# Australians at War Film Archive

## Colin Adamson (Col) - Transcript of interview

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## Tape 1

00:40 **Give us a summary of your life without too much detail. Tell us about where you were born and your family.**

I was born in 1935

01:00 in Newcastle. That's been our, you might say, family home for quite a long time. My mother's family, just as an example, my mother was a Fleming and her great grandfather arrived out in Australia in the early 1800s. He was quite a big business man in those days. Though the family wealth has all been dissipated since then. My father was a baker. He'd been employed in

01:30 the retail trade during and before the Depression, but like so many others he lost his job as well. His father, my grandfather, owned a bake house and he said to Dad, "well, you've got to earn a dollar. Come and work for me." So in fact Dad stayed on in the bake house and finally took it over from my grandfather until he sold it in the mid 70s. I went to

02:00 primary school at Tighes Hill, which is not very far removed from where our home was. From there went on to Newcastle Boys' High school, which was at Waratah, which was an inner suburb of Newcastle. It was really there, I guess, that I had my first touch with the military because I joined the school cadets. I found

02:30 that it was something that I was enjoying. At the same time I was an avid boy scout. I'd been a cub for three years and went on then as I grew older and joined the scout troop. In the event I, at the age of 17, I was sufficiently proficient and was awarded the Queen's Scout badge. That was quite a moment in my life.

03:00 **When did you enter the army?**

I joined the army in 1953. I was still 17. I'd been working before in an insurance company. Hated every minute of it. It just wasn't what I wanted. I just felt the army was for me. So I joined the army as a private soldier. Shortly after that I was selected for attendance at the Officer Cadet School at Portsea in Victoria.

03:30 That was a really interesting situation. I think, from memory, we were the third group to be selected for attendance at the Officer Cadet School. We were a mixed bag. Probably about one third were already serving in the army. The rest of us were pretty much on the civilian side of things with a

04:00 minimal amount of military training beforehand. The course went for 5 months. It was a 24 hour a day job there, I can assure you. We graduated as Second Lieutenants. Nobody liked us too much. The corporals took no notice of us, and the colonels didn't like us too much at all either, but we filled a gap that the army needed in those days anyhow to train national servicemen.

04:30 **Take us through the posts you had in your career after you graduated.**

On graduation we went off and had a fortnight's leave. Then those of us that were selected for infantry, we were sent then to the school of infantry which was in Seymour in Victoria for 3 months concentrated infantry training.

05:00 There we refined our knowledge of tactics. We worked on the midi machine gun and the anti-tank gun. Just as importantly we were on, have I mentioned tactics? I'm not sure. I'll start all over again, I'm sorry.

**No, no. That's okay.**

We concentrated on tactics, the used of the medium machinegun and mortars and the anti-tank gun. Just as importantly we

05:30 spent a good deal of time on methods of instruction. In other words, how to put the message across in

the best possible way. That's been pretty vital all my life in fact, on how to talk to people. So that was 3 months. Then there were 8 of us allocated to infantry and we were then dispersed among a number of the national service training battalions. This was the first

06:00 national training scheme of course. I was sent to Sydney. I joined the 13th National Service Training Battalion. That was pretty interesting in fact. It was very, very interesting. The commanding officer was Bruce Fergusson and he'd fought during the Second World War and he'd fought in Korea. He'd commanded the 3rd Battalion in Korea in fact, and been awarded the

06:30 DSO [Distinguished Service Order] for his service there. He was a most excellent man to work for. The remainder of the staff, the majors and the captains, they had very, very little to do with us Second Lieutenants. They didn't like us, but we worked hard for them. They were a much decorated group. They, without exception, the majors and captains had all fought in the Second World War. A good

07:00 many of them had fought in the Middle East and fought in Greece and Crete and come home and fought over Kokoda Trail as well. Quite a number of them had signed up at the conclusion of the war for service in Japan with the occupation forces. So there was a lot of experience there that they didn't pass

07:30 onto us. They could have if they wanted to, but they didn't.

**What happened after that?**

On completion of my duty with the national service training battalion, I was sent to the Pacific Islands Regiment, which was then based in Port Moresby. We had the standard

08:00 infantry battalion set up with a headquarters and an administrative company and 4 rifle companies. At the time I joined there was only the one battalion in New Guinea, composed almost entirely of native soldiers with Australian officers and a few warrant officers. On a rotational basis there was always 2 rifle companies based in

08:30 Port Moresby. A third one was based at Manus Island and the fourth one was based at Vanimo, which was up on the north coast quite close to the old Dutch New Guinea border. We used to rotate around from Port Moresby to one of the outstations and then back again on a 6 monthly basis. So that was quite interesting there.

**How many years did you spend with the Pacific Island regiment?**

I spent, actually on that tour I was there for four years.

09:00 I was due to come home after 2 years, perhaps 2½, and I bled all over the place and said, "Please leave me here. I'm more than happy with what I'm doing." That was pretty fascinating in fact. We spent a good deal of time, we did more than just train the soldiers we had. We used to

09:30 patrol throughout Papua New Guinea. We spent a good deal of time helping the administration where we could. They were always understaffed. So at their request we would on every occasion when we were in a village within the hinterland, we'd have a look at their toilets and have a look at their admin system and talk to the leader in the village and see what problems they had. If they needed

10:00 medical assistance then we would provide that as well. We carrier out exploration patrols on behalf of the administration. Particularly in the Sepik area. That was more than satisfying and a good deal fascinating. We found, on any number of occasions, we came upon people who had not seen white men before. That was even more fascinating. We

10:30 conducted also a good deal of purely medical patrols where we, with basic knowledge, we had bandaids and we had aspros, but more importantly we had puff bottles full of penicillin powder. To see that in action against a gaping yaw, which is open the skin right to the bone, and se the scab

11:00 appear on top of it wafter a couple of days was quite, that was fascinating. Quite magic in fact.

**After that, were you sent to Vietnam straight from New Guinea?**

No. Not on that occasion. From my first 4 years with the Pacific Islands regiment, I returned to Australia and served with the 1st Battalion of the

11:30 Royal Australian Regiment as the anti-tank platoon commander. We were based in Holsworthy then. From there I went to the Recruit Training Battalion in Kapooka just outside of Wagga. I was the adjutant there, that was the chief staff officer to the commanding officer. So that was a real change in my direction then from

12:00 really from commanding troops to pushing a pen. That was quite interesting and the colonel I had then, he was a fine fellow. He was very, very much on my side and assisting me there in those points where I fell short. It was after my tour duty of a couple of years in Wagga that I was sent back to the

12:30 Pacific Islands Regiment again on the basis that there was of course problems with Indonesia in those days. The Papua nationalists in what was formerly the Dutch New Guinea, they were coming across to our side of the border and they were being pursued by Indonesian police and sometimes the military. So the government decided then to raise a second battalion. So I was sent initially to the 2nd Battalion,

which was

13:00 then formed out of about half of the 1st Battalion and we set up base in Wewak in the north side of the island and commenced patrolling along the border between us and the former Dutch New Guinea, pushing the Papua nationals back and building, not building, but extending airstrips

13:30 in the area that would take military aircraft. We didn't have, I've forgotten it, the aircraft that the air force used. We didn't have Caribou in New Guinea in those days, but we knew they were on their way so we were extending the airstrips. We built probably something in the order of well over a hundred landing points for helicopters to

14:00 get in and out from as well along the border. So that brought us into contact with the Papua nationalists and with the TNI [Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Indonesian army] occasionally and of course with a good many native people that we hadn't met before too. So that was quite interesting. Then I was, after some time there, I was sent back to Port Moresby. I was promoted to major then and was given the task of raising

14:30 another rifle company for the 1st Battalion, which meant I was given a warrant officer, a native warrant officer, a couple of sergeants and a few corporals and told to get on with the job and find the rest of the NCOs [Non Commissioned Officer] as they became available. So we took on 100 soldiers straight out of recruit training, sorted

15:00 them out and then we gave them all names and fixed them up as far as their gear was concerned and then took them up the Kokoda Trail where they settled down with their corporals and their sergeants to get to know each other. That was an interesting fortnight we spent.

15:30 **Take us through the major areas you served during the engagement with Vietnam.**

We didn't travel a great deal. Most of the time we spent within the Phuoc Tuy Province. That was the area given to the Australian Task Force to keep under control and

16:00 most of our time was spent in Phuoc Tuy Province, but it was on one major occasion that we were sent out of province because the threat to Saigon was on the increase and the American forces there didn't have the strength enough to hold them back. So there was a period in

16:30 April-May we spent 35 days on operations without hold in an area, let us say, north west of Phuoc Tuy and north east of Saigon itself. This is not to say that we were physically operating against the enemy for a full 35 days, but we were there for 35 days

17:00 in the likelihood, on operation, in the likelihood of striking the enemy. And occasionally we did.

**This was the time of the engagement fire base Coral?**

Yes. We moved from, when we left Phouc Tuy, sorry when we left Nui Dat, there were three other fire bases that we

17:30 built between there and the time we were sent to Coral Wee. In fact, we were leapfrogging forward until eventually we were ordered into firebase Coral, which hadn't until then existed, it was just, you might say, a patch of bare ground. It was a destroyed rubber plantation. Nothing there at all, except little tracks here and there.

18:00 That was perhaps less than 30 kilometres north of Saigon. We were told we were going there to ambush the North Vietnamese, we were told that they were fleeing out of Saigon, we were told that they were cold, red, hungry and tired, and that the ambush was already set up. So

18:30 we flew in. At the time we weren't told that the US 1st Division, which was two hours west, was in the middle of a massive fire fight and because of that the helicopters that were due to come and pick us up and take us to Coral weren't available. That got us off to a really bad start because we were all

19:00 set to put 6 or sometimes 7 men onto a helicopter and have the fly out. What did arrive in fact were Chinooks, which take 35 guys. So that delayed us and messed us around a bit until they finally took us in. Then we found that they'd landed us at the wrong place anyhow. The guns got there before

19:30 we did, and that's a no-no when it comes to looking after things. The 3rd Battalion, they were providing cover for us, but they'd been put down at the wrong spot as well. So that didn't go off too well. So we found ourselves in a real hurry and we were still sent off to set up these ambushes.

20:00 One company was sent to the south, the other three, including my own, we were sent to he north, the north west and the north east, some thousand meters away from the fire support base and virtually settled into ambush. Little did we know that there was a full size North Vietnamese regiment consisting of three battalions

20:30 and all their support troops on the way down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and ready to take us on and they bounced straight into us. My company was quite fortunate that night. That was the night of the 14th of May. D Company, which is right off to my west, it took a bundle of

21:00 RPG [rocket propelled grenades] grenades that night with several guys killed and a bundle wounded. They slipped passed me. I knew they were there and we found a few bodies the next morning, but they just kept on going. They slipped around passed B company as well, which was off to my east and then moved in on the fire support base.

21:30 They had troubles with our mortar platoon and our gunners there and killed several of our mortar men, they were in our mortar pits, and they virtually destroyed one of the guns there, but the guns were firing flesh hit rounds over open sights. That was quite a nasty situation for a battalion then.

22:00 They finally cleared out in the early hours of the next morning.

**You spent a year long tour in Vietnam?**

Yes.

**What happened to your career after that?**

I finished my tour in Vietnam and

22:30 was selected for attendance at the Australian Staff College in Queenscliff in Victoria. That was a full your of putting aside the sword and picking up a biro and learning how a good staff officer works to support his commanders in all sorts of tasks. That was quite interesting because I ran into, there were

23:00 about 60 of us on the course, all majors, and a good number I'd met before. Quite a lot though that I hadn't met before and they were guys that…we had officers from overseas as well and from Great Britain, from the US, New Zealand, Indonesia, Malaya as well.

23:30 It was quite fascinating to be with those. We used to work; quite frequently we would work in the syndicate of 5 or 6 or 10 people to prepare a paper or discussion period or things like that. A lot of it was also individual work. That was quite fascinating. The instructors were good too. Most of them were Australian but we had a British instructor, we had a New Zealand instructor and

24:00 there was an American instructor as well. So it was a good rounding off.

**Where were you posted after that?**

I was sent to army headquarters. That was in 1970 I went to army headquarters. I had a number of jobs there. I worked for

24:30 a time in the office of the Chief of General Staff as one of his staff officers. I worked in the directorate of military operations and plans, which had to carriage to a degree of overseeing what was going on in Vietnam still. Perhaps even more importantly for my future career after that, was that with my knowledge of Papua New Guinea, I was sent

25:00 to the Joint Intelligence Organisation. There were problems there and they needed, problems in New Guinea, and JIO [Joint Intelligence Organisation] needed somebody there who had a feel for the place and an idea as to what was going on there. So I wound up spending 7 years in the joint intelligence organisation. Firstly as a major and then as a lieutenant colonel. I had many, many

25:30 trips back to Port Moresby and other spots there, talking to old friends and driving around and flying around and talking to other people as well. After that I had other things to do and finally resigned from the army.

**What did you take up in your retirement from your military career?**

I sold real estate for a time.

26:00 That was very rewarding. Then my then partner and I decided that we'd open up business on our own account. She'd been in real estate for a good deal longer than me. She'd been a manager for a firm in Goulburn and she had many, many administrative skills and she also had a licence. So we decided that we'd open up on our own account and we did, and we

26:30 were in business. Jan ran the sales side of things, and I turned myself into a property manager and we worked our heads off for 5 years. We had good staff. After, about 2 years ago we thought enough's enough, we've got other things that we want to do and we sold up and now we're busier than ever.

**So there's no real retirement?**

There is no real

27:00 retirement. Our parents are elderly. My mother's 94 and she's in and out of hospital all the time of course. She's in Newcastle. So we're up and down to see her quite frequently. Jan's parents, they're in their late 80s. Fortunately they're here in Canberra. But they're not well either. So we spend a good deal of time with them. We're able to

27:30 do some travelling, but not as much as we'd like to. Our parents hold us back, and that's not to be

derogatory at all. They're more important that travelling to New Zealand. But the time will come when there's nothing more that we can do for them. So in the meantime we do what we can.

**Any children of your own?**

I've got a family of three kids. Though they're not kids

28:00 any longer. The oldest is 42. And Jan has 2 kids. So that's 5 of them we look after. Half of them are married.

**Now we can go back in detail.**

28:30 **What was it like growing up in Newcastle?**

It was a good place to live. Our house was ten minutes by pushbike from Newcastle

29:00 Beach, which in my mind still remains one of the best beaches in Australia. There were lots of sports fields around the place. Schooling was good. I can vividly recall the teachers we had at Tighes Hill. They were extremely good. Our headmaster, he'd served in the First World War. I didn't really know too much about that then.

29:30 One teacher I had, he'd been an air force pilot during the war, and he was good. There were a couple there that had retired, but had been brought back into the teaching system because of the war and so on, but that was good. It was a good place to live.

**What did you enjoy doing as a young boy?**

Scouting kept me very occupied.

30:00 And sport. I used to play a lot of football. I was never very good. I was always the smallest person in the team and I'm still the smallest person in the team. I used to take a bit of a battering, but I used to enjoy football. I played league. I played Aussie rules and I played [Rugby] Union in winter. Didn't matter.

**When did you first enter into scouting?**

30:30 I think I was 8 when I joined the cubs and I was with them for 3 years. Then I joined the scouts. We had a particularly good scoutmaster. Nothing was too much trouble for him. I mean, at the age of 12 and 13,

31:00 we would be walking through Barrington Tops, which was north of Newcastle and he used to teach us to pan gold and would show us how to fish for trout and we'd build our own shelters out of native materials just lying round the place rather than carry flies with us, to keep the rain off us. He taught

31:30 us compass work, he taught us how to read a map and all those good things that have over the years come to be of value to me. Taught us Morse Code. We sent messages to each other using a heliograph. They're very, very rarely used these days, but they were great fun with those. And of course we used to learn [semaphore] flags as well. They

32:00 were good days.

**What impressions to you still hold of growing up during the Second World War?**

It's very, very little that I remember of it in fact. After the Japanese submarines had finished in Sydney Harbour, one of them I think sort of escaped and it threw a

32:30 few shells into Newcastle. They landed somewhere around the steel works from memory. My mother was quite upset about that. Our neighbour had relatives at Scone and she had two daughters my age. So she said to my mother that she was going to take the kids up to Scone and see how things were. So I got evacuated with

33:00 them. I remember that quite vividly. I was there perhaps 7, I might have been 8, I'm not sure now. Certainly no older. We wound up on a dairy farm. A little place called Steward's Brook just outside of Scone. The gent who owned the property, he was not only a dairy farmer, but he had the local mail contract as well. So we

33:30 used to go out with him sometimes and deliver the mail. We went to school at Stewarts Brook. The three of us used to get onto one horse and ride there a couple of miles. It was good fun living on a farm. But after a couple of months, or three months, my mother got a bit weary of being by herself so she called me home. And that was that.

**What did you understand of why you'd been sent there?**

I don't think I really thought about it.

34:00 I think I was too young to understand what was going on. But what I do remember is that my mother and her sister used to take us kids away for school holidays. Quite frequently we'd go to the Blue Mountains. I can remember quite vividly Mum sent me off one day while we were up there at Katoomba, to pick up the paper. I came back and I walked into the house and I said, "We've crossed the Rhine." I remember that quite vividly now.

34:30 What I mean by “We’ve crossed the Rhine”. I haven’t the faintest idea. But I’d read it in the front page. So that made Mum feel pretty happy. I’m not sure that I knew why she was happy. But there it was in black and white “We’ve crossed the Rhine.” But I can remember the end of the war. Dad drove us into the middle of Newcastle to the celebrations and he was flying a New Zealand flag. Where he got that from I don’t know, because we’re Australians.

35:00 There’s no New Zealand touch in our family at all, but it was a New Zealand flag. I can see that now.

**What was your father’s involvement in the war?**

Dad had minor involvement only. He’d served in the militia pre-war as an engineer and he made attempts to

35:30 sign up, but they wouldn’t accept him because he was a baker and that was a, I’ve forgotten the word now. A protected industry. So he didn’t go. But he did belong to the VDC, the Volunteer Defence Corps, during the war.

**Were there any military role models in your growing up?**

In my growing up? I don’t think,

36:00 no there were not. Nobody I can think of that I thought. Obviously I met several as a school cadet, but no. No I didn’t. It wasn't until after I joined the army that I found role models.

36:30 […]

**Do you remember any feeling about Anzac Day from your childhood or other wise?**

I think you’ve caught me out there. I’m not sure. I can’t ever

37:00 recall going to an Anzac Day service when I was a kid. I don’t think Anzac Day had the. I don’t think it was the force then that it is today. I’m sure I didn’t go to one. I would have known about it. That really threw me that.

37:30 **What did you know of the First World War? What did you learn in school about it?**

I knew my grandfather had been killed. That was my Mum’s father. He was my Mum’s father. He was 36 when he enlisted and he went off with 3 of his mates. My mother tells me that they all got themselves

38:00 blind drunk and went off and enlisted and went off. What I do know, I’ve got his records, he was in France for 6 days and that’s when he was killed. He was killed at Messines. He was probably pretty lucky because one of the fellows that he went away with, Mr Marney, I only ever called him Mr Marney, he was gassed badly. Very, very badly. I can remember

38:30 I was 25 before he died. Poor old Mr Marney he just used to sit in a chair and cough his head off. That was his life for 40 years.

**What contact did you have with him?**

His daughter had gone to primary school and high school with my mother and they were best friends. So we used to see him quite regularly.

