Australians at War Film Archive

Bruce L'Estrange (Slugger) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 22nd January 2004

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1266

Tape 1

00:40 **Bruce, if you could give us a summary of your entire life.**

Well, I'll have to cut it fairly brief. I was born on the farm out about 14 miles from town.

01:00 We only had a little old house. To go to school, about two miles away, I used to ride a little pony. We were fairly poor people. I used to ride this little pony bareback to school when I was four.

01:30 Then after a year or two the school burned down and we had to come to town and board with our grandparents. But all the time I grew up a pretty tough little bush boy. Bare feet.

02:00 I rode horses and was a good little stockman. I used to chase wildlife on horses, bareback and full gallop, when I was growing up from six, seven, eight, nine, ten …

02:30 Then the war started and I wanted to join up when I was only 15. Dad was a returned soldier from WW1 and fought in the Somme

03:00 in France. Knew all about that sort of thing. He wouldn't let me join a unit that was going away to fight and kill till I was older. So I enlisted when I was 16 in the Light Horse, which was

03:30 very good units. They trained fellas when they was very young and trained them properly. I remembered that I never had owned a saddle and I'd ridden bareback and in a wild manner. I never ever owned

04:00 a saddle until I went into the Light Horse at 16. I settled down in it. I had a very happy time in the Light Horse. But after I was there about two years,

04:30 the Japanese came into the war and I felt that by the time I was 18, I was big and powerful, and I wanted to go into the commandos and fight. Which I did. When I was 18 I enlisted in the commandos.

05:00 We trained at Wilson's Promontory down in the southern tip of Victoria. It was very strenuous physical training. But I was disappointed in one way, because up to this stage I'd been in the army

05:30 for three years and they'd only given us about 20 rounds of ammunition to practice with. If I hadn't have learned to shoot and ride and fire quickly when I was a kid on the farm, I wouldn't have lasted much time at all when we hit the Japanese, and

06:00 it's a shame that Australia had to send young men away to that when they weren't trained. They had no idea of hunting, of knowing their whereabouts in the jungle. They got lost. Lots of people did. Bush training was what

06:30 we all should have had and learning to shoot correctly. Not sighting rifles. When you only have to shoot 15 yards to kill your enemy you don't have to sight your gun. You learn to shoot from the hip. When I got into New Guinea and they dropped us ammunition from the air,

07:00 I used to go down with permission from the high officers and I'd pick up a blanket full of ammunition that was dropped out of the planes and I'd fill up all my magazines and I'd fire from the hip. Pistols and a Tommy gun.

07:30 I had first an American Tommy gun. I learnt to fire - I'd make Wild Bill Hickock look like a mug and it saved my life and saved the lives of a lot of my friends too I think. Eventually. The Tommy gun

08:00 fired the same bullet as a .45 American revolver. I had an American revolver carried under my arm. Then we were issued later on with an Owen gun - the Australian born-and-bred Owen gun, and it only cost

08:30 Australia, I think, around about four pounds - or about nine dollars in our money now - for one of those remarkable guns. There was just nothing like it for shooting. We were up to 50, 80 yards in the mud, in the water, in the bracken.

09:00 You couldn't stop them and they'd fire 600 rounds a minute, and never let you down. They were that light that you could hold them in one hand and shoot with them like a pistol. There was 30 rounds in a magazine. They were just the most wonderful thing

09:30 for the Australian soldier. Anyway, we went to New Guinea in 1942 and the Japs were coming in thousands. They swarmed into New Guinea.

10:00 They were going to take the airfields and take Port Moresby and then Australia. We had a few Aussie boys - 18 or 20 - and the whole army comprised mostly those because the older ones had enlisted and gone to

10:30 North Africa with the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. Churchill didn't want them to be brought back to Australia and the Japs are coming at us only hundreds of miles away, and he didn't want those troops to be brought home to help protect Australia. John

11:00 Curtin, the Western Australian who became Prime Minister, defied them and brought them back and sent a lot of them up to the Kokoda Track and they stopped the Japanese about 30 or 40 miles from Port Moresby.

11:30 If they'd taken Port Moresby, Australia would have just fallen. So it was very close. And everyone had to fight his best. There was to be no retreats and no prisoners. We never took a prisoner.

12:00 They never took us prisoner either. We couldn't take them prisoner because they would conceal weapons and hand grenades in their clothing. When you'd come up and think that they were disarmed they'd produce their hand grenade and blow you up

12:30 and also themselves.

We'll talk about all that detail later. If we could just keep it to a very brief summary right now and we'll get through that and then we'll go back and we'll talk about the whole thing in total.

I won't say any more. Will you be able to

13:00 switch that off and turn it on again?

That's all fine. Just give us a broad impression of all the places that you ended up fighting in, and coming back to Australia and having leave, and then coming back with your brother and fighting there again. Then coming back, war being over, getting on with your life after that, just very broadly. Then we'll be ready to go in and get all the detail.

13:30 Instead of being sent to the Kokoda Track they sent us up to Wau - a beautiful place. It had a little airstrip there. It wasn't very far from Salamaua. Salamaua was overrun with

14:00 Japanese by this time and they were coming, out some thousands of them, towards us at Wau to take the airstrip. So we went out to meet them. There were 330 of us. Of course it was a hopeless task, but they swarmed through us and kept

14:30 going towards Wau and they were eventually stopped with reinforcements that had been flown in to Wau in hundreds, and we fought in the mountains there, cut off. Being cut off they had to drop our food

15:00 from planes because all the tracks were occupied by the Japanese. The sad part of it all was that we kept fighting in the mountains and we'd take our wounded back to our base but we couldn't get them out to go to hospitals.

15:30 They just laid around and never got proper care and that used to depress us a bit. But we kept saying, "Well, this is war, it's not a picnic." So we just kept going. Eventually with the other troops that we had

16:00 and our little bit of help we pushed the Japanese right back towards Salamaua. Then there was another breakout away in west New Guinea, and they gave us a couple of weeks spell and they flew us back to Port Moresby,

16:30 away up into this part of New Guinea where the Japanese were beginning to infiltrate into these beautiful mountains that were there. They grew a lot of food up there. Now they call it - this tricks me all the time, I know it like I know myself

17:00 and I can't think of it - it was Bena Bena, and then further west again to the Timbus, big tribes of natives. There'd be quarter, half a million in a tribe. We were always kind to them and helped them and told them

17:30 the truth and they helped protect us. Spied for us. Led us about on trails and tracks. We performed really well there and kept the Japanese out of all this country. They thought that they had half a million

against them. Just that we were in threes and fours,

18:00 all through the mountains on the tracks that came up from where the Japs were. We stopped them from getting in there, anyway. By this time we'd been in New Guinea 14 months and they don't like to keep a front line soldier much longer than that. There would be

18:30 cases where they were, but very seldom. They flew us home to Australia but we were like lost sheep when we got home. The country was full of Americans. No-one cared much about us. We just went in, find a little pub

19:00 and we'd go and drink all day. Of course we were riddled with malaria and a lot of our fellas had scrub typhus which you die from. We just ruined our leave, really, ourselves, by

19:30 purging ourselves. Couldn't settle down. Too much grog and eventually we were glad to go back to Queensland, up to the Atherton Tablelands and be put together again and re-equipped to go back up to New Guinea

20:00 again. We were glad to do it because we just couldn't fit in with things. You soon get over things physically, but you can't get over things mentally. I suppose it's probably sixty years since I had things happen and I don't draw any

20:30 soft pensions or anything, but my old brain's not like it used to be. You can't live it down. You think that you can, but it bubbles out every now and again. The best thing to help you most is a good carer.

21:00 A woman that believes in you. That's what helped us all most. All those fellas out of our unit that came back had a good woman. They did more for them than a doctor could.

21:30 Yes.

We'll be able to talk more about that later on in the day, Bruce. That'll be a good thing to talk about.

Good. I would just like to mention

22:00 my brother that enlisted in the AIF before I did, he went to the armoured division and went to Western Australia to train and then was to go to the desert warfare with tanks. He was trained for all that, but you see the Japs came into the war, swarmed all through the Pacific

22:30 and overran everything, and they broke up the armoured division mostly. They only kept a small part of it, and told these fellas they could transfer to anything they liked. My brother wanted to come with me. He was older than me, and

23:00 Dad, being a returned soldier from WW1 had seen what happens to brothers where a brother will lose his life trying to save the other one, and then the mother has nothing. So

23:30 he didn't want us to be together, but my brother explained to him that he had to do it. He had to do it. He said, "I can protect him and he can protect me. We mightn't have to give our lives". And he came away with me the second time.

24:00 And was never wounded, only in an accident in the barge. And we promised Dad that we would never go together on the fighting patrols because if one's hurt the other one will rush out to get him and get killed.

24:30 But we broke our promise and we went out on all fighting patrols and looked after each other. We both said that it made no difference to us, that he or I were brothers. We loved our men that we were with,

25:00 our mates, just as much as we loved each other. And we both got back eventually and did as good a job as possible. I'd just like to mention that 333

25:30 originals went away from Wilson's Promontory and at the end of the war, after two campaigns, there was only about 15 left of those 333 and I've got all the names of them,

26:00 all their ranks and all their history out there. Some men would be great athletes but that means nothing. They come up there and in one month

26:30 or half a dozen fighting patrols and they're gone. They got to take them out. And to see a great big powerful man, I used to think, I'll be mates with him because he'll help me if we get into a lot of trouble, but it's not the case. It can be

27:00 a little squirt of a fella, insignificant, and he's got it in here. He won't let you down. He'll die for you. And you'll die for him. That's the way a soldier's got to live. I think that's

27:30 why we only ended up with very few, because we couldn't get reinforcements. Life wasn't very permanent in the commando squadron. And fellas didn't like to come to it because he mightn't last very long. And the living was tough

28:00 with a commando squadron. Do you know that our own men, our own troops in base units, pilfered our food? They stole our rations, they drank our beer, they pinched our razor blades and sold them to the natives and we know that's right because

28:30 our wounded that went back there to be treated in hospitals saw it all happen. Sad. Terrible thing. I'd just like to say this while I'm grizzling: Senior officers, brought up in Duntroon [Royal Military College]

29:00 and in other ways, they think that the only way that you can get discipline and control a wild mob of men is by putting a lot of pressure on and standing over them and not mixing with them. But that's

29:30 not correct. I was a sergeant all through the war with the Japanese and I was only 19 when they made me a sergeant and I gave everyone a fair go and I was nice to everyone and they appreciated it.

30:00 And they never ever objected to doing anything that I ever asked them to do, and I used to pop some pretty tough things on them too. But they never let me down and I never ever had to draw on the army to punish someone that refused

30:30 to do something, because they all did the right thing by the army, by Australia, and by me. That's what made us very strong and we still have reunions with those old crippled fellas and

31:00 it's still the same with them. You don't have to dominate people. That's what the Australian Army has got to learn before they go away to fight and die again. They've got to be mates. I had officers

31:30 that were mates, really top fellas. There's no way that they stood for any of that standover or "I'm better than you." They're not like that. The best officers we had were never like that. I'd just like to mention that because otherwise all the experiences that I had

32:00 are just thrown away. They're of no use to the country or anything.

That's a good point, Bruce.

Yeah. I think so. I didn't like to mention anything like that. But I won't mention any names ever.

You're most welcome to mention anything you like through this interview, so don't hesitate.

32:30 **We'll just get this brief summary over and done with so then we can really get back into the nitty gritty and you've already touched on a lot of stuff that we want to talk more about, so just give us a rough rundown of what you did once you came back to Australia and you finished your involvement in the war.**

Yeah. When we came back the first time?

The second time, after you'd been over there with your

33:00 **brother and you managed to come back.**

The second time it was a bit different to the first time. I didn't want to come back to that first business. But the second time the war was over, I was single, you know that I never even had a girlfriend

33:30 all through my youth. I never had a woman. And I reckon that there's no way that I was going to die until I'd had one. Anyway I couldn't get home. At the end of the war there's thousands of soldiers

34:00 up there. The married man with a wife and family had to have priority over us single fellas. We didn't ever begrudge that. I had long service. But you see you double your points if you're a married fella. They had to be all shipped

34:30 home. I had a few unhappy memories and I'd been there a long time. I didn't think I was fit to come home. I used to roam the beaches naked with a machine-gun, shooting fish,

35:00 to try and get my mind off things. That was only some things I did. But I had the chance to enlist in the occupation force, and I could go away and leave New Guinea and all that environment of night and day it's with you. You've got to have some

35:30 sort of a break. And if you're a very combatant soldier… So I enlisted in the occupation force and we went up to Morotai Island and we had to wait there a few weeks because there was no facilities for us in Japan. The war

36:00 had only been over about six weeks till then. And there was a certain amount of danger in it too, because we didn't know how the Japanese would accept the surrender. So eventually we went up there and I got the shock of my life.

36:30 All these people are so disciplined and so good mannered. They were so different to the Jap soldiers that I fought against who were brutal, who killed defenceless natives and women and children. They'd rape and mutilate.

37:00 They were different people up there. The Japanese women seemed to me to be a different race of people than the men, because the men dominated the women for a thousand years. But the women were just like our women in temperament and

37:30 kindness. Show them kindness. They feared us, and they thought that we would do terrible things to them. But we didn't. I remember a little thing. There were probably 100 women standing along a brick wall, waiting to get a job

38:00 from the occupation force washing or fixing up toilets, menial things. I was going back from the cook house and I took a couple of pieces of bread in me dixies. It was snowing and cold and

38:30 I wanted to have a little bit of a feed in the morning - morning tea. So I took that bread and a bit of jam on it and I got to these people standing there in the cold and wet and I thought, "These people are hungry and they're human."

39:00 I walked up to the first one and held the dixie open for her to take the bread and she never, she just bowed that low and touched me boots, mud and rain on them. Touched the boots with her head and then stood up

39:30 and smiled, and took the bread. And I looked along the others as much as to say, "I'm sorry I haven't got any more for anyone," but they didn't care. They all looked at me and smiled and bowed. I'd done

40:00 what they wanted most - to be treated with a bit of courtesy and kindness. Yeah. It did me a lot of good, because at this stage I was full of hatred and contempt. Everything was bad,

40:30 was poisoning me, and I was becoming a different person to what I was a few years before. That was my first sign to myself that I was going to come back to normal again. I wasn't mad. But I was just full of hate.

41:00 No good to us in civvie [civilian] life either. I only stayed there a little while. They were selecting men to go to England on the [HMAS] Shropshire with the victory march - the cream. I didn't even put me name in

41:30 for it. I thought, "I'll stay here." They sent for me. The colonel of the battalion that I had enlisted into, he picked seven men out of 4,000 – 5,000 to go to England with the victory march, and I was lucky enough

42:00 to be one.

Tape 2

00:34 **Bruce, if you could just finish the summary of your life. We've got to the point where you had been chosen to join the victory march in London.**

Oh yeah. Will I tell you briefly about the trip and the victory march?

Yes, just very brief. We're going to come back and talk about the details later in the day.

01:00 It's only like…I don't want to talk much about that anyway. There is a significant thing in that Mainwaring, when he did that painting for me - not me, but I was sent down to him,

01:30 and I had been recommended for a commission in the field. There was only two or three men out of 20,000 that was going to happen for. When the officer - a colonel - saw me painted like that he said, "It's a disgrace that that fella, we could never

02:00 have that sort of a man in the officers' mess back in Australia." They (UNCLEAR) the commission I was going to get. I was going to be made an officer, you see, without a school. Just on the ability to lead men. And they wiped it. But then on that victory march that Fango

02:30 Watson selected me as the most perfect example of a parade ground soldier. I was both. But that other fool, you see, he didn't know. He wasn't in our unit. He was the colonel. You're not recording this are you?

Yeah, we're recording.

Are you?!

It's alright. We want to know everything.

03:00 **Best to let us know what happened.**

I'd have told you in a little bit better way.

You're doing really well.

Anyway - where will I start now?

You're at the victory march in London. How long were you in London for?

A month.

You had a great time? What kind of time did you have?

Yeah. Great. I had a good mate.

03:30 He was a commando from Timor. He was one of the toughest. He had two decorations. A Dutch decoration and one from Australia too, next to a VC [Victoria Cross]. He was tough and handsome.

04:00 Full of fun. You'd have liked him. And he and I went everywhere together and we got into rows and fights and all sorts of things.

04:30 The march itself was - I thought - we just marched out of a park and there were no drums and no bands and no anything, and we couldn't see any crowds or anything, and then all of a sudden the sky was black with aircraft, fighter planes and bombers and they just crawled across the sky.

05:00 We were out on the street and the band was playing and I swelled up like a cane toad. Everyone did. And we marched through the streets of London and we looked good too.

05:30 I said to myself, "Fancy the country sending us all this way over here at all this expense to march in a victory march and I feel nothing." Well, all of a sudden I got that feeling - proud. And I marched

06:00 through the march through London, and to think that I had all these highest decorated soldiers following me through London, it made me feel pretty good. Then we were given a months leave.

06:30 We went up to Scotland and tried to get to France. We were having so good a time just having fun, clean fun. It was great.

What was it like coming home?

Coming home was good. And going over was good because we had all these fair dinkum soldiers

07:00 front liners, and nearly all of them highly decorated, and they had such vital things to talk about - about Greece and Crete and Tobruk and all these places where they fought and all through the islands. And where the commando squadrons

07:30 all fought through the islands and we talked as one to each other. I learnt a lot more things too. Sea breeze, the jumping about on the boat, lightheartedness, "It's-all-over!" feeling,

08:00 and the feeling that I carried with me from Japan - no hate. I was a new bloke. Then I came home and was given the chance of going back to Japan. And I didn't want to. I wanted to come home and

08:30 try to make something of myself. Joe, who's the friend that I had, he said, "We'll try for six months to settle down and if we can't we'll become soldiers of fortune. Go to other countries and train other people to kill each other".

