicopter, as part of the company, I had my headquarters group and the helicopter Huey and we were moving

17:00 by air, at about two or three thousand feet to an insertion LZ. I don't know whether it was hot or cold, I got no idea at the time. And I was listening out on the command net, talking to, we were coming reasonably close to where we had to land and I was talking to my other commanders in the other helicopters through the helicopter command net. And, there was also conversations coming in periodically

17:30 and breaking us up from other helicopter flights in the general area and there was a conversation going on at very high pitch, anguish and fear and the crew on the helicopter were talking to each other and they said that they'd lost the Jesus nut and the

18:00 Jesus nut in a Huey is the main assembly that holds the huge blade on, and if you lost the tail rotor, quite often they can auto rotate using the main blade and land the helicopter reasonably safely, but they'd lost the assembly, therefore lost [control] of the aircraft. And they're all talking to each other

18:30 and, from that, I wrote a poem, just had a pencil and wrote on the Newsweek, a poem about that incident and I did an analogy between that and the crucifixion of Christ. And I'm not a religious person and I said,

\n[Verse follows]\n "Farewell, tears are spent,\n A kiss, a smile,\n The tender caress,\n A father, wife and child.\n An Autumn in Vermont,\n

19:00 Orange, green and gold\n

Heralds the winter's cold.\n

\n[Verse follows]\n Ride the jet stream\n Close to God's right hand,\n A one way journey\n To the sweat of a foreign land.\n Leonardo, father of flight,\n Flying dragons, Chinese kites.\n Wright brothers,\n Kittyhawk field paper,\n String, sticks, advancement on the wheel.\n Wonder of this modern age\n Is humans birds within a cage,\n Christ on the cross, Calvary,\n

19:30 The plead of the Lord\n

Faith, the Jesus nut,\n Key to the warring blade\n Legends of King Arthur's sword.\n Say fave and up above it all,\n Green world below, serpentine river,\n Humanity, life's slow flow.\n A bird in flight, Feathers, blood, bone,\n God's creation, a law alone.\n

The whirling blade a metal thing,\n Legacy left by then\n Da Vinci, father of flight,\n Flying dragons, Chinese kites.\n

20:00 Flying home, completion,\n

Successful drop,\n Cannons raw\n A faithful shot.\n

\n[Verse follows]\nCenturions thrust with naked spear,\n Torn flesh blood of Christ,\n Agony gone the Jesus nut.\n Right seat, left seat, crew chief, gunners aft,\n A grim prelude to the Reaper's laugh.\n

God almighty hear us\n Scream heaven and hell,\n 90 seconds in\n Break the spell.\n Helen and Jody, die\n

20:30 And I love you all,\n

Mother, this is your son,\n Why must life finish\n Before it has begun.\n

\n[Verse follows]\n No name to call,\n Just sit and wait,\n Scotch on the rocks\n With Peter at the gate,\n Screw the war\n Forget the world,\n I don't give a goddamn,\n Die you bastard, die like a man.\n

\n[Verse follows]\n The Lord is my shepherd,\n An autumn in Vermont,\n Orange, green and gold,\n Heralds the winter's cold."n

21:00 That was the Jesus Nut poem that was pretty much, as I wrote it that night, sitting in a train.

**It's very strong imagery actually, very strongly impressionistic and obviously what you'd read had brought back very strong memories.**

Yes.

**Can you explain for the audience what the Jesus nut actually means,**

21:30 **as a nut on the helicopter?**

Well it virtually stops the main rotor from coming off.

**Why is it called the Jesus nut?**

If it's lost, which is pretty rare, that the pilot and the crew just say, "Oh Jesus," because if they're flying at height, there's nothing can be done, the aircraft will just crash, and, I suppose with the fuel they've got on it

22:00 it'd just burn up.

**Well thanks very much for reading us that, that was excellent and I think there's another poem in there isn't there?**

Yeah, it's, there's some fill poems in it, but before I went up to the mobile strike force, I was the adjutant of the training team and I spent a fair

22:30 bit of my time moving around the country side, seeing the advisors, and also went on some operations with them but one of the jobs that I had was to identify the dead advisors. And this was completed on this occasion at the morgue at Saigon, and I knew, I didn't know, there were two advisors,

23:00 Johnny Durrington, who was a young family man with young kids, and he'd just recently been back to Australia on R&R leave and he'd come back, he was in the mobile strike force out of Da Nang. And Fred Hammersley, Fred was a rough diamond who had served in the Korean War, just a bachelor, in his mid 30's, as rough as guts. Excellent soldier and he'd been one of the platoon sergeants in the first battalion

23:30 during my first tour in Vietnam and what happened is that they'd both come back from R&R, they took R&R in different places. Johnny had gone back to his family in Australia and the period was about two weeks. Fred being Fred had gone to the flesh pots of Hong Kong, that's where he spent his leave and they'd gotten back, back to the mobile strike force in Da Nang and into this A camp.