# Tape 2

00:34 **Tell us about the bake house your father ran.**

There were two ovens and they had steel fronts on them and steel hobs. They were lined inside with bricks and they were semi circular. They were wood fired

01:00 and Dad only ever used one particular variety of wood. I’ve forgotten the name of it. He had a massive steel mixing bowl, which would have been 6 feet across and perhaps 4 feet deeps with a massive

01:30 claw hook on it that turned the combination of water and flour into dough. Then he had proving troughs. They were made of oak. They were, I think there were three of them, there may have only been two, but they were all about 30 feet long and perhaps

02:00 3 feet wide and 3 feet deep. So the dough would go into them and be covered over with flour bags and then they would rise. Then after 2 or 3 hours of rising, Dad had, and the team he had working with him, they had special knives that would cut through

02:30 the dough and in one big lump, which perhaps might weigh in the order of 20-25 pounds, that would be thrown onto a dusted table and then cut up and weighed. I think all the loaves in those days weighed 2 pounds. Cut up and weighed and put into tins.

03:00 Some of the tins were open topped, some of them had lids on them which kept the bread in a square shape. Then they'd be put into the ovens themselves with paddles and at one end, the paddle might have taken two or three tins of bread, then it had a handle on it probably 40 feet long,

03:30 which would than push it down. What else? The hob. The hob always had one of those old, square 44 gallon kerosene drums. Every morning Dad would put in half a pound of tea and fill it up with water and it would just bubble away on the hob. Everybody had their own mug and they'd just dip it

04:00 in and drink this vile concoction. No milk, no sugar, and stewed tea, which was pretty ordinary, but they used to sweat a lot in the bake house of course. Christmas and Easter were good times. Dad used to make really good Christmas cakes. It used to be my job to break the eggs and Dad would buy two or three boxes of eggs every Christmas, and I'd sit on a little

04:30 stool in front of the, with a kerosene drum between my legs and break eggs into it. So I'd come home pretty messy in the afternoon from that. Dad used to cook hams for all his clients as well. They'd provide the ham and he'd wrap the ham up in good bread dough and then send that in there. The smell of the cooked ham in the bake house with the smell of

05:00 Christmas cakes was a powerful sort of combination. Hadn't thought about that for years.

**Smells can really brig back**

Yeah, they can.

**What other jobs did you have around the place as a boy?**

On Fridays, Fridays was always a busy day for Dad on the bakehouse because

05:30 there was a time when he used to deliver bacon deliver bread on a Saturday. But that got cut out. So Fridays was particularly busy for him. It was he and his brother who only did the deliveries. Dad, he always had an assistant and so did uncle. But on Friday in particular on the deliveries that Dad had to make, that was beyond the

06:00 pair of them. So, with school coming out at 3 o'clock or 3:30 in the afternoon, I used to dash home and give him a hand at deliveries.

**What was your clients or the people of Newcastle at that time?**

We used to deliver to half a dozen shops on the Friday afternoon.

06:30 I'd cart in a basket load of bread at a time while Dad would go around the block and deliver himself to another shop. So I was the only one that those shops used to see on a Friday afternoon. I'd say, "Hello, Mr Jones," or "Mr Bloggs, here's your bread."

**What sort of a boy were you?**

07:00 **Well behaved, larrikin, studious?**

I'm not sure that I was studious. I worked hard, but I was not studious. I was well behaved. I think the combination of my scout

07:30 training and the way my parents brought me up had me down as somebody solid and steady. I never got into trouble at school and the local policeman I used to call Mr Jones.

**Can you recall any incidents when you did get into trouble?**

08:00 There was one terrible occasion at primary school when I threw a pen up onto the ceiling at primary school, and it stuck up there. I got a real hammering from the headmaster. That was bad in those days.

**What sort of hammering do you mean?**

I mean a tongue lashing.

**Any brothers**

08:30 **or sisters?**

I've got a sister. She's five years younger than me. She was a teacher. She finished her career as a headmistress of a very, very large primary school in Newcastle. I have a brother.

09:00 He was very, very ill when he was young. He was always, in those days, he was always ill and sickly, but he was a good scholar at school. When he decided to leave school, he wanted to become a carpenter.

09:30 Dad took him out to the BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary] who were always taking on apprentices. The apprentice master there said, "No, he's too small. He can't handle this work." So Dad spoke to a friend of his who was at the BHP and he said, "Please try him." So they did. It was quite miraculous really. Mum still talks about it, how with Geoff at the BHP and working away physically.

10:00 He grew in height and grew in size and he became a particularly good carpenter. Finally went into business for himself as a builder. He's still working. He doesn't feel like retiring at all. That changed his life quite completely.

**How important were the steelworks in terms of the life of the town you grew up in?**

10:30 When I was a kid, the steel works was always there. They used to burn off the excess gas on a Sunday night and the sky would be lit up with this red flare and you could see that for miles and miles and miles.

11:00 When I was a kid nobody had a car. Very, very few people had a car. I would say everybody who worked at the steelworks got there on a pushbike and rode home on a pushbike. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon the main roads leading into Newcastle, say from the steelworks along Maitland Road, which is quite a,

11:30 still a busy road, the steelworkers would be 4 and 5 and 6 abreast on the bikes and you couldn't get passed. You couldn't cross the road. They were always there. When word started creeping out that the steelworks were closing down, the place was doom and gloom. It didn't last, though, because other things

12:00 took over and you'll find in Newcastle now that the whole of what you might call Newcastle Harbour is now being developed or taken over by land developers. The government's moved in there and they've turned the waterfront into something that's quite magnificent as far as parks and gardens and restaurants are concerned. And

12:30 real estate developers putting up high rise blocks right along the waterfront there, and other accommodation. Hotels are built there as well. It's turned Newcastle around completely because where the land is that the steelworks were, that's about to become under

13:00 high rise buildings as well. They'll use that for other purposes. Where the steelworks were once the dominant feature of Newcastle it's now the state dockyard, which is expanding more and more and more there.

**What role did the beach have in your growing up?**

Always. Even when I worked in the insurance company we used to go, we were 5 minutes walk from the beach and we would

13:30 go swimming and surfing every lunch hour and have a sandwich on the way up there and on the way back. Good beaches there. All good beaches. It didn't matter where you went.

**Did you have any ambitions other than the army? What other plans did you have for the future?**

No. I had no other plans. I only ever wanted to be a soldier.

14:00 I worked in an insurance company for 2 years. Hated every moment of it. I just didn't like it. It wasn't what I wanted anyhow. It filled in the time.

**Can you explain in more detail where you think the passion to become a soldier came from?**

No. I really can't. I don't know

14:30 where it came from. It was just something I wanted to do.

**What aspects of the cadets did you particularly like?**

It was the friendship and the camaraderie. That was important to me. I had that in the scouts as well. The friendship and the camaraderie, that was good. The opportunity to travel a bit. We used to go to camp twice

15:00 a year. That got us out of Newcastle. We'd go down to Sydney, round Holsworthy and Ingleburn even then. That was good.

**When you finished high school, what did you do then? Did you attempt to join up at that stage?**

I was only 15 ½ then. The CMF [Citizens' Military Force] had only just come

15:30 into form then, and I joined what they called the regimental cadets in those days too. They'd let us join as young people. It was a bit on the ordinary side. They didn't really know what to do with us and we just filled in spaces wherever it was needed. I didn't learn a great deal there.

16:00 **Tell us about joining up. What did you do and how did it come about?**

In those days there was a recruiting office in Newcastle. I don't think it's there now. I just walked in and I said, "How do I go about joining the army?" This fellow said, "Fill in the form, son." So I filled

16:30 it in. He said, "Okay. I'll give you a call. We'll give you a phone call and then you come back up and see

us, we'll give you a train ticket, send you down to Sydney for the medical examinations and psychological interview and

17:00 things like that and see how things go." He gave me a list of the forms and pieces of paper that I needed to take. So about a week later, rang me, said, "Come on in. You're on the train tomorrow."

**What discussions did you have with your parents about this decision?**

My mother was not happy. My father, he was happy enough,

17:30 but my mother was not happy at all. I just bled all over her and said, "You know this is all I want." So she finally agreed that I could go, but she wasn't happy. I was 17½. So down to Sydney I went and the recruiting office there then was in the old Queen

18:00 Victoria Building. I'll never forget it. It was a tumbled down wreck then. This was 1953. Tumbled down wreck. It was falling to pieces. The recruiting section and the medical inspection section was up on the second floor. What passed for floorboards were, well they looked pretty dangerous to me.

18:30 That's how bad the building was. They weighed me, they measured me, they told me to cough three times and said, "We'll let you know, son." Went from there.

**How did you feel at that moment? Is that something you look back on now as a pivotal moment in your life?**

It was. It was.

19:00 I finished all the interviews and the medical examinations and so on. I felt pretty happy about it. I just couldn't wait for the letter to come to say, "You're in."

**What did you know of the Korean War?**

That was in 1950, so that was

19:30 my final year at high school. I remember that we had to study it to a degree as part of current events, which was part of our curriculum. I can even now see a few of the headlines that appeared in the paper

20:00 about it. When I was working at the insurance company, one of the girls that I worked closely with. Her boyfriend was in the air force and he was in Korea. I think he was a mechanic of some description on the planes. That's about it. I don't think I had any

20:30 contact with anybody.

**What bearing did the fact that there was a war on have on your decision to join up?**

It probably reinforced my desire to join the army, but I don't remember anything in particular that sort of said, "You should be there." It probably reinforced it.

**So the letter came.**

The letter came. I showed it

21:00 to Mum. Well, she cried a lot, but she said, "I said you could go so you can." She packed my sandwiches and said, "Off you go."

**And where were you off to?**

That's where I went down to Sydney and to the, I think,

21:30 somewhere out near the airport. There was a barracks there and that's where they gave us our final medical examinations and gave us our uniforms and gave us blankets and said, "Stay here for a while."

**How long after that was it that you were sent to your first training**

22:00 **situation?**

It really wasn't very long at all, actually, because they'd been, while I was there, they'd been talking about Portsea.

22:30 I hadn't really known about it before. So they sent me into Victoria Barracks for an interview and to do a few more exams. The major interview, I went in there a couple of times in fact, the major interview was held by the commandant then.

23:00 That was Colonel Harrison, he was later a General and he was the Governor of South Australia. That's really when I was selected for the Officer Cadet School. That just came as a big surprise and I think probably made my mother feel a lot happier. But from there, that's when we, after

23:30 that was over, that's when it was a group of about 20 of us out of Sydney I'd sort of all joined up with, had also been through the same sort of system, and we were sent to Seymour for sort of 3 weeks of

very, very basic military training. While we were there

24:00 a lot of it was just parade ground drill and probably not a great deal more. That was quite interesting and I'm still in contact with the guys I was there with all those years ago.

**What surprised you about life in the military?**

24:30 I was surprised at the quality of the training I was given. It was everywhere, certainly in my early days, I found it far, far better than the. The training I received I thought was far, far better than what I was really expecting. I think I'd seen a few movies where

25:00 training was just one person shouting at another. It was better than that. It was much. Much better than that. It was good training. It was training that stuck.

**How did you respond to the discipline?**

There were occasions when I didn't like the form of discipline that was being handed out, but I accepted it.

**What occasions were they?**

There were occasions when I thought that the discipline

25:30 was of an unfair nature, but you quickly learned that you're not going to get anywhere by complaining, so you put up with it. But they were only occasions.

**Were there any particular figures who was someone who stood out?**

Yeah, the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] at Seymour at the school of infantry. He was

26:00 English and he was known as Ronny the One. You could hear him from a million miles away. No doubt it was deliberate. He only had us for 3 weeks and he had a lot to do to lick us into shape in 3 weeks before we went off to the Officer Cadet School.

26:30 On our last night there he bought beer for everybody. So there was a kind heart there. He gave us a terrible time, but we probably deserved it.

**Tell us about the Officer Cadet School and what you did there.**

There was 62 of us and perhaps,

27:00 there might have been a dozen, maybe a few more, who'd come in as regular soldiers with a good deal more training than we had. We were a mixed bag. There were those like me who'd had a little bit of time at school cadets and scouts. There was one guy who was a journalist, there was one guy who was a footballer, didn't get paid for it, but that's what he'd like to do. We were a mixed bag. I was

27:30 the youngest at the age of 18. The eldest was 27. We were formed into 2 platoons, each of about 30. Those with some knowledge of the military were instantly promoted to,

28:00 one, Noel Graham, good friend of mine, he was, Noel was 27, he'd served in Korea, he was made a warrant officer on the spot. He was the company sergeant major. Then there were a couple of others with some experience, they were made as platoon sergeant. Then there were a couple of corporals as well to each platoon. So there was, the military hierarchy was set there. They were selected

28:30 because they had a modicum of knowledge of how the system worked. Then we had the instructors, and the instructors were, we had two majors above us, you might say the commandant ran the

29:00 place. Colonel Harrison. Then he had a major who was the supervisor of training and then he had beneath him a number of captains who controlled us and more closely supervised our training. Then there were a number of warrant officers

29:30 who were very closely aligned with our training as well. They taught us the tactics that we needed to know as young officers. They taught us how to write a proper letter. They taught us how to look at a military situation from a military logical

30:00 point of view. They taught us a modicum of military history. They taught us how to dig holes in the ground that would protect us from attack. They taught us a modicum of, in a minor way, how to use explosives. That was just a bit of an aside.

30:30 They taught us how to look after ourselves. That was a 5 month course. Of the 62 of us who started, 52 of us finished.

**Was that a reflection on how hard it was? What was the difficulty like?**

You mean the 10 not finishing?

**Yes**

31:00 I'm not really sure. I guess the, I mean we went; this was right towards the end. We're talking about the last fortnight before graduation.

31:30 We were out in the field and a couple of jeeps just turned up and these guys, we didn't sort of realise what was going on, they were just sort of tapped on the shoulder and said, "We need you back at Portsea." When the exercise finished three or four days later, they weren't there. They just weren't there any longer.

32:00 That's how it happened.

**How did that male the rest of you feel?**

We said, "Oh." In some cases guys said, "Wasn't surprised". In other cases guys said, "Well, well." So they just, anyhow, I'm not sure. We weren't told, "Jones didn't qualify

32:30 because of this, this and this." Jones just wasn't there when we got back. I think we were all a bit shocked.

**Were there any mates among those blokes that didn't make it?**

There were in fact. I mean, one who didn't finish I had a good deal of respect for. He was captain of our football team. He had good

33:00 leadership skills. They saw something there that we didn't see anyhow.

**How did you find the officer cadet school? It was a new system, it was compressed officer training. Do you think you missed out or do you think you coped in other ways?**

There was a lot of pressure on us. They were busy days and

33:30 there were never any excuses allowed for not doing this or not doing that. That was, I think that was just a function of weeding out those who weren't suitable. A function of the limited time they had to do something with us, and all that, and a combination of our desire to do

34:00 the best we could. It wasn't easy. The staff were on our back all the time. I mean, our barracks, they were the old quarantine station barracks there on the Mornington Peninsula. We were only 20 feet away from the cliffs that sort of led down to the bay. I mean, on a daily basis, you

34:30 did get a storm or heavy wind, so in 5 minutes flat, the windows on your bedroom would be covered in salt spray. Well, that used to earn a demerit point on the parade ground at 5 o'clock the next morning. So it didn't matter how often you cleaned the windows, you'd still get caught. But that was part of the system.

**How prepared were you when you came out of that course**

35:00 **for what you faced next?**

Prepared enough. You mean as an officer? That was my job.

**As a young man. As a lot of things**

Well, prepared enough, I guess, but the extra 3 months we had

35:30 at the School of Infantry doing the other training made us better prepared. I shudder to think how we could have handled things a the national service battalions without that additional 3 months of training. Certainly, I mean, even when I, so when I first went there, at the age,

36:00 when I first joined the National Service Battalion at the age of 18 and 9 months, there were guys there older than me.

**How did you feel about being sent to the school of infantry?**

Before we graduated we were asked what, you know, "Fill in the

36:30 form and tell us what you want to do." Well, infantry was my first choice.

**Can you explain what it is about infantry in particular that you wanted to be part of?**

I just felt that's what I wanted to do. I just wanted to be a soldier, I wanted to lead men and I wanted the excitement too, I guess.

37:00 I certainly didn't want to, I mean, we know that we need supplies, but I didn't want to be a supply officer. I wanted to be up there at the front doing something.

**What did you learnt in the 3 months' training at the school of infantry?**

Well, we

37:30 refined our knowledge of infantry tactics. We learned how to use and employ infantry support weapons

such as the medium machinegun and the anti-tank gun. We re-learned how

38:00 to teach and how to train. So we would be given a demonstration by one of our instructors, just as a simple aside, we'd be given a demonstration by one of our instructors on the parade ground on, as an example, how to stand to attention and how to stand at ease. Then we'd be hauled out and we'd be instructing

38:30 our other 7 fellows, and we'd be doing that all the time.

**How did you respond to being in a position of command as a very young man?**

It was something I looked forward to. It was something that I knew that I'd made mistakes. It wasn't easy

39:00 by any means. The sergeant and the three corporals I had to assist me instructing the national servicemen, I don't think I got on with them as well as I could have. They were so much older than me it wasn't funny. They

39:30 didn't really like accepting instruction from me.

**The infantry tactics you were learning, how much were they based on Korea and Second World War experiences?**

Well, a bit of both, but these were what we called minor tactics and the principles of warfare

40:00 rather than based on any particular situation. Just as a matter of course when you're in the attack situation there are set principles you need to follow and if you don't follow them, then you're

40:30 at your peril of getting into major trouble. Similarly, if you're withdrawing, there are set principles that must be followed, otherwise you'll fail.

# Tape 3

00:39 **You were talking about the difficulties of being 18 and in command. Can you tell me how you came to that position?**

01:00 The training we underwent at the Officer Cadet School was pretty much basic training only. It was increased to a degree at the school of infantry, but it's one thing to give instructions to

01:30 your fellows who are there supporting you while you are, as an example, instructing them into coming to attention or standing at ease or anything other similar. So they are assisting you as much as you are instructing them. But it's quite different when all of a sudden you're confronted with, as an example, 60 young men who are doing

02:00 their national service training mainly under duress. A lot of them certainly didn't want to be there. University students who'd been pulled out of university and sent off for training. Not to mention the commitment to part time duty and training at the conclusion of their full time duty, which was going on for 2 or 3 years after that. At the

02:30 same time, while I could handle, I thought, well enough the national servicemen that I was instructing, there was, I think resentment is probably the correct word, the resentment on part of a lot of the NCOs, particularly the sergeants, in accepting instructions from

03:00 somebody who had much, much less experience than they had. So we made lots of mistakes and learned from them. Some in a bad way I guess. It was just one big learning program. Some did better than others. I don't think I did terribly well for the first year in my relations with the non-commissioned officers that I had

03:30 assisting me in training the national servicemen. It probably took me a year before I had any sort of, what's the word? Any sort of cohesive arrangement with the NCOs I had working for me. They didn't like me, I was too young, I was too abrupt, I was too much this, too much that and so on. Looking back, they were dead right. But you learn through experience.

04:00 And I survived.

**Did you understand at the time why you were chosen?**

I'm sorry, chosen to be an officer or chosen to? No. I think all I realised

04:30 was that I'd passed the necessary training curricula and I was good enough. I mean, nobody certainly said, just as an example, this is something I'd never thought of before. I guess at the end of our training at the officer cadet school, and probably towards, probably at the end of our training at the infantry centre at the same time,

05:00 nobody ever, our instructors never, ever took us aside one by one by one and said, “Congratulations, you’ve passed the necessary qualifications and you’re about to be made a Second Lieutenant. These are your strong points and these are your weak points that you’ve got to improve on.” Nobody ever gave us guidance in that sense. So as it was, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one to

05:30 be in this situation as I’m talking about right now. I guess some times we just stumbled. Stumbled a lot to start with. Stumbled less as we became more experienced.