09:00 I didn't want to do that. He didn't want to either. But we had no job. I hadn't even learnt to drive a hammer and nail into a piece of wood. I had no skills at all. Only what I'd left behind in the jungle. He met a girl, his present wife.

09:30 They married, and been together ever since. I met Beryl and that was it. I'd been all over the world and saw a lot of pretty good sorts too. But we just got along together. Married. Will I talk about that now?

Just really briefly, if you

10:00 **just tell me what you did while you were married - the jobs you had and how many children you had and then later on in the day we can go back and talk about your later life. So you told us you got married. What happened then?**

Married Beryl and she had nice people. Her father - the boys make a bit of a joke of this, but it's serious to me -

10:30 was a Church of England rector. They thought it was funny that a rough old diamond like me would marry a parson's daughter, but it wasn't like that. Beryl's always been a good sport and a good mate. We've never really had any differences in 55 years.

11:00 No trouble. We had four kids. They had kids and those kids had kids. So we got 25 in our family now. We don't hang about too much. Most of them are here in town. We're just

11:30 all good mates and go about our own way of life. My oldest boy's in the motel, but other ones are in

earth moving and laying places out for irrigation and all sorts of very progressive farming.

You went back to the

12:00 **land when you married Beryl? You bought a property?**

Yes. I didn't wait for a soldier's block. I had a few quid - I think about a thousand dollars or something, but the bank lent me four thousand and I bought a few sheep from two uncles

12:30 at a few hundred each. I told them I'd shear them and give them the money for the sheep. I never had to pay for them for two or three months, so that was good. And they were good fellas. They were L'Estranges. Then the kids grew up

13:00 and they all wanted to go on the land. We couldn't afford to do that so we gave them everything and then we came, bought this house. I wanted this house for Beryl because the house we had in the bush it was going to go to one of my daughters

13:30 and we've had this house about 20 years I think. I just do the gardening and the lawn mowing and make love.

Alright, that's a great summary. So what we're going to do now is go right back, take you right back to your childhood.

14:00 **Where were you born?**

Out on the farm.

Near Condobolin?

Yeah. In Condobolin. My father went to the First World War and when he came home - they never had anything in those days. People generally never had anything.

14:30 They used to drive to town with a horse and sulky to get groceries, about 15 miles in and 15 out. Most men in those days worked to clear land, be able to farm, to grow wheat and grasses and to be able to

15:00 graze sheep and cattle. It was essential that they clear the timber and clear the land, which they did do, and it was very hard because they had to do it with their hands. That's what Dad did, and he shore sheep for a living and slowly put things together.

15:30 We were just little brats that ran about on the farm. Used to ride horses at a mad, reckless speed. Shooting. We used to shoot while we were riding the horses. That's what saved my life in New Guinea.

What did you shoot?

You mightn't like it,

16:00 but we shot wildlife, foxes that were eating the lambs. We shot kangaroos that were eating the little bits of crop that we had. We shot rabbits. There were a lot of rabbits and we ate a lot of rabbits too. And you know, kangaroo's a beautiful meat to eat.

16:30 We shore sheep. I was still shearing sheep when I was 65, but only for my family. I never charged them for it.

How old were you when you first started shearing sheep?

It was after the war. So I'd have been

17:00 about 23.

What about when you were younger? You said when you were growing up on the farm you used to get round on a horse bare back?

Yeah. I can still hear Mum standing on the front veranda screaming, "Don't do it!" We used to hook billy carts

17:30 on behind horses and there was no way of stopping the billy cart. The horse just had to keep going faster and faster or uphill. Otherwise the billy cart would run into his back legs and then he'd kick our brains out. We used to do all these things.

What kind of woman was your

18:00 **mother?**

Pretty strict. Dad was casual. But Mum tried to make us speak a bit decent and have a few manners. And she didn't get far did she?

I wouldn't say that.

Dad, in later life, when we came home from

18:30 the war, he was a good speaker. He was the best Anzac Day speaker I've ever heard, because he spoke from in here. The others spoke out of their mouth. He knew what a true soldier felt. And he was mayor of the town for,

19:00 I think, about 15 years.

Was that later on or was that when you were a child?

After the war. I think when he enlisted he was in the council then. See, it was only a little town. They wouldn't have had a lot of talent really. And

19:30 he had a bit on top and he used to be on the hospital board and help as much as he could in public life and then as a mayor of the town. But I never went for that. My brother did a little bit. But I didn't.

Which brother was that?

20:00 My brother, Ron.

Ron.

Yeah. He was a bit more public minded than I was. I just like to keep to myself. I had my family and had my wife and I loved and that was pretty good for me. I put a lot of land together

20:30 after the war. I bought properties and I had thousands of sheep. I had 10,000 sheep at one stage. I had 5,000 head of cattle at one stage. Not together.

Alright, we'll talk about your later life later on in the day

21:00 **because at the moment we're just trying to get a picture of what life was like for you as a child growing up in Condobolin. What about school?**

Yeah. I rode to school, to this little subsidised school. There was only six classes in it. This lady used to drive to school about four miles in a

21:30 sulky. She was very good and she taught the six classes. There might have been only two kids in each or three. And then somehow after some years the school burnt down. I don't know if someone did it deliberately. But anyway we then had

22:00 correspondence school and it was good. Very good. Gives you a good education. All the essential things. We learnt, as the correspondence school - you had certain things that you had to do. You had to see that those things were done. And they were

22:30 done. I never had much intelligence really at that sort of thing, but when I left the correspondence school to go to town in fifth class I should have gone to fourth class, but they reckon I was a fifth class standard from the correspondence school. Better than the public school. Better teaching system. Must have been.

23:00 **How did you get your lessons at correspondence school?**

They'd send them out on the mail. We used to get the mail once a week and we'd go up and get all these papers with what we had to do for next week. Then we'd post those away.

23:30 If you wanted to go out and work with the sheep and help Dad you had to go and do all your work first. You couldn't neglect your schooling to do the jobs. So if you liked doing the going out with your father and riding

24:00 horses and that you'd do your homework, correspondence work, as quick as possible. It's a real good system. I think it's a lot better than a lot of things I hear about today.

What kind of work would you do with your father?

Drafting sheep, mustering sheep, chasing kangaroos and foxes. We'd always do a bit of that

24:30 even if we weren't supposed to. Muster. We learnt to work in the wool shed when we were only very young people. Before long, before we were able to shear we were working in the wool sheds. Little kids become very…very good training for little kids, because they've got to be

25:00 busy. They've got a job to do and they've got to do it and keep up with everything. It was real good training for anything.

Did you get on well with your father?

Yes. I can't ever remember him smacking me. But I'd probably a been a lot betterer if he had of.

You were a bit of a rascal were you?

25:30 Not really, you know. I was pretty good. I was a bit of a devil, but harmless. School teachers used to like me, but they reckoned I was hopeless. I remember I sat through my Intermediate [Certificate]. In those days the Intermediate was the big thing.

26:00 And I sat for the Intermediate and I got the…I had to do two years in third year of the high school to get it and I got the lowest pass possible.

But you passed.

But I was popular at school.

26:30 And I was popular in the army too. And I got through life. I had a good accountant and a good bank manager and they were honest and they would help me and advise me because I had a big business. There was no-one in this district had 5000 head

27:00 of cattle to look after. I had properties all out and leased thousands of acres of properties.

As a child, why do you think you were popular?

I never wanted to fight anyone; I never wanted to hurt anyone. I

27:30 used to be a bit of a funny man. I'd have jokes and amuse people. That's the same in the army too. So life in that way was pretty happy.

Did you have enough to eat during the depression years?

Yes. That's what Mum and Dad used to fight about. They didn't get along

28:00 like Beryl and I do. No. Mum used to spend money and Dad couldn't afford to have. Her father was the Scottish storekeeper, you see, and she was used to that upbringing and then she came out to a starving little farm.

28:30 She wanted to feed her kids. We grew up big powerful fellas because she fed us well, and Dad ran us about well and developed our muscles. But Dad and Mum used to row [argue] about all the money she was spending on food. That used to upset me.

29:00 It didn't upset my brother much, but it upset me. As a little bloke, when any visitors'd come to the farm, I'd crawl under the house and I'd hide there until they left. I got withdrawn. I was glad that I

29:30 cut loose and had fun and I enjoyed my days in the Light Horse Unit, and when I was only 16. 15 when I enlisted, but I never went into camp until I was 16.

Alright. Just before we get to that period, what was your father - did your father

30:00 **talk much about WW1 to you?**

Yes, he did. He went away to the war with friends and they were killed and wounded in that little group. Dad was wounded two or three

30:30 times, but in those battles of the Somme it was like that. But Dad used to tell us stories of the war and the hell of it and the mateship of it. He was a great one to glorify

31:00 the fighting soldier. He didn't worry very much about the others because they were 'like civilians in uniform', he said. And he used to tell us true stories, as they turned out. They were true stories. But he had this great

31:30 bond of the WW1 diggers had. I think he was - WW1 only lasted into the fourth year and he was…he didn't go to Gallipoli. He hadn't enlisted

32:00 at that time. But he went straight to France. He loved it. He loved the mateship of men.

What kind of impression did those war stories create on you as a child?

I think it helped me to understand what they would be like. But the two wars were so totally different,

32:30 because there were no air war in the first war, very little, and in this one it was massive air wars, in WW2. The Navy had old-fashioned, slow ships, and very few of them. But in this war, the sea - under and over and in it -

33:00 was alive with death. The jungle warfare was so much different to the battles in France because it's in jungle and we're in the jungle and the mountains that are at least twice as high as Kosciusko, and

33:30 smothered in jungle and mud and slip and disease. If there was anything in this world that you could get, you'd get it out of the jungle.

Did the stories he told you make you feel you wanted to be a soldier like he was?

34:00 I think I knew nothing else. I think that did have an influence on me because I thought that Mum would be the one that'd stop me, but she didn't. Scottish ancestry. Scots were great soldiers.

34:30 She accepted that youth had to go away and fight to defend their country. The healthy strong youth have to do that. Politicians can talk a lot of rubbish, but if the enemy's coming, you've got to get out there and get

35:00 him. No use in saying, "Put your gun down, we'll have a yarn about this". It doesn't work.

But your Dad has French ancestry?

Yes.

And he had a different attitude to you going to war?

Yeah. See, he had a big family. I think he had seven brothers,

35:30 and none of those went to the war. They were too old or too young and one was crippled. He could hardly walk. But Dad was not like that. He was a bit like mongrel me. I've been very healthy. Actually,

36:00 through my life, I think I went for about 35 years without seeing a doctors. And when I did have to see them they did more damage to me than what the Japanese did. A good doctor's a most wonderful thing. And a nincompoop is a terrible

36:30 thing.

How did L'Estranges end up in Australia?

The story is, that my grandmother, she had the rearing lion on her emblem. She had a bit of something in her.

37:00 She was a potter. Her husband, Dad's father, was a big rough bushman - Australian. She was a little woman. He was a great big man. She came with him from Goulburn.

37:30 They came from England. Put it this way - originally as far back as we can tell, there was a French doctor and he got out of France when they were chopping their heads off and went to England and then he went to Ireland and generations of them happened, and they came back to

38:00 the part of England that's just north of London. Then they came out to Australia when Australia was to be settled. I think they came out here and Dad was born about 1890, and he wasn't the first one. I'd reckon they probably came out here about 1860.

38:30 They came from Goulburn and they came down the Lachlan River to here. Then they selected land here because it was cheap here, and because it's a long way from anything, I think. So they settled out north of Condobolin.

39:00 He used to take a horse team - this is my grandfather - and a big wagon, to Orange, with his wool on it. Then he would get some work while he was up there at Orange with his wagon and horse team and he'd buy groceries

39:30 and candles and things like that - very primitive in those days. No-one ever heard of electricity I don't think. Then he'd bring all that 200 miles back from Orange. And they'd take it to this little old shack in the bush

40:00 and she had ten children, my grandmother, and reared them all in the bush herself. Dad was educated in a little bark hut up, way up the paddock, about three miles, and the old fella that taught him was an old drunk - Murphy

40:30 was his name. And he taught about six classes.

Same as you.

Yeah.

So what was Condobolin the town like while you were growing up?

All the Aborigines or half-castes lived over the river in a mission on the river and others lived at a

41:00 waterhole. A murri. And they were half caste mostly. And if you lived in the mission you only got a shilling a week. They used to have to go out and work and do all manner of things, help clearing and fencing and all those things, and a lot of them

41:30 were very, very good people too. Condobolin had no industries. They had wool. They didn't have many cattle. They never farmed very much because the farming implements were little narrow things with poor quality steel in them. You'd laugh yourself to death

42:00 if you could see them now. And we still have them.

Tape 3

00:32 **Bruce, when you were a young boy on the farm working pretty hard did you ever feel like you were a bit isolated out in the sticks or did you feel okay about that side of it?**

No. I think I felt alright about that because everyone was the same. All the people out here had a very quiet,

01:00 lonely type of farm life compared to what it is now. It's nothing like this.

Was there a bit of a sense of community all the same with the various people who had farms in the area? Was there a bit of spirit amongst people?

Yes. They'd go over and visit each other on Sundays and that sort of thing.

01:30 Mostly horse and sulky. Then motor cars started to come in, and breakdowns. Nearly all of them had trouble with them. And they had terrible old tyres and things. We seemed to be happy on the farms.

02:00 Sometimes Mum'd look after a couple of kids for someone while they went to Sydney to a doctor or something. Life was pretty good because we didn't know anything different. But I'd hate to go back to it now.

What did you do for recreation? Did you have a chance to have a bit of

02:30 **time off and do any socialising or mixing with people?**

No. Men used to just have a few drinks on Saturday afternoon. I think the stores stayed open when I was little until 9 o'clock at night or something and the old cockys'd [graziers] have a bit of a yarn.

03:00 Pretty screwed down sort of an existence really. The people that worked on properties, on the big stations and that, they had a pretty very ordinary sort of a life because they would only be getting, in those days, around about three pound a week and their meat or something, and they had to keep a family on that.

03:30 And sometimes they'd have a house in town so their wife could send kids to school. They rode pushbikes out to work. Pretty awful sort of an existence to what we've got now.

Pretty tough going for everyone by the sounds of it.

Yeah. A pensioner now can live pretty good.

04:00 **Bruce, when you were say about 13, 14, were you starting to think a bit about what you were wanting to do with your life? Were you thinking that you were happy to continue on the land at that point?**

I never tried to think it out very far because I just thought, Mum and Dad'll

04:30 find me a job somewhere. I used to do a fair bit of axe work when I was about that age. I'd swing an axe all day when I was about 14 and work in amongst timber, ringbarking trees, cutting scrub down. I think that's where I developed

05:00 and got a lot of strength. I think when I was about 13 or 14 and out on the farm I was a bit conscious of being physical and having big muscles and being strong and I had two big spring

05:30 cart axles that are real heavy things. You just get them in your hands. I used to be able to control one and I'd lift it above my head, and it wasn't very many months before I could lift the two of them up like that and pump them up and down. That developed my bones and

06:00 body. And it always stayed like it. I haven't got a bad carcass now. Only, a bit too much here. For eighty. I'm lazy, but I'm strong.

You certainly look it. So that was something that you did off your own bat?

06:30 **It wasn't your dad saying, "Son, you better get out there and develop those muscles"? You just realised you were at that point where you were starting to get a bit bigger and you wanted to move that along.**

Yeah. Dad was a good old fella in many ways but he wasn't really interested very much in what we were doing, my brother and I. We thought it out for ourselves.

07:00 We'd get a game of cricket or something. I don't condemn him for it. It's just the way people were in those days. And all his family before that - his mother wouldn't let them do anything on Sunday and they

used to go down behind the big shed on the old family property

07:30 and they used to run and jump, and hop step and jump, all those sort of things behind the shed because if the old mother knew they were out doing that, they'd get a caning for it. Life was so different.

You didn't have any restrictions yourself on Sunday as far as religious commitments were concerned?

No.

08:00 Mum, her parents were strict and religious - fairly religious. But she was a modified edition. She wasn't quite like that. Dad was just what you'd call

08:30 normal. He liked to play his game of cricket or bowls.

Bruce, just before the war was declared did you get wind out this way that there was the possibility of war coming along?

Oh yes. We were shearing sheep, I think, at the time, and I was very young in '39,

09:00 and we had a little old wireless set. No electricity, running off batteries. They said that the war had been declared. The shearers were a bit worried. Dad was a bit worried. But my brain hadn't developed enough to be

09:30 caring about…excitement or something was probably the way I thought about it. But I was keen to get into the Light Horse because I was a good horseman.

Had you been thinking about that before war was declared or was it the declaration that made you think that way?

No. It was everything seemed too much for me. I hadn't experienced anything like that. I

10:00 just went along with everything until they wanted troops, young fellas for the Light Horse.

So when was it, round about, when you started up with the Light Horse?

I think it was 1940 or 41, just around about then.

10:30 I was keen because it was - all the young fellas were getting an old horse and going in and we were playing cowboys and things. Just the right amount of intelligence for the army to handle you and keep you busy doing things. So Dad never had any trouble

11:00 rearing us because we always had something to do. We were never allowed to be idle. I think that's good. It certainly would be good if they could have things like that now because there's a lot of fellas that just kick tins around now.

11:30 **Do you think your Mum and Dad were happy about you joining the Light Horse?**

They were happy about me joining the Light Horse. But Dad wouldn't let me join the AIF and go overseas to fight. He said, "You're a child. You've got to mature more than that. A child's brain, you can destroy it very quickly

12:00 with things that you can't understand and look at and see". I think that's right too.

