Australians at War Film Archive

Allan McNevin - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:38 **Alan can you tell us an introduction of your life thus far?**

Well, I'll start with my birth. I was born 9th November 1920, so if you're good at arithmetic you know I'm 83 years old.

01:00 I was born in Brisbane to two parents of Scottish origin. There hangs a story too, McNevin is not a Scottish name it's an Irish name and supposedly they came from Galway Bay in Ireland. That's one of my digressions. There was five in the family, I was the youngest.

01:30 The baby and the next member of the family above me was nine years older, so I was what you call the change of life child and to a degree I supposed I was spoiled, particularly by my mother as I was the only boy. We lived in Ascot, Brisbane, and I attended Ascot school until I passed scholarship.

02:00 Now to you people, scholarship doesn't exist now, the examination I mean. It was when you passed from primary school to secondary school. I got through that I suppose I could say without being egotistical in the better half of the class, I was not the top of the class, but the upper half. I went to Brisbane Grammar School.

02:30 Had two years there and passed my junior. I would have liked to have gone on but that was in 1934 the Depression years. My father was never unemployed during those years so we were never on the breadline as it was but everybody had to watch their pennies and my family couldn't pass

03:00 me beyond junior level. I got employment in a bank, remained there until the war broke out. I did extra studies there in accountancy but never completed them before enlistment. I was not a great sport, I liked cricket.

03:30 I liked tennis, was never in the top grading of those sports, but I was a keen sailor and such that a friend and I ended up buying our own sailing boat and sailed on the Brisbane River, and eventually I got into a sixteen skiff

04:00 boat competitively from which we won the South Queensland 16-foot Skiff would have been about 1937. I was only the bailer boy; I wasn't skipper. I was in the boy scouting movement from a youngster, first as a cub and as a cub I had the honour of having had my hand shaken by Lord Baden-Powell

04:30 who was the big man in the scouting movement, the founder. He had been visiting Australia in the late 1920s and they had a Scouting Jamboree at the Queensland Exhibition Ground and I was one of the characters that pulled a chariot and our chariot won. A chariot wasn't a thing with wheels on it; it was a bit of wood made into the shape of a rectangle

05:00 which skidded along the grass. So that was my first contact with notoriety, Lord Baden-Powell. After my employment, after my scouting thing I meant, went up into Scouts, became a patrol leader, moved into the Rovers and moved into the Sea Scouts where we had a much bigger boat at our disposal than the

05:30 little thing I mentioned earlier. We used to sail out to Moreton Bay and get up to lots of funny tricks just quietly. In 1938, I decided to join the militia. At grammar school there was a cadet corps of the militia of artillerymen and

06:00 naturally I had learnt a little bit through them, not that I was in it, about artillery so I joined an artillery militia unit. It used to meet at Kelvin Grove and later used to have exercises out at what is now Grovely. In those days guns were dragged by the horses. I had a little bit of horse knowledge having spent a

06:30 lot of my school holidays as a youngster on my uncle's farm at Nambour, so I was able to get on a horse and stay on it. When the war broke out in September '39, the militia was called up and we went into camp at Caloundra until Christmas '39. We were re-entered into the camp and

07:00 then February 1940 where I stayed until transferred to the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] in July 1940. We trained in Redbank with frequent trips to places like Caloundra where they had the gunnery firing range. I don't,

07:30 looking back now, I don't think our training was really serious. For a start, the guns were left over from the First World War. They had their old wooden wheels taken off and given rubber-tyred wheels so they could be towed by a truck. The level of

08:00 training was not terribly high, there didn't seem to any level of urgency about the war at that stage in Australia. We almost treated it as a holiday camp. When I moved into the AIF, in the militia I reached the high rank of a lance-bombardier. Now a bombardier in the artillery is a corporal

08:30 in the infantry. They're the same rank but they change names. So I dropped my high rank of lance-bombardier and went into the AIF and reverted to a gunner. The gunner is the lowest form of life. Well even then I don't feel…looking back the level of training wasn't terribly serious in the AIF.