06:00 **Who, when you enlisted and you wanted to be a soldier, who was it that you felt that you were fighting for? Or hoping to fight for.**

06:30 I think I was quite nationalistic. I felt I wanted to do something for Australia.

**At the time you enlisted, how do you think Australia needed protecting?**

Well, I’m not sure. I think I was too young and too immature to think of matters like that.

07:00 When I enlisted I guess the fighting in Korea had come to a halt. There was an armistice on round about that time. We stayed there for another 2 or 3 years after that. I don’t think we came home until about 1956. I don’t think I can answer that in any other way. I think,

07:30 yes, I was nationalistic. Yes, I thought I was doing something for Australia. But that’s about it.

**Talk to us about some of the difficulties of training men who had been called up and didn’t want to be there. What kind of strategy did you develop?**

08:00 To answer the second one first up. I had no strategy. I just didn’t know how to handle that sort of reaction that they were going through. Certainly the officers who were senior to me and who were hopefully there to guide me, gave me no assistance. I mean, they had no answer to it either.

08:30 No answer at all. Looking back on it now, in many respects we were young men, and I’m talking collectively as us Second Lieutenants, we were young men and there were very, very few of our seniors that we had respect for.

09:00 **Why was that?**

Mainly because of their attitude towards us. They demanded everything of us and yet we could see that they weren’t following the same rules that they applied to us. I don’t think I’d like to speak of anything more on that. Not now.

09:30 **Were there any situations when you might have had to deal with a guy who had been called up who was acting out of line? How did you deal with it?**

10:00 I guess not nearly as well as I should have. I did the best I could, but I was talking to guys who didn’t want to be there, who were either my age or older than me, and they really didn’t want to hear me

10:30 telling them that they’ve got to pick themselves up and get on with the job because this is what the government says you’ve got to do. So it was difficult. I think down the track, I think the longer I stayed there, the more accustomed I became to it and I used to laugh a lot of things off as far as their unhappiness was concerned.

11:00 I’m sure I didn’t do too well to start with, but I wasn’t given any guidance and no assistance.

**You said you feel now that you were perhaps a little brisk or strict**

That would be. Yes.

**in order to deal with**

Exactly. Yes.

11:30 I guess I was. They didn’t like that. I’m not quite sure what they really expected, but in retrospect yes, I was over-strict.

**In what way, perhaps you could explain that?**

Over-

12:00 strict to the extent to the point that they didn’t like me. I wasn’t liked for my gentleness. I think perhaps I was too young.

**Were there standard rules and disciplinary punishment that you had to adhere to that maybe you felt uncomfortable with?**

No, I had

12:30 no powers of punishment. There were occasions when I would have; you might say a recalcitrant soldier

taken before my company commander. He had the power, not me. That caused troubles as well.

13:00 **It sounds like there was quite a bit of tension between the men who were called up and the professional soldiers such as yourself.**

There was. Yeah. There was. All I can do is just

13:30 repeat again, they were young men who didn't want to be there. Most of them. Some of them were happy enough, but most of them did not want to be there. Most of them were not accustomed to "military discipline." Strangely, if I can just mention this, that is that the national servicemen

14:00 who were called up for service in Vietnam on the whole, took it in much better heart than those soldiers back in the 1950s. I was older and wiser 30 years down the track as well, in my dealings with the young soldiers.

14:30 **How did you cope with being slightly demoralised. What could you do to get yourself through?**

I'm not sure that I purposely tried to do anything. I just thought to myself, actually, I kept on telling myself, "It will pass, it will pass, it will pass."

15:00 I knew it would. I think I might have ready those words in a book somewhere and thought that doesn't sound like a bad sort of idea. There was nothing I could do about it. Nothing I could do to change the situation. I just kept on saying to myself, "It will pass, it will pass." It did eventually.

**What did you learn during that early time that stood you in good**

15:30 **stead later?**

I learned that, this always sticks in my book and that is, discipline by the book really works. There's got to be a lot of understanding, much more understanding than I used, much more compassion that I used in my dealings with the younger soldiers.

16:00 I'm sorry. Am I making it too difficult for you?

**No, no. I'm interested in hearing how you dealt with it, and also with conscription. Most people focus on the conscription around Vietnam and not in the early 50s.**

16:30 **You mentioned that you felt that you weren't really all that well liked by the soldiers. Who did you look to and what kind of mates did you make?**

There were, I think in the battalion in those days, there were

17:00 probably 30 Second Lieutenants and at least half of them were doing, I felt, doing far, far better than I was as far as handling situations were concerned. I always had, I used to talk to them, but

17:30 they were busy blokes as well. I never, ever really got to the nitty gritty of, "What can I do to get away from that situation?"

**Can you talk about how the training of the national servicemen differ from your own course?**

18:00 The training that I was passing on was virtually similar to the training that I received. The major difference is that the training I received was training that I wanted to receive. Whereas with them,

18:30 the vast majority didn't want to receive that training. That put you back up. So the standard of training was good, but you can only do so much with guys who don't want to receive. And it goes back to that again.

**Describe the training in more detail and**

19:00 **what was involved.**

It generally started with drill. That was drill with rifles or drill without rifles. It concerned minor map reading. It concerned

19:30 rifle practises. It concerned looking after yourself as far as living in the field was concerned. It concerned the standards of dress and the way that they had to look after themselves. It

20:00 concerned how, I mean, we're talking about group living in those days of 20-30 guys in one hut, cheek by jowl. So it concerned on personal hygiene. There were any number who never had one single lesson, I guess even from their parents, on personal hygiene. It concerned how you conformed with the system, which

20:30 said, "Every morning at 8 o'clock you'll be standing by your bed." The attempt was always made to drop a penny on the blanket and see whether it bounced. Whether the hut was kept clean and so on. They were a lot of the things that used to upset the soldiers when they were pulled in on the line, because their boots were dirty and their fingernails weren't clean.

21:00 There was a period during their training when you might say the military part of their training would cease for let us say one full week out of the 12 or 13 weeks that their training was taking place, where they'd be sent to the cook house for cleaning duties or potato peeling duties and so on.

21:30 Few of them liked that. Few of them liked that at all. […]

**Tell me about weapons and weaponry training.**

There

22:00 were a number of weapons that we trained the soldiers on. The first one of course was the standard rifle, the 303 Short Magazine Lee-Enfield [SMLE], that was the standard weapon. We would conduct bayonet practise with the bayonet stuck on the end of it. We trained them in the use of their own machine carbine and finally

22:30 grenade throwing. That was conducted under, all those three weapons, on the live firing on the ranges, was conducted with the utmost strictness for safety purposes of course.

**Were there any mishaps or accidents?**

Well, they will always happen, but I

23:00 can't think of any. None come to my mind, but we were always frightened that there would be.

**Were any of the guys actually outspoken**

23:30 **conscientious objectors, and what did you do if?**

I don't believe that I ever had any of those under my command. I can't recall any. There were probably, there were no doubt some there, but not

24:00 to my knowledge.

**In the face of such resistance, how do you feel the morale was by the end of that period of training?**

I think their training went for 13 weeks.

24:30 It may have been a little longer. My reaction to that right now is that I think with the training coming towards the end, most, if not all, of the soldiers had sort of

25:00 recognised that it was about to end and the less problems there were…for example, we used to mark the end of their training by a fortnight long field exercise in the Holsworthy training area. We would spend all our time out there for the last fortnight. Living in a hole and patrolling by night and

25:30 what would for young men be the most interesting part of their training where everything they'd learned about in the previous months was now all sort of coming to fruition.

**Can you tell me about your next posting after**

26:00 **that period of instructing?**

That's when I went to New Guinea. That was an entirely different situation where, and I found it quite fascinating, where I walked in, I was taken down to the company lines. I was

26:30 posted to D Company, to 11 Platoon. That platoon had been commanded for the previous two years by a warrant officer, Jim Crawshank. He was Scottish and the soldiers got on really well with him. He was there to meet me, took me around, he introduced me, some of them were on leave, took me around and introduced me to every single

27:00 one of those soldiers. He told me who were the really good ones and told me who the ones were that he had a few doubts about. He gave me a lot of encouragement and said, "Well, I'm on the plane tomorrow. It's all yours now. Goodbye." That went over really well. That was good. That was fascinating because

27:30 of the 30 soldiers I had, my sergeant's command of English was pretty good and a couple of the others theirs was not bad at all. There were some who couldn't speak a single word of English, so I had to set to then and teach myself Pidgin English. We were

28:00 very fortunate there, there was an education officer there. He used to conduct, you might say minor reading and writing lessons, for the troops. But he was also a good linguist as well. He used to take me for a one on one, one hour lesson every day of the week.

28:30 So by the end of a couple of weeks I was proficient enough in, you might say one sentence orders or one sentence questions, to start being able to communicate with the soldiers. My sergeant particularly, he was really good, because I wouldn't speak to the soldiers unless he was nearby.

29:00 So if I muddled through with my question or my statement, then he'd be there prompting me with the

right words and so on. Then one night, and I'd only been there for perhaps a month maybe 6 weeks, this is still in Port Moresby, I spoke to my company commander, who I had a good deal of respect for, and

29:30 I asked him if I could pack our bags and take the platoon up onto the start of the Kokoda Trail for a couple of weeks so that I could get to know them better. He said, "Pack your bags and go tomorrow." So it was as simple as that. So by the time we came back after a fortnight of living, we were training and doing some exploring and all those good bits.

30:00 At the close of the day's training we'd sit around a little bit of a fire and have a chat and this and that and the other. After a fortnight of that I came back to Port Moresby fairly proficient in my communication skills. It only got better after that. So from there

30:30 **Before you went to New Guinea, at the end of the training, how did the opportunity come about for your next posting? Was there an application process? Where were you hoping to go at the end of that first 4 years?**

I think

31:00 I had, I was given no choice. I didn't even know that I was about to leave. I just had the posting order, which was an instruction on a piece of paper saying "You finish here on such and such a date, report to Port Moresby on such and such a date and here's your plane ticket."

**What did you know about the brief and what your tasks were going to be?**

31:30 Virtually nothing. I knew that there was a battalion of native soldiers in Port Moresby. One of the company commanders in the battalion had served there, but

32:00 he was no longer there, sorry, he'd served in New Guinea with the Pacific Islands Regiment, but he was no longer there when, he'd been moved on from the battalion by the time I got to know that I was going up there. So I had really nobody in the battalion to talk to before I went. At the time that

32:30 the posting order to New Guinea had come through for me the battalion had in fact closed down for about a month because the government had changed the training system and I think they'd decreased the number of weeks' training by a

33:00 month, maybe 6 weeks, something like that. So they were reorganising the draft system. I was sent to Victoria Barracks in Sydney to command the guard there at Victoria Barracks. While I was there I got talking to

33:30 a colonel who was based in Victoria Barracks who'd not long come back. So he gave me every piece of encouragement to go there. He gave me a lot of information I found handy. At the same time he organised, he knew a lot of people, and he organised for me to go to what was

34:00 then known then as the Australian School of Pacific Administration. That was at Middle Head. ASOPA was run by, I'm not, I don't think it was Department of Foreign Affairs. I think it was really run, it would have been run I think by the PNG administration. It had been

34:30 set up to train young would be cadet patrol officers before they went to New Guinea to start working and then it was also used to, after they'd been there for a couple of years, to bring them back to Australia for 6 months maybe a year and put them back to school again to really finetune their

35:00 skills. Then they'd bring them back for promotion if they thought that they were going to be promoted from say patrol officer to district officer, or district commissioner and so on as far as the gradient was concerned. So I was doubly lucky there because I was sent straight from the position of guard commander there at Victoria Barracks off to a safe job and I was there for a month mingling with cadet patrol officers

35:30 and good instructors, really good instructors, and I went through the same training course that that cadet patrol officers were going through. As a consequence of that when, by the time I really got to Port Moresby, from then on, virtually everywhere I went throughout the territory, I was running into one or other of these guys. So that was really handy.

36:00 When I went back for the second time in a more senior position than, they were still there in another senior position as well. So that really set things up for me.

**Before you went, how were you briefed about the tactical reason for**

36:30 **the presence of the Australian army in New Guinea?**

No, I was not. No. It was really part, the Pacific Islands regiment, it was part of the Australian army. It was an administration, I mean there a civil administration of New Guinea in those days. They had their own police force. An armed police force. They had the

37:00 patrol officer system and many of the police were under the command of the patrol officers. But as far as why we had an army there was concerned, I was never confided in that.

**How did you understand your role?**

37:30 Well, it was, I was going there to command 30 men. Simple as that. I was hoping I'd get the opportunity to do a little bit of exploration. I was hoping that I'd get the opportunity to see more of New Guinea than Port Moresby,

38:00 but in many respects we had to make our own judgements on that and it was the sort of thing that I was looking forward to. But it wasn't until I'd been, yeah, it was a year before I really started being

38:30 able to do what I wanted to do. Now, whether it was military or not of course is a moot point. As an example, while we were in Port Moresby, I never had any trouble at all in getting the okay to put my soldiers on the back of a couple of trucks, take them to the foothills or the Owen Stanley Ranges and then walk up and down the Kokoda Trail for two or three

39:00 days in each direction and then come back. That was good training. But to get any further than that, that was sort of beyond thinking of. There was just no, people saw no need for it. But then later on, the administration was, it was, the patrol officer system was over-

39:30 stretched and they were looking for assistance. So out of our base in Vanimo, I was given the opportunity to join an administration exploration patrol and I flew into Ambunti on the Sepik River

40:00 and then in huge motorised canoe with half a dozen of my soldiers that I took with me. We joined up with a patrol officer at May River and, his name was Jack Mater, and he had half a dozen cops and we had a hundred carriers that he'd got together. Off into the bush we went. They were

40:30 swamps in fact. We spent the best part, probably 6 weeks, up to our knees in mangrove swamp and just plain mud for just as I say 6 weeks. We probably found about 2,500 people, never seen white man before. We lot a couple of carriers through

41:00 arrows and a couple of more ran screaming off into the bush never to be seen again, My corporal, he took an arrow in his leg one day and the police corporal took another arrow through his leg. But they didn't like us and each time we'd come to a small village, and a small village in that context in the May River, was

41:30 one large communal hut. Take about 30 people, no more. That required, we would just sit down still in the mud and wait for them to come to us. We had people with us who had a knowledge of their language and sometimes we might be using two or three interpreters

42:00 before we'd get a message through at the other end. Then it would come back the same

# Tape 4

00:35 **Before we stopped the tape you were telling us about the assignment up on the May River. How did that assignment come about?**

The administration were looking for assistance and they,

01:00 and this is all second guessing on my part, but I know they needed assistance, and I think they were looking at going into unchartered waters and they knew that if we were to find anybody then they would need a large line of carriers to carry food and other supplies.

01:30 They were just looking for potentially armed assistance from the army as well as the police in the event that there was a problem. That's a pretty, I mean, that's all conjecture on my part, but I think the army at the same time had been talking to the administration and was keen that we had. Our colonel was a very outgoing bloke and he was trying to increase our responsibilities.

02:00 I guess he was pushing the administration for us, the army, to join the administration patrols at the same time. In military terms we're talking about the rules of engagement and quite clearly the

02:30 problems faced by a patrol officer who used a weapon on a native person of New Guinea were quite horrendous. The rule in essence said that, "If force with a weapon was used, then it would be

03:00 no defence at all for the patrol officer to use such reasoning as 'I felt I was in danger'." They would be looking for a defence far, far stronger than just a feeling that, "I was getting into trouble." So the use of armed force while we carried

03:30 weapons was, you might say not even last resort stuff. I've got the words in my diary somewhere. Pretty powerful.

**The rules of engagement in that particular theatre would have been difficult for you as a soldier.**

04:00 Jack was a pretty, he was a very knowledgeable bloke. I can recall him being confronted one day by a guy. This fellow, he had

04:30 the arrow pulled back so tight on the string it's a wonder the string didn't break. The people of the May River, they had a system where the arrow was held back by the thumb and the little finger, between those two fingers. At the same time, these three fingers

05:00 would be drumming on the string, which made a pretty fearsome sort of a noise, I can assure you. So there you are, and he's pulling it all the way back here. This would be up here near his ear, holding onto that arrow like that and drumming on the string. We'd be praying that his fingers didn't slip. The arrows that they used to use, we used

05:30 to call them pig arrows. At their broadest they'd be, the arrowhead itself would be at least six inches long and at least 2 maybe 3 inches wide at its widest. Holding that at two or three feet where you can't miss would slice straight through you. Jack's system was pretty simple. He'd just take his hat off and he'd look at this guy and he'd laugh.

06:00 And he'd smile. And the guy would ease the arrow off the string.

**What were you looking for up the May River?**

We were looking for people. We'd been instructed to go and find people and bring them in to the administration.

**What sort of people?**

06:30 I mean native people. Native people who had not been in contact, with whom the administration had not been in contact before. They wanted, I mean they we doing a bit of a census I suppose, counting numbers. We were carrying a lot of medical supplies to treat them and we were putting their little village on the map.

07:00 **How prepared did you feel to meet an arrow?**

I guess when I saw the way Jack reacted, I felt that, I just knew that he was doing the right thing. I

07:30 saw that he was doing the right things. I took it upon myself to promise myself that if I got into that situation, that's how I'd deal with it.

**You mentioned that one of your tasks was to push the Papua nationalists back over the border.**

08:00 That was many years later. That was on my second trip, my second task in New Guinea. That was many, many years later.

**On your first tour, how much of an issue was the tribal warfare?**

They weren't something that we,

08:30 I certainly had no instants of being involved in tribal warfare and I can't think of any instants where the Pacific Island Regiment was. The tribal warfare, and I know it's still going on now, has always been between clans and conducted in the

09:00 highlands. They certainly, when they occurred in my time there, and reading the reports that we used to see in the joint intelligence organisation, they were as a general rule brought under control fairly quickly by the administration. I can't

09:30 speak on how firmly they're dealt with today, but certainly then, it was not uncommon for the district officer to stand in front of a couple of hundred guys, or between a couple of hundred guys, take off his hat and say, "Go home you silly buggers," and they'd go home. A lot of it was just traditional

10:00 dancing and challenging rather than were they seriously looking for a fight. But you could never be sure how serious they were. I'm getting myself out of a little bit of depth there all the same.

10:30 **What surprises or shocks did you come across personally?**

I'm not sure that I ever

11:00 was ever really surprised or shocked at anything I saw. Whatever I saw and experienced I think, while I hadn't realised it at the time, I was probably expecting it anyhow. New Guinea then, particularly then as opposed to now, was pretty much a wild sort of a place.

11:30 We were always prepared for the worst and praying that it didn't happen, but certainly Ion Idress, the author, he wrote several books on New Guinea back in the '30s. In the mid '50s when I first went there, and I'd read

12:00 his books. In the mid '50s when I was sent there, things didn't seem to have changed at all from what it was like there in the '30s. I don't think I was ever surprised or ever shocked at anything I saw or witnessed or became involved in. But certainly, the longer I stayed there I felt the more skilful I became

assessing a situation or dealing with

12:30 people.

**You've told us that you learned Pidgin English. How did you relate to natives and how did they relate to you?**

With my platoon, with the 30 men for whom

13:00 I was responsible for I think that after 2 or 3 months with them, particularly recognising the time I was up there at the start of the [Kokoda] Trail with them for so long, I don't think I had, we had good rapport. I felt I had good rapport anyhow. My communication skills were getting better day by

13:30 day. I'm not sure that I can say anything more. I felt more than comfortable with them.