Do you think you took that on board at the time as a young bloke or did you still want to get out there and have the adventure?

I just wanted to be capable and efficient as a soldier.

12:30 The Light Horse was like that. But they only put us into the Light Horse because they had nothing else, you know. They gave us old weapons and things from WW1, and to go into battle riding a horse now, knowing what I know, like you could…

13:00 even a snake couldn't crawl through that jungle without being heard and seen. Anyone who thinks that the Japs are easy going, easy stuff, they've never fought them. They're tough and they're capable soldiers.

I will ask a lot of questions about

13:30 **the Japs when we do get to New Guinea. So you joined the Light Horse with your brother, is that right?**

Yes. We went in together.

And some other mates, or just you and your brother?

My brother and I and fellas that we knew about the town and farm boys. They were good material, too, looking back on it. Good types of fellas.

14:00 Not flashy or anything, just tough fellas that could do a hard days work and wouldn't do much grizzling. Why I liked the Light Horse when I first went in is that Dad bought me an old horse that was pretty goey and the

14:30 army gave me a sword and a rifle and a saddle. That's what I wanted most. A saddle. Because I'd never had a saddle. Dad was too poor. He had an old thing had fallen to pieces.

15:00 So I got good gear, you see. I reckoned I'd stand a fair bit.

What sort of training did they give you in the Light Horse?

Put us through a month, first, of ground drill without a horse. Marching and carrying yourself properly.

15:30 Looking like a soldier. All that type of thing - building you up to be proud of what you are doing. That was good. Then we went into a camp in Wallgrove in Sydney and took all our horses. They were taken down in trains. We

16:00 got them out and we drilled, then, with the horses. Spectacular. It looked good, you know. But you still had a horse and a horse was hard to look after. Take him into rough country and his shoes - you got to keep shoeing him and you got to keep feeding him and they got to follow you with food for the horse

16:30 and food for yourself. After some months of that they started to - the politicians and army authorities - could see that it was hopeless what they were doing. They took the horses away and put us into trucks. That was so much easier.

17:00 It was better to walk somewhere than ride a horse. You can't go into action nowadays with a horse because they've only got to shoot the horse and down he comes and you're not worth a stamp. Years ago, when they did it, everyone had horses or camels and

17:30 you could cope with that sort of thing. But they got into motorised things.

That was while you were still training in Sydney did that change come or was that a bit later on?

That was a bit later on. We came home from that and then next time …

So how long were you there in Sydney all up around about?

I think a few months.

And the initial training

18:00 **that you did before you went to Sydney - where did you have to go for that?**

Over to Cowra. We were in camp at Cowra for a while and we learnt all the marching and army drill.

So you came back from your time in Sydney and what happened next?

I think we were just released

18:30 after that camp for some time - some short time. And then they called up young fellas about 18 and they put a lot of them into these - used to be - Light Horse Units, but now are motorised, you see. So they put

19:00 them into the motorised things. They were conscripted and we were volunteers. Makes a bit of difference with some people, you know. The volunteer, if you can get him…in America all the main soldiers, the rangers and the

19:30 main battalions, divisions, they're volunteers. The ones that came here - they were all conscripts. Very hard to make them fight in New Guinea. Very hard. Too soft and their officers were badly picked.

20:00 No good.

So you'd come back from Sydney working with the horses. You were here for a while and then you got involved again with Light Horse, but this time you were working with the trucks. Is that right?

Motorised, yeah.

So you did training with the trucks?

Yes. But not much. They just took us to a bivouac or somewhere.

20:30 We'd do marches through the scrub. Not marches, just free. So you'd learn to move. Officers and that had to learn to move people. That's why we had to be there because they have movement orders and

21:00 all this sort of thing, you see, so you can't forget anything. They put out a movement order. You can't forget things then. The same as when you're going into battle. You make a reconnaissance and you seek it all out and all the facts, and you come back and you say, what we'll do is

21:30 this. They might only send three or five fellas out to find out. That's the army system. All that part of it's good. But they just got to have those changes that I spoke about earlier, I think. But then ….

Alright Bruce. Can you tell us what happened next for you

22:00 **after you'd done that extra training with the trucks, you did the bivouacs, what happened next as far as you moving closer to joining the commandos?**

I think that what had happened, I just did what I was told. I was only really young and immature. But all those regiments that they had

22:30 and all these trained men, they were wanting to - the old senior officers were wanting to - keep those units intact so they could draw their big wages, and they reckoned, too, that those units were pretty good.

23:00 But one day - see the Japs are starting to come around and everything's boiling over, they're rushing into the Pacific and they asked us at the Light Horse one day, "What do you want to do? Do you want to go to the AIF independently?

23:30 Do you want to go away as a unit to fight? Or do you want to stay as a militia unit here in Australia and virtually do nothing?" I got the shock of my life. Most of them wanted to do nothing. And I thought - well I wasn't

24:00 going to talk about these things but I felt so disgusted that here we were fit, young, strong, robust men and talking about sitting on our bum and our country's threatened - directly threatened. So I said, "I want out." and they sent me down to a commando unit.

24:30 I didn't know, but they would have grabbed me with open arms. But they sent me down to be selected as a non-commissioned officer. When I found they had seven men there and asking me questions - could I ride, and swim, and fight and do all these things. And I said,

25:00 "Yes, I can". They were umming and ahhing you see. They said, "We don't know". I had two stripes in the Light Horse. And they said, "We'll leave you with the two stripes and put you in the commandos" and I said, "I don't want the two stripes.

25:30 I don't want to go in there as a private. I don't want rank. I don't want money. I want to join up and get into a unit where I can fight. That's what my country expects of me". They said, "You're in, then." Glad to have me.

And you kept your two stripes anyway?

Yeah.

26:00 I went in as a private. Went away as a private but we might come to that later.

We will. Did you know anything about what the commandos did before you rolled up to talk to them, did you know the role of commandos?

Not precisely. Just daring things. And things that three or four men

26:30 would have to do instead of three or four hundred.

So the Light Horse made that decision that they thought you would be good in that particular situation?

Yeah. They weren't interested in me once I wanted to get away from them.

Did you have other options available to you as far as where you ended up in the AIF? Why is it

27:00 **that you went straight to the commandos?**

Went to the commandos because I wanted to get into action quick, I wanted to do something quick. I never had enough brains to go into the aircrew and I wasn't good enough at school to sit down and persevere with all sorts of things like that.

27:30 All the things that I could do, the commandos needed. Swim and fight and ride and do daring things. I had done them as a child. They were the sort of fellows that they wanted. It doesn't sound much now, but when I

28:00 got to New Guinea I had a knowledge of the bush that a lot of others didn't have. They were very brave fellas too, but they would get lost because … I was like a cat. You could take it out in the bush and throw it away and it'd be back home before you.

28:30 And know the way. I was pretty good at that really.

When you were still with the Light Horse and the war was going on were you - even before the Light Horse presented those options to you - starting to feel frustrated that you weren't there

in the middle of the war doing the job?

A bit, yeah.

29:00 In those days I wasn't very brilliant about organising anything meself even. I could learn to shoot good and learn to do all these things good, but a lot of other things I couldn't fathom out. It only took me one week in action and that turned all round. Different

29:30 then.

So you got to the commandos, and did you get a sense straight away that you'd come to the right place, that this was the sort of unit that you wanted to be involved in?

Yeah. I went down to Wilson's Promontory just a young private and the heat was on. Men getting

30:00 really fit and powerful and I was so worried when I had a broken rib in a football match about fifty a side with a tennis ball - I made the mistake of grabbing the ball, and when I

30:30 did, about twenty fellas jumped on top of me. I ended up with a broken rib. But I wouldn't tell them because I thought they might say, "You can go back to your unit. You're busted for a month or two". And you know they used to send us out to sea from Wilson's Promontory

31:00 into Bass Strait about three or four hundred yards in the middle of July. Cold as cold it was. And come back and come out of the water blue. But oh gee, after a month you couldn't grab anything as you didn't want to smash it.

31:30 You felt that fit. Everything you grabbed - if you grabbed a beer glass you'd want to crush it. Great feeling. Very fit.

So you thrived on the intense training that they gave you?

Yes. Loved it.

And you were enjoying the military lifestyle? That was agreeing with you in general - the discipline and so forth?

32:00 Yes. I think there were 800 men were down there and I think they only wanted 300 because they had 30 non-commissioned officers, you see. They only wanted 300 of that eight. And I was so pleased that

32:30 I'd become one of the three. They just sent the others back to their units, you know. They showed the slightest sign of being a whinger or not being strong enough to stand it, out you'd go. It was good. And it made you feel good.

What other training did they give you?

33:00 Long route marches, 60 miles, through bracken fern and things like that. Carrying big loads. Picking out the whingers and cull them. They put you through a tough thing. And it was good.

33:30 They took us on the rifle range and gave us ten or twenty bullets and a rifle. Started about 300 yards and you sight the rifle and fire a couple of shots. Then you run forward and then you fire it standing up. Then you

34:00 run forward again and you fire from the hip, the rifle. All at a target. And then you count your hits. And then when you get right in close, you might fire six rounds, real fast, and you have to finish in a certain time. But that was good. That was good training.

34:30 And I passed that real good. I don't know, I think it might have been in the top two or three. And I was feeling good and happy that I was doing something that was going to be some good.

Did they give you any training to be able to deal with jungle or bush conditions?

35:00 Down there in Wilson's Promontory it was thick scrub, but it wasn't a jungle. And there were no mountains like there are in New Guinea. We even went into a mountain in New Guinea that was 15,000 feet high and the snow on the top of that at one stage of the year in the tropics.

35:30 The higher up you go, the thinner the jungle gets, and the thicker it gets when you come down those mountains…until it gets that thick that you can't even wade through it - growth. I can't - I was going to say something about the Light Horse.

Related to jungle training

36:00 **or bush training?**

Yes. I think that we were shipped out of there, Wilson's Promontory, after 12 weeks and we were taken by train right up to Townsville. The train only stopped at railway stations

36:30 to give you a pie or a feed. And then it'd move again. If anyone tried to jump off - and they did - to see their girlfriend in Sydney or something usually an officer would jump off with a pistol and they were so… Discipline had to be foremost, you see.

Had they already selected the 300 by then?

37:00 Oh yes. And we're going on our way up to New Guinea.

Did you feel like you were really competing against each other to make sure you made the cut?

Yeah. I think that we were at that stage we did what we were told to do. They'd got through to us.

37:30 We had to stick by a rigid line of discipline and most of us did. Very few jumped off the train and usually there was an officer following him and stuck him up with a pistol you know.

And would that be it for that bloke? Would he get a second chance?

No. The fella I'm thinking of, he went up to New Guinea but

38:00 he lasted a few months, but he wanted to go home. We all did after a few months.

After those 12 weeks of training did you feel like you were ready for action?

Yeah. I reckon I was wanting to see what was in here.

38:30 And when we got up there and went into action I didn't put a foot wrong. I was very lucky. I did a few things in that week that made a good name

39:00 for myself. I'll put it that way.

We're going to talk in a lot of detail about that first week very soon. During that training did you get a chance to make some good mates with some of those blokes you were training with?

Yeah. Made good mates and we stuck together forever. Some, of course, got killed. Some got terrible sick.

39:30 Some got terribly wounded. The wounded man up there - if you get gut shot in jungle warfare you're finished, because the doctors can't do a gut operation on you unless it's that deep and if it goes through you,

40:00 they've got to have an operating theatre. That fella - I won't mention his name, but the fella on the wall that was there, he won those decorations and he got gut shot right at the end of the war and he was dead the next day.

40:30 Couldn't do anything for him. Where some of our fellas had terrible wounds, but if they're flesh wounds - they don't hit arteries or bones you've got a good chance. But if they were just - I'm jumping ahead of myself.

That's alright. We will get into that. We're

41:00 **almost in New Guinea now, so just going back to being on the train and knowing that you were starting your journey towards being in the action, what was the general mood amongst all the blokes on the train?**

Oooh, "Get up there and get into 'em." Yeah. And that stayed with some fellas for two campaigns, that same attitude.

41:30 They were little old shrivelled up fellas, run out, worked out, but they still had that same dogged attitude - we're going to stop 'em.

Was there a bit of excitement amongst the boys?

Excitement?

That you were finally getting in there to do the job?

No. They just took everything philosophically,

42:00 I think.

It was pretty serious, then.

Tape 4

00:37 **Bruce, could you talk to us about the stampede when you were in the Light Horse at Wallgrove?**

Yes. We had three regiments and there's about 600 in a regiment, camped, scattered about there, around in that area, and

01:00 they have a watering time. One man will lead out three or four horses and water them at a trough and then walk them round and bring them back onto the line and they're tied up like elephants, one foot tied back and the rope onto another big strong rope along, and that's how you

01:30 secure your horses. Very important thing because there's hundreds and hundreds of them, in the First World War, in the army. So anyway, we were leading these horses around waiting for our turn to lead them in to water them. And there were some fellas there in an old truck.

02:00 They're taking away the horse manure. They were throwing it up on the truck and then belting it with the back of a shovel to make it set there so that they could carry it away on the roads, to vegetable farms and things, I suppose. But anyway, these horses had been fed so well

02:30 and exercised so well in the camp that they were real frisky, like race horses. The things that we had to lead them by were chains. They weren't ropes because they break the ropes. They had these quite heavy chains on them. And it was a bit hard to hold on to four chains and hold four horses. Especially ones that you

03:00 didn't know. Some would pull back and others would pull forward. So as I was going past these horses, past the manure heap – Bang! Bang! Bang! went these fellas, and the horses pulled away from their holders and

03:30 started this stampede, and that was about probably 50 horses behind me, but they were coming at me at a rush. So I thought, "Well, there's only one way out of this." I let the three go and held my own horse. But as he went forward I jumped on his back.

04:00 Good bareback rider, you see. The other horses are swarming around and past, and picking up horses, and the men running everywhere to get away from them because they'll kill you - and they'll kill themselves. A lot of them killed themselves. I got on my horse and I held the chain short and I just kept flipping

04:30 him over the side of the head with the chain and rousing on him. He went out to the outside of the mob. When I got him on his own, he stopped then, and I got him out of the stampede. But all the rest of the horses went around and they went through, they picked up, I don't know, 200 horses there, at least.

05:00 And then they went over to another regiment and they were watering their horses - picked up another great heap of them. They're all going like a tornado. It was just no time before they were down at Liverpool 15 miles away. They went through the paddocks, through the dairy farmers' paddocks that were there in those days,

05:30 and a lot of the dairy farmers' paddocks were fenced with big cables that they'd bought secondhand somewhere. The horses went through those and over gullies and the first fella over, well, he'd fall and roll over and he'd be down and then the next fella'd fall on top of him. There were a dozen horses on top of each other. Must have been terrible

06:00 for them. Anyway, they took trucks and they went to all the trouble in the world to get these horses back and they carried them back and they could hardly stand up when they came back. Just exhausted from the stampede.

How many horses did you lose?

Well I don't know, officially, but I'd say there would have been

06:30 scores of them. And there were horses there that we knew them so well, and they were so fit, we had to nearly push them back into the line to tie them up, they were so crippled and exhausted from the whole… But we were lucky. It could have killed a lot of people, too.

Did it kill anyone? Was anyone injured?

07:00 I don't think there was. They might have been knocked over. I was lucky that my horse, he was a big old race horse, but I used to ride him bareback and ride him with one rope and that sort of thing and he knew what I was up to when I got him out of the mob…

07:30 ..by tapping him on the side of the head with the chain.

The men must have thought that was fantastic, you getting out of there like you did. That would have been quite a sight.

Yeah, it was pretty good. There was a lot of talk about it because in those days, with the enemy about and fifth column activity and all that, they reckoned that the

08:00 horses - someone had got at their feed and put drugs in their feed and all that. But it wasn't anything like that. It happened near me. It was only that fella with the shovel that frightened them.

What do you mean by fifth column activity?

That was a saying that they had in war time.

08:30 The fifth columnist was a traitor, more or less, or people like that, that white-ant towns and cities and cause troubles. It originated in a thing many years ago - I won't go into that - but that's where this fellow said that he was - he had four columns…

09:00 I'll tell you quickly. Four columns that were going to attack this city, and they asked him which column was he going to use and he said, "The fifth column" and they said, "But you only have four columns" and he said, "Yes, but the fifth column is in the city. It's already taken the city." That's how they got the

09:30 name of fifth column and fifth column activity.

Right. I wanted to ask a question about your brother. While you were in the commandos doing your training, what was your brother doing at this stage?

He was over in Western Australia in the armoured division, an overseas unit. It was to go to Africa and the

10:00 Middle East where a lot of other Australians had gone - fighting battalions. And they were to go over and take tanks and artillery. They were training in Western Australia, but then they had to cease that training because the Japs were coming down through the islands and they were sure that we'd have to be fighting in those islands -

10:30 Solomons, New Guinea, Timor and so on. And they couldn't use the tanks. So they - I forget where I'm up to.

So where did he end up, your brother?

Where did he go?

Yes.

After they couldn't go to the Middle East the

11:00 army told them that they could transfer to any unit that they wanted to and go anywhere that they wished to, and a lot of them transferred to easy jobs. But he wanted to come to me. And I was home on leave from the first time.

Okay.

11:30 **I know that you went back to Papua New Guinea together the second time, but before you went to Papua New Guinea the first time he was still over in Western Australia doing his training at that point?**

That's right.

Okay. Alright then. I'll just take you back to the train journey, the train that you were taking on your way up to New Guinea. You mentioned that there were some reinforcements from the Middle East who came up to New Guinea with you on that train?