24:00 And the A camps supplied, on this occasion by road, and the trucks had been ambushed, close to the A camp and were burning and a reaction force was sent out to do something about it. When they got close to the burning trucks, the NVA who had ambushed it

24:30 had picked up their ambush and started to run and Johnny Durrington being a young, agile man, he started to chase them with some of his Montagnard troops, who fell away a bit. Fred was a heavy man and a bit slow and Johnny took a round

25:00 through the stomach, and went down, and the word quickly got back to Fred who was at the back of the

- group, he ran forward to get a hold of Johnny and he got shot through the thigh and just got shot, took a round through the head and blew his brains out. And, Johnny wasn't killed, but he was
- 25:30 disabled and went to ground and they were both, the troops took off, went back into the A camp, a sweep was done of the area the following day and, both of them had been stripped naked, and when I went to identify the bodies, so the death certificate could be issued,
- 26:00 I had a look at them, and I said, "Yes, they're the two people." And, Johnny had no visible marks on him at all, except a very small puncture in his abdomen, but his right hand was chewed back to the knuckles. Which means that he'd just died in agony over a
- 26:30 long period of time. Fred had taken a gun shot wound to his thigh and I lifted his head up and there wasn't anything there, the back of his head had just all gone. His brain had been blown straight out. When I went to the morgue, I'd been to a few morgues, but that was one of the poems
- 27:00 about that visit to identify Fred and Johnny and I wrote this poem:
- \n[Verse follows]\n "Come through the door,take a chair,\n I am Lieutenant Jones, US quartermaster's corps.\n
- We don't see many of you guys in here,\n Except a few who have lost their fear.\n
- You know I came from OCS\n Assigned to 'Nam as part of the mess,\n I'm called by the team,  
Formaldehyde Jones,\n The head mortician. Man who\n Did you say these guys were, we get so many through,\n
- 27:30 my memory's a blur.\n
- They were Harrington and Lesley," - I've changed the names of these two people in the poem, because I didn't want the next of kin if they saw, read the poem to be upset by it, particularly Johnny Durrington's wife -
- \n[Verse follows]\n "They were Harrington and Lesley, I understand,\n They were flown in bags on Wednesday from the hinterland.\n
- Sure I remember now they were debagged, washed and made clean,\n by Johnson, the best cleaner and debagger in my team.\n
- 28:00 Coffee break already, before we start,\n
- Let's grab the cart, black or with cream?\n Shortly you'll meet the team.\n
- Finished? Good, let's go\n Where it's cold in the inner sanctum of my shop,\n Where the living only know when it's hot.\n
- The sliding door shuts the house of the dead,\n A slab of marble, cold, cold bed.\n Now look at this guy over there without a torso,\n I put him on view, this way or more so.\n
- The box will cover what is not there,\n
- 28:30 He's lucky he had his own hair.\n
- A glance here, a stare there of part faces and heads,\n God almighty, what of the dead.\n
- The sheet is pulled back an old friend looks up, stiff\n Blue cold, dead, so dead.\n
- Is he one of the two you came here to see?\n Yes, it's Lesley, a good friend of mine,\n He has fought his last battle. Well,\n He's now in my pipeline.\n Let's move on there was one other,\n
- 29:00 Here he is pull back the cover.\n
- A man in one piece, except for his fingers,\n They're ragged and chewed did he linger?\n
- The door is shut, the cold is no more,\n It's hot out here in the sweet fresh down-pour.\n
- The job is complete, I've looked at the places,\n It was Lesley and Harrington, I know by their faces.\n But what of the fingers?\n
- Time marches on, the war in its stride\n Takes one in the highlands, where Lesley and Harrington died.\n
- 29:30 In March of this year not far from here,\n
- An enemy ambush was set at A camp Ben Het.\n The ambush was sprung to the convoy's surprise,\n It was touch and go, would help arrive?\n
- The ambush was countered quickly by the Mike Force,\n With tooth and claw they fought hard to a close draw.\n With victory almost within grasp,\n Harrington went down with his blood covering the breech\n Of his rifle still hot, covered now with dust\n Away from his reach.\n