**With many years of hindsight, what do you think it was that enabled you to relax and relate?**

I think,

14:00 well, I'd learned a lot of lessons in the previous job I'd been doing just for starters. But even before I went to New Guinea, the discussions we had at the school of Pacific administration and the fellows I met there

14:30 were always, they were always telling us that, "When you go to New Guinea it's not Australia and different standards apply. You'd be foolish to think that you could get away with things up there that you can back in Australia. We're dealing with

15:00 different people so that takes different attitudes." I don't think I had any difficulties in handling that situation. It was just different that's all.

**Can you elaborate on those differences?**

15:30 If I was having a problem with a soldier in New Guinea, then I would be, because of the language difficulties, I'd be talking to him and explaining to him in far, far greater detail and

16:00 for far, far longer than you would need to have with an Australian soldier. So that's the first instance. In the second instance, I'd be talking to him with either my sergeant with me or that soldier's corporal with me who would also be reinforcing what I'd be saying.

16:30 I think that was the major difference.

**Did you feel at the time that there was a mutual respect?**

In New Guinea? Yes. Yes there was. I got on well with the soldiers and I

17:00 believe they looked at me as somebody who would look after them and take care of them. That was my job. It's the job of any commander with his soldiers. Got to look after them, got to take care of them.

**One of the other tasks you were doing was to ensure there were medical supplies. How would you go about**

17:30 Whenever we went on patrol, we had a particularly good RAP [Regimental Aid Post] in Port Moresby, and a couple of particularly good medical officers, who used to take a lot of their time in training the orderlies.

18:00 They had good skills. We had the basics of medicine you might say. Iodine, bandaids, bandages, and puff bottles as I've mentioned earlier of penicillin powder. They generally got us through the

18:30 major problems. Soldiers and the village people would always be chopping their leg somewhere with a machete instead of chopping a bit of sugarcane. Of course a lot of the bush and certainly in the sago palm swamps, there's lots of…the sago palm has large needles on them.

19:00 So when you're in bare feet you're likely to get a needle in the toe or in the ankle and so on. That quickly becomes infected, so on with the iodine. The materials we had were pretty basic, but they worked and they worked really on the village people who had never seen so much as an aspro before.

19:30 The use of a bit of a puff of penicillin powder in an open wound, or yaws, which will go through to the bone, it will start crusting up in a matter of hours and a scab will form in the matter of a day and a half. Just like magic to somebody who had never had an aspro before. So it was

20:00 unskilled medicine, but we were using the medicine on the wounds that we knew we'd be encountering.

**Did you come across malaria? It was a pretty big problem in World War II and the soldiers all took Atebrin. Was that an issue for you?**

Yeah. We did

20:30 what everybody has done for years and years and years. On patrol we had the roll book with everybody's name on it who was in the patrol. We would line the soldiers up every morning, open up their mouth and fling a Paladin tablet down their throat. I would open my mouth and the sergeant would throw one down my throat and he'd

21:00 tick off everybody's names as they were given the pill every day. There were rare occasions when somebody went down with it, but Paladin, it's not a preventative, it's just a suppressive and it just keeps it under control. In four years, you will believe this story, in four years in New Guinea, I didn't have one dose

21:30 of Paladin, and when I came home, three days later I started feeling a bit wonky and all I wanted to do was sleep. I came good on that and I was due to join the 1st Battalion again going north of Newcastle. I walked into the barracks and I said, "Hello" to the adjunct and, "I'm Colin Adamson, here's my posting orders" and he said, "Good to

22:00 see you onboard Colin, I'll call somebody up and he can show you where the hut is for you tonight." I walked into the hut, and as I set foot inside the door my legs crumbled up under me and down I went like a sack of spuds. They took me off to the hospital at RAAF base Williamtown. I was there for 5 days.

22:30 The most massive dose of malaria that anybody had ever seen.

**It's interesting that you didn't get it the whole time.**

Well, I'd come home and stopped using the suppressives.

**Going back to New Guinea, did you have any**

23:00 **jungle training before you went there?**

I'd spent a fortnight at the jungle training centre at Canungra. That helped considerably. Certainly in the navigation side of things where

23:30 you're trying to point it in the right direction to where you're going. That helped a great deal of course. But the jungle training centre […]

**In that first tour, it sounds like your role was a peace keeping**

24:00 **role.**

We didn't use that term, but yes, I guess you're correct. […]

**What elements were crucial to the first tour in New Guinea for you?**

24:30 It built up my self-confidence by unknown bounds. It showed me the things that I was capable of doing that, it made me feel that nothing could be tougher than this, that the sort of

25:00 work we were doing in New Guinea. That was of major assistance to me without a doubt. It just prepared me for bigger and better and brighter things. I'm quite sure of it. It was the experiences that I went through there,

25:30 they'll be with me all the time. No doubt about that. The patrol in the May River area was just one of many that we did.

**It sounds like it was successful for you on a personal level, but how successful did you feel the unit was**

26:00 **in achieving its goals?**

I think it was very, very successful. It showed the soldiers themselves, and I only had half a dozen with me, they were a mixed bag. The Pacific Island Regiment had a tradition and a philosophy and a standard of not mixing

26:30 or on to putting together soldiers all from the same village or the same district into a group. So there were, every one of those six soldiers came from a different part of the territory. I guess, individually while they were excited, they were as excited as much as I was to be going there

27:00 and finding these people. They were individually as much as I was, just a little weary, a little cautious as to what they could expect and what we could all expect. What's it going to be like there? What are we going to find? Who are we going to find? What are they going to say to us? So that built up their

27:30 knowledge and built up their standard and built up their self confidence just as much as it built up mine. Of course when we finally got back to Port Moresby, they were boasting of their exploits as much as I was, being men to be looked up to.

**Were there any**

28:00 **stories going around about head hunters and any kind of tribal activities that you thought you**

**might encounter?**

No. All we knew, I think the post at the May River had only been established for about six months.

28:30 Jack was given the task to get out there and do some exploring and talk to the local people who were in fact living in villages on the Sepik River, "what do you know about anybody living up there or over there?" and so on. So he'd had some knowledge already that the people who were living on the Sepik itself knew that there were people living up there on the May River.

29:00 In fact the district commissioner had gone looking for a bunch of murderers some time earlier, but failed to find them and he felt that they were guys from the May River.

**Can you explain about the rule of having Papuans from**

29:30 **different areas in the unit rather than having men from the same village?**

I think the main reason for that was to try to instil into the soldiers that this was an army for Papua New Guinea as opposed to an army of people from Karamu or people from Milne Bay or

30:00 people from the western highlands and so on. I can remember when I first went there, not long after I'd joined the battalion in Port Moresby, the recruiting officer, or the recruiting officer's team, they arrived at the barracks with 50 or 60 young men from the highlands and they'd never been recruited from the highlands before. They came from the western highlands,

30:30 the eastern highlands, the southern highlands. Those guys had never seen salt water before in their life. The guys from the coast who were already serving were looking at these people quite strangely. They'd never seen people in their life before either. And the highland people had never seen salt water before.

31:00 **How were the native men recruited and selected?**

By some pretty basic methods. A good medical examination, and then a, by a doctor, then a bit of a physical examination by the recruiting officer and the team.

31:30 We used to have a look at their muscles and we had rowing races to see how their stamina was. You might say skills, how quickly can you build a house? What do you know about rafts? And things like that. But I think

32:00 in the long run it was the gut feeling, what the recruiting officer felt about this fellow or that fellow. "He's got shifty eyes." "Well, don't take him." But the recruit training course would sort out any problems. A very similar recruit training course as the one that we do these days in Kapooka

32:30 we did then.

**On that first tour, where was your main camp and what was that like?**

Well, the main barracks was in Port Moresby. Tarana barracks, and it was about 7 miles out from the town of Port Moresby

33:00 itself. We had the, on rotation, had the battalion headquarters and the administrative company and two rifle companies based there. Then about ten miles out of town we had the Goldie River training camp and that was really bush hut construction

33:30 then. That was a good training area, a good bush training area. From let's say January 1958 we started training all the recruits out there as well in stead of training them in the barracks. Then there was a rifle company based at Manus Island for 6 months. Actually we call it

34:00 Manus Island, but it really wasn't. It was a small island off Manus itself. They were there for 6 months and then another rifle company at Vanimo, which is about 15 miles from the old Dutch border on the coast. Then every six months everybody'd take one pace to the left and come back to Port Moresby or go to Manus Island if you understand what I mean. So six months in, six months out.

34:30 In the early days I was there, it was mainly training in Port Moresby and we didn't get out of the barracks at all. Not too fat anyhow. Most the patrolling was done whilst on out-station, but with a change of commanding officer. That changed a good deal.

35:00 We used to spend a lot of the time outside of the barracks and doing real work instead of parade ground stuff.

**What do you mean by real work?**

I mean patrolling and exploring. Until then, and bearing in mind that a lot of the soldiers would go on leave then come back to Port Moresby from being on out-station.

35:30 They changes a few things around anyhow. It meant that the battalion was doing more work and covering a wider area than it had been before. It worked well. It was always busy.

**I wanted to ask you about leave and what opportunities you had to take some time out?**

There wasn't much. If we were in

36:00 Port Moresby, then we would on a Saturday morning I'd always go down and talk to the soldiers for and hour or so. Then the choice was

36:30 we had some friends who had a sailing boat so we could go sailing. We had some friends in a rubber plantation away, and we could go up there and have lunch and dinner at night with them and come back. Or we could just go into Port Moresby and go to the dance on a Saturday night at the RSL.

37:00 The Bank of NSW, it was the only bank in Port Moresby then, Commonwealth was there too, but the Bank of NSW had a staff including 15 girls all used to live under the same roof. So they were always around for us to go and say hello to. That was just sort of weekend stuff.

37:30 It was rare that we'd go out at night during the middle of the week. Very rare, too busy with other business. Leave back to Australia you're talking about? That was pretty rare. In four years I went

38:00 to Brisbane for a two week long training course and I went home on leave once for 2 months.

**You'd go down the RSL for the dance on a Saturday night. How important was it to have a beer on the weekend with your mates?**

38:30 That was important. Yeah. They were good times. Good days.

# Tape 5

00:31 **Early on in New Guinea you took your soldiers up the Kokoda Trail. How aware were you of the Australian military history of that place?**

Certainly not as much as I know about it today. Every time I read a book on Kokoda, I find, on the fighting on the Kokoda Trail, I find something new that didn't appear in the previous book. Certainly I knew, I mean as an 18 year old,

01:00 I knew that we'd been fighting on the Kokoda Trail and I knew that it was tough and I knew that we held back the Japanese there and I knew that we lost a lot of soldiers there. But what I didn't realise at the time was how poor the administrative support that the fighting soldiers had on the Kokoda Trail was. How poor the total administrative

01:30 support running from food to ammunition to medical assistance was hopeless. It really was. I didn't realise just how many of them were wounded or how many of them were killed and I'm quite sure that I didn't realise just how vicious the fighting on the Kokoda Trail was.

**What**

02:00 **lingering evidence of the Second World War was there during your time in New Guinea?**

As you walk along to the main points where, to the points where the major battles were fought, by scavenging around you will come upon weapon pits everywhere. You'll find

02:30 tins, you'll find bone fragments and things like that. But it's the weapon pit holes in the ground that you're more than likely yo find than anything else.

**How much in your later experience in Vietnam did you feel part of an Anzac tradition?**

03:00 I don't think that I had ever felt as being part of that until we'd had our first fight in Vietnam. And that stayed with me.

**What did that mean to you at that time?**

03:30 The first fight we had, in Vietnam I was a rifle company commander, so I was directing soldiers as opposed to being, you might say actively involved. My task was to tell them how to do it, what to do and how I could help them and so on. But it wasn't until then that I

04:00 felt that I was really doing what I was, had been trained to do for the previous 20 years.

**In the period before then, in the Pacific Island Regiment, was there an element of frustration in your role as a soldier not in such a frontline capacity?**

No, because, it wasn't, because the frontline capacity in New Guinea, with the Pacific Island Regiment

04:30 was out on patrol be it exploration or meeting the people or medical patrols and doing what we knew best and getting out there. That was good frontline stuff. That was enjoyable and it was hard work, but very rewarding.

**You mentioned Pidgin English.**

05:00 **You must have gotten quite good at the language after 8 years in New Guinea. What words hang in your mind as being useful to you?**

I don't think that any were more important than others. I suppose instructions

05:30 to soldiers to look after each other, they were always important. I mean there are still, I mean, the Kokoda Trail. Imita Ridge, we retreated to there and held the Japanese there, and the next ridge up was

06:00 Ioribaiwa and that's as far as the Japanese came because we retreated to Imita Ridge. After a gruelling advance across the Owen Stanleys and see-sawing battles with the Australians, the Japanese offensive was finally halted at Imita Ridge, outside Port Moresby. The worn-out soldiers of Maroubra Force were relieved by the 25th Brigade commanded by Brigadier Ken Eather and then moved forward and threw them off Ioribaiwa and then advanced. Well. Imita Ridge itself is just one steep pinnacle and you can virtually straddle it with two legs. I slipped there one day and fell quite badly, bouncing from rock to rock with a pistol

06:30 on one hip and a water bottle on the other hip. That was pretty much a bruising deal. That taught me one lesson and that is, no matter where you go in New Guinea you need somebody to be there with you to help you out. I always used to say to my soldiers, "Look out them old garraman." In other words, "Look after everybody,

07:00 look after yourself as well."

**What can you tell us about the 'wantok' principle?**

Fraught with danger if it's not looked after properly.

**Can you explain what it is?**

The wantok is essentially it means somebody who speaks the same language. But a wantok can be

07:30 the section of men, be it 7 or 8 or 9 men, or it can be the whole platoon or it can be the whole rifle company of 120 men.

08:00 The wantok system it's a cohesive group of, call it like minded people. Wantok can be everybody from the southern highlands or wantok can be those three men who come from Milne Bay.

**Why do you say it was fraught with danger from your point of view?**

Because

08:30 it's a, the wantok system is a New Guinea person's habit to operate with one talks. That's dangerous from a military point of view because

09:00 it's factionalism. We did our best to try to put it aside.

**What other ways did you have to work with existing cultural structures?**

09:30 There were many, the soldiers essentially brought their, you might say village spiritual beliefs into play.

10:00 They were difficult to handle sometimes. Their spiritual beliefs are many and varied and pretty complex as well. So that created problems sometimes. There were frequently enough, and I mean once is

10:30 enough, where you would find a senior soldier would be having an affair with the wife of a junior soldier and the junior soldier would go and locate a friend of his, either within or without the regiment

11:00 who had spiritual powers and then he would, you might say cast a spell on that recalcitrant soldier and then tell him what had happened. That would throw the recalcitrant soldier into, you might say something approaching an epileptic fit on occasions.

11:30 So that was pretty bad from a regimental point of view. Invariably we would dismiss both soldiers. We can't have anybody interfering with good, traditional army discipline like that. I

12:00 remember the first time that ever happened, our colonel, he was a good bloke, and he just lined everybody up and he said, "If there's going to be any spirit men around the place it's me. The rest of you keep your nose out of other people's business." So that used to, it wasn't as if

12:30 it was an everyday occurrence. But when it happened we used to jump on it pretty quickly.

**It must have been fascinating for you at the time.**

Yeah. There's, I'll just give you another example too and that is we were, I

13:00 was exploring with a group of about a dozen of my soldiers in the Karema sub district. I knew the

district commissioner there pretty well and he said, “Take care around here. We’ve been having some trouble. I don’t want lead footed soldiers around here messing around.” I promised him

13:30 faithfully that I’d take care of things. We hadn't been out very long, 3 or 4 days I think from memory. We woke up in the morning and there’s one of my soldiers had been, call it again an epileptic fit. I said to my sergeant, “What’s gone wrong with this?” He said, “I don’t know.

14:00 I’ll go down to the village,” we were on the outskirts “And go and talk to people.” He came back and he said, “We’ve got trouble. That fool they caught him stealing some wild ginger out of the gardens.” Wild ginger is called kalawa and you can use wild ginger from

14:30 one end of New Guinea to the other for, you might say medicine spirit stuff. It’s got magical powers. They all believe in it. Anyhow, they pounced on him, took it off him and then you might say, I’m not quite sure what they call it, I’ve forgotten now, but in our terms they pointed the bone at him and down

15:00 he went like a sack of spuds. So I took my sergeant with me and we went down to the village and I had a tomahawk, small one, gave that to them and gave them some stick tobacco and I gave them some tea and some sugar. I said, “That’s all I’ve got to give you. Now release him.” So they

15:30 released him. We were out on the track then for about another 4 or 5 weeks before we got back to Port Moresby, and in that 4 or 5 weeks I made his life and absolute misery. The day we got back to Port Moresby I took him up to my colonel and we dismissed him on the spot, put him on a plane and sent him back to Manus Island.

16:00 **At what times were you frightened?**

Never. Never. Concerned sometimes, never frightened.

**What was your view on this superstitious behaviour?**

Dangerous sometimes. Dangerous to the group as a whole.

16:30 That’s why we tried to stamp it out. But it’s, I don’t think that the people of New Guinea will veer erase it from their system. A lot of them are confessed Christians, but

17:00 that sort of thing is still there. It doesn't go away.

**Are there any instances that you can relate from your entire experience of New Guinea of that being used in a mutinous way against the over arching colonial power that was Australia at the time?**

I don’t think I can answer that one.

**Any in your own regiment?**

I don’t think so.

17:30 **Never pointed the bone at the commanding officer?**

If it ever happened then they didn’t tell him that the bone had been pointed. If they had told him he probably would have knuckled them on the spot. So, did it happen?

18:00 It may well have, but unless you know about it, then you’ve got to know that somebody’s pointed the bone at you for you to start feeling sick. If you don’t believe in it then you don’t feel sick anyhow. But if you do believe in it, and if you do believe in the powers of wild ginger

18:30 then you’re a gone goose.

**During your whole time in New Guinea, you’ve got 2 tours three that you served in different capacities. Can you talk about one outstanding experience that you had that changed you in some way?**

19:00 Certainly my first exploration patrol in the May River. That just expanded my vision and that really filled me with confidence in my own ability. Probably the second occasion was again on the, I mean I didn’t mention it, but

19:30 this rooster with the ginger, we started walking from Karema and then we walked due north to Margarima, which was really about the centre of New Guinea whether it’s north, south or east, west, Margarima in the highlands there. Then east to Lae. That was about

20:00 35 days all up that we were out. There’s no track between Karema and Margarima and a minor track between Margarima and Lae. I had a compass and I had a map that was half green and half brown. That meant nothing except that here and there, there were villages

20:30 marked on it. What we did was that so long as my compass was pointing, no, not that way. So long as the ridge line was going either north west or north east, I knew I was going in roughly the right direction. That was about the best we could do. Sometimes we’d follow little creeks if they went in the

right direction. The people we were going through were the Kukakuka, and they

21:00 are the most ferocious people in the whole of the territory, and they are, I don't know, certainly then, they were completely untamed. They were people, they killed people because they liked killing them. They would

21:30 kill, they weren't a person until they killed. They didn't mind killing from ambush, they didn't mind killing babies. So that just made them a man. They were good practising cannibals as well.