12:00 **They were very hardened men who'd already seen battle and they were raring to go as well. Was there rivalry between those men who'd fought in the Middle East and you men who were going into battle for the first time?**

No. There could have been somewhere else, but there was never in our unit. No, I never ever heard it discussed.

12:30 But there were a lot of them came to our unit. But they weren't - there was no rivalry there. They were just all as one, which was a wonderful thing, really. They were good types of men too. Big men, big strong young men

13:00 that went away with the AIF early and I met a lot of them on the victory contingent too. Big powerful fellas. Good fighters. It's just a shame that all that Timor, Singapore business and

13:30 Malaya, terrible shame that it happened like it did for all those 110,000 taken prisoner.

Terrible. Alright. Now we get to New Guinea. Tell us what it was like arriving in New Guinea for the first time?

We flew up because they thought we'd have to go on to the Kokoda Track.

14:00 It was collapsing. The Japs were becoming very fanatical. They could see the lights of Moresby from the Kokoda Track and those fellows were worn out completely, but they still hung on and they died like flies there too, Australians.

14:30 You ask, what was it like landing there? Well, we flew up to do that, to go to New Guinea, and it didn't feel like anything frightening or anything to me, and I don't think it did to anyone else either.

15:00 We were well trained. We were trained in mind and strength and everything and we were all aggressive soldiers. We didn't mind the thought of getting into action and having a lash [a try]. We were all capable of doing that. We'd been trained well.

So you arrived in

15:30 **Port Moresby first?**

Yeah. Went to Port Moresby and we stayed two or three days until they could get planes and get themselves organised. Instead of sending us to Kokoda they sent us away up north into New Guinea into the Wau Valley where there was this little airstrip. And the Japs - it's only four days over

16:00 the mountains; four or five days for them to come from Salamaua to there and take that airstrip and we were supposed to not allow them to do it. And so many of them came that we had to call for reinforcements of course. Do you know, the Japanese

16:30 got right up to within a hundred yards of that airstrip before they were repelled.

Very close.

They fought them back all the way. Another commando squadron was there and another commando squadron came in. Commando squadrons are handy for the army because they don't have to have

17:00 a lot of equipment. They just have light guns and they can be moved quickly into situations that would take other units a long time.

What equipment did you have in a commando squadron?

Mostly what they call small arms. Bren guns. Owen guns.

17:30 Tommy guns. Rifles. EY rifles. And all that light stuff that a man could carry about on his back all day and then use it, if he's got to. And there's not much else that he can carry about the mountains. That's why jungle warfare's so tough. You don't see

18:00 anyone till they're 10 or 15 yards away and by that time if you waste two seconds, you're dead.

Where would you sleep? Did you carry a tent on your back?

No. We never had any gear like that. I had the one set of clothes - drill trousers and drill shirt and I never

18:30 worried about the cold. I just laid down in the mud or on a banana leaf or wherever. If you could get a dry bed, well, you'd get it, but it's not a bed. It's just some dry grass and you'd lie on that for preference, but I never took my boots off one time, because of

19:00 fighting. Never took them off for 15 days and 15 nights.

How were your feet?

All white and all wrinkled. Like an old dead woman.

They would have smelt a bit too wouldn't they after 15 days?

Yeah. We didn't

19:30 get much food. Bully beef was the best food that we could have and nearly every man will admit that. It's fat and corned beef in a tin. One tin fed three men for a meal. Most days we would only have one meal.

20:00 You would eat that meat out of the tin with your finger because you wouldn't be bothered carrying a knife, fork and spoon, because they rattle and you've got to get rid of everything that rattles and moves. Even the swivel on an Owen gun sling,

20:30 when you ran along with it it'd go dingle dingle dingle. I'd tape mine up so that it wouldn't make any noise at all.

Would you eat anything else for dinner apart from the bully beef?

Sometimes from the cookhouse - depending on where you were - you'd get tinned potato or

21:00 tinned beans. They're mostly the same thing. You'd get that camp pie, which is nothing near as good as the bully beef was - pure beef, you know. Natives used to like it. We used to have to have a lot of natives around to carry things and wounded and things. If you go into action

21:30 you've got to have a lot of natives. It takes eight men to carry one man because they carry four at a time, but they won't last long before you've got to have another lot under the stretcher. And talking about stretchers, the best stretcher that they made up there was not what you get from the hospital

22:00 or an ambulance. All those sort of ones are too tight and too straight. You put a man on those things and you're going down like that, and up like that, and around like that, and you lose him. He rolls off. So the natives can make you a stretcher in a few minutes with a big bush knife. They just cut the

22:30 sticks - two long things like shovel handles. And then two cross bars. But they make the bag that goes on it all, or the whatever-it-is in the floor of the stretcher - not tight - it's down like that. The fella lies down. The wounded man lies down in it and he doesn't roll out.

23:00 He can't get out unless you put the thing down and then it's level.

Much better idea.

Lot better idea to make your own stretchers.

When you first got to Wau did you have contact with the natives immediately? Did you have to befriend them as soon as you got there?

Yes. There was another company had been there for a few months.

23:30 They had contact with the natives and also some white men up there - they call them ANGAU (Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit) - Australian New Guinea Army Corps or something. Those people were in constant contact and administered all the natives

24:00 all the time.

So what was your first impressions of the natives?

Generally speaking they were wonderful, but like in every population there's a few rogues and a few that would - a very humble sort of people you know - but there were a few

24:30 people that would sell you out to the Japanese and get some reward for that. But you couldn't blame the natives, some, for being like that because they had to exist too. They had their families there and all the Japanese there and the

25:00 way they treated the women and the children was just disgraceful.

The Japanese soldiers?

Oh yeah.

What did they do that was disgraceful?

Rape and murder and mutilation.

Did you witness any of this?

Yeah.

25:30 It was well known. And with children too. And missionaries. Sad, terrible things. And yet their people back home in Japan weren't like that. When I went up to Japan even the soldiers coming back from the war, they weren't like that.

26:00 They just go mad training. Go into a new place and the natives have done nothing to them but they'll do all these things to them.

How were the Australian soldiers with the natives from what you observed?

Very kind. We knew - and we'd been told and taught - that if you're

26:30 cruel to these people they'll get you. They'll go and tell the Japanese where you are and lead them into your camp. You'll pay for it. Don't interfere with their women. Don't interfere with their everyday life. If you tell them you're going to reward them for something good

27:00 that they're going to do, if they take you as a guide through here and there through the mountains and you tell them that you pay them, well, you be sure to pay them because if you don't they'll get you.

Who passed on this kind of knowledge to you? Was it other soldiers that had been there before you or had you learnt this in your training back in Australia?

27:30 Those ANGAU people told us what was expected of us, and we knew just from general talk with the natives and that, too, what they would accept and what they won't accept. I think there was about four million natives in New Guinea, and towards the end of the

28:00 New Guinea war people said that the Japanese were run out of food and that they were easy to fight. That was just the opposite. People that don't know and don't understand that they're fanatical. And

when a fanatic knows that the pressure's coming on

28:30 he'll just fight all the harder. He will never surrender. Hardly ever a Japanese would surrender. They'll fight on.

When was the first time you came in contact with a Japanese soldier when you first got to New Guinea?

29:00 When I first came in contact with them I didn't even see them. They used to say that - their wounded, I've heard say - that they never saw us. It's that thick and that in there that you're wounded or dead before you know. Truly.

29:30 You never see anyone, from here out to your car. It's very seldom - only in a dry river - where you'd see that. But I think that it's a shock to see a man dressed different, long hair, usually, smaller,

30:00 and when you do see them, you stir. It's a shock to you. If you do see them before they shoot you and before you shoot them.

Did the Japanese have long hair?

Some of them did. And I think, too, that depending how long they'd been there in that battle -

30:30 might be months and months, or years, and they had nothing to cut their hair with. They could nearly live on as much as a bird. You'd get someone

31:00 that dead and tip his pocket out and he had as much rice in there - raw rice - as you'd put on a 20 cent piece. That was his food.

When was your first battle or skirmish with the Japanese when you got to Wau? Can you tell us about that very first battle that you

31:30 **encountered?**

We went out to Mubo, which is halfway between Wau and Salamaua. They were coming in and we went out to meet them. We knew that we couldn't stop them, but we had to try and delay them until they could get some infantry battalions into Wau.

32:00 The weather is so - it's raining nearly all the time. They can't say, "We'll get someone in there on Tuesday." It might be a week later before - the planes can't see to come down.

You were saying the first battle, you went up there and there was lots of Japanese coming.

Yeah. We went to

32:30 Mubo. I get off the track a little bit. That's age. And we met them and we stayed for a week there and fought them in there for a week, hoping that the reinforcements would be flown in back at Wau, but they weren't. They couldn't get them in.

33:00 They're fighting them on the Kokoda and they're fighting them somewhere else, too, you know. So we hung on as long as we could there. Then we withdrew into the mountains and they went past us to head for Wau, but by the time they got down near Wau some of the

33:30 battalions had got in, and they fought. Stood toe to toe and never gave a yard. And fought them very courageously there, on the outskirts of Wau. And eventually pushed them back into the edge of the mountains. And all the time that was on,

34:00 we were cut off for four months. But we kept raiding them as they came through the mountains. We'd go and ambush them. That worried them a lot.

Alright. We've got a few things to talk about there. We'll go into the nitty gritty details. You just told me a lot of your story there. What was it like when you'd done all this training in Australia and you're really

34:30 **ready and raring to go - can you walk us through the first time that you actually shot a Japanese or that you knew you were in battle? You were there and you were actually doing the job you were actually trained to do. Can you walk us through that? What was it like?**

No-one ever enjoyed it. Everyone was jittery. Doesn't matter how tough you were.

35:00 You were toey. I think it's because it's not a normal natural thing for man to kill man. I think that's the real reason for it. No-one ever enjoys anything like that. Doesn't matter what the other fella did. It upsets you to have to do it.

35:30 I think that's the law of the world nearly.

Can you describe what you were actually doing? You'd gone up there - how many men you were with? Can you paint a picture for us like we were there with you? Can you paint a picture

for us, that first battle you were in?

The first one we were in,

36:00 I didn't agree with their tactics, what they were doing. He was a high ranking officer and you don't dispute anything. You do what you're told. I thought it was a stupid thing.

What were they doing?

Just sitting there firing at a long distance across the valley. If they wanted to stop these people

36:30 they should go on to the track where they're going through and ambush them, and withdraw back and withdraw back, through your own next ambush. They - as they approach again - they shoot again and then they draw again. The way we were doing it,

37:00 you could have driven 2000 of them through us and up to us. Which they did do. We fired at them for days and it didn't disturb them very much. They came up. And when they came up after us we only had 80 men there then, on Vickers Ridge.

37:30 They always… Every time that we had contact with the Japanese, there's so many of them that they always outnumbered us, and they came up to us and swarmed all round. We had to get out. We had to get away. Then this officer sent us back down again

38:00 the next morning after we'd all been forced out. And then he sent us to go right around the back of them. Thousands of them. We had 20 to ambush them. I was a private. I knew where I was

38:30 but no-one else did. They got lost. And if we'd have fired one shot - we were behind the Japs, you see - they'd have swarmed on us like bees. So we were gone for three days, lost, and the fellas were starving, no food, starting to get pretty

39:00 upset about it all and I said, "I know how to get out of there. I'm not lost. If you follow me and shut up I'll take you out". I went to the front of the little heap and went the way that I wanted

39:30 to go, and it was only about four or five hours and we were on the track that I was looking for. I'd never been there before. But usually the natives make a track along the very top of the mountains, and they'd done that, and that track went back around

40:00 to where our base was at a place called the Saddle. They were happy and they got to that track. You know, I fluked something. There was no seepage of water. We were perishing for water, where it usually rains every day. I saw this bit of a depression

40:30 beside the track, full of leaves and things. I thought, "That hasn't been made by an animal, it's been made by a human." And I thought, "Why would a human want to dig that out?" I said to myself, "It's because he wanted water." On top of this great mountain. It wasn't down a little bit where the soak would run out.

41:00 It was right at the top. I put my hands in and pulled out a couple of loads of mud and leaves and water ran in. Unbelievable. And I put my old head down in the hole and had a drink and then called the fellas in. And some of them even filled their water bottles out of this hole. And 23

41:30 men drank at it. A gut full of water. And it was still running in. It's surprising, isn't it? Then back we went to the Saddle and then at the Saddle that night the Japs came up - a big force came up to us again. A lot of shooting went.

Tape 5

00:38 **Bruce, just to pick up the story that you were in the middle of telling us at the end of the last tape, you had just explained that you had managed to get back to camp at Saddle after being lost for three days and just as you got back the Japs raided you.**

01:00 **Can you tell us that story please?**

Yes. The Japs came up in force and we were expecting them, ones that were already established on the Saddle. In the - it was about dark and the -

01:30 I don't want to say names. He was the captain out the front supervising everything, and I think there'd been a counter attack on and he was wounded, and he fell down in sort of a no man's land.

02:00 A few of us were called on to rush down to him or to the lieut [lieutenant]who was responsible for his job. The lieut wanted to get him out immediately because, if the Japs pushed up further

02:30 they would collect him and then he'd be tortured, and we didn't know how badly he had been wounded. If he wasn't wounded too badly they could take him back down into their mob and there he'd get the works.

03:00 So the lieut asked me, would I go out and pick him up? Which I did. Pulled him down the hill a little bit by the leg and there was shooting going across the top.

03:30 I picked him up with a fireman's lift, threw him over my shoulder. He was a heavy enough fella, too. I took him down through the jungle and up the track towards the Saddle.

04:00 When I put him down, up where our fellas were, of course, I was - he'd bled freely all over me and I knew that he would be seriously wounded, and he was shot through the stomach and it

04:30 must have come up against vitals in there. He was unconscious and I handed him over to some other fellas. I think one was a medical bloke. They took him back further.

05:00 I reported back to the officer that sent me down there, and some time - I think about midnight - he let the rope go. He died. That was that. We fought on the next morning until probably ten or

05:30 eleven o'clock but the Japs were starting to come around us like they did all the time, and if we didn't get out we wouldn't have got out. So we got out. Previously - I'd just like to mention that before we left,

06:00 down further, there was a captain wounded badly and a sergeant shot through the head - dead of course. Just out in front of me and the fella that was with me, and probably only thirty yards out.

06:30 Straight away the officer in charge of us told us to get out, and he left nine men there and we got out and then another officer reminded him

07:00 that he had left nine men behind. He turned to me and said, "Go back and get them, private". Get the nine of them. They were in holes up the mountain. So I went back and

07:30 ran fast with a pistol in my hand because I knew that the Japs were only 30 yards in front of those people 15 minutes ago and they'd be trapped. So I got back there and got to the first fella, exhausted, but told him to pick up the others

08:00 and go up the hill and keep going up the hill. They never had time to come back around to us. Keep going up the hill to the top of this mountain, which took five or six hours in the night. But they all got out. I went back around and didn't waste much time getting back, either…

08:30 ..because they were infiltrating all through us. So they thought it was a pretty good job. Later on they recommended me for that military medal for getting the officer out. But it

09:00 embarrassed me a bit, because anything I did I didn't think was worth a medal. I think it's because I've done some other good jobs - when they were lost, and the one on Vicker's Ridge was nine, and then that lot, and then

09:30 the officer himself. So they made me a confirmed sergeant in the next week and recommended me for that military medal.

And that had all happened in the first week you'd been there?

First week. Yeah.

So you'd got them back from being lost for three days and helped them

10:00 **find the Saddle again and as soon as you got back then you ended up being sent off to get those nine men to safety and then came back from that and you got sent down to pick the captain up and bring him back?**

Yeah. I think the three things together they thought were alright. Pretty good. So

10:30 they recommended me for that. But any of those men that were near me, they would have done it too. They would have done any of those things except when they were lost no-one knew their way home.

But that was the week that you referred to earlier and said that that's when there was a real transformation in you as a person and that you felt like

11:00 **you really became focused and you really came into your own and you could handle the situation. How did that transformation feel for you?**

It felt good. I felt confident and I was glad that I… Every man, every soldier, likes to be able to get through his first action,

11:30 and in some sort of strong way, that helped me. Then we withdrew further back to a bigger base that we had in the mountains and we were surrounded there, or cut off, really, for

12:00 three to four months.

How many in the group were there with you?

I think our whole unit was there. But by this time our unit was cut back by about 30 or 40. As these Japs passed by us over in the mountains,

12:30 we used to go out on ambush patrols and catch them in ambushes. They were like ants, there were that many of them. Ants going up the hills.

So while you were stranded there, you were cut off, you continued to do ambushes?

Yeah.

Do you remember the first ambush you ever did?

13:00 Yeah. You select a position that you can get out of, because they always have higher numbers than we have, and when you fire on them first, they go down in the front, but the two wings come round and if

13:30 if you don't move very quick you'll get cut off. They'll surround you. Then they slowly come through the bush until there's none of you left. That's easy for them to do because they've got so many. We were always expected to operate with small numbers.

Round about how many?

Oh,

14:00 we'd go out with five to ten, but we'd run into Nips that were 50 to 80, 50 to 100. I think that - this is only my thoughts - that we'd have handled those situations better

14:30 if we'd have gone out. We did alright, we killed a massive number of enemy. But if we'd have had more troops to do that with, we'd have done better because we were always scrambling to get out. We were always struggling to carry a wounded man and it takes eight men to do that.

15:00 And that's all that we had. And you're trying to get them out. And you're making all the noise in the world and you very often have to go in to get that fella under fire to get him out. So you mightn't get him out. You mightn't get yourself out either. We must have been very deliberate

15:30 about this because we never left a wounded man - in two campaigns - in all that time. Eleven hundred days and nights, we never ever left anyone to the mercy of the Nips. So we were quite proud of that. And it showed in the troops.