30:00 'Three two, this is three one,\n

Help me, I can't move. I got one below the chest,\n Hopeless, my soldiers are withdrawing to the west.\n 'Three one, it's three two, stay still, don't move,\n I'm aware of your need, I'm running towards you with all speed.\n

I can see Jim there in the dust, careful, careful, crawl now if you must.\n Christ almighty too late, a burst through the thigh,\n Down, down dead, shot through the head.\n

30:30 Morphine, morphine, it's there in my pack,

I can't move my legs or my back,\n My hands are free, I have strong teeth,\n Chew my fingers, I hope it relieves\n The pain from underneath.\n

A sweep was made, two days later,\n They were found together dead, stripped naked,\n By an enemy who gives no quarter\n In this war of hopeless slaughter.\n

Wreaths have been laid,\n A volley was fired over each grave,\n A grand finale,\n The Last Post's haunting tones.\n

31:00 Whatever did happen to the head mortician,\n Formaldehyde Jones?"\n

**That's very good, thank you. That's once again quite strongly evocative; I see the images there as you read them out. Well we're coming to the end of the interview now and before we finish, I'm just wondering if there are any aspects we haven't covered so far that you feel that we should be covering.**

31:30 Well, I've spoken about a number of incidents in the Nova Strike Force, and an incident that may be of interest, in its pristine state, the central highlands of Vietnam had a lot of wildlife. Tigers, not elephants, I don't think there was an elephant there, a lot of tigers, some leopards,

32:00 all different species. As the war ravaged through certain parts of it, the wildlife either ran away or was killed and there was also quite a number of deer in the food chain, the tigers which were there, they obviously fed on the deer. One particular night,

32:30 I was in command of 2-2-3 company and my sister company, 2-2-2 company, commanded by Captain Frank Seivers and Bob Daniels was his second in command, master sergeant Daniels, and, I was sort of dozing with all my gear on - it was absolutely pouring - wrapped up in a poncho trying to

33:00 get some sleep and, up on the radio net it was Daniels and he said, "One of our Montagnards has just been eaten by a tiger." And I said, "Bullshit, come on, you're having a joke with me, it is too late in the night to start." "No," he said, "It's true. We put a listening post out." And I said, "Well I'm pretty close to you and it's

33:30 raining just as hard there, obviously as it is here." He said, "Yes, and about half an hour ago, or quite recently, one of the Montagnards came screaming back through the perimeter to say his mate had been eaten by a tiger or taken, carried off by a tiger. And anyway, I said to Bob Daniels, "Look I'll call you later on in the morning when I get my troops up and get them moving."

34:00 So the Montagnards have also got their own radio net, so the following morning, just when it was getting light, I'd got my troops together and I couldn't see them. They all, it was well, I had them on a low hill and I can normally look out and see all their heads. And, I couldn't see any Montagnards'

34:30 heads and I said to Jan my counterpart, "Where are the troops?" "Oh" he said, "They're all there." And I said, "Jan well I can't see them, where are they?" And he said, "Oh they're all tigers this morning." And they're all down there on their haunches, and he said, "Yes, they're all tigers," because he's talking about the strength of the tiger and the virility of the tiger and the fact that the tiger was hungry, and

35:00 he said, "That wasn't the tiger that got the Montagnard last night. It was an NVA but he was dressed as a tiger." "My God!" And he said, "Yeah, you got to watch out for these NVA tigers, but this morning, we are Mike force tigers and we're not going to let the enemy, the NVA get away with that." That's what you had to put up with. And in point of fact, that was a true statement that the

35:30 tiger had grabbed the Montagnard and taken him away because the following morning, the bodies were airlifted, or the body of the Montagnard was airlifted back to Pleiku for burial, to send back to his family village and one of my friends took some photographs of the corpse and it was a partly eaten, so it was a true statement.

**That's quite a story, sort of**

36:00 **moving between allegory and harsh reality. Yeah. Well look on behalf of Rebecca [interviewer] and myself, I want to thank you very much, for what has been a truly remarkable interview, you've taken us on a, quite a few journeys, and, also on behalf of the Australian's at War Film Archive project thank you very much for what has been a truly excellent interview.**

Well thank you both very much for coming to my home, I

36:30 really take my hats off to the very professional way you've done it, and congratulations, and I do hope that in later times, if people probably researching some aspects of the war, particularly in Vietnam, that was my highlight, not so much Korea or Malaya, that maybe, they might get an insight into what went on in Peter Rothwell's

37:00 little world. Thank you very much.

**Thank you Peter.**

**INTERVIEW ENDS**