22:00 So we were walking through these areas and we got through to the patrol post and spent a couple of days there and the patrol officer he had 4 or 5 murderers all shackled up and the weather was too bad for

22:30 a plane to come in and he wanted to get rid of them. He said, "Will you take them through to Lae for me?" I said, "Certainly." So they were all shackled up and off we set. We hadn't gone more than a day and a half before their friends were surrounding us on either side of where we were and yelling at us, taunting at us and they were saying "Let them go." We knew what they were saying. I put my soldiers

23:00 into, you might call it a wagon wheel, and put the prisoners in the centre, grabbed my sergeant and then we went down and confronted these roosters who were yelling at us and shaking their fists and bows and arrows, and shooed them off. They stayed with us for the best part of a fortnight until they finally gave it up and went back again. We took the prisoners with us through to Lae.

23:30 That was pretty good.

**How did you feel you held up under this kind of pressure?**

I thought I handled it pretty good. It was a change from the norm and I'd been there,

24:00 I'd been in New Guinea then long enough to sort of feel how I would handle something like that. The patrol officer, both the district commissioner at Karema, I had long discussions with him before we left, and the patrol officer at Margarima, I had good discussions with him too before we went on. So I had

24:30 a good idea of how I'd handle anything if it was going to get ugly or not. That was a bit different.

**When you came back to New Guinea for the second time, how had the situation changed? What were the main differences?**

I'd been, I'm just trying to think.

25:00 I hadn't been in New Guinea for about 3 maybe 4 years before I went back the second time. Things had changed a lot within the army itself. The soldiers were much better educated. The World War II tin shacks that they used to sleep in had been pulled down

25:30 and good, solid barracks had been built both in Port Moresby and in Wewak, because I went back there to help raise the 2nd Battalion. The soldiers were much better educated than they were when I first went

26:00 there. The facilities that both battalions had were much better too. The rations were better. If I can just digress and go back. On the first tour if we were out on patrol, we would have,

26:30 we had a pound of brown rice and half a tin of bully beef per man per day. I was given a shilling per man per day to buy what you might call fresh fruit and veggies or anything else on the way. Most of the money was useless anyhow. So we used to go to the trade stores and

27:00 with that shilling per man per day we would buy little axes, little tomahawks or a knife, stick tobacco and salt and carry that and then barter with that on the way through. The food on my second trip was much better. We had the devised special ration packs we used to use in New Guinea.

27:30 They were quite good. And we still had some money that we could spend to buy from the gardens fresh fruit and whatever passed for fresh fruit and vegetables around the place. On the second trip back we had, each of the two battalions we had

28:00 three army Cessnas up there. That helped us a lot in getting around. The air force had two maybe three Caribou there all the time. The navy had a couple of launches that they let us use all the time. They would take us all the time, so we were much more sophisticated when we could travel a good deal further and get into places where we,

28:30 with more ease than before. A lot of the airstrips, the Caribou was such a good aircraft it can land on an airstrip that a Cessna can use. It just pulled up. The only difficulty with them is that if it's been raining a lot, then when it uses the brakes it tears up the airstrip. So we had to be careful there. Sometimes we missed the return flight out of the

29:00 airstrip we were supposed to be using because it wouldn't take the Caribou. So we would then up bags and walk to the next airstrip and pray that one was suitable to fly out from.

**These were airstrips you had been involved in building yourself earlier on?**

No, we never built airstrips for the Caribous. What we did was extended a few for them.

**Can you describe how they were set up**

29:30 **and what they were made of?**

They were just flat strips of dirt. When we extended them, all we had to do was chop down maybe another 20 or 30 yards worth of trees to give them that amount. Helicopter landing points, the size of that really depended upon the size of the trees in the vicinity. So if for example,

30:00 for best ease, for saving petrol and so on, the helicopter should come in at say something like an angle, a good shallow angle of say 15 to 20 degrees. But if you've got trees 30 or 40 feet tall, then you've got to go back there and, that's just mathematics, to see how far you've got to go back there to get that 20 degree angle, and that's

30:30 probably too much. So you bring them in at a 45 degree angle, which means there's more juice being used and more strain on the prop to bring them in. I mean, if they have to they can come straight down, but we used to just extend them, find a good spot that looked as if it would take minimum effort and just extended a little bit so that a helicopter could get in.

31:00 **When is the first time you can remember using a helicopter, being introduced to this new piece of?**

It was at Holsworthy and it would have been in 1961, 1962. It was one of the little bubble belles [Sioux helicopter]. When I looked down through my feet,

31:30 from 300 feet up, I thought I was going to die. That was a real experience first time in one of the little bubble nosed belles. The Iroquois, that was fascinating. In Vietnam we took the seats out and kept the doors

32:00 wide open to give us more room. More often than not, because there were no seats, we'd just sit in the doorway with our feet on the skies. It was surprising how easy it was to feel comfortable and safe up there. You might just hang onto a strap or hang onto the,

32:30 not the seat, but the edge where you're sitting. But there was no tense grip. Pretty comfortable and very easy and quick to get out of. That's why we took out the seats and kept the doors open.

**The helicopter became such a crucial piece of machinery in the war in Vietnam. Was there any sense in those early days when you first was exposed to them how**

33:00 **important they might be or how they changed things in terms of mobilising men?**

We always knew how handy they were. Quite clearly, I mean, and this is why in a year you

33:30 can be on operations for, you might say, I mean real operations, for 300 days out of the full 365. Because when you're moving from, you have the capacity with the helicopter to move from one operation to another one, to another one, to another one, to another one. Whereas in previous wars, the infantry soldiers

34:00 got there by flat foot. So for better or for worse, he's got that relief of the operation concluding, but then he's stuck with walking maybe for a week, maybe for a fortnight before the next operation starts. So the helicopter has changed warfare.

**How did that change filter through into your training and the tactics you were being told about or prepared for?**

34:30 We did very minor helicopter training in Australia before we went away. Enough to see one and go on a flight. It wasn't till we went there that, I mean they had us sitting on seats with the doors closed in training at Holsworthy before we went. I think there was a

35:00 bit of a safety problem, or a felt safety problem training. But certainly as soon as we started in Vietnam, with in-country training, all that changed and the seats came out and we sat there on the edge and it was just like being back home. It all came so naturally.

35:30 […]

**In your second tour, how had the political situation changed in your role in Papua New Guinea?**

I don't recall that it changed a great deal by then. There were, the district

36:00 commissioners were I think essentially all still Australian. They may well have had, what's the word now? Assistant district commissioners who were Papua New Guinea nationals. But I think essentially all the district commissioners were still Australian. By the districts I mean there was, I forgot,

36:30 my memory's gone, there were 12 to 15 districts throughout New Guinea. New Ireland, Manus and so on. The police were still, I think a number of police had commission rank, New Guineans had commission ranks. But certainly not all of them. The New Guinea police was still greatly

37:00 Australian. There were, in Port Moresby there were a fair number of New Guineans in public service positions.

37:30 There were a number of commissioned New Guinea soldiers who were platoon commanders there. There were Qantas had a number of administrative clerks at the airport, but no pilots then.

38:00 **How much more of them were New Guinea nationalists?**

I'm not, I mean it's along time since. I don't think there's ever really been a New Guinea nationalist movement. I don't, they were never

38:30 on the streets saying, "Australians go home." They were never on the streets saying, "We want to look after ourselves." I think they were forced into it at the time. As an outsider, I think it came too early, but that's not a shared opinion.

# Tape 6

00:44 **Can you tell us about Manus Island?**

I'd love to. Thank you very much. My company was sent there for a six-month rotational period in March 1958. Our base was aptly

01:00 named Nutt Point and that's spelt with a double T. That was on Seeadler Harbour, on the second smallest island, just south of Manus itself. We shared Seeadler Harbour with the naval refuelling station, which was just on the other side of Seeadler Harbour. The air force were also in control of an airfield on Moekareng Peninsula, which was

01:30 perhaps about, in those days, perhaps 5 or 6 miles to the north of our camp. That was used as a stop-off refuelling base for our transport planes and US transport planes travelling between Australia and Korean still in those days. Moekareng was a bit of a home away from home

02:00 really because there was, it really had nothing on it for us except for rubber plantations, but it did give us the opportunity to get away from Nutt Point, which was our base, to somewhere a bit different to conduct training. So we'd have forced route marches out there at night, set up our camp. Good honest platoon training among

02:30 ourselves for 4 or 5 days and then march back to Nutt Point, which was quite good. One interesting thing about our base at Nutt Point was that the large building we used as a gymnasium was the one that had been set up not only to hear the Japanese war crime tribunal, but

03:00 the far end of it was still the remnants of the gallows that they used on a few of them. When it came time for our 6 monthly, I should go back there and tell you how we got to Mannus Island actually. We had 2 methods. Firstly it was by air and secondly it was by army boat.

03:30 My platoon in fact flew by TAA flying boats called Catalinas. We flew from, they only took about 7 passengers at a time, but we flew from Port Moresby through to Madang on the north coast of Port Moresby, 7 people at a

04:00 time. Offloaded there and then onto the army vessel Tara, which was a 50 ton wooden boat that took three days to get to Manus Island. At the conclusion of our 6 monthly spell of duty there, it was time for a fair number of our soldiers to go on leave. They only went on leave every 2 years. So it

04:30 fell to me to organise the dropping off of a fair number of them rather than fly them back to Moresby and then send them off in their different ways from there. So we set off in the army vessel Tara. Myself, about 50 soldiers and the crew on board, and we headed east from Manus Island to New Island, to new Hanover, to New

05:00 Britain. We made three or four stops along the way. Then across to Lae where we dropped off soldiers and then from there, over the Guadalcanal, which was then what they called then in the British Solomon Island [BSI] protectorate. We had a bundle of, we had boxes of clothing and rifles for the BSI police to

05:30 hand over to them. That was quite interesting there and I really don't remember too much about Guadalcanal except it was fascinating just to be there. It was just an ordinary little town half the size of Lae, which was nothing to talk about. From there, back across to New Guinea there, we stopped off at Milne Bay for a couple of days and then to Goodenough Island and Samarai on the point of,

06:00 on the south eastern tip of Papua. We were still dropping off soldiers along the way there. Then finally

to Port Moresby and I think from memory, we were about 19 days afloat. A good trip all the way.

**It would have given you quite a good grasp of the layout**

There were lots of

06:30 places that I wouldn't otherwise have seen.

**Just to wrap up both tour in New Guinea, do you want to touch briefly on the border patrols that you were conducting?**

When I

07:00 returned to New Guinea for my second tour, I was sent back there because we were raising the 2nd Battalion of the Pacific Island Regiment and it was going to be based permanently in Wewak, but retaining the outstation in Vanimo. I was initially, I was sent there as intelligence officer and between

07:30 myself and the colonel who what served with Pacific Island Regiment before as well, we spent a lot of time initially in border recognisance, both by light aircraft and by helicopter identifying points that could be extended to use larger aircraft and also helicopters. We were flying up and down the border

08:00 between the demarcation between Papua and New Guinea at that stage and talking to all the patrol officers and the district commissioners in the area and the people who were running the missions as well, to advise them that we were there, we told them why we were there and hoping that they could help us out with any information that they thought was necessary to pass onto us and so on.

08:30 That probably took us the best part of 3 months before we had completely covered all the mission stations and all the patrol posts that we felt was necessary. Then we set up a plan of campaign of border patrols in that area to ensure that if anybody was coming across, then

09:00 we'd pick them up as they came through. About a month after those border patrols started, we started collecting people. They were mainly Papua nationalists who were fleeing across and trying to gain, you might say entry visas into New Guinea. They were coming across because they were being pursued by the TNI and

09:30 Bri Mob, which is the Indonesian police. But we were under instructions to turn them back. On the same account, if we found Bri Mob or TNI on our side, we'd turn them round and ask them to go back too. That only lasted, for me, only lasted for a month. Because after that I was promoted and sent back to Port Moresby to raise another rifle company in Port Moresby.

10:00 **How hostile were those encounters?**

They varied from, you can say verbal abuse to, on the Papua national's side, shaking their fists at us, occasionally shaking rifles at us, but not pointing them at us and lots of,

10:30 you might say heartfelt feeling, but that was about it. The TNI, arrogant mainly, but acquiesced in turning round when we showed them were the border markers were and said, "Don't come over any more."

**They understood and responded?**

They did. Well, they knew they were in the wrong.

11:00 **What positions were you promoted to?**

When I left to go back to Port Moresby, I was promoted to major. That's the rank for the commander of a rifle company of about 120 guys. So I started off afresh again with not one platoon, but with three platoons to organise.

11:30 I was given a warrant officer as a, a New Guinean, he was my sergeant, he was a sergeant major. And I was given three platoon commanders. Two of them were Australian and one was a Ghurkha officer on exchange from one of the British Ghurkha regiments. I was given 3 sergeants and 3 corporals and

12:00 told to go out to the recruit training company and find 120 soldiers and take them and train them into real soldiers. So that's what we did. We went out there about a month before the recruits had finished their training. So we stayed on generally there until it had finished, which meant that we were able to assist with their training

12:30 and their administration and we'd be a month ahead in knowing their names and sorting things out. So as soon as they finished their recruit training, rather than take them back to Port Moresby, we put them in a truck and took them up to Owers' Corner, which was the start of the Kokoda Trail. So 2 days later, they were half way to Kokoda and we spent about a month up there.

13:00 We took a lot of rations with us, and we took enough money to buy food anyhow if we'd run out. So we spent a month up there. A lot of it was just sitting around at night, talking around the fire, talking to the soldiers so they get used to who was their boss and so on and a little bit of training as well. Not too

much, but just a little bit of training. It was more getting to know you and getting the fell of things and getting people to

13:30 act as a team. And that worked out well.

**How did you feel about the history of the Kokoda at the time?**

I wouldn't have known one tenth about the Kokoda Campaign

14:00 then as I do now. I knew where the major battles had been fought and while we were there, I mean we didn't set out to walk the trail. We set out to get the new recruits a bit accustomed to working together and if they were training on the trail then well and good. We took time

14:30 out to do a bit of exploration as well as far as old weapon pits were concerned and so on. In very, very general terms, where we were, we spoke about what happened here and what happened over there. That was about it. Kept it fairly simple. It was a good place to do training. Better than most. Better than Holsworthy training range.

15:00 **You spent about 8 years in New Guinea. How did you feel about leaving and your time there?**

Well, you always have mixed feelings. It was sad to go. I mean, I'd been with those guys for a long, long time, but I was happy to go at the same time because I was ordered back to Sydney

15:30 to rejoin the 1st Battalion and take the rifle company to Vietnam. So I was probably getting a bit old and tired for New Guinea anyhow. Don't know. It wears out. The joy of it wears out after a while. I was married at the time and it was good to get the family back to Australia anyhow.

16:00 **I didn't realise you had a family in New Guinea. Do you want to talk briefly about that and how difficult that might have been?**

We were busy and my wife was there by herself. Not completely by herself. I mean, she was there with two young kids. One was born in New Guinea. Youngest daughter was born in New Guinea.

**Was your wife Australian?**

Yeah. But

16:30 we spent, she had the company of all the other wives. We were out in the bush all the time. We spent a lot of time in the scrub. That didn't do the family life much good. There's always problems in a , well we'll call it a 3rd world country, where you can't get the food and the clothes and the amenities that you need. So it

17:00 was good to get everybody home anyhow. So I was only home, back to Sydney, out to Holsworthy, introduced around to the new soldiers and 6 weeks later we were off. So it didn't take long to change. It's a soldier's life.

17:30 **I understand that you arrived in Vietnam just after the Tet Offensive. What kind of briefing, or what did you know about that state of the Vietnam War before you left?**

I can't really recall that we had much of a briefing at all. We certainly weren't gathered together to be told, as a formal briefing.

18:00 I don't recall anybody talking to us formally at Holsworthy, I mean anybody who'd just come home from Vietnam to talk to us formally. I think we read a lot in the newspapers, saw a lot on television, but formal briefing, I'm not so sure that we got anything. I can recall that we

18:30 knew that before we left that the second Tet Offensive had started, but only in a minor way. About, if my company was 120 strong, then probably about 20 of them, perhaps 30, went up with the advance party

19:00 and those 30 guys, they joined A company of the 7th Battalion for a few weeks. Out battalion was relieving the 7th, so my A company guys, they joined A company of 7 RAR [Royal Australian Regiment] for 2 or 3 weeks went out on operations with the 7th Battalion when they went out

19:30 and generally, 7th Battalion helped them sort of settle in. So by the time I got there, I went up by Sydney, I got there with the remainder of the troops, they were all settled in. My second in command was there waiting for me and he had a briefing, so he brought me up to speed as soon as we arrived. So that's how the changeover worked. It was good and smooth

20:00 and well worth it. So we did miss out on any real briefing in Holsworthy before we left.

**What was your attitude to the campaign in Vietnam and how much did you want to go?**

I had no personal view.

20:30 But I was a regular soldier so you go where you're sent. I was pleased to go, yes. Because there I was, I'd been in the army 15 years and I'd been trained to do what I was going off to do. Simple as that.

**It sounds like**

21:00 **you felt prepared and well equipped.**

I was as well prepared and as well equipped, both physically and mentally as I possibly could have been without actually having seen action before. But I knew what to do. When we

21:30 came back to Coral after the ambushes, then I knew exactly point by point by point what I had to do to ensure that my company position was going to be as safe and sound and secure as possible. There was for example a huge, because of the distance we were trying to cover, there was a

22:00 huge gap on my left flank between my company and D Company on the left. So I walked over to D Company, spoke to their company commander, a good friend of mine, and we went out to his right flank and I said, “Look down there” and I used his radio and I sent a message through saying, “Stand up and wave a hanky or something,” on my left flank. I had

22:30 that all rigged. So they waved the hanky and that was about a 300 yard gap. I said, “That’s my extreme left hand pit. There’s the gap between you and me. If I get into trouble I want you to have your machineguns on fixed lines to cover that gap between me and you, because I’ll be too busy doing everything else.” So we

23:00 organised that. Then I went back to the…there were 8 army personnel carriers in behind me and I then went back to them and I said, “There’s a gap there to there. Don’t let anybody come through that at all.” Then I spoke to my

23:30 mortar sergeant and he was what we call a mortar fire controller, an MFC, and he was a sergeant. He was attached to be away from the mortars. He was talking to our mortars and he’d give them directions. I said to him, “Sergeant, see that gap there? Don’t let them come through there.” And he was registering targets already,

24:00 even before I got around to talking to him. So he knew where the rounds would fall on certain, depending on where the occasion occurred. But the mortars already would have registered on those targets so that all he had to say was, “Fire target 1,” or, “Fire target 3,” or whatever mumbo jumbo the mortar people use. So I went around, so all those

24:30 things were up there. A checklist of what to do was up there.

**Can you tell us about the intelligence that you received?**

Well, it was poor. We were briefed constantly and we were told that the Tet offensive was over,

25:00 that the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were leaving Saigon in droves, that they were typically tired, wet, cold and hungry, and they were just fleeing north. The exact were the opposite. There was no indication at all that within 24 hours we’re going to have a North Vietnamese regular regiment knocking on our front door.

25:30 That statement by me is, it’s held by everybody who was there. It’s reinforced by the fact that we arrived there late in the afternoon. Common sense tells you that if you’re going to be prepared for anything, you’ve got to get there early enough to be prepared and we

26:00 weren’t. We weren’t prepared for anything. Not like that. We had no defence stores. We had the odd entrenching tool, but just like a little fold up shovel thing. I’d just like you to bear in mind that we were accustomed to, and we were training for counter revolutionary warfare, which is

26:30 heavy patrolling and sniping the odd angry shot at somebody who was running away. We certainly weren’t prepared for 1,500 or 2,000 regular North Vietnamese walking down the road at us. So the beat we had as far as preparation for our weapon pits was the typical Dixie and entrenching tool and things like that. That

27:00 wasn't all that difficult because it was good, soft sandy land and easy to dig in. If it had been harder we’d have been in terrible trouble because there were no engineer supplies. We had no sandbags, we had no star pickets, we had no barbed wire. It came in drips and drabs and there was never, never, never enough of that.