16:00 They knew, when they were going out, that they're not going to be left - that we'll do everything possible if they're hurt to get them out. That was a good lesson for us and everyone.

Did you learn the principles of ambush in camp at Australia? Is that when you learnt how to work that technique?

16:30 You only get a bit of an idea. But you can only operate as good as your opponent will let you. It's like playing tennis or something isn't it? If they're wise to these things they outwit you. You've got to outwit them. The best way to outwit them is to

17:00 be very quick and fire automatic weapons and don't wait and don't sit around and look about. Get in, fire and get out. Then you can set another ambush if you really want to.

Is that a lesson that you learnt in training, or is that a lesson that you learnt once you got there?

Once we got there.

17:30 There's an old saying in our unit - and in others, too, I'd reckon - that you can't train a man in his home country. When a man can go on home leave and back to normal life, you've lost it. He's got to be away

18:00 where he can't get home leave. I think that was right. It sounds hard, but yeah. You become a human and normal again. And the other way, you operate like a wild animal. Truly. Your senses and everything, your smells. You can smell

18:30 your enemy hundreds of yards away because he's eating different food and his sweat is different and his smells, his sanitary smells are different. You can smell a Nip camp before you ever get to it. And I didn't have a real good nose.

When you were doing those ambushes initially, when you'd been cut off,

19:00 **the group of blokes that you would work with, would you co-ordinate the ambush or would you be working it out with someone else in the group? Who would be co-ordinating it?**

You would try and get yourselves into a position where you could all see each other and even talk to each other after the din, the noise broke down.

19:30 But you would have a pre-arranged signal and you would have a pre-arranged rendezvous. But sometimes that doesn't happen too good. You get bushed in the confusion; you can't go where you want it to go because you'll run into a heap of them. It's all a bit of luck really.

So you'd have a signal

20:00 **which would mean attack?**

Yes. It really means to get out. Because you might only have five men there and they might have 50 and they're just like a big crayfish. The wings come round and they're in a circle and then they just slowly get you, hack ya, so you don't get into those predicaments.

20:30 **Can you remember how you felt in those early days of ambushes and finding yourself in such an intense threatening situation? Did it take some adjusting to get used to working at that extreme level?**

Yes, it does, and it's only a matter of keeping doing it.

21:00 It's very hard to keep doing it. You can sneak into an ambush, is the good side of the ambush. You can sneak into the ambush and prepare for your battle, but if you've got to keep going up the track until you get to the enemy, those forward scouts, be it you or

21:30 your mates, they've got to go along there fully exposed to those Nips and they lay and they ambush you. So that's what you've got to avoid. I used to think that in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh

22:00 had weapons that weren't anything like the Americans, but he used to rely on ambushes. That's what we did rely on a lot, too, but not all the time. You can get caned by breaking the rules and if you've

22:30 got an inferior number to your enemy, the only way you can even the score is with ambush. That's my belief. Other soldiers might have other ones, too. And you get the least casualties that way. Do you know that early in the second time

23:00 we were away, we kept tallies> Each troop and section kept tallies on their kills. And I don't like talking about kills, but we'd killed through ambushes over 2000 Japs, and only a little unit of 300 men.

23:30 And it was never 300. It was about 180, 150 because we had sickness and things to battle with. But these… I just lost me track.

You were talking about keeping track of your kills.

Yes. That's right. We'd only lost, at the time

24:00 that we counted up everything in our platoon - not my platoon, but all of us - we'd had five men killed in that same time, and with ambushes we'd killed over 2000. I got it written in a book.

When you were there cut off for that amount of time it was clear to everyone

24:30 **that the only hope you had of being effective was just to continue this pattern of ambushing? That was the only way you were going to make any headway?**

That's right. Yeah.

Do you remember the first time that you did kill a Jap and realise that you'd well and truly gotten him?

25:00 I think that often you kill them but you don't know that you've killed them until you've walked past, forward, and then you find him. There's all sorts of scenes that you can come by. It's an awful feeling.

25:30 I never did see that much of it. I… Honestly, my first thing that I wanted to do was look after what I have. I didn't really seek out kills all the time.

26:00 I used to look after - as much as I could - the fellas, and see that they didn't get into trouble or hurt, and I've got plenty of stories on those sort of things. The little thing that I'd like to mention is that - it's not a little

26:30 thing, but it's very hard on a soldier, unless you're troppo - when you ambush men and you shoot them down in cold blood and then you go to leave, to go back to where you came from, and invariably

27:00 half of them are still alive. Now the jungle's full of wild pigs. Are you going to leave those men there like that, wounded, blood around for the wild pigs that are going to come in the afternoon for a feed

27:30 and they're not dead? Or are you going to go around and shoot the wounded? Now, the war crimes people can get you for that as well as your conscience. Hard, hard decisions to make. Some fellas can't

do it. Some

28:00 fellas could. I'd rather not commit myself. But that is the real hard things for a soldier, because he goes back at night to his little bit of a bush or the butt of a tree where he started from in the morning and he lays down there. He's got no light.

28:30 He's got nothing to read. He can't light a fire. He's got mosquitoes crawling over him and biting him. He's got every insect in the scrub is going to come out and get a feed off you because they smell the blood and the protein in you. You've got to put up with all that and think about

29:00 what you did today. That's why a lot of fellas couldn't handle it and found it very tough. That's why I've got such high respect for a frontline soldier, one that's out making contact with the enemy.

29:30 It's beyond belief what that's like compared to a fella that might be ten miles back along the track. They're just things that come up that people don't know about.

Did you find yourself in that position

30:00 **sometimes? Battling to keep your mind together in such an incredibly stressful situation?**

It was a bit like that. Towards the end of the war I started to get a bit worse. It wasn't that I was more frightened because I'd trained meself to believe

30:30 that I wasn't going to get home anyway. I was going to die in it because I didn't think it wasn't possible to get shot at so often and get away with it. I think that I got that way I didn't care very much.

31:00 That's when it's dangerous. And it's dangerous when you're sick and you're suffering with malaria and you've got a temperature of 103. Some went up to 105, you know. But I went unconscious at about 103. But when you're walking along a track trying to keep up with your mates and you've got a big temperature coming

31:30 and the malaria's on you and you get weak and that and you don't care about anything, as long as you can just fall over and say, "Well, I don't care." It's bad when troops get to that way. You've got to rest them. Only thing. And very often you don't get rest.

32:00 In a commando squadron you don't get much rest because your highest ranking officer is probably only a captain or a major at most, and he's got no say in the big theatre of war. A battalion has got a colonel and

32:30 a battalion in a brigade has got a brigadier, and they've all got authority. They can put the thumb on the air force and say, "We want a strike on that hill." And they'll get it. But not a commando squadron that's got a captain or a major there. They won't even answer his call.

33:00 Crook isn't it? That's what's got to be changed. It might be changed now. I'm hoping that it is, because I don't think that we ever put in for an air strike on a feature that we ever got it. That means we're fighting heavy equipment with little small arms.

33:30 Little guns that can shoot 50 yards.

So when you were in situations where they couldn't let you get much sleep, how much sleep were you surviving on?

I think that if you're real tired you can just go like that and you'll drop off. But you've got to go on guard every night,

34:00 and you'll spend usually two hours doing that. Two hours out there staring into the night and you couldn't see that far. That black. And you're trying to listen and there's everything that's got legs is walking about and they're only that big sometimes.

34:30 And it might only be a frog jumping along on the top of your trench and it just sounds like a fella walking 15 yards away. If you panic and fire a burst out there, there might be some fella out there, but he might be behind a tree. He sees the flash from your gun.

35:00 So he just goes Boom! and you're gone. So you're under - I was anyway - I was under great tension, pressure, all the time. And sometimes I'd go out with the fellas that weren't - their nerves were frayed and…

35:30 Why I mentioned the frog story - because that actually happened - and this fella said, "There's someone walking out there," and we waited and the light came through from the moon and I saw this little grey frog, only as big as my thumb, on the parapet.

36:00 Humour is a great thing. I picked up the little frog by the two hind legs and he was standing up like that and I went - and bit his head off. And I said, "That'll teach you to go round frightening people". And this fella was with me laughed like anything.

36:30 He relaxed. I didn't taste the frog.

Humour was a very important part of surviving over there?

Yeah. Do something stupid. I had a bit of a name of being like that. "He's a silly bugger".

37:00 **Did you enjoy that role?**

Yeah, I did, because it did me good, too. I can't tell you stories here. They're a little bit too crude. But it kept us all alive.

You haven't got one story

37:30 **you want to try that isn't too crude?**

Can you cut it out if you don't want it?

Of course.

I had a mate, a corporal. He's dead now, just dead a month or two. He's a thin fella, but he broke wind like you couldn't believe.

38:00 We'd been out on a long distance patrol, and we came back the natives had built a sort of a shelter for us, with three decks of beds and a bit of a space between each pole so they could wrap bark around it to lash it. We were laying there and we'd

38:30 had a great big feed and the cook put big things in the garbage tin. That was his cooking utensil, you see, and he used to stir it with a shovel. We'd had this big feed and this fella was making wind like you couldn't believe - like going across Bass Strait.

39:00 Anyway, there's another little fella underneath him and he said, "If you don't cut that out, I'm going to drive this bayonet straight into you." Down under him he was. Anyway, he steadied down a little bit. But I got a bright idea. I climbed down

39:30 like an ape through the beds and I picked up - there's mud that deep everywhere - I picked up a bit of mud and I formed it into a nice roll, like a big saveloy, and I climbed back up again and he's laying there, the other bloke's laying there, his arms behind his head,

40:00 and I pointed to the big saveloy and to him and he said, without speaking, "Wait a minute," and then he - this mongrel little stomach that he had - I don't know how he did it, but he let go this thing like a charge of

40:30 dynamite, you know. And the moment that he let her go - that little gap between the beds - I dropped it down on to this fella's chest. Big heap of mud. And he went straight up about two feet flinging his hands like that and saying all the filthy things he could think of. And he said, "I'm going to kill you now!" And he chased him all around

41:00 the beds and all over the top of everything. And then I told him. I said, "It wasn't. It was only mud." And this little bloke got down and when he was making his bed and brushing it out he must have been suspicious about something, and he picked up a big piece of this and held it up to his nose

41:30 and smelt it. All the fellas roared laughing. It wasn't very funny. But it was a relief and that was what they needed. Off they went to sleep

42:00 End of tape

Tape 6

00:33 **You used a signal that the Japanese were close by or there was a Japanese movement. Can you tell us about that?**

Yes. The natives had a big log dug out in the form of a drum, and it might have been nine or ten feet long and about three foot high. To make it

01:00 make a big drum sound, they hit it across the opening of the drum, and that would make a Boom! sound that would carry signals way down through the mountains everywhere. The Japanese didn't know about this, about how to work it,

01:30 and we didn't either. But we were friends with the natives and we got the natives - whenever they had talkalong Japan [pidgin English – means, discover the Japanese], they couldn't ring up and talk nothing. They had talkalong Japan, and we would say, "If you know that they're moving somewhere, beat the drum. We'll get the message and we'll

02:00 send a patrol out to ambush them." Of course, this went on often.

Better than morse code?

Yeah.

And there was a certain sound that rang through the mountains, can you … ?

Yeah. A booming, spooky noise. They weren't allowed to use the drum at

02:30 night and they weren't allowed to talk about their own private tribal affairs. Only allowed to use the drum for our good. They understood that, but one night one fellow lost his wife. She ran away with some other fella or something. So he got on the drum. The wind was blowing and it was spooky,

03:00 and Boom! Boom! Boom! was going on. We found out in the morning that he was only ringing up about his wife.

Would you have been able to understand the message he was sending out?

No. We had - they don't call them interpreters, they call them 'turnemtalks'.

03:30 He turns the talk. So we'd get hold of this turnemtalk and said, "He talk what?" and he said, "He talk long Japany come" or "He talk Kanaka talk". But it was a wonderful thing, wonderful for us, and we used it

04:00 extensively. But that was only in one part of New Guinea.

Which part was that?

That was in the Western Highlands. No, wait a minute. Yes. How can I describe it? It was inland from

04:30 Aitape, near Tong. That's where we used it a lot. That's where we got a lot of those, killed a lot of Japanese with that system. You had to be like that. You can't play fair all the time.

If you didn't have the support of the natives do you think you would have done as well as you did?

05:00 No. And sometimes, if ever you were suspicious that a native might be untruthful, you put him out in front and you follow him. But you let him know in no uncertain terms that if he leads you into a Jap ambush you'll blow

05:30 his head off first. He'll be the first one shot. They usually did what they were supposed to do then.

But as a rule most of the natives were on the Aussie side?

Yes. Once they got a taste of the Japanese they didn't want him. He puk puk man. Puk puk was a crocodile. And he was the

06:00 puk puk man. And they didn't like him at all, because he was cruel to their people and they ate his vegetables. See, that's the only food that the natives had, was what they grew. They couldn't go down to a little shop somewhere. They had nothing else. The Japanese'd come along and just take the whole garden. And those

06:30 people starved then.

What did the natives call the Aussie soldiers? Did you have a name?

I don't know. I never ever heard them say anything that wasn't nice. But they probably did have something.

The Japanese had their own special methods of going into battle as well. Can you tell us a little bit about those

07:00 **methods with the bugle, and can you describe what the Japanese were like?**

Very spooky too. They used to signal with bugles and they used to use big dogs.

What kind of dogs were they?

They were just like a sheep dog. A bit dingoey looking, mongrel looking. But they used to lead those along the tracks.

07:30 They'd get a reaction from the dog if he smelt our footprints. But the bugle was a big thing with them. The natives used to use signals too. They'd cry out. They'd hang on to the last note.

08:00 And it'd fade away into the night. That was the end of his message. But those bugles and the dogs used to really spook us. If we saw a dog coming along the track you shoot him first before you shot the Nip. He was more dangerous than the Jap was.

Why's that?

He could tell

08:30 the Japs. The fur'd rise on his backs when he smelt us. He could even smell us a hundred or two yards away. Cause we smelt completely different to a Jap. Different food.

Why did the Japanese have the bugles? Do you know what the purpose of that was?

To signal each other. Even in those

09:00 days the most magic wireless sets that we had, the best ones that we had, were not worth a pinch when you got in the mountains and the steep mountains. You couldn't get them to go over the ridges. And they

09:30 were heavy. And if the dampness got at them they wouldn't signal at all. You couldn't rely on them at all.

Did you get to know what the Japanese bugle signals were?

No. They never blew them enough. But I didn't mind them, really, because if they blew away down there, you'd say, "Oh there's a heap of them down there.

10:00 Another heap over here". You could tell from the bugles where they were. But it sounded spooky, especially at night. Then the dogs'd Roo! Roo! Roo! No wonder I'm baldy headed.

You mentioned that there was a man from the Salvation Army

10:30 **that turned up during your first trip in Papua New Guinea? Can you tell us what his story is?**

Well, he was down in Port Moresby and he was an old man to us. We were 18, 19, 20. He was nearly 60. We had a hard enough job walking in those mountains

11:00 but he wanted to get up to where we were to do something for us, and to help our wounded, because we had no welfare officer or anything like that. So he stowed away on a plane leaving Port Moresby and in his pack he put a whole case

11:30 of coffee and milk, and never even took his toothbrush. He sat up in the plane with this thing on and they let him off at Wau and there was a lot of trouble about him getting to Wau where this other airstrip was that we'd saved. So he disappeared one night

12:00 soon after that, and he went up into the mountains where we were carrying this coffee and milk. Rain and mud and cold - nothing. He'd get feeds from a few troops along the line somewhere. And then he got down to our last outpost where

12:30 we used to send our troops or go ourselves straight into the Japs.

What was the outpost called?

It didn't have a name. It was just that's where we stopped there and then we'd send patrols up into the mountains from there. And, you know, he got in there and he had

13:00 two old mugs and he had this coffee and milk with milk mixed in it - condensed milk - and these two old mugs. And when the fellas'd come back off the patrols, the high priority, of course, would be the wounded, and they'd be carried back. But he'd give them a mug of this coffee.

13:30 And he shamed the army. He shamed them into doing something about it and sending some coffee through. Something human. He also put up on the front of his little place that was nothing - butt of a tree or something - he put up

14:00 the red kangaroo. "Hop in, you're welcome". Wasn't it good though? This old man.

So he was from the Salvation Army was he? Do you remember his name?

Yes. No, I wish - I'd give a hundred quid now to know it, but he's dead. Lovely old fella and he shamed

14:30 our officers and shamed the army for treating us like they did, really.

After that did some coffee supplies and other supplies come up your way?

Not really. I think that - things go up and down you know. They get better and then they get worse. Depending on the old Jap - wherever he is.

15:00 **There was one period soon after you'd landed in Papua New Guinea where you actually got cut off for 15 weeks, was it? Can you tell us about that time?**

Yeah. I think it was three months. Three or four months. That was when they pushed through to take the Wau airstrip. We went down and ambushed them all the time.

15:30 They dropped us food from the air. They even had a plane crash into the camp. Because there's no bare ground anywhere. All big high trees, like the river down here. And they'd drop the food. They never had parachutes, first, and they'd drop it down and it'd bust, and we had to all get out the moment the plane

16:00 stopped. Get out and pick up all the broken tins and took them up to the cookhouse, and there's a fella there with a tommyhawk and the tins were all ruined, you see, and he'd chop down through them and scratch and tip the stuff into the big drum for the fella to heat it up on an

16:30 open fire. But we found we had to stop doing that, because in two or three days of that sort of food, we had dysentery. It was no good. We had to leave all that, and that wasted. But then we told them. We had wireless sets.