27:30 When we finally got barbed wire, and it comes in coils, and of course the smaller the quantity of wire you get, then the longer you’ve got to stretch it. And the longer you stretch it, the lower it becomes. So what we had was not very effective. But effective

28:00 enough type of thing he extent that when battle was finally joined on the morning of the 16th of May at 2 o'clock in the morning, we had fire support just waiting to be used. The first indication

28:30 we had that the North Vietnamese were there was 2 o'clock in the morning when the sky was alight with their signal flares and their green tracer. The North Vietnamese used green tracer, we always used red. So we knew they were around. So the green tracer was coming in. The flares were going off. The sky was alight

29:00 with 207 millimetre rockets with the flares coming from behind the rocket propelled grenades. They had 12.5 millimetre machineguns firing in and they were on the wire within 2 minutes of all this starting, with torpedoes and satchel charges blowing the wire

29:30 right there in front of us. It didn't take them very, very long to get a number of guys into our weapon pits. My platoon on the extreme left was Neil Wicks, and one of his sections was badly knocked around. We had to withdraw then and then Neil counter attacked and they

30:00 were finished off there. But at the same time, we weren't really aware of it, while all this was going on, what we didn't know, was that there was a Royal Australian Air Force pilot above Coral in a little Cessna with a forward air controller. He was a Mirage pilot.

30:30 He called in, we think it was Phantoms, and there were 3 of them, and there were 3 armed helicopters and there was Spooky. Spooky's an old DC3 loaded down with flares and gattling guns. They were just flying backwards and forwards across our front

31:00 firing right along our wire and finally we had our own guns and they were firing in depth behind the NVA. There was an American 8 inch battery at Tan Uyen about 10 kilometres behind us and they were firing. On one occasion, and we don't know how it happened, but we didn't mind it, an 8 inch shell

31:30 landed about 30 meters in front of our wire, blew a hole in the ground as big as this lounge we're in, scattered dirt from one end of the place to another. The force of the explosion blew an M-60 machinegun our of one of my gunners hands. That was the force of the windblast from that. That hole was really big.

32:00 **Why do you say you didn't mind the friendly fire?**

Because it was just close enough. We didn't know it was coming. One would normally think that it would have landed a bit more than 30 meters from us, but it came at the right time. We had no danger. We weren't in danger. The ground was too soft. So the shell would have penetrated to some degree before. It was soft, sandy land.

32:30 That shell would have penetrated to some degree before exploding. So it just blew this big hole. If it had landed on a base of concrete we'd have all been splintered by it. Then to crap it off, and we didn't' know they were coming at all, but in came, and we thing they were Phantoms, and

33:00 they came down to us from the north and they had napalm. That got dropped almost on our wire. That finished the morning. That finished it.

**Do you think your company received any fall out from the napalm?**

No.

33:30 It was just out far enough. Just out far enough. They should have been coming along, running along our front, but they didn't. They came towards us. The only way, the only reason I knew they were there, because there was so many, everything in our vicinity was on fire. We had tents on fire and bundles and there were ammunition boxes and they were on fire

34:00 and the scrub was on fire. I'm not sure whether I heard any noise to hear them coming, I don't know. I may have heard a noise and not known what it was. I looked up and there before me I saw these fires glinting on their belly tanks and under their wings as they sort of lifted off, and I saw

34:30 those napalm canisters dropping. That's how close they were. Then they just went poof, exploded everywhere.

**It wounds like a very intense action.**

It was. Lasted perhaps 3 hours. Maybe a little longer. First light, half passed 5, 6 o'clock.

35:00 They came in at 2 o'clock. I think it was 2. Yes, it was 2 o'clock that it started. So it was, it could have been perhaps 5 o'clock that it finished. Say 3 hours. Very intense period. Very intense. My company ran out of ammunition. We had a Landrover come,

35:30 one of the guys from behind us, he brought a Landrover up full of ammunition while it was all going on. That was unloaded and then we carried it forward to the guys who needed it. The main force came against me and spilled over to the left and spilled over to the right against the remainder of them. It was intense. Not much time to think. That was how the

36:00 planning that we'd gone through when I first went there paid off, because we knew, everybody who needed to know, knew where that gap was and how dangerous it was to have a gap like that. So all we had to do was fill it with fire. The guns had already settled on where they would be firing if we were on trouble and

36:30 similarly with the mortars and, unbeknown to me, similarly with the 8 inch guns that the Americans had at Tan Uyen. Very intense. It never every got back to that stage while we were there, but it was

continually active. There were,

37:00 there was one other very, very half hearted attempt that didn't, seemed to peter out almost before it started. The commander of the taskforce, he sent tanks up and they were a real blessing because they could get us out of a lot of trouble. Then

37:30 to keep the off guard rather than sit there in a hole, then we started pushing our patrols right out and then going even further, keeping them right away from us and out there looking and patrolling for them. On one particular occasion, D Company, it ran into

38:00 perhaps you might call it a small fortified camp about 3,000 meters north of Coral. He was getting himself into a bit of trouble there until we sent tanks up and APCs [Armoured Personnel Carrier]. I sent one of my platoons with them to give them a bit of help. That worked out pretty well. But we spent, a lot of our time was spent there after that

38:30 major attack, was spent in heavy patrols out at least 1,000 meters and that would give us early warning if we ever ran into anybody. It just kept them away. I think it just pretty well petered out after that. The 3rd Battalion, they were off to our west, and they'd had

39:00 really nothing to do with what we were doing. Then the taskforce commander decided to shift them to the north of us. I've forgotten now, perhaps about 7 or 8 kilometres north of us, to another fire support base. It didn't have guns, but we had the use of the guns

39:30 that were in direct support of the 3rd Battalion. We had, the guns we employed were, they came from 104 battery. The guns that the 3rd Battalion were using came from 161 New Zealand battery. So we had 2 full batteries there based at Coral eventually. They would be used

40:00 not only for our protection, but they were also within gun protection, also in protection of the guns we had. That was why they only went about 7 or 8 kilometres, because in general terms, the range of a 105 millimetre gun is only about 10,000 meters. Okay? So they went about 7 or 8, which gave them a good overlap, which meant that not only

40:30 could our guns and the Kiwi guns put fire onto their wire, but they could fire a further 2 or 3,000 meters beyond them, which would be of great assistance on the event that they were attacked. In fact they were. They were attacked twice after they went up there. Not to the extent that happened at Coral, but enough to keep them on their toes anyhow.

# Tape 7

00:33 **The event you were describing in the thick of it were in the middle of May. Can you lead us up to how this action started and what your orders were when you were going and how you got up there?**

Okay. If I can go back just a little bit before that.

01:00 The main body of the 1st Battalion did not arrive at Nui Dat until about the middle of April. It took us some time to finish the handover with the 7th Battalion and then become used to where our camp in fact was placed within the Nui Dat

01:30 complex. So perhaps for the first week, we concentrated really on local defence where my company in particular was based right next to the airfield, and it extended beyond what you might call the Nui Dat complex to a point where

02:00 one of my platoons was in a sense isolated from company headquarters and 2 platoon. It was very, very heavily defended with engineer stores. I've forgotten what I was going to say. Hang on.

02:30 We were more involved in local defence and keeping people away. It was just a settling in period. We used to sent patrols out each night and they'd be standing patrols ready to ambush anybody who was coming in. It was just a matter of keeping people away from the camp. Our first operation in fact did not

03:00 take place until, I think we finally left for operations on, I think it was the 22nd of April. No it wasn't, it was the 24th of April.

**What is the expression standing patrol? What did that involve?**

A standing patrol is one that might exist of two or three guys who are out there maybe 300 meters, 400 meters in

03:30 front. They are just sitting there, hiding there, observing. Whereas a normal patrol might do a big, long circular loop around the front and then come back.

**During the period at Nui Dat, what other initiation to the whole Vietnam conflict did you receive in any way?**

04:00 Myself and my 2IC [Second in Command] and my two platoon commanders were put in a Landrover and driven around, it was a good, you can call it a road complex in the whole of Nui Dat, pointing out where the other three of our rifle companies were, where the battalion headquarters was, where the

04:30 stores building was. Then on to where the 3rd Battalion complex was, where the guns were, where the engineers were and so on. It was just a ride in the park to see where everybody else was and how good the defences were.

**What were your first impressions of the conflict and how well the Australians were set up?**

It was probably better than I expected

05:00 to see. We had, I mean, it was no Taj Mahal. We were there, arrived there in the dry season and the wet season had finished, and it was just red, there was nothing you could do about it, it was red dust everywhere. But we had large tents and they were in under the

05:30 cover of rubber trees. Rubber trees had been cut down and moved to make room for the tents, so we were getting a modicum, of shelter not only from the sun, but from observation from anybody who might be out there with binoculars and so on. That helped a good deal. But lots of dust. Dust permeated everywhere. Every time a Landrover drove passed, then it would take 5 or 10 minutes

06:00 before the dust settled again. All tents we had, had floorboards. They were movable partition things, but that kept you up off the ground. We had wire stretchers and a mattress of some description, sheet and

06:30 mosquito nets. So that was comfort. It was rough, but it was a combination we didn't get while we were out in the field on operations, which was rough. Each company had its own small canteen building. Pretty small because we couldn't allow anybody in there at any one time.

07:00 It couldn't allow the whole company in there at any one time. It was held to about 30 at a time. We had our own kitchen. Had good cooks. There's one thing that soldiers miss terribly when they're on operations and even in training exercises and that's bread. You can't get bread. The Americans in fact had tinned bread that came in a little tin. You just pierced the top

07:30 a couple of times and put it over a bit of heat. The next thing you know it's gone from dough to bread and that didn't taste too bad at all. We had a couple of good cooks and they used to make bread rolls and fresh bread when they could. Even when we were out on operations they'd get bread out to us. Just digressing a little.

08:00 Rations out in the field was always tinned rations, except, generally, lunch on a Sunday. In would come a helicopter loaded down with hot boxes and rice and stew or curry and stew or something in stew, but lots of rice and good, hot food. Lots of it, more than you could eat, but we were always hungry.

08:30 So rice and stew, rice and curry. Nobody minded that. And fresh bread. If somebody had just come back from R&R somewhere, particularly in Australia, then they'd bring back 40 and 50 meat pies. Everybody missed a meat pie.

**I can imagine that was appreciated.**

It was. It was indeed. Yeah. So I was talking about,

09:00 so that was the sort of

**While we're still talking about rations, what were the hard rations like that you took out on operations?**

It was a combination. We took out a combination of Australian rations and American rations. That helped. That wasn't bad. The American rations, it was edible, though we didn't like eating them, you couldn't eat them for too long. Our rations aren't all that brilliant either. But

09:30 to share two varieties, that was okay. You could live on it.

**What is the difference briefly?**

Theirs is probably not so wholesome as ours, but sweeter and different. I mean, if you like ham and lima beans.

10:00 The Americans liked ham and lima beans. They're not too good sometimes.

**What was your personal favourite?**

I had a deal with a friend who had a job in Saigon. Every couple of weeks he'd sent be down a ten pound

10:30 bag of white rice. I used to share that around with the guys. We had curry as well. Curry and bully beef is not a bad sort of a combination when you get tired of straight bully beef. If it had curry in it, you'd get anybody to eat it. Just a change of taste.

11:00 **Can you briefly explain the relationship of company commander to the men under your command and indeed the chain of command above you in Vietnam?**

The chain of command within a rifle company goes down. So between me and the rifleman soldier is his platoon commander,

11:30 young lieutenant, and the platoon sergeant. Below that again is the corporal and the lance corporal who really owns that rifle solider. It was not my way to castigate

12:00 a private soldier. If I thought he was doing the wrong thing or being slack or being idle or being lazy or whatever that may have come to my mind, I'd be speaking heavily to his platoon commander or sergeant, I wouldn't go to the corporal, always go to the platoon commander or sergeant and tell them that, "I think that Bloggs is damned idle. I can see rust

12:30 on his rifle from here. What are you going to do about it?"

**How important was that sergeant's role in running the company?**

The sergeant was very important. Because it doesn't matter, I found this myself, it doesn't matter how experienced the platoon commander is, the sergeant

13:00 is, he's the steadying influence and he's the one who will offer advice without being asked to the platoon commander. The three platoon commanders I had, they were all very good, but all different in the same way. Two of them were national servicemen, the other one was a regular soldier. They were very good.

**What was the**

13:30 **difference, if any, between a national serviceman and a regular soldier under your command?**

Didn't know which one was which and I never bothered asking. I didn't care. All I cared was that he kept his rifle clean. No, I didn't know. I knew what the proportion was; I knew it was about 60 regs to 40 national servicemen but who was a national serviceman? Didn't bother asking. It was of

14:00 no value. Didn't matter.

**Are there any particular personalities from your company at that time that stand out in your mind?**

Gino Terranova. Gino was my medical corporal. He was a tower of strength. He was a bit of a

14:30 swindler too. He used to carry about 3 times the amount of medical gear that anybody else had. He must have had some friends, but he had access to some medicines that nobody else had access to. I'll just say it like that. He was pretty good at calming down

15:00 pain. He was always there. I recommended Gino for mention in dispatches and that was given. He was always there. Good bloke, Gino. And my batman, Sam Bateman. Sam was always there. He looked after me and a

15:30 company 2IC and my warrant officer, the CSM [Company Sergeant Major], Jack Crant. Because when you might say the days weren't as done and the troops were settling into our little defendant position at 4, 4:30 in the afternoon

16:00 or whenever it was, then I had jobs to do, Jack had jobs to do and so did Bill, my company 2IC. So by the time we got back to where company headquarters was, Gino would have the water bubbling ready for a cup of tea and he'd have the rice on and he'd be cooking for 4 of us. All out food would be there, so

16:30 he was pretty damn handy. Got things right. I mean, in the morning a similar sort of thing was doing. The three of us were out there doing things and seeing how people were after the night. By the time we got back, he'd have a couple of little billies boiling. One for a cup of tea and one for us to shave in. I might point out here, water was still pretty precious no matter how

17:00 many bottles we carried. One huge mug would provide a, we'd all dip in. To save weight, we had one razor and one shaving brush between the five of us. 4. 5. Between the 5 of us. Just dipped

17:30 into the hot water, lathered up and had a shave and then started off on another new razorblade. He was vital in things like that. Most important. He was spare radio operator as well.

**How hard was personal hygiene out in the field?**

Difficult. Very difficult.

18:00 We had, our latrines were always, if we were in ambush, no I'll start off again. If we knew we were going to go ambushing tonight, then we would not have dinner at night. If a soldier

18:30 was in ambush and he needed to relieve himself, then he just lay there with his rifle and ready and evacuated his bowels where he sat or lay. If we were in a defended position, then we had small slit

trenches dug in the depended position. It was absolutely forbidden to go

19:00 outside that defended position because no matter how careful you are, particularly at night, you can go out between Jack there and Joe there, coming back, lose track of just where you are, and you come back through Tom and Dick over there and they'd shoot your head off. So we had the small trenches dug inside. But difficult. Personal hygiene,

19:30 very, very difficult.

**Apart from shaving water, what other concessions were made to keeping yourself clean and orderly out on patrol?**

We did our best to have a change of clothes once a week. That used to come in with the hot lunch on a Sunday. We rarely ever missed a hot lunch on a Sunday.

20:00 Everybody, we probably had, I don't know, 5 or 6 sets of uniforms, 5 or 6 trousers and 5 or 6 shirts. Something in that order because it is needed to change them over all the time. So before we went out on operations, and we'd never know how long we were going to be,

20:30 so we were a bit limited there. Each of our section had three kit bags and all our clothes were marked. So each person would put a shirt and a pair of socks and a pair of trousers into that kit bag. Sometimes people would put a carton of cigarettes in there and

21:00 maybe another hot pie and maybe, I don't know, a lolly or something, but something else would go in there besides. It was only supposed to be for shirts and clothes, but other things would get in there as well. A bit of home comfort anyhow. So that would come in with the rations at lunchtime on a Sunday unless we were otherwise involved. The dirty ones would go

21:30 back and then they'd be sent off to a laundry in Baria or one of the paddy fields and washed there, sent back, and then fairly clean, pretty clean actually, cleaner than the dirty ones anyhow after you'd been in them for a week, and ready to go back out again. So it was a good system.

22:00 **You were almost like kings when you had a clean pair of clothes on.**

Oh yeah.

**How did you receive orders from battalion level?**

Our CO was Phillip Bennet and he made lieutenant general and he was Chief of the Army. He was Governor of Tasmania for quite a while

22:30 and he was Administrator of the Commonwealth, so on and off for three of four occasions. He was extremely good to work for and his orders were, he never left us in doubt as to what he wanted us to do when he gave us our orders. They were usually face to face. That wasn't always possible, frequently they'd come over the radio as well. He used to speak slowly and we would

23:00 quite meticulously left us in no choice as to what he expected of us. He used to speak slowly, so that gave us the opportunity to write it down, word for word, exactly what he wanted us to do. So that worked well. Yeah. So we never had any troubles there. We did have problems sometimes, but we had no problems.

**Was there an occasion where you on the ground had cause to question the orders coming through from the CO?**

No.

23:30 **Was it thought about?**

Thought about, yeah. He was not a man to have anybody query his orders.

**How important a role do you think you had in the running of the entire system? It seems to be a pivotal ones in many way. You were in charge of the unit that does the most.**

24:00 **Or is that a misconception? How responsible are you for what happens as a company commander?**

I always thought I was responsible for everything. If I felt that one of my platoon commanders had dome the wrong thing, or if I felt

24:30 that he'd let me down after me giving him instructions, then I'd haul him up and ask him to go through again with me the instructions I'd given him.

**How do you deal with that responsibility? Essentially all these men's lives are on your head.**

You,

25:00 you become determined that it just doesn't happen again and you issue orders that cannot possibly be misunderstood.

25:30 **Let's go back to the 22nd of April when you were sent out into the field. What were your orders at that stage?**

Actually, I said the 22nd, it was the 24th. That came as a bit of a shock to us in fact, because we'd been waiting and waiting and waiting and saying, "When are we going? When are we going? When are we going?" Then

26:00 on the 23rd the orders came, "You're out tomorrow." That was a bit of a shock, because that was the 24th of April and we were all set to, in our minds anyhow, we were all set to enjoy Anzac Day in 36 hours time. But it wasn't to be. So it was the battalion's first operation.

26:30 We'd been out a little bit before, but only company by company and not going very far. It was more a familiarisation journey out there over a period of about 6 hours in armoured personnel carriers just to see what the countryside around the place looked like. But this was our first battalion operation. We were going out to the west of

27:00 Nui Dat. There's a small mountain range, two small mountain ranges in fact, which, and both of them generally run north south. There's a bit of a track. They called it the Old French Road, but it's more of a track, that ran between those two little mountain ranges. The Nui Ti Rise they used to call them. I was instructed to go by,

27:30 take my company by armoured personnel carrier to the base of the nearest mountain range and get dropped off there and then walk through and start searching that right hand mountain range for any VC who might be there, and I'd be moving from north to south and seeing what we could

28:00 find. So we set off and we were moving through elephant grass we used to call it. It would have been 7 or 8 feet tall. We got there at let's say noon and it was stinking hot. I've told many people

28:30 that I fear we were most unsoldierly, because the scout was out front and he had a compass and he had three or four guys immediately behind him, hacking away with machetes, trying to push a path through this rotten stuff. This elephant grass is sort of saw toothed so it's rubbing against you all the time. It's full of biteys and mossies and

29:00 other knots of things, buzzing around all over the place. Your shirt is being filled up with pollen falling from all this muck. And before I knew where, I'm starting to get reports that soldier X has gone down with heat exhaustion and soldier Y has gone down with heat exhaustion and so was soldier Z. And we were still stuck in all this rotten stuff and couldn't get out of it. So

29:30 we carried them and just kept on walking until, and got out of it. We sort of poured water bottle after water bottle over these guys, but had to get them evacuated. By then we were out of all this stuff and ready to start climbing. It just looked, I thought it was too steep to bother about, but in the

30:00 event, what I decided to do was I had myself of my company headquarters, and I kept two platoons with me and we got onto the major ridge line and started climbing. I kept the third platoon down below and they were walking slowly and very carefully up the Old French Road which was at the base of it. The plan there in fact

30:30 was that we would walk along towards the top of the ridge line anyhow and we just knew that from habit, the Vietcong would camp very, very close to water and that if there was any water in any of the ravines that flowed down from the top of the Nui Ti Rise down to the Old French Road, then we might well be able to flush them out and have

31:00 it was the number 3 platoon down there on the Old French Road. So we set and the first day nothing much happened. Fired a couple of odd angry shots and nothing happened. The second day we flushed

31:30 a couple of guys and lost them. Then it got far, far too steep so I left one of my platoons right up the top and moved myself and company headquarters down to the base again to join 3 platoon on the Old French Road. So we travelled slowly up the road. The platoon I left up the top they could travel a little bit faster because they weren't being held back

32:00 by masses of numbers that we were there. They had some success up there. So we were pretty pleased with that. Almost that the same time one of the other companies found a huge abandoned hospital, and another one of the companies found a huge supply dump. By then we'd all reached, my

32:30 company anyhow, had reached the sort of end of the Old French Road where the Nui Ti Rise petered out and we got flown out. I think it was a total of 5 days. A lot of effort for not much result, but it was good training. We learned a lot over that.

**How did things change for you after you had been out on operations for the first time?**

33:00 I was pleased that we'd been successful. It taught us a few lessons. We appreciated that elephant grass was something that we'd never go back into again if we ever had the choice. That was really terrible. But it confirmed all the lessons that we'd been teaching each other for the previous

33:30 few months. There was nothing terrible we did that we shouldn't have done.

**Not long after coming back, you were sent out on operation again. What were your orders there?**

It was fairly simple. We were to move to

34:00 what was eventually to be called fire support base Wattle. I was to command the fire support base while the other three rifle companies were out and about around the fire support base, searching for anybody who might be there. As we've learned subsequently, it wasn't, that was up to the north west of Nui Dat, not

34:30 all that far really. We thought we were going to be there for a week, maybe a bit more. That was the impression I had anyhow. But as it turned out, we'd been there overnight and the orders came, "Move again." So what happened then was that

35:00 the battalion, less my company, were flown off to the next fire support base, and I've forgotten the name of it. Harrison. Sent off to Harrison and started working there while I ensured, as commander of the fire support base at Wattle, I was ensuring the safety of that

35:30 until right at the very last moment. We had a troop of APCs with us, so they, this was getting late in the afternoon by the time we were ready to leave, and abandon the fire support base. So the APCs, they took us to a

36:00 US cavalry base called Black Horse, which is north of Nui Dat. We got in there perhaps half passed 4, 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Getting dark. Yanks knew we were on our way. They found some hutted accommodation for us and took us up to their meal house and fed us and

36:30 said, "Take care, we'll see you in the morning." Well, after we'd had dinner I was sort of sitting outside with my 2IC and my CSM. I was looking around the place and there, and I hadn't noticed it before because we made a point of not sitting on top of the APCs while we were travelling, we were quite down low for a little bit of protection,

37:00 there, just to the east of us, was this huge mountain. It seemed to be only just across the road that it just travelled up. It could not have been more that 2 or 3,000 meters to our east. Then I looked in another direction and there, not more that 3 or 400 meters away from where we were sitting was this huge steel pylon. It was a

37:30 radio beacon and there's a red light on top going blink, blink, blink, blink. It was obviously a warning light for helicopters flying at night to stay away from there. I thought to myself, "Holy cow, that's the biggest aiming mark I've ever seen in all my life." I just looked at that little mountain, just a couple of thousand meters away and I thought, "If anybody's up there with a couple of mortars, then they're going to make a mess of us." So

38:00 I called in my three platoon commanders and told them about that and they said, "Well, what are we going to do about it?" I said, "Well, I'm not sure. We can't just scarp it and leave the APCs here." O went over to talk to the commander of the APCs and all his guys had seen it and they were sleeping inside. So there was no room for us inside. They were sleeping inside the APCs. So I said, "What we'll do is," the Yanks had given us

38:30 this hutted accommodation, it was rough but it was a bed, anyhow they had all these iron stretchers, I said, "Get the guys to sleep under the stretchers." So that's what we did. At first light we cleaned our teeth and had a shave, got the APCs and ran for it. It didn't quite finish there because we were still travelling towards,

39:00 in the general direction of Saigon and we came to this little place called Trang Bang, which will always stay in my mind, because just as we hit Trang Bang, and we would nose the tail and Trang Bang was just this little village with shops on either side. I though "Oh!" I hated being in there, just so enclosed. But there was nothing we could do about it, and the next moment there's buzz, buzz,

39:30 buzz, flop, flop, flop and an American military police helicopter landed on the road a couple of hundred meters in front of us, and two more behind us. Out jumped maybe a dozen military policemen, US military policemen, armed to the hilt and called me out. I said, "What do you guys want?" They said, "We're missing some tools."

40:00 I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Somebody's stolen a box of tools." I said, "Don't be bloody stupid." They said, "Well, we're going to search your APCs." I said, "No, you're not." The next minute, click and click, he put one up the spout. I said, "Who's your commander?" and the sergeant said, "I am," and I said, "I am, sir, thank you." He said, "I don't call you Aussie sir." I said, "Well, you call me sir. What's your number? What's your name?" So he gave me his name, sir, thank you.

40:30 So I said, "Well, let's go and talk to the APCs." The bloody APC commander had it in his, it was in his APC, big bundle of tools. I said, "Are you happy now?" He said, "No, there's something else we want." I said, "What's that?" He said, "These buggers have stolen one of our AK47s that we knocked off from Charlie last week as well. Hand it over." I handed it over. Then they handed back three rifles that they'd stolen from the APCs

41:00 instead.

# Tape 8

00:35 **What were the repercussions of this incident in Tram Bon for you as a company commander?**

There weren't any. It was probably 7 or 8 days, maybe 5 or 6 days before I ever spoke to

01:00 Colonel Bennet face to face. It wasn't something I was going to talk to him about over the radio about anyhow. By then things had cooled down a bit and I think we were getting involved in something that was much more important than that anyhow, as I told you.

**What was your response towards the APC people who had?**

I spoke heavily to him. Left at that.

01:30 **In general, how would you characterise the relationship between American and Australian forces?**

Look, I had very, very little to do with them. Very, very little. It didn't start until we were at Black Horse. They

02:00 just put themselves out to help us in every way they could. From there I had no dealings at all with any American soldiers until we were at Coral. The Americans you might say gave the taskforce, or lent the taskforce,

02:30 sent a battery of 155 millimetre guns to the taskforce and they were under command of the taskforce. They were on tracks. They wound up at Coral. They weren't

03:00 there for the major battle we had, but they were there when the NVA attacked Balmoral where the 3rd Battalion was. So their guns with longer range and a heavier shell was very, very useful to them. Their guns were only perhaps less than a hundred meters behind my command post. They seemed

03:30 to come down in dribs and drabs to say, "Hello" and, "How are you doing?" and, "What can we do for you?" and so on. When things were quiet they would come down and say, "do you want to send half your guys up for a decent hot meal?" They had their own kitchen cooking away.

04:00 **How did the Australians in general feel they were equipped matched with the American army?**

We didn't think they were, well, their fighting equipment was on a par with ours. Their logistic support is much, much superior to our. Gunners are different. I guess even our

04:30 gunners would have had the opportunity to have better feeding arrangements than we had because it takes a Chinook helicopter to carry one in. If you had the opportunity to put on another say 20 cans of water, then you do that.

05:00 They travel with their own field kitchen.

**You were moving towards Tram Bon towards Saigon. What were your orders at this stage? How much did you know about what was happening?**

Remained pretty little. I was given instructions then that our battalion headquarters in fact was

05:30 going to Anderson. Finally going to Anderson. Battalion headquarters and the guns were going to fire support base Anderson. Where as the rifle companies, we were being dispersed and going looking for the NVA, or Charlie, again. So

06:00 the APCs, they let us off in a rice paddy field at the base of a ridge line. I knew that would take us up to where my search was going to start. We were let off at 2 o'clock in the afternoon

06:30 I suppose. Climbed and climbed and climbed. It wasn't steep. It was just long. Round about 4 o'clock in the afternoon I came upon a really good little clearing. It was about 3 or 4 times the size of a baseball court. I looked at it and I was getting a bit tired, and I said to my CSM "this

07:00 looks like a good helicopter landing point." The rule of thumb was "if you're going anywhere, get somewhere where a helicopter can come in and land without any difficulty." He said, "Looks good to me too." So I said, "Okay, let's see where we're going. Just move into the thicket there and we'll set ourselves up." So we have this procedure where

07:30 we can very, very quickly go into all round defence. The lead platoon knows that it has to cover that arc from 12 o'clock around to 4 o'clock, and the next one from 4 to 8, and the next one from 8 to 12, and company headquarters in the middle. That's just the normal battle procedure where you do things

without even thinking about it. As soon

08:00 as you're in position there, then each of the three platoons would send out clearing patrols. Just a couple of guys, they'd go out 50 or 60 yards and go out one way and come back the other way, just to make sure there's nobody in the immediate vicinity. Anyhow, it just so happened that when one platoon came back, their platoon commander cam in to me. He said, "There's a track up there about

08:30 40 yards. Bluey Dorton" who was the corporal who went out "he reckons there's fresh tracks up there." I said, "let's talk to Bluey. What do you think Bluey?" He said, "I'm sure they're fresh. The imprints are sharp. There's a bit of breeze around right now. If it had been going on for quite some time

09:00 they'd have sort of dulled over a bit." I said, "Sounds good to me. Let's get up and go forward." So we moved forward till we were you might say virtually on the track. Very carefully we got one of the platoons to go onto the far side of the track and I had another platoon on our side and company headquarters and the third platoon just a little

09:30 way back. So we set up this little ambush and said, "There may well be somebody coming tonight or tomorrow morning." So the night passed and about quarter to six, six o'clock in the morning I was awake and I looked around and I was

10:00 turned around and I said to my sergeant major "it's time to send the clearing patrols out." He said, "it is too." I sent the order down the radio "send the clearing patrols out." And so help me God, 20 seconds later, off went the Claymores, off went the rifles and off went the M60 machinegun as well. I thought to myself "God,

10:30 they've shot out my clearers." Then came the word back. "We found one, we found two, we found three of them." These VCs were coming up the path and they were tax collectors. We know that because their pockets and bags were full of paper money and full of jewellery and watches.

11:00 They were, one of them was carrying three rifles and another one had a couple of pistols. They had a whole bundle of stuff. There's a message came through from battalion headquarters "what's all that firing going up there?" I said, "I'll tell you when I let you know how many we've got." Fun town.

11:30 The upshot of that was that about an hour later I got a radio call saying "there's a helicopter coming in wants to bring you back to battalion headquarters." I said, "Please don't do that. There's still plenty of guys around here, we just know. You bring the helicopter in and you tell them where we are." They said, "We're sending it in." I said, "Thanks a million." So back it came

12:00 and the brigade commander was waiting for me, Brigadier Hughes. So he said, "I hear you've got a successful ambush." I said, "it was pretty good." He said, "Well, that's okay. Now I want to talk to you." I'd been out of communications in the travelling in the APC and he gave me a real blast because I hadn't been talking to him.

12:30 He claimed that nobody knew where I was and that I really shouldn't to it anymore. Well, I just knew that he was having me on. I think that he was angry with me. I just knew that the APCs were talking back to their base, so they all knew where we were, but nevertheless. Then Colonel Bennet had a

13:00 go at me because I'd stopped short of where he told me to go by about 500 meters. He didn't want to hear about the helicopter landing part. He didn't want to hear about the successful ambush anyhow. So I said, "Yes, sir. I'll go off and be a good boy in the future."

**How did you take out that frustration? It must have been horribly frustrating to be dressed down for something that you didn't**

13:30 I went back and told my CSM and my 2IC. That's what I did. The next morning, three more came along. I just knew it. Three more of them. Different guys. We got on the radio and Bluey Dorton was sure that a couple of them had been wounded and got off. So we radioed in and said

14:00 "send out the tracker dogs." And they said, "We can't. They're too busy" or "they've been up all night" or something or other. I said, "Send them. We've got these monkeys." So they didn't send them. So we went chasing after them. Found one of them, but he was dead already. So from there, that's when we got called back to Anderson. So we went,

14:30 we retraced our steps and went down to where the APCs had dropped us off and they took us up to Anderson. The whole battalion was gathered there then and then came the orders. "Off to this place called Coral, Charlie's coming out of Saigon. Cold, wet, tired and hungry. We're going in to ambush them, they'll be easy meat." That was,

15:00 that's the full circle.

**We've talked about what happened a bit then.**

Oh, I'm sorry. There's a couple of more things I forgot to mention. We were, our battalion in fact was over strength. We had, when the 7th Battalion went home after we'd relieved them, they left behind I don't know, it might have been 40 soldiers, it might have been 50 or 60 who hadn't

15:30 finished their full year. So they were haded over to us. That was the normal sort of thing. Nobody realised that took us over strength. So, can't have that, can you? So it was decided that they would all be sent home. Forget that would then make us under strength, but don't worry about that. So it was decided that

16:00 they would be sent home. Then it was realised that some of our soldiers, I don't know how they worked it out, but anyhow, it was realised that some of our soldiers, even though we'd only been there for less than a month, were due to go off on rest and recreation leave for a week. So I said, "I'm not sending any of mine off." They said, "yes, you are. 7." So I lost 7, just like that.

16:30 They flew into Coral with us and were then, there must have been 30 sent home. Sent back to Australia or back to wherever they went. Phnom Penh maybe. You had your choice, you could go home to Australia, or you could go to Singapore, to Phnom Penh, or, what's the capital

17:00 of Thailand, Bangkok. If you were lucky, you could go up to Japan if the Yanks were going there that day. So it would have been maybe about 30. They were all sort of landed, we flew into Coral finally, in the Chinooks, then they were sent off over there and flown straight back to Nui Dat.

17:30 **At this stage you didn't know what you were about to face.**

We were not, no.

**When was the first inkling you got that this was out of the ordinary, it wasn't going to plan?**

18:00 There were a bundle of things that sort of didn't make sense. We were told that these roosters were coming out of Saigon, fleeing. Cold, wet, tired and hungry, okay? Yet, they ambushes, three ambushes were being laid to, let us say the

18:30 north, the north west and the north east of Coral. Not quite as simple as that, but out that way anyhow. Generally northwards of Coral. Away from where these people were supposed to be coming. Charlie company was sent to the south to clear the road. I thought "that's a bit strange too." To cap it all, battalion headquarters was

19:00 to join me and my company on location, and I was to protect battalion headquarters while I was in ambush. So we all four of us company commanders tried to illicit a little more information, but colonel Bennet was pretty

19:30 fixed "just get on and do it." So we did. That all struck funny, but there was no answer. Then of course, on that night, that's the night of the 14th, it started with D Company got into trouble, Charlie bounced the hem and

20:00 I think they lost 5 or 6 soldiers that night and a whole bundle wounded when the rockets, the blooming rocket propelled grenades came in. So they were off to my west. B Company was to my east and they had the NVA bounce into them, but then slipped around

20:30 to the side. The NVA came in between me and B Company. We found a couple of bodies the next morning. That was it.

**Whose bodies were they?**

NVA. Then of course, they

21:00 just, they weren't waiting and stopping for an argument with us, they were headed further off to bigger things and so on. They were headed back to the, they continued through to the fire support base. We weren't really aware of that at the time. Perhaps about an hour later, all hell let loose. We weren't, I was only 600 meters away.

21:30 There was no way in the world we could get out of there, stumbling around in the dark to go and help them poor brutes. So they really went on there and did over the mortars and the guns. Then the next morning we were all ordered to return to Coral.

22:00 D Company, who was as I said off to my west, they started off about the same time as I did, and they ran into a group of NVA who were returning from Coral. So there was a little pitch battle going on between them and D Company. We were, my company had sort of cleared ourselves out of the scrub and we were out in a

22:30 flat bloody paddy. The next minute we're taking overs from D Company. You know what an over is? From our own troops. That's, that is an over. So we just dived behind little paddy buns and prayed that it was going to be all over. The day hadn't started and here's all these unexpended

23:00 bullets of D Company coming over our heads. That's an over. I was fortunate here, because Bob Sutton, who was leading us out, his platoon, he was further ahead than the rest of us. We were spread out because of the open country.

23:30 He was further ahead from us, and he managed to extricate himself from all this. He said, “This is where I am.” I said, “Don’t stop. Just get going. When you get into Coral, track down the operations officer and get him to show you where our company, what area to defend as being allocated to our company

24:00 and get ready to guide me in and take me straight to all those, straight to that area.” So Bob said, “I’ll do that.” He was there waiting for me. By the time Tony, who commanded D Company, had finished his little effort, that was time for me to get to our feet and start getting back.

24:30 So Bob was waiting for me and he said, “This is where we should be, but B company have snitched a bit of our dirt and this is why we’ve got this big gap.” So I had a few strong words with B company and then left it at that. It was too late to change things and that’s when I started walking around to everybody else, telling them about the gap and what I wanted them to do for me.

25:00 […]

**What was your reaction as a company commander when the first instance you had of losing troops?**

25:30 I was philosophical. I felt I’d done everything that was possible. I felt that I couldn't see that

26:00 there would have been any other way to guard the interest of my soldiers in the way they were set up for defensive position. They were taken by a combination of an assault that

26:30 they couldn’t withstand and by the lack of proper defensive stores and the way in which the North Vietnamese used their weapons. We were very fortunate that they

27:00 didn’t do more damage to us than they did. We were stretched out thinly enough as it was. We were fortunate with the lightness of the casualties that we had. Though I feel badly about it. I wrote to all their parents. The platoon commander, Neil Wicks, he was pretty upset, a national serviceman, he was

27:30 upset. He got over it. I’m not sure that, I didn’t mention it, but, or perhaps I did. Did I mention that I ordered Neil to counter attack them? Neil called me on the radio and he said,

28:00 “these guys have been hit and looks as if they’re dead. I’m not sure what I’m going to do.” I said, “in that case, withdraw the rest of your section.” Neil was a platoon commander responsible for three sections. It was just the one left hand section pit had been

28:30 taken out by the NVA. I said, “Withdraw the guys from there and we’ll bring in the mortars onto those pits as best as we can. That will hopefully assist getting the NVA out of our pits.” It did to a market degree and Neil said, he used words like, as I recall it, he said

29:00 “I think they’re moving.” I said, “Then counter attack now. Keep them going.” That’s when he moved back in again and we took over the pits. I think they left a couple of guys behind. I think I was philosophical. Can’t afford to be upset or emotional I’m afraid. I didn’t think so anyhow. But I did

29:30 write to their parents.