17:00 We told them right back along the line that they had to send it up with parachutes. But they were unpredictable, you see. The parachute would float away down the mountainside. Had a terrible time there.

Why were you isolated?

They'd gone

17:30 past us and cut us off from our base. Our base was the aerodrome in Wau and they went past us in the mountain and down to take the aerodrome. That cut us off.

So you were surrounded in the mountains? You were basically surrounded by Japanese so you couldn't get out any way?

No.

18:00 Rather than surround you, they fight for control of the tracks. If there was a track going down there they'd occupy that and out there they'd occupy that, out there they'd occupy that. So they really had you surrounded.

Why didn't they just come in and kill you?

Because they were too frightened, I think, and

18:30 their main target was the airstrip. That's what they'd come in for, was the airstrip. They couldn't get the airstrip.

So when you say they - the Japs - had cut you off by cutting off the different tracks, would there just be one Japanese man standing there at the track? How would that work?

No. They'd just occupy

19:00 that track. There might be 20 or 50 or 100 there. But they wouldn't be on the track. They'd be off the track back in the bush and they would put, say, an ambush of ten men out on that track and they would control the track by doing that. If you go off and into the bush,

19:30 they hear you or all sorts of things. You live like wild animals and you can do things like animals do.

During that two or three month period when you were trapped or isolated did you lose many of your men?

We lost a lot with sickness because it was very wet and

20:00 very cold. Malaria was rife. We lost nearly as many with sickness as you do with bullets.

How many were there trapped up on that mountain all together?

About 300.

And how many did you lose by the time you came back down?

Of those? I don't know exactly,

20:30 but we would have lost, say, a third of them.

That must have been really hard for you to deal with?

Yeah. You get at your wit's end. Out here it's bad when there's a drought, but it's only a picnic compared to that sort of thing.

21:00 Anyway, eventually we opened the road through and the other fellas that were down there fought like Trojans and they pushed them back. There was a terrible lot of Japs killed there. They were so determined to get there.

21:30 There were two more commando squadrons fighting down there. And the 17th Brigade, which is one of the finest fighting brigades in the Australian Army. We fought with them quite a bit.

They'd been in the Middle East?

Yeah. But they're not all

22:00 originals, like. They might be…half of them would be still originals and the other half would have been reinforcements that have come up. They might have only been up there a little while. They got to keep doing that because no-one lasts very long.

What was it like for you coming back? To actually be able to get out of that situation where you'd been

22:30 **isolated for two months, what was it like getting back to the base camp after all that time?**

I kept going until I started…everyone had to walk back, and of course a lot of them went back very quick. I couldn't because I had malaria and dysentery.

23:00 I lost a terrible lot of weight. I used to be, when I went up there, I was 12 stone something and when I came back to the temporary tent hospital that they had at Wau I was nine stone. For a big man to be nine stone, there's not much of him.

23:30 They carried me back the last part in a jeep. I had beri beri too. Beri beri's when you feel nothing. Doctors stick a pin into your back or burn your back with a hot cigarette and you don't even move. You can't do that - if you were trying to you can't

24:00 do it. I had a mate there in the hospital - funny thing - he was a lovely, loyal bloke, and the doctor was talking to me and he walked around behind me and he was smoking. He took a drag on his cigarette and he jabbed the cigarette against me back. This big fella jumped out of the bed and he was going to grab

24:30 the doctor by the throat. He said, "I saw you torturing that man". Anyway, I picked up quick. I got drugs and things. It was funny that that doctor that was there, his name was Refshauge, the same as the fella that's in Sydney. But I don't think they were any

25:00 relation.

Once you got better where did you go to next after you got out of hospital? Did you go back to the front and start fighting?

The unit was all living on a little creek there, having a spell. After we were there about two weeks and all picked up a bit, and then they had all these new

25:30 soldiers coming in and another division even came in. That's thousands of men, 15,000. So our little unit, exhausted, they sent us back to Port Moresby and then flew us away out into western New Guinea.

26:00 We operated there until we did 14 months and then we came home.

Did you have any big skirmishes there with the Japanese?

Yeah.

You mentioned one where you lost 15 men. Was that at that time?

No. Actually that was in that when we were cut off.

26:30 **Can you tell us about that?**

That was when the padre wouldn't bury them.

Tell us that story, 'cause that's really important.

They actually weren't shot by the Japanese. That plane crashed into the camp, right into the camp.

27:00 They were killed in the plane and the plane caught fire, and we all dived in and we were trying to get them out and that, but they were all dead. And they only did it because they came down real low over our camp in the mountain, because they wanted to be sure to drop it in the camp…

27:30 ..because it was missing the camp and dropping down about a thousand feet. We'd lose it in the undergrowth. The undergrowth'd be as deep as this house. And you couldn't find - wouldn't find a motor car in it even if you dropped it. So these fellas all died and we put them together. We got

28:00 a head and an arm and another arm and another leg and sewed them all together, and the natives helped. We carried them over and one of our officers buried them. Said a few biblical things about them. Said something. Because their parents

28:30 worry that they don't get a decent burial. So they did that sort of thing. But that padre, he wouldn't do anything.

Where was he from?

From Australia. And he got caught up in there and he was living in a little tent there and the CO [Commanding Officer], the commander of our unit,

29:00 he went over to his tent when he wouldn't come out and he grabbed hold of his pack and his belongings and he threw it out in the mud and the rain. And he said, "Get your gear and get out of this camp, and don't ever come back to my unit again!" and "I'm not going to send anyone back with you." Normally, those sort of people, they send someone

29:30 with them with a gun to protect them in case a lonely Nip gets them. But he wouldn't give him a guide, a guard even. Terrible. The fellas were very wild about it all.

So this padre had been with you through that whole time?

No. He'd only been there… oh, probably a month.

Most units had a padre

30:00 **attached to them?**

No. You might get a padre for say six commando squadrons, a couple of thousand men. You'd get a padre for it. But one other old padre that we had, he was real good and real kind. I said, "Why do you keep coming back to our squadron?" He said, "Because

30:30 you're the worst people I've ever struck and there's plenty of work for me here trying to make you good." We were moving and he had an old rifle. I said, "Where'd you get that rifle. You're a non-combatant." I was the sergeant, I could. But he knew I was only joking.

31:00 "You shouldn't have that rifle," I said. "If you shoot a Jap with that they could hang you". And he said, "Yes. And if I don't shoot him, I'll die anyway. I'm carrying a loaded rifle".

Just to clarify with the first padre, the reason that the CO was so angry with him and the rest of the blokes were angry was because he wouldn't

31:30 **bury men who were of a different faith?**

That's right.

Or just of a different denomination to what he was?

Yeah, religion.

'Cause you would have all been Christians, I imagine?

That's right.

What faith was he? Was he a Catholic?

Yeah. I suppose I shouldn't say that, when it goes through that. But he was.

32:00 But he was the only one that we didn't like. All of them were good kind people. One old fella wrote a book and gave me a special mention in it.

One of the old padres?

Yeah.

What was the book called?

Beryl'd know.

32:30 **We'll take you back to western Papua New Guinea. You'd been flown over there and this is where you ended up before you went back to Australia. Can you tell us one of the highlights or one of the major things that you remember happening there?**

The thing about it was it was so different to what it was down below, where we were, in the jungle.

33:00 Open rolling hills like you see down around Canberra or something. Grass. Natives that were friendly and many of them. They'd all dance and jig together. It was just a different atmosphere for us.

So you'd go to parties with the natives?

No. But sometimes when they have

33:30 a "sing sing" - they all sing and they go on night and day for about three days. But I never went near them because I didn't know what they were yelling out about half the time. But they were kind to us and they

34:00 would tell us if there were any Japs coming. But sometimes they didn't. I just thought…sometimes they

didn’t. The fellas on the observation post - there might be three or four or five men there and they’d lead the Japs in. The Japs’d try to kill them all. Some Japs were different. They would

34:30 respect the people, put a bit of a something over them when they killed them. Others would mutilate. So people are so different, aren’t they?

Very different. You’ve actually fought a Japanese, how would you

35:00 **describe the Japanese as a fighting soldier?**

The fighting soldier?

The Japanese that you fought, how would you describe them as a soldier?

Really good. Really tough. Really courageous. They could stand all sorts of things. Sickness.

35:30 Dysentery. They were loaded with dysentery. They never had much food, but they could exist on nearly anything. They used to eat the saksak out of the palm trees. Like the sago palms, I suppose. They eat each other too.

36:00 Cannibalism was rife. The tougher things got, the more they ate each other.

You mean they would kill each other for food?

No. When someone was killed you’d go back the next day and he’d have his head belted in and his brains taken out.

36:30 There’s his favourites. And he’d cut into his back and take his kidneys. And he’d take the muscles off his legs, specially up here. I never held that against them. I went to the war crimes trials at Morotai on the way to Japan. Actually, I was the sergeant of the

37:00 guard that was responsible for the Japanese that were there. I was only there for two or three days. But cannibalism, I saw fellas charged with cannibalism there. They said that they were soldiers, had sworn to fight for their country and the only way they could

37:30 continue to hold on and fight was to eat wounded. They did eat an Australian, you see. That’s why they had them there at the court, at the war crimes. They just took it. They got ten years or death or whatever for the things that they did. I thought it was

38:00 pretty awful, really, because there were no Australians tried for brutality, and an Australian can be that way too. He doesn’t eat people because we didn’t need to. But if you’re starving, and I’ve been starving, you’ll have a go at a

38:30 bit of human meat because your body is mad for protein, and the meat, flesh from your body is full of protein.

Save your life.

It’s awful to say these things, but it won’t be long before I die and people should know.

39:00 There’s some terrible things in war. It’s just not a matter of Bang! and Bang! and he’s dead. Not like that. A lot of people have terrible mind blowing things they see.

You said there was a time you were really starving, when was that time?

39:30 You’d say it was most of the time, but it really wasn’t, because you can eat less and less and you can still survive, and if you’re healthy you can…a third of a tin of bully beef and a couple of those dog biscuits that they have, that’ll keep you going.

40:00 One feed a day’ll keep you going. But if you’ve got to walk hills and carry big weights and get chased and shot at, well, then you need more tucker.

You were mentioned before the humdrum of being in a war, the day-to-day boringness of it.

Yeah.

40:30 **How do you deal with that?**

Humour is the best thing. Talk a bit of sex to each other as though you’ve been sleeping with a woman every night and haven’t ever slept with one. Fair dinkum. Tell lies that are only fun.

41:00 That’s the only thing that keeps you going. Only thing that kept me going.

Would you have days and days on end when you were just doing nothing?

Oh no. You were always…got to walk somewhere, and do something, and see that something’s not happening. Very seldom you get a time when you can lie down

41:30 in the daytime. Very seldom.

What about when night came? With no electricity around, nothing to entertain you?

Terrible. That was terrible for me. Some people used to just go to sleep and they wouldn't care about their shifts or anything, but I couldn't do that. I used to be sure

42:00 that I was about and someone else would

Tape 7

00:33 **Bruce, if you can continue to tell us a bit about why night time was so hard over there?**

I think that some people probably could stand it alright. I'm not frightened in the night, but you can't see anything.

01:00 You're locked in. A few grenades thrown about put you on edge a bit. I don't know what it was, but I wasn't very happy about the night and I don't think anyone else would be either.

01:30 **Did the Japanese do a fair bit of attacking at night time?**

They're got special troops for that. They might spend most of the night getting into you. We used to get up to a few tricks too. Not going out on the attack at night,

02:00 but we made a landing on a beach head and we found that there was swampy country in just 50 yards. We thought that we'd get a big counter attack from the Japs that night so they started to put up barbed wire and things,

02:30 and I dug a pit and I found out that the frogs…because it was low-lying and swampy, the pit filled up with water, that far from the top. It was probably about that deep. And no sooner had I gone on

03:00 to the next one, and cursing the water, but the frogs got in there and, of course, they can feel all the vibrations of the earth, evidently, because I noticed as I walked near one of those slit trenches that the frogs all stopped -

03:30 dead silence there. I thought, well that's a good cue. So we dug some more and we didn't put any more barbed wire up because the frogs would come into them all, and if you walked in within say five yards of that pit, it all stopped.

04:00 That gave us the cue with the old Nip. He was coming in and couldn't see anything. The frogs stopped. Fire'd burst over the top of that and you get him.

So that frog alarm system worked for you?

Yeah. Frog alarm. Yeah.

04:30 You come at all sorts of little funny things.

It seems that being in that situation, it forced you to really tune in to nature and the environment and everything about it, and to make that an ally and to use that to your advantage.

That's a good way of putting it. That's just the way it really is. You've got a better choice of words than I have.

05:00 **Speaking of choice of words, Bruce, just before we move on and forget to ask you, how did you get the nickname Slugger?**

I don't know. I was never a fighter, like that sort of fighter. I suppose I could do enough of it to keep me out of trouble. One little fella

05:30 started to call me Slugger and it just happened like all nicknames. They called me Slugger. But I like the name because I like the fellas that were calling me Slugger. I felt that it had a good friendly sound about it to me. That was all.

06:00 **You were just telling us that the night was a particularly challenging part about being over there. What were some of the other really terrible things that you had to put up with over there that maybe we haven't heard too much about? Can you think of anything?**

I don't know. My heart went out to fellas

06:30 that were sick. Fellas that would keep going when they should be stopped. That used to depress me. But everyone was depressed about that sort of thing. I think we just looked on it as being

07:00 part of war. You've just got to put up with it. You never ever feel very jovial about it. I think the whole thing, generally, and your health and misery and fear, too…You know, you don't respond to things

07:30 very good if you fear…I had a friend, he was in my platoon. He was on an observation post. He was cutting a fella's hair. The Nips arrived. Native brought them in I think. The officer

08:00 drew his sword. They like to draw their sword, you know, and dong you with the sword. It's part of the belief or religion or what. Anyway he hit him twice in the head and cracked his skull.

08:30 Then he hit him on top of the shoulder, and it swept down his arm and cut the elbow off - part of it - and knocked his little finger off, all in one blow. This fella's name, I won't say it, and he's still alive.

09:00 Still a nice, real gentleman. He said he was bleeding badly and knocked out from the two blows to the head. And he said, "Don't talk to me. Shoot me. Don't talk to me". He drew a Luger or a Mauser. They had a

09:30 lot of German weapons. And he put it on his heart and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Pulled her again. Nothing happened. While he was looking at the gun and wondering what he'd done wrong, Bruce pushed him over and ran for the scrub,

10:00 which was only 20 yards away. The other Japs that were there were ratting [investigating to find what they could] the bodies of the other fellas that they'd killed there. He ran for the bush. When he did, the Nips grabbed their guns as quick as they could and

10:30 fired shots at him. A couple went into his buttocks, but sideways I think it must have been or it'd have crippled him. One went through this arm and went under his tit and they couldn't find where it came out eventually.

11:00 But he ran for the scrub and got away. Another fella did too. The fella that I've mentioned's down in Melbourne. He was with him. Then Bruce roamed for three days, lost in the jungle, and

11:30 flies and mosquitoes after his blood. He was perishing for a drink of water because your body craves water when it's been through a rough time like that. You don't have to just run a mile to do it. Anyway, he used to get

12:00 the water, lick the leaves when you're hiding at night. They were still after him. He licked the leaves and get a little bit of moisture into him and eventually he worked it out where he was and he got back to where the other fellas were at his little base camp.

12:30 Walked in naked. He had all this wounds and things and chopped to pieces with the sword and he said, "Who wants a haircut?" It's terrible. Poor devil. Anyway, they tried to find this bullet. The medical orderly that was there was

13:00 worried about that. Maggots in his head. But they got those out with a bit of kerosene out of an old hurricane lamp. Looking around and thought, "That bullet's gone into his lung." It hadn't. It had gone across his chest and over his brisket there and pulled up over

13:30 here. This medical orderly said, "How long have you had that lump on the left side of your chest?" Bruce said, "I've never had a lump there". He got a razor blade and he went Zif! and got the bullet out. So he was real pleased then, 'cause it wasn't in his lung.

14:00 They carried him on the stretcher for 20 days. It's written on that thing out there. 20 days they carried him, before he saw a doctor. Way out in west New Guinea. Tough go, wasn't it?

Better believe it. So you were in west New Guinea

14:30 **because you were trying to stop the Japs from getting in to Bena Bena country, is that right? Why was that?**

Yeah. They got up there…beautiful country. A lot of natives, a lot of food for sale…vegetables. They still grow vegetables from up there and take down to the coast. It's a mild climate too.

15:00 It'd be 20 degrees less up there than what it would be down on the coast, and a very pleasant place to be. So we used to go out beyond that. It joined on to the Ramu Valley. Ramu means death. And it was that sort of place. The Japs got hunted out of

15:30 Malay and Salamaua and they landed the doovies behind them and they belted them all the way up the Ramu. They… What was I going to say now?

Why was it important to keep the Japs out of Bena Bena country?

16:00 That was because they'd get in there and get all this food and they'd live well and they'd have enough food there to last them for years, because they'd make the natives grow vegetables for them.

So you were working in an area called...was it Goroka?

Goroka, yeah. Did I say that on the phone, did I? Goroka

16:30 was near Bena Bena and there was another place that I went out to on the edge of the Ramu that was real bad, because we were isolated out there and the Japs used to come up out of the valley and rob our tucker line, shoot up the natives and

17:00 very risky and very unpleasant. That's where Beryl was telling you about the little native boy, Nugget. Little, muscly, nice skin - nice little fella, happy, and we took him down into the Ramu Valley

17:30 as a guide, and in the night the Japs came and they grenaded him. He was sitting near a little fire and they threw grenades at him. Anyway, several days after he hadn't come back. Only one that didn't get out. So we went back down to see if we could find him,

18:00 and we did. He was near a little spring, a little water trickling along, and he used to go in there every day and bathe these massive wounds that he had from the grenades and they were that big round, and you could see all the sinews working in his arms. He'd got there and he'd wash.

18:30 Kept it real clean. No poison had got into him, but he couldn't walk. His feet were blown to pieces and he couldn't walk. We carried him back and then had other natives carry him back over the mountains and got him back. They used to call him Nugget. But he was that thin and frail that I think he'd have been

19:00 flat out to be five or six stone. All in a week. Anyway, we kept the Japs out of all that country. Then we went down into the Ramu Valley and joined up with the divisions that were coming up the Ramu Valley, and joined forces and

19:30 pushed them right back up the coast. They were further up and further over to the coast. Then the war went on for a long time after that. We went home and then we came back.

Let's just talk briefly about you going home? So you got back round about when?

20:00 **'43?**

I think yes. My mother's birthday - 29th November, '43 was the exact day I landed in Australia.

That was a difficult time for you, that return to Australia, wasn't it?

Yeah.

20:30 I wasn't settled at all. I couldn't cope with me new way of life. I was drinking too much. Being too sorry for myself. It was no good.

How long was that leave meant to be?

A month, I think.

21:00 But some fellas never had a home, and some fellas had a home in Western Australia. So I told them to come home with me. I didn't have a home, either. My mother lived in Sydney. My father was in the army. He was a staff captain in the army.

21:30 I brought them back out to here. I didn't have a home then. Mum lived in a flat in Sydney at your place, Bondi, Curlewis Street. But Mum was like most

22:00 mothers, she didn't know, really, how to treat a soldier son coming back from that sort of an existence. I got back with the boys and drank too much and then went back up there again.

22:30 **And when did you talk to your brother about the possibility of him coming along?**

That was when I was on leave in Sydney. He had to go to Uralla for something. Concord Hospital. It might have been a hernia or something. I never even asked him. He said he wanted to come up.

23:00 He was older than me.

By how many years?

Only two. But he'd always been the boss because he was older on the farm and that. When we got up there he was the perfect soldier. He never ever…if I said jump, he'd jump. He was really good.

23:30 Really good mate. We've been very close ever since.

So getting back up there, that felt good, felt right for you at that stage?

Yeah. I didn't care about it. I wasn't happy. I think if I'd have met someone and was in love with a nice girl or something, and

24:00 had a few home comforts, I might have been alright. But I didn't, and so I just went back up there and was glad to be with them.

So you joined up with the same group again?

Yes. Went right through with those fellas.

Where did you land this time?

Up at Aitape

24:30 up on the far north coast of New Guinea. The Americans had been there and there were many thousands of Japs killed up there. The Jap Army told them if they could take Aitape the Jap Navy would be waiting off the coast there for them and they'd all go home -

25:00 and it was a lie. And these poor devils, they lived on - nearly - grass. They went up there and terrible lot of them were killed there. We patrolled all along and through the mountains there. There were dead Nips everywhere. Died of starvation and

25:30 everything else that would come their way. Sickness.

Just before we go further into that time could you give me an impression of how Australia seemed to you in that time that you had gone back there? I know that you were concerned that there was a lot of Americans over there. What about

26:00 **Australia weren't you happy about?**

I think I was probably just a bit like the Vietnam boys were. They'd done all they could do and all they were asked to do, but they came home and people insulted them and were rude to them.

26:30 Those fellas had risked their life. They put their life on the line to go up there. The people were back here in Australia, they hadn't done anything like putting their life on the line, and they just felt a bit as though they weren't wanted. And I don't blame them for being like they are or were.

27:00 They got it tough, I reckon.

And you got it tough yourself at that stage?

Yeah. They never…each fella mightn't have had to do things like we did, but they got it tough when they came home. They were insulted.

27:30 And that's an awful way to be. Awful thing to do to fellas.

Did you feel a similar isolation yourself when you returned to Australia?

There were a lot of people that I knew here in this town and that, and they were all nice to me, but I was just unsettled and

28:00 I wasn't used to doing that sort of thing. I think that unbalances a young bloke.

You didn't particularly like having the American soldiers around the place?

Actually they were very kind to me every time I saw them. And I was in an American hospital with a damaged leg -

28:30 foot - and they were real good. I had nothing against the Yanks meself.

Even though they were grabbing all the Australian girls?

Yeah. Well, I didn't want them, I don't think. But then I think that I was too sick and too twisted. But I've wanted them ever since.

29:00 Normally a fella steadies down at 70, but I'm 80 and still happy.

And a handful, by the sounds of things. Let's get back to New Guinea then. You were just explaining returning up there and surveying

29:30 **the territory that you arrived at and seeing a lot of dead Japs around the place.**

Yeah. Up at Aitape.

What was your role to be up there at that stage?

They had to…I think the way the army or the politicians looked at it, there were still four million natives in New Guinea, unprotected.

30:00 For us, after the kindness they showed to us, for us to just walk out and leave them to the mercy of these Japs was pretty low. That would have an effect on some people. We were supposed to clean them up more

30:30 than what we had done. And we did, too.

So you started ambushing again.

Oh, yeah. Only way. They always had more Japs in New Guinea than there were Australians. Never got the other way. Do you know,

31:00 I've read this Japanese history of this business. There were 360 Japanese landed on the coast of New Guinea. 360,000 were landed there, and according to Japanese history there were only

31:30 8,000 ever got back from New Guinea to Japan. I can't guarantee those figures, but that's written in a Japanese history book. Another surprising thing that I read -

32:00 there were 102,000 Australians killed in the Boer War, WW1 and WW2, Vietnam and somewhere else. Five wars. 102,000 killed. Australian troops killed twice that number in New Guinea

32:30 of enemy soldiers. They stacked a lot into you, didn't they? They were going to go on from New Guinea into Queensland. It was only the Coral Sea battle that stopped that.

So this was the time that you made a special friendship with one of the natives.

Yeah.

Can you tell us about that?

33:00 Some parts, yeah. He was a fella about 40 years old, I'd reckon. Baldy and tough. Tougher than tough. He was a Sepik warrior and they got a great name for being like that. He would

33:30 sneak into Jap country in amongst Japs. He'd do all sorts of fantastic phenomenal things. And he wanted to learn to fire an Owen gun. See, the natives were just given rifles,

34:00 and it wasn't fair. He had to go in and get in amongst a dozen Japs with an old rifle to shoot with. And the things that he used to do he should have been allowed to have an automatic weapon. We gave him one and said, "Say nothing. That's your gun".

34:30 But then he had to learn to use it. An officer got me to teach him how to use the Owen gun. Very simple, but it's all feel, it's all - I don't know what. But he thought that he was the greatest thing that was ever made.

35:00 He gave me that scarf and that boar's tusk and I read after the war that boar's tusk is the emblem of courage. It started with the fellas right up in

35:30 Norway and Sweden. What were they? The seamen?

The Vikings.

Vikings, that's right. That was their symbol. The boar's tusk. And right over here in Australia, they never ever knew of each other, but these famous warriors of the Sepik, they adopted the boar's tusk too. And then

36:00 one day he had the red scarf and he gave me the red scarf and the boar's tusk and he went away and working for some other army fellas. He got killed. I thought, well I'll always wear this. I'll keep it

36:30 forever. And when that portrait was painted, there was fools of officers that condemned Mainwaring for that and said that I was like a lout and would be… "You couldn't see him in an officers' mess back in Australia." And our CO said

37:00 "He doesn't have to be in an officers' mess to prove anything. He's proved it here with this unit and he's been doing the job of an officer for eight months now". And there's still this colonel wouldn't sanction that I was recommended for

37:30 a commission in the field. There were only three fellas out of 20,000 that happened to, but he wouldn't allow me to have one. He said I looked like a lout and a tramp. I went to the victory march and they picked me to lead it. So it's a strange thing

38:00 and it won't hurt if I say this, but another officer then condemned me up there, came on with a patrol. He was out of another unit. He and another officer came with me and I took them down to a Japanese staging camp. There were stacks of Nips there building

38:30 structures and things for troops moving through and back. They said, "We want to go down there and see everything. We don't want you to say, there's Nips down there. That's no good. Your gotta take us to where they are. We want to go right into them." And I'd been doing this every day, and sometimes

39:00 on my own, and I went right in amongst the Japanese, but they didn't see me, naturally. So I took these fellas down from this other company and the two mongrels let me go in on me own, only with their scout.

39:30 Let me go right in, and there were Nips cutting bushes down all round me. I said to this scout, “Where’s your officer?” He said, “They’re not here with me. I think they stayed well back. I don’t want to stay here. I’ve seen all I want to see”. So we both went back. They were hiding under a

40:00 tree, under the roots of a tree. These are the brave men that were going to do wonders. They even said they were going to sleep down there. They never supported me. They let me go right in there. I thought I had two more machine-gunners behind me, if I’d have got surrounded. But I never had anyone.

40:30 Funny, isn’t it, that one of those fellas that reckoned I was a no hoper - he was a no hoper himself?

That second visit you also were working - you had a doctor along with you. Can you tell me about that doctor?

Yeah.

41:00 He was a wonderful person. He had great faith in me. He was a very religious Christian. I was probably the opposite. I think I had all my belief knocked out of me. Even still, we were good mates.

41:30 He said to them…we used to get all these rashes and things and I never had any. The reason was that I used to piss into a tobacco tin and put my fingers in and pat it all over me. You can imagine what I smelt like. Nothing would

42:00 attack me.

Tape 8

00:32 When I went into the Light Horse my father told me, “If you get a horse with girth gore” - that’s where the girth goes around him and it rubs on him and it causes a bit of a lump - and he said, “If you get that, piss on it”. So when I started to get rashes and in here, I’ll do something about that.

01:00 The doctor could only carry that purple dye in a little bottle in his pack. He was loaded up with things and had to walk the same hills that we did. So he’d run out of purple dye and he said to this fella, “I haven’t got any more purple dye. Go down to Slugger, he’s got a

01:30 bottle of a better cure down there”. And when he came down to me he said, “How about giving me a bit of that cure for me rash?” “Righto, mate, she’s right.” Pulled out the old tobacco tin and filled her up. Held his arm up and threw it all over him. He said, “God Strewth, what’s that?”

02:00 “What do you think? You saw where it came from”. And it cured him. Old doc never had to worry about purple dye any more.

You were involved in another operation with that doctor, weren’t you? Can you tell us about that?

Yeah. This fella was wounded in a creek and he was shot through both legs.

02:30 The following morning the doctor said, “I’ve got to take his leg off. He’s got gas gangrene and he’ll be dead in 24 hours if I don’t”. We were away into the mountains. A long way. We had no facilities much. So they got a little plane to fly in

03:00 and drop blood plasma in the river. We had a half a dozen fellas in there in the raw, waiting for this to drop. Then they dived on it and got him the bottle of blood plasma. Back up to his little hut - and that’s all it was - and to this fella lying there dying. And

03:30 people might think, “Oh that’s nothing, an amputation.” But it is, it’s a big thing, because most doctors don’t travel where you’re getting shot. But this fella did. Normally they would try and get them back over the hills to the doctors. But this fella would have been dead if they’d have tried to do that. So he said,

04:00 “I’ve got two orderlies to help me. I want you to come in with me”. I said, “What’s the good of me going in, Don?” I shouldn’t say his name. “I’m a sergeant and I’m a fighting soldier. I couldn’t fix a pimple. I can’t do anything.” He said,

04:30 “No. I want you in there because you give me confidence.” Anyway we go in, as crude as anything. He had one fella with a pair of pliers holding his tongue, a bit of cotton wool over the fella’s nose and pouring a bit of anaesthesia

05:00 stuff on the cotton wool. Holding his tongue so he wouldn’t choke. Another fella, the doctor was putting a big tourniquet round the top of his thigh. They put two on to stop any blood moving. Then he

05:30 got me to hold the leg, and this bone had been broken up here where the bullet went through, and that was good because he only had a little hacksaw blade about that long to cut through the thigh bone. So

he just cut straight through that thing and his leg came off.

06:00 I put it in the corner. As I was going over I made it walk, his leg, and I said like you say to the natives, “Walkabout you fella”. I said to the leg “Walkabout you fella”. That made us all feel a bit good.

06:30 Anyway, went through all this operation and he sealed off the arteries. But he’d been operating about two hours and he said, “You’ll have to excuse me.”

07:00 He never had anything - only a little primus with a little dixie that you eat out of, to boil up anything that he had to use in the operation and he said, “I’ve got to go to the toilet and I can’t move from here and I can’t touch myself.

07:30 So just stand where you are and you’ll just have to put up with it.” And he let go both barrels. He operated for the next another hour in that state, with the bit of dysentery and everything. Kept his hands clean, held them up in the air while he did it.

08:00 And then he found all the nerves alive, kept cutting steaks out of his great big leg until everything was good, and then he sealed her up…didn’t seal it up, he threw sulfadiazine or something into it that we used to put into all the wounds, and then just

08:30 put the flaps over, and then the old padre sat with him through the night. He said to the old padre, “I’ve lost me leg haven’t I?” And he said, “Yes, you have”. He said, “Well, that won’t matter much. I’ve got a good job in the bank.

09:00 I don’t need two legs anyway”. Good attitude, wasn’t it?

Did he survive?

Yes. And they carted him for three or four days through the mountains, and the rivers were flooded and they held him up, struggled to get him through the flooded rivers. They were wider than this river too.

09:30 Got him right back to the coast.

Were there natives helping carry the stretcher?

Yeah. His brother had heard about it. He came through to walk back to try and help. Anyway, home he went and along went the war and

10:00 some long time later, war’s finished, up in Japan, hit the job to come home and go on the victory march and we went over through Adelaide and Perth. When I got to Perth the talk had got through.

10:30 These poor fellas, they came 400 miles to Perth to see me, and this crippled one-legger is on crutches still. He was very quiet, religious fella.

11:00 He said, “What are we going to do today, Slug?” “We’ll get a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK and half a loaf of bread and sit in the park and eat it”. “Is that all you want to do? I’m going up to the pub and we’re going to get pissed”. It wasn’t like him to talk like that.

11:30 He came and I said, “If you’re going, I’m going with you”. All these fellas, all the Western Australians, had all arranged to meet at this fella’s pub. He’d lost his son with us, so it was good for the father, too, at the pub.

12:00 We had our big meeting there and a lot of singing and a lot of laughter and it was real good.

Alright. You’ve got another amazing story to tell about a rescue up in Itapi. You went and rescued some of your mates. Can you tell us about that story?

Yeah. I’ll try and be quick

12:30 if I can and it’s not that long anyway. It mightn’t look good eh?

That’s fine. Whatever you feel comfortable doing. You’re doing a pretty good job, I must say, of telling us without notes. You tell us very well.

Sixty years, you know.

Long time.

An officer and about 20 men of our

13:00 platoon were sent down the river to see if we could locate these Japs, and especially this machine-gunner that had shot this other bloke. The officer left about 15 men to hold the fort just down near the river while he and I and two other scouts had a look around. We went up the hill. The Jap

13:30 gunner and three or four riflemen had got themselves into a strong ambush position, knowing we would have been annoyed with them. They knew we were after them. We walked up a very narrow and steep

spur. The Japs were concealed by light jungle and

14:00 would have seen us easily as we approached. We were met with heavy rifle and machine-gun fire. Three of us jumped over the ridge to the right, while the last man jumped to the left behind a fairly solid tree, but on the same side as the Japs. The Japs immediately began heavy firing at

14:30 each side of the tree. Very soon they would be able to get him. Each time I stood up to help him they gave me the works too. I spoke to him through the ridge - it was like that, the ridge was that steep - and I told him that when I -

15:00 he was very calm, I'll always remember that - I told him that when I started to fire, to wait till the Japs' burst stopped, then blow through, go. This is the only time that you'll have any chance of getting out. By this time I had pinpointed the Jap's position

15:30 and also I had spotted the smoke from the machine-gun. See, he'd fired about 200 rounds, and hot. It began to smoke. I knew that he wasn't hiding behind anything, because he was firing at the other fella. I had a double mag on my Owen gun

16:00 and 12 more in reserve. So I ripped it into them. I fired only four mags as quickly as possible. They only returned the fire during the firing of my first two mags, but I still didn't know if my little mate had escaped or if he had been wounded getting out. So I quickly looked at his hiding place.

16:30 I looked over the top of the ridge and looked in. If he had escaped or had been wounded getting out…I quickly looked at his hiding place, but he was gone. Still no reply from the Japs, so I called the other two mates and told them to return to the rest of the platoon. One was an officer.

17:00 I won't say anything more. I waited a short time, and then went back also, down the river to where the mob were. Still no fire from the Japs. My little mate walked out from the mob, fell on the ground in the mud and wrapped his arms around my legs. I felt as high

17:30 as a mountain. I did, too. A few weeks later some Aussies were patrolling through that part of the jungle. They told our officer they found four dead Japs and a light machine-gun and wondered what the story was. The Jap was the machine-gunner

18:00 that got our one legged mate. We are sure of that. I never thought I would make it back to Aussie, but I had 1100 days and nights exactly. I was very lucky and grateful. Our unit, in all that time, in all those actions, never left a wounded mate

18:30 to the mercy of the enemy. That's gospel truth.

That's amazing isn't it?

Yeah. You got to be a bit lucky.

Over the whole period you were in New Guinea, you had to adapt your uniform to suit the conditions you were fighting in.