**What made you angry?**

I was angry on several occasions when I felt that we weren’t being looked after as well as we should have been. I was

30:00 angry with all three of my platoon commanders because I didn’t think that they were, not together but separately, on separate occasions, I didn’t think they were working as hard and as well as they were capable of doing. I was angry with some of the orders that were coming down. Upset.

30:30 Again, you’ve got to clear that from your mind.

**How do you clear that emotional haze from your mind and get back to work when things are not going well?**

Well, because there’s a job in hand and because

31:00 what’s done is done and is there any more point in carrying on about it? Because there isn’t. That’s how I handled it.

**A common expression used in commanding a battle is that there’s the fog of war.**

31:30 **Can you tell us what that means to you?**

It means that it’s difficult to understand what’s going on. It means that you’re not being told, not being given adequate information. It means that there’s misunderstandings. But chiefly I think things

32:00 aren’t going the way you’ve expected them to go. That’s what I think the fog of war is. It’s probably all things to all people, but different ideas, but that’s, yeah. When it doesn’t work out the way it’s planned

to go and something serious has happened.

**When did that fog first start to lift for you at Coral?**

32:30 It started lifting the next day when we were more clear with what was going on. When miraculously more defence stores started turning up. When

33:00 I was able to have the time to get out and talk to all my soldiers where I had no time at all to do anything at all when we came back from the ambush position to set up the defence position. All I really had time for there was not to talk to my soldiers, but the talk

33:30 to the support weapons. Go over to D Company, and talk to my mortar man and talk to the guns and so on about the gap. That's what really worried mer. So there was no time to sort of get around to talk to the soldiers and say, "if something happens then we are as ready for it as we possibly can be." So the next day, the next morning. The next morning was quite different.

34:00 When those F-4 Phantoms, I say F-4 Phantoms, we think they were F-4 Phantoms, we're not, we're infantry soldiers, we don't know one aircraft from another, but we think they were F-4 Phantoms. When they came in and dropped the napalm that, you might say that saved the day. After that, they were so noisy, they were only 50 or 60 feet

34:30 above the deck, I'm sure. We saw them. It seemed like minutes only later the sun was up and the sky was just one huge red haze. There was fires everywhere. Every little thing that was capable of combustion

35:00 was smoking away. There were fires everywhere and the sky was just one huge red haze. There was the stink of explosives and kerosene in the air. I can smell it now as I talk about it. There was this deathly hush. Not a bird twittering.

35:30 Deathly hush, it was just so quiet after the noise we'd been going through. I called in my three platoon commanders and had a few words with them and said, "I'll be out to see your guys in the next 10 or 15 minutes." My company sergeant major, he called in the three sergeants, had a few words with them.

36:00 Gino Terranova, he went off and took out a big bag of medical bits and pieces that he thought might be needed out there. One of the guys in, John Harmer, he was one of the artillery guys with me; he gave me a cup of tea.

36:30 I'll never forget that. Then things started you might say getting back to normal. I did the rounds, went out to see all the troops. Gave them a swig out of my water bottle. Then back to business again.

**What was the situation with defensive stores**

37:00 **that you had lacked?**

They just weren't there. Why didn't they get there? I don't know. I can only hazard a guess, but we just didn't give taskforce headquarters enough time to get them there. We were,

37:30 it would have been 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I'm sure, before I had returned to fire support base Coral. Even if we'd told the logistic base

38:00 back at Vung Tau at 8 o'clock that morning, I've got my doubts that they could have had time to get together everything that we should have had and loaded up and sent to us. The only feasible way of getting all that stuff to us would have been by Chinook. You wouldn't put all that stuff on board 3-tonners and drove it up through Indian company.

38:30 I don't think, logistically I don't think it was possible to get it out there in time for that night even if we'd been aware that there was an NVA regiment just over the hill waiting to come in.

**You then had a further two weeks at Coral after that, but it was never quite the same?**

39:00 No.

# Tape 9

00:34 **You talked a lot about Coral. Can you talk about your views on the significance of that action?**

01:00 I think it showed that we were training wise and preparedness for war wise I think we were more than capable of holding our own. I think we were essentially trained for counter revolutionary warfare where we were out there

01:30 hopefully looking to find the Vietcong and tracking them down by methods that had been employed for

a long, long time. Perhaps arguably commencing in Malaya and Borneo where our troops had been most successful in

02:00 tracking down, let's call them bandits. The last thing we were excepting to do was to be fighting main force soldiers. Yet, the skills that we had learned as part of out standard military training, in this I'm talking about that direction of fire support, just

02:30 came through as a matter of norm. When I saw that gap that was going to exist between my company and D Company, or Charlie Company over on the left, I just knew that I had to do something about it. I knew that I'd been trained or taught back in the dim dark past that I needed to ensure that

03:00 Charlie Company's machineguns were going to be able to fire there and not fire on my troops as well. I knew that my mortars had to cover that gap, and I knew that the guns could also cover that gap. I didn't need a little checklist to say, "What do I do next?" I just knew it. When it comes to withstanding an assault like that, that we thought was quite massive and

03:30 quite different from anything that we'd been trained for, then we stood firm and we'd like to think that we'd won out. Does that cover it?

**When you say that action was like nothing you'd encountered before, how much of that was due to the fact there wasn't a clear**

04:00 **frontline?**

Well, there was no frontline. It was not even an (UNCLEAR) frontline, there was no frontline. We were, I know I'm harping back on it all the time, but we were expecting to fight counter revolutionary warfare. When the first battalion went to

04:30 Vietnam in 1965, that was what they were doing. They were searching and destroying, they were seeking out, using good intelligence they were seeking out the Vietcong in their camps away from habitation. They were searching villages and

05:00 not only the people within the village, but the village itself using all those good tactics. Nothing had ever, ever come up like this before. Nothing similar, not with our forces. The American forces had many, many battles the way we had, some of them much. Much more significant indeed.

05:30 **A key element of that battle was good strategy. What other survival techniques got you through that?**

We survived, and we survived well because the soldiers stood firm.

06:00 I think it was as simple as that. They didn't run from it, they just kept on at it. Is that too simple? That's the truth.

**Of the time you spent in Vietnam, it sounds like you were mainly out in the field on ops rather than in barracks.**

06:30 Oh, yes indeed.

**How much did that contribute type of thing he stress of the time?**

It was stressful because you never knew when you were going to strike the NVA again or the Vietcong. Significantly though, it was the lack of action that put

07:00 I think more stress onto us than continuous action in that we were, I mean nothing was the same again. Every time we went out on operations, we were, I was, we were expecting to bump into main force troops.

07:30 It wasn't that we'd been told they were out there, it was that the first time we struck them we weren't told they were there and we found them. We felt, I felt anyhow, I'll talk about myself, I just felt, every time we went out on operations, that we were going to strike main force again. Well, we never did. We struck parties of, I think the biggest party we ever struck was about 20.

08:00 On any number of occasions however, we would go for days and days without seeing anybody. Without seeing anybody. When contact was made, it was always a bit of a surprise. At long last the boredom has been

08:30 lifted again. So there's more stress, it's just as much stress when nothing's happening as when it does happen. Perhaps when something happens, then there's no time for you to be stressful. Is that double Dutch?

**In Vietnam, how did you cope with the boredom and what could you do to relieve it?**

09:00 No, there was no boredom. On operations you mean and the quietness and the lack of contact, well that wasn't boredom. There was plenty of fear attached to that as well, because you just never knew when you'd bounce into somebody. Sometimes your nose would tell you that you were in the right spot

09:30 where somebody should be. Particularly little creek beds, things like that. Nobody can go without water for too long. There was always that feeling that sooner or later you'd bounce somebody. So there was no boredom. No boredom at all.

10:00 Actually, there was one period of boredom. It was terrible. The engineers were cutting swathes through the jungle to make it easier for the VC to travel from A to B and at the same time it would be a sort of a man made helicopter landing

10:30 pad. Some of these swathes, they were 20 kilometres long, which meant if you were in a hurry, you could put your tanks or your APCs into one of them and belt down there as fast as possible. If you wanted to land troops in a hurry, then there was plenty of open jungle to land the helicopters and so on. The engineers were there and they had these massive

11:00 D8 and D10 tractors, bulldozers, with a length of chain or cable that would hold one of Her Majesty's Australian ships firmly anchored. They'd just tow that between them and over would come the trees. We were there guarding them and that was boredom. We hated doing that job.

11:30 It was noisy, dirty, dusty, couldn't' hear a thing. We'd have been taken many times if anybody had been around the place. So that was boring. I think that lasted for about 10 days. That was awful.

**Did you and your men get any time for leave?**

We had the, every now and then we had the opportunity to

12:00 send 2 or 3 guys at a time to Saigon as part of the embassy guard and they'd be there for a week. Whether that was a break for them or not is another matter, because those guarding the embassy would have been a bit stressful on occasions and they'd be on the lookout all the time. But that was a break for them.

12:30 Most of them went off on 5 or 6 or 7 days leave to, as we've been through before, to Bangkok or Australia, sometimes to Japan if they were lucky. They'd all come back loaded down with frozen meat pies.

**How**

13:00 **aware, or what were your feelings on the idea that communism was a real threat to Australia? = and that's why you were there in Vietnam?**

I don't think I ever thought about it. Is that too simple? Then put me down on record. I don't think I ever thought about it. I went because I was told to.

13:30 That was my job.

**I understand your tour lasted 12 months. Why were you sent back to Australia?**

To go to staff college. I was selected to attend staff college and that's the

14:00 first rung in higher military education. There were, that was at Queenscliff then. It's now shifted here to the ACT. There were about 60 of us pulled back from, probably at least 20 of them had been pulled back from Vietnam at the same time as me. They were all pretty much my age and

14:30 some were of my seniority, probably in round terms, probably about a third were in my age and seniority, another third were a year junior to me and another third were a year senior to me. So all the same ilk. We all had different views. We were gunners

15:00 and we were armoured corps and we were infantry and we were signallers and we were engineers. We were educationists, we were psychiatrists, we were a whole mixture of people from different jobs within the army. We had a number from overseas. An American, a couple of Kiwis, couple of English,

15:30 a Malaysian, an Indonesian. I think that's about it. So there was a good mix of cultures. Good mix of ideas. Lots of arguments during discussions in the classroom. We were in little syndicates of 10 I guess, and they were a mixture. We changed the syndicates around every month or every two months, something like that. So that you didn't

16:00 become too used to arguing with that group of people. So you'd wind up with another group. You might have one person that you'd been in the previous groups with. So they'd be mixed around again and then they'd swap the instructors around and so on. In its way, in a clerical sense, it was quite interesting. Lots of views.

16:30 Lots of views. It was good.

**When you were pulled out of Vietnam, did you and your company have an inkling that the war was un-winnable?**

That was something that we never entertained.

17:00 We saw our task as doing what we were told to do as best as we possibly could. We were looking at life on the micro scale, not the macro scale. Was it un-winnable? Well, it was probably un-winnable the moment the politicians

17:30 decided that they didn't want to have anything more to do with it. It wasn't through lack of willpower on the part of the armed services.

**How was the morale when you were pulled out?**

18:00 Just before I answer that, I'd like, by the time we were getting toward that, I'd finished at staff college and I was working at army headquarters and life in Canberra was not all that hot then. We were being abused

18:30 on the buses. We were being abused on the streets. We were being abused in the restaurants. It got so bad to my shame, and I guess to his as well, General Daly, who was then the Chief of General Staff, he instructed us all to stop wearing uniforms. I felt terrible about that. I bet he did too, but he thought that's what was necessary to do to stop

19:00 what was going on. That was awful. I never felt quite whole when that order came and I had to obey it. I felt terrible about that. We were still fighting in Vietnam then. I thought "this is …"

**When did that order come? Was that when the big public protests were going on?**

Yeah.

19:30 It was not good. Not good at all. They made us feel unworthy. They made us feel dirty. They made us feel, you know, bad. It wasn't good.

**Did you have thoughts of getting out of the army at that time?**

No. No, not then. But there was, no. Not then.

20:00 I didn't leave the army for that reason. It was not a good scene. Not good at all.

**A lot has been written about Vietnam and it's now many years later. Do you feel now that 1RAR has had the recognition finally that it was due?**

20:30 No. Thank you for asking me that question. We're still working on it. No, I don't. We'll change that. We're working on it.

21:00 **In a position of command, now in reflections, was there a time in Vietnam when you felt you were faced with a difficult decision?**

21:30 No. No. No, I never had, and I never had since, had any difficulty with any of the decisions that I made. Some of them might have been wrong, but I've never admitted to it. Never concerned myself that I made the wrong decision. If it was wrong, that's, you can always look at things after the event and say, "Boy, I'd do that again

22:00 another way." But when you're making a decision there and then on the spot and you've got, how much time do you need to make up your mind, 3 seconds sometimes, or less, then the decision you make is the right one. And you can't change it. No matter what. So it's got to be the right one.

**What is your strongest memory of that year?**

22:30 At Coral, just before the F-4 Phantoms came in, the NVA had set up a heavy machinegun and they were not

23:00 firing at us, they were firing at the aircraft in the sky. There were three American attack helicopters there. One of the helicopters was flying down

23:30 the path of the NVA's machineguns which were firing at it, and their tracer was going skywards. The US helicopter pilot was flying straight down the path in the face of that green tracer, firing at him. So there was red tracer going down and there was green tracer going up. And he just went straight down like that. He didn't pull up

24:00 and he was probably, everybody saw him, he had his light on as well. He pulled up about 50 feet from the deck. He got hit and the helicopters broke contact then to escort him back to make sure if he crashed then they'd be there to pick him out. That was most memorable. Most memorable. When dawn came up, I've

24:30 already mentioned how the sky looked and not a bird twittering and so on, that's something that I'll never, ever forget.

**What is it about that**

It was just the deadly silence and the smell and the stink of the explosives and so on. It was silent.

25:00 There was not a leaf was fluttering and we were, I guess, to put it more bluntly, we were all shocked, not just by what had happened in the previous 4 or 5 hours, but by the dead silence of everything. I mean, there was not a noise. Just nothing. Absolute silence

25:30 after all the noise we'd gone through.

**It's a powerful image.**

Yeah. Nothing.

**When you came back to Australia, how did you adjust?**

I was happy to go to staff college. I was

26:00 disappointed that I was leaving my soldiers behind, but I was a regular soldier and staff college was a way of promotion and a better understanding of how the army worked and a change in sort of career path.

26:30 No army keeps 50 year old majors on to run troops when they've got other skills. I was disappointed but I accepted it. I didn't even bother arguing. That would have been useless and stupid to say, "I'm not going. I'll put off going to staff college for another year." I was a regular soldier so I went. So it was different.

27:00 Disappointed that I left the troops behind, but the guy who took over command of my company was Kim Patterson, good friend of mine, and I knew that he would take over and run things as they should be run. So there. So I talked myself into that. Had to. You know?

27:30 **Did you personally suffer from any kind of nightmares or stress because of your time in action?**

No. No. Not at all.

**How do you think you managed that?**

28:00 It wasn't something that, I knew I felt guilty about being there. I'd never felt that, I always felt that I was doing

28:30 everything I possibly could to assist my soldiers. We meet at an annual reunion and I've never had one of them come up and tell me that I did the wrong thing. So we're good friends these days. We

29:00 weren't good friends then. I told them what to do. But today we are. So reunions are quite good. They're worthwhile. We've got one next week. You were coming here on the 21st initially? Yup. I got it changed, because I'll be in Victoria on the 21st at the big reunion.

29:30 **What are your views of those people suffering from those people suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the Vietnam War?**

I've met a few of them and they do have, they've got some form of disorder anyhow. I have, I've got more than every sympathy for them. Some of them

30:00 are suffering badly. Probably because they had times that tested them that they couldn't' handle. That's not unusual I guess. I don't know. That's my

30:30 answer anyhow.

**It sounds like you have an empathy for recognising**

I do. Yeah. We've got guys who come to our reunions and it's really, it's sad to talk to some of them. So you do your best to sit down and cheer them up.

31:00 They're still suffering some of them. Quite seriously. But why? Well, that's for the medics to come up with an answer. I don't know. There's just one thing though that, soldiers who served in Vietnam are not the first on this planet to suffer

31:30 from sort of problems like that. They all do. Certainly the civvies in Berlin and London and Stalingrad would still be shaking in their boots over the bombs and firestorms that landed there. Sure. Sorry.

32:00 **In your career after Vietnam you spent many years in the intelligence unit. Is there a moment or memory from that time that stands out for you?**

32:30 There is. I'm not an intelligence officer by training. I'm not a real wordsmith by training, though I think I write a good letter and a good article.

33:00 I'm certainly not an academic. Many intelligence officers or many people I've met within the intelligence organisation are all free of those that I'm not. For a period of a couple of years I held a

33:30 position in what was then known as the Joint Services Estimate Staff and I worked with a navy fellow and an air force fellow. Between the three of us we used to write papers, estimates of capabilities of whatever country the government was interested in. We used to take it in, as we were handed

34:00 a job and given a task to write, we would take it in turn to be the coordinator of that paper. So we all three would write on the different aspect that we wanted covered in the paper. Then as coordinator I would go through what had been written and put together one single paper

34:30 in the way that I thought it should read. We used to turn out one of those papers a month I suppose. Fairly lengthy. Not once did I, as a coordinator, did I produce a final paper that the navy and air force guys didn't

35:00 agree with, and on every occasion that we sent one off to the director who wanted the papers, he sent back a little note saying thanks. So that made me pretty happy. It was worthwhile. That was a good job. When the military takes away your sword and gives you a biro instead, it's a shock to the system.

35:30 But that was a real live job. And it was pretty interesting. More than pretty interesting.

**Looking back, how would you like 1RAR to be remembered?**

36:00 It's remembered, it's all remembered already. The army recognised our fight at Coral by granting a regimental battle honour for our action there.

36:30 Some years ago, the government introduced a new system of honours and awards and decorations and so on to take over from the imperial honours and awards and decorations. They included it in that a couple of unit citations for good work.

37:00 Despite that fact that the 3rd Battalion was awarded and allowed to be given a US citation for the good work they did in Korea, and despite the fact that the 8th Battalion was allowed to accept a

37:30 Vietnamese citation for good work they did in Vietnam, we're still yet to convince the hierarchy that the 1st Battalion is also due for a bit of, you might say visual recognition. But we're working on it. We're being stubborn. They don't like us, but we'll work on it. We are working on it together.

38:00 **Is there a proudest moment when you look back on your war service?**

Is that the proudest moment?

**What is your proudest moment from your war service?**

It's a series. It's a the reunions when guys come up and they say,

38:30 "I haven't bothered coming to reunions for years because I thought they were a whole heap of rubbish, but I'm pleased I've come here today because I just want to say thanks a million for looking after us the way you did." Yup. That happens often enough for me to feel pretty happy. That's why I would not miss out on one of those reunions.

39:00 **If any of your grandchildren would come to you, asking for advice. What would you like to pass on to them?**

I'd say that if they wanted to learn good skills in all sorts of directions, then they couldn't do better than top join one of the armed services.

39:30 **is there anything that you would like to say in either summary or closing? Or if you feel there's anything we've left out?**

That's a hard one, Kathy [interviewer]. I'd like to say thanks for your patience with me. I don't think there's anything more that needs saying. I think we've pretty much been through it.

40:00 I think I'd like to conclude and say thanks again to both of you. And leave it at that. Thanks for bearing with me. I don't want you to count all the ums and ers. Have you got that turned off yet? I don't want you to count the ums and ers.

**Thank you for speaking with us. It's been enlightening.**

Thank you. It's been good.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**