19:00 **Can you tell us what your uniform looked like and how you changed it?**

Yeah. I've still got the boots in there that I fought in and marched in in London and over in Japan and back home. They still fit me. Anyway,

19:30 through all, the trousers that we had were just King Gee trousers, and they were good, if you could get a good pair when they were being issued. Get a pair that fit you instead of being great forks in them like that. For a shirt we just had

20:00 the drill shirt and I used to cut mine down there and it'd come open because of sweat and heat and hard pulling all the time. It used to get a bit more air around me, because you didn't have to worry about

20:30 sight, like some people would say, "Oh, you had a red scarf?" They would see the red scarf, but by the time they saw the red scarf they were finished, because you would usually just go on the movement of leaves in the scrub. You don't wait to see someone. If you do, you'll go yourself.

21:00 I had this big Jap belt. Hand grenades in the front and magazines in the back.

A Japanese belt?

Yeah. I won it one day.

That had come off a Japanese soldier?

Yeah. They had a bit of good gear. It was soft webbing. It was about that wide.

21:30 I'm so sorry that I never kept it all the time. And I had these two revolvers. One under each arm. I could swim with them. I could pull them out and at night I pulled one around and put the lanyard around my neck and I could just pull them out and, bang!

22:00 I thought I had myself pretty well equipped. Had American gaiters. They were wonderful. Strapped down through around the sole of your boot. They would come up to about there. Your trousers'd tuck into those. Stopped the mud getting in there. That's all I had.

22:30 I never had a change of clothes. Coming back from a patrol, many times I'd just jump into a river and rub my trousers and everything else I could grab hold of, and that was my shower. It was so warm nearly every night.

23:00 Soon, with the heat of your body, all those things by eight o'clock be dry, anyway.

What about when you had dysentery and malaria, you made another modification. Can you tell us about that?

Yeah. To get all this gear off to go to a toilet in the bush was hard work, and you can get caught.

23:30 You got to be ready all the time. So I used to just get my knife out of my big belt and I'd put it down into my crutch and rip my trousers open. That left a great big gap about that long there. I could go to the toilet while I walked.

24:00 This is a terrible thing to be talking about isn't it?

Oh, no, but it's real.

So help me, it's real. I had a hat that fitted - in that picture - it fitted on my head. I had a lanyard there.

24:30 When I was going into action or crawling through the bush, I'd just push that hat right back and it'd sit on top of my shoulders, and I thought that I could see 360 degrees if I didn't have the hat on. All around. I was always

25:00 happy with my gear. I never even carried a spoon to eat with. I ate with mostly a piece of bamboo, like a spoon. If you had the spoon very often it'd get stolen anyway. I did have a good one and it got stolen. So I just had the bamboo and no-one

25:30 wanted that.

When you were in Itapi you fought more aggressively than you did when you were first in Papua New Guinea - would it be true to say that?

I think that they were weaker and they weren't getting fed as well. But the

26:00 one big thing in their favour was their courage, the Japs. There's no doubt about that. Anyone that doesn't admit that never fought them. The Kamikazes just weren't only in the air in planes. They were on the ground in the army too. Their belief was that they'd

26:30 rather die than surrender, and they just kept fighting on, and it made it a lot harder to fight because they wouldn't be wounded. One fella one day, an officer, he's in a hole and we couldn't get them out on this feature,

27:00 so we brought up a flame thrower and it's got tar and fire, and we fired it over the top of the trenches and it falls down - the burning tar. And it's a terrible thing, but what are you going to do, send fellas in there and go in yourself and get killed? It's war. It's not

27:30 playing mates, is it? This fella was actually burning. His flesh was burning and he just sat there and waited with a pistol in his hand. When it came the time where we were to go in one little fella, nice little bloke, he ran in

28:00 to go and shoot them and this fella, dying, and he looked up and he just went Bang! and he shot this fella, this young Aussie right under the chin. Killed him. But that's him. It's war.

28:30 You're up in the air one day and down in hell the next. Life's so miserable.

Was that the adrenalin going up and down?

Might be. There's probably an explanation for it. But I don't know what it was. I don't know how you manufacture it.

When it was announced.

29:00 **that the war had finished, what was your feeling?**

Terrible. I've got a thing written in that book there. Did you read that? Yeah. Well that's about the way I felt.

Can you describe again for us?

I didn't know what I felt when the signallers that we've got

29:30 they said, “She’s all over. They’ve dropped a big bomb on Japan and it’s finished. We’re all going home”. I was that tired and worn out and sooky that I just fell down at the butt of a tree and thought, “I’m going to wake up in the morning.

30:00 I won’t have to worry about anything.” Of course I did. I fell down there and I woke up crying. And I’d never cried all through the war and I’d buried mates and I’d had a lot of sadness. But I cried this time.

30:30 And everything was alright. I’ve never been able to control my emotions since. I can for a month sometimes. But something’ll come up and I have to have a bit of a weep. It’s been a curse to me. I’ve even asked my doctor, “For goodness sake, give me something that’ll stop it,

31:00 my feelings.” He said, “I don’t know of anything that’ll do it. It’s too deep. I don’t think I can do anything for you.” So I just do it. I didn’t think I’d get through today. I thought that I’d make a clown of myself. But anyway, because

31:30 you people are so understanding and well educated to do these things, that’s what helped me through - and the sensible questions that you ask.

Thanks for that. I’m not finished yet. We’ve still got some more questions to ask you.

Have you?

32:00 I wanted to say that before I ran out of steam, because I am grateful. I’ve never been able to talk this long, anything like this for a long, long time.

You’ve done remarkably well, you really have. Outstanding.

You and Sean [interviewer]

Thank you.

32:30 **We’ll take you back and you said you were crying at the end of the war and then you went to a beach? You spent a bit of time on your own on the beach?**

Yeah. We were near the beach and by this time my unit had promoted me to a warrant officer and I was booked to

33:00 be sent back to Adelaide to the officers’ training school. I didn’t care where I went or what I did, but the war finished and all that was done for. But the warrant officer, that’s like a sergeant major, and I’d never been to an army school, even, and I could do anything that I liked.

33:30 So I went up to the armourer and I said, “Give me one of those big snipers’ rifles and them hand grenades”. And I stripped off and I was in the nude and I walked along the beach and I was getting brown and feeling good, and I was shooting

34:00 these fish - Long Toms I called them. They’d come in standing on their tail waving like that. I’d go bang. And stun him. When I got about three of them I cooked them on the beach on my own. And thought how wonderful it was to look out over the sea

34:30 and eat something fresh and not bully beef. After a few days of that I just slept naked on the beach and I swam in the calm sea and it made me feel rejuvenated. Made me feel good.

35:00 But I thought, “I’ve got to get out of this place. I’ve been here too long”. I enlisted in the occupation force and went.

So you went up to Japan immediately?

No. I had to wait for a couple of weeks and I got away. But I’d have been there for at least six or eight months more.

35:30 There were too many ghosts there. I knew that I couldn’t repair myself. I wasn’t troppo. But I was burnt out. I didn’t like being that way.

How was it for you to arrive in Japan and be in the country of these soldiers you’d seen do

36:00 **so many terrible things to your mates?**

A few things happened and people were nice to me, and I met an old soldier that had been in Manchuria - Jap of course - and a very high ranking officer. He could speak real good English. He was a real nice old fella.

36:30 Just as nice as people you meet here in Australia. His son was a Kamikaze and he was shot down, killed, or he shot himself down, really. But he was as proud as proud. I think he was more proud than if the boy had come home.

37:00 Little man he was, little sharp mover. He used to like to walk along the street with me. I thought he’d hate that because of his Jap friends. By this time he’d been retired from the army and he was a

something very high in the police force.

37:30 They put him into the police force because he was too old for the army. But everyone seemed so nice. And one night on the wharf at this little place, there was a drunk Jap wandering round threatening all these old ladies with a gun and shaking it and going on. Mental, I'd say.

38:00 I pretended to be drunk, wobbling about, and I wobbled over to him and he didn't take much notice of me because he thought I was drunk. I whipped up a real good punch and knocked him flying and picked up his gun and chucked it in the sea. There were sirens went

38:30 and police came. They grabbed me because they thought that I'd done something mad. Then these old women said, "No, no, no," and they talked in Japanese to the police and the police couldn't stop bowing. They were like a mob of pigeons in the breeding season. They were grateful.

39:00 Those old girls were, too. Just makes you feel good.

What did you do in Japan? Did they put you to work?

You had to police everything, like they didn't do in Iraq. See, we took over from a 100 million people there. We saw that the law was made,

39:30 all the guns and all the ammunition were all blown up. We started to do all that. I was only there a few months. We never had the slightest bit of trouble. I didn't have. But I didn't want to go back after England. I was away six months.

40:00 I thought I wanted to settle down and meet someone that I could live with forever.

So Japan was part of a healing process for you?

Yes. It was. I understood then the way these people feel and think.

40:30 And I liked them.

So how was it that you came to be leading the victory march for the AIF in London?

This good mate that I had, a commando, he said, "We're going to have a good time." He used to call me Jack. "We're going to have a good

41:00 time, Jack. We've earnt it. We're going to have a few grogs and we're going to meet people. One thing we've got to remember. Our country has sent us over here, around the world just about, and we owe them something.

41:30 They've given us a great six month holiday. We're going to do the right thing and when we're on parade we're on parade. We'll do our very best." And we did, too. And when we were on the deck of the ship and we were heading doing drill and things,

42:00 we drilled real well.

Tape 9

00:32 This Fango Watson selected three fellas, army, navy and air force to go in the colour party of the victory march. I think he just selected the fellas that marched similar and looked the part. I didn't always

01:00 look like this. And I think that's what got me into the thing. He picked it. It wasn't the captain of the ship or anything.

Did you wear your pig tusk? And your scarf on the march?

No. I left them at home in privacy.

What was it like

01:30 **marching through the streets of London with the crowd roaring around you?**

Great. Great feeling. Was so different. The crowds were there for two days before. I had all the Allied soldiers, they sent their contingent to march. The planes were flying over,

02:00 the big bombers, and when you think of all the raids they went on and all the things that they did to win… The fighters are weaving about, up on the top. The bands are playing…as we went past the saluting base,

02:30 with the royal family and all the hangers-on, they played Waltzing Matilda. I don't think my feet hit the ground. I felt good. I felt that I'd done a real good days work. I was grateful for my country to send me. I felt good.

You spent a few months

03:00 **overseas before you came back to Australia?**

After the war? I think I was only about a year. Only a year. That's one thing that made me think that I wouldn't go back

03:30 to Japan, was that Mum and Dad hadn't seen much of me for four or five years. I thought, "They might die or something." They were wanting me to come home. That helped me make up my mind.

Had you been out partying in London and seeing the rest of

04:00 **Europe after that victory march?**

No. I only went to Scotland. It was grog again. Go into little British pubs and go to a dance or something and have a bit of fun. You think, well it can't get much better than this. But it can.

04:30 **So it got better for you?**

When I came home.

Can you tell us about that?

No.

Come on.

I came home and they had, eventually, here in the town they had a little dance in the biggest hall in town and there were a few fellas that hadn't received a welcome home or anything.

05:00 So I went to this welcome home for anyone that hadn't got a welcome home and I met Beryl there. Then we just kept seeing each other.

Beryl was a local girl?

Yeah. She worked in the shop down the street. That's all

05:30 that young kids could do. She was about four years younger than me.

But you'd met her before.

No. Didn't know her before that. We went together for - how long Beryl?

[Beryl answers] Couple of years, Bruce.

Yeah. A year and a bit.

06:00 We just suited each other. We were married for three and a half years before Spike was born. I didn't know what I had to do. Eventually I found the door open.

06:30 **So you made up for lost time.**

Yeah.

And how many children did you have?

Only four. Two boys and two girls. The boys were wild. You could have reared a hundred girls. They were real good and still are. The boys are alright. One fella in particular is a bit of a knuckle man. He was

07:00 a bit wild. But that's come from Beryl's side.

When did you actually leave the army?

In 1946.

Was that a difficult decision?

No. I was finished with all that sort of army.

07:30 If I hadn't have met Beryl and my friend hadn't have met his wife, we were to meet again and we would go to a foreign country where…a lot of these little countries were arming themselves and fighting amongst each other. We were offered big money to just go and train them.

08:00 I didn't like the idea of it, really - training people to kill other people. I didn't know anything about their politics or anything. So I was glad when I put the hard word on Beryl that she accepted me.

What did you decide? Did you go back to the land then to what you knew from a child?

Yes.

08:30 **How did you make a crust?**

We had the chance…see, a lot of chances in those days. We had a chance to buy half of this property - my brother have half and I have half. Then I took a job. Then I put sheep on it and that was around about 1950,

09:00 or a bit before. When the Korean War was on. Because it's cold up in Korea, the countries that were sending troops to Korea - part of the United Nations or whatever they called them then - they wanted wool. We'd just started in the sheep. The money I got for the wool

09:30 paid for the sheep. Then the sheep had lambs and then the price stayed up for a year or two and we were able to build a home out in the bush. We both worked hard. No doubt about that. But since we been here in the last eighteen

10:00 to twenty years we haven't done much and don't intend to.

I just want to ask you a few more general philosophical questions now that you've walked us through your whole life. One of the questions - there's a very very famous painting now in the archives in Canberra that was painted by an artist called Mainwaring.

10:30 **It's a painting of you entitled Slugger. Can you tell us about that painting? When did it happen? How did it happen?**

We came out of the battles back to Aitape and there was a divisional headquarters there, and Mainwaring was there as the official war artist at this little place.

11:00 It's nothing. It's only tents. My CO said Mainwaring had heard something on the grapevine about me and my CO who was a good, nice fella, he said, "Slugger, would you like to go down to

11:30 divisional headquarters to a war artist? He wants to do a painting of you." I said, "Is it in the nude? Or can I go down as I am?" "No. Go down as you are". I said, "The way that I live and fight with me ammo, my guns and everything?"

12:00 And he said, "My word. Don't you go down there any other way. You're going down there to represent a commando squadron. You go down there". I went down this night and I walked into a big tent. I didn't know where this fella's tent was, the war artist. So I walked into this big marquee tent that was an

12:30 office. When the fella behind the desk saw me coming he didn't know what it was. He ran out. He ran out the back. Anyway, I sang out to him and told him that I was just looking for the war artist and no harm in.

13:00 He came back in and told me where to go. I went over and saw Mainwaring. He said, "I want to do a special portrait of this." He said, too. I didn't know what he was doing. I just sat here like I am now. But he made a real good job of it, I thought.

13:30 He was a nice fella too. He came to England on the victory march with us too. He painted all the way - when he was going through the Mediterranean and that, he'd go and paint things. Nearly finished? Anyway that's how it all

14:00 happened. But then this high ranking officer came down and wanted to have a look at the painting of one of his commandos. It wasn't his at all. He looked at it and he was disgusted that it was like I was. That's the way I was.

14:30 That's the way everyone knew me to be. I never had an enemy in the world. Only a Jap. Mainwaring had a row with them about it. I've read things from the War Museum. They sent me things, actually. I was sad that Mainwaring died,

15:00 and I kept thinking about him. I wanted to see him before he died. I think he was about 82 and he was down around Bendigo or Ballarat, teaching art. Anyway, he died before I could get onto him.

And he was arguing that this is the painting he liked and he wanted to keep it this way?

15:30 Yes. They wanted him to change it. He wouldn't. He said, "That's my subject and that's the way I'm going to do it." He defied them. I was wanting to tell them about these two officers and their score on them. They weren't worth that. But

16:00 I didn't. I didn't know it was going on.

Alright. I have another general question. Why did you survive the war?

Not for any religious things. Some old religious ladies have come here. They reckon

16:30 that someone was looking after me. I don't feel that. I said, "It was just luck, mostly." But you can make good decisions quickly and you can make bad decisions and get killed. I think that

17:00 I'd never be able to go through that sort of a thing again and come out of it as lucky as I was.

How do you think the war changed you as a person?

I think it was…it matured me. I think that you've got to see a lot of

17:30 grim things in life. If you come through well, you'll come through tough and you'll be strong, inwardly. I think that happened to me a bit. I don't know how else I

18:00 could do it. I think the love of me friends had a big thing to do with it. Always. Honestly, I was prepared to die for them. Not that I wasn't prepared to die for myself. But I was prepared to die for them. That's the way I felt when the war was on. Yet when I got hold of this

18:30 old sheila, I wasn't prepared to die for anyone. Oh, gee, Beryl, you'll have to be good now.

You spoke about your mind - you came back without severe physical injuries, but you came back with mental

19:00 **scars.**

I think so. I don't think even Beryl's found me an idiot or anything. But I think you do get a bit short-tempered, probably. There's all sorts of little things happened to you. But that happens to everyone.

19:30 I'm happy with everything that I've done. And everything in me own life and married life, happy. I'd like to live another five years. But I mightn't. That's all the grip of the

20:00 Gods isn't it?

After living through some real horrific times in WW2, and maturing to a ripe old age now, what is your opinion on war these days?

I just hope, as I read out in that thing,

20:30 that… Have your thoughts about these things. Hope that your politicians will use their brains and decide that we're not going to do these things, and then if you've got to fight,

21:00 if you're going to be invaded and you've got to fight, don't stand back. Don't try and just get along with the enemy. I wouldn't. I'd go out and I'd fight like a Trojan, but only if I had to. I'm wanting the politicians to use their brains, and more than they have done

21:30 in the past year or two. I'd like to live in peace all the time. I don't think I can put much more together.

One more for you. Is there anything that you'd like to say?

22:00 No. Just that I'm grateful to you two people and I hope that I see you again some day, and if ever you pass through Condobolin, come and see us. We'll give you a feed and a bunk.

Message for your kids?

22:30 **Or your grandchildren?**

Yeah. They live their own life, but they're good supporters of mine. I just hope that they understand all these things, and there's still a lot of my mates still alive and they might laugh about what they've said if they ever

23:00 read it. They might. But really they're good stickers for me.