09:00 There didn't seem to be any urgency about things, but eventually in February 1941 we were shipped to Malaya or to Singapore actually. I had the honour of travelling on the Queen Mary. It was hard to imagine to a comparatively

09:30 sheltered lad to see this ship in Sydney Harbour. A terrific evening. During the voyage I was extra lucky, I'll interrupt there, eventually before we sailed overseas I reached back up again to the rank of bombardier, that's artillery corporal. Digressing, on the ship, Queen Mary,

10:00 they used to have the, what they called the duty officers and NCOs [Non-commissioned Officers] of the day, chosen from the different troops on board and it consisted of a captain, a lieutenant, a sergeant and a corporal or in my case a bombardier, doing the rounds of the ship with the ship's officers. Mainly to make certain troops were doing the right thing

10:30 and to inspect different aspects of the defence of the ship. It had a couple of anti-aircraft guns on it. So I saw a lot the ship that others even senior officers didn't see. They used to take you down to the engine room and up round the bridge, everywhere. Another thing about that voyage which was been written about by many others, we were escorted from Perth

11:00 up into the Indian ocean by [HMAS] Shropshire [cruiser], it was a British destroyer or it might have been a cruiser, but in the middle of the Indian Ocean, the Queen Mary broke away from the convoy which consisted of three other ships and did a sole dash to Singapore. I believe the ship was travelling at 33 knots at a time and for a ship of 84,000 tons

11:30 or whatever it was to travel at that speed it was mighty. The opinion of the powers that be the speed could outrun any radar or submarine that may have got as far as the Indian Ocean. Another thing in passing, I read a book much later of the story of the German raider in the Indian Ocean and during the war

12:00 called the Atlantis or Atlanta or something like that. He actually had the Queen Mary, or he knew of it and was around and went after it until he realised he couldn't match the 33-knot speed. So that was what the author in the book said. Another remarkable thing about it was we got to Singapore; this huge ship was docked in the naval

12:30 area without the aid of tugs. That amazed me, how they could get a ship of that size in there without a tug pushing or something pulling. Moving on now to my story in the army and Malaya. They railed us up to a place on the Malacca Straits called Malacca. It was a little

13:00 town of great history, it was first built I think by the Portuguese, later captured by the Dutch and finally overrun by the British. The remains there of Dutch-built buildings, of Portuguese fort still remains there, it was a quaint

13:30 little town and again our holiday in the army continued. The war was still going on in Europe, but the Germans had overrun France by then, but that didn't seem to be much urgency in Malaya. We had leave practically every night if you weren't on guard or weren't on some duty. The town

14:00 boasted a cabaret with taxi dance girls [dance partners for hire], there was picture theatres, there was an amusement park, small amusement park with Chinese Opera and all that going on and by day you might do a little bit of army work, perhaps in the afternoon you'd go off to the local swimming pool. It was a funny thing, when we

14:30 first arrived in Malacca, because it had probably been a tradition in the British Army they had a siesta after lunch every day, you were supposed to get on your bed and sleep for an hour. Well the Australians didn't do that. They either played football or played cards or argued but they never slept, so that only lasted about three months.

15:00 Wiped the siesta. Going on, then things started to look bad up in China and they moved us from Malacca, which was on the west coast of Malaya as it was called then, across to the China Sea on the east

15:30 coast to the Mersing area. Then things started to take a more serious view. We started to build protective embankments around the guns, which were placed on the edge of a rubber plantation. Everything became a bit more serious; there was no fooling around. Another interesting part

16:00 of that time pre the Japanese arrival that they had marked out fields of fire where supposedly the guns would fire over the Japanese which in their opinion would land here, or here, or here. Well where my troop were stationed the observation post was to be in a rise in the jungle

16:30 about a mile inland from where the guns were placed. The observation post was up the top of a very small tree in the crest. We had to lay telegraph lines to that gun, telephone lines, so any instruction could be passed back to the gunner. We had a hell of a job with maintenance on that line. That section of the jungle was inhabited by baboons. The baboons would

17:00 regularly see this wire, the wire was held up in the trees, well this is a good place to swing and they'd break the lines all the time, even though they were insulated steel lines, some of the baboons weighed quite a bit and they'd break the lines. So you were always out there repairing the line from the baboon. And another thing, not only on one occasion did we often see

17:30 in muddy spots a paw of a tiger. You could see it, you never struck one, we always carried a rifle in case you did. Another [tale] hangs on that too, that when war was imminent they put a wire, a boundary fence around where

18:00 our guns were, had trip alarms on it with a little cigarette tin with stones in it so it would disturb with a rattle. One night we had one character, Sam McLeash, who was on duty in the rubber plantation, which is rather heavy in undergrowth,

18:30 and suddenly he fires two shots. And of course panic, not panic, but concern goes around, "What's going on?" Old Sandy says, "I saw a tiger, it was coming towards me and it's eyes parted and it went around me", poor old Sandy had seen two fireflies, the two fireflies came for him and went around him. Another story about the tiger goes with our doctor whose name appears

19:00 in a lot of other recordings, Piccone, I've mentioned him now, he used to like the bottle a bit [liked to drink alcohol]. He claims that one night returning to his tent, this tiger paced him to the other side of the wire, we think that was just the liquor. Well the story goes on, the Japs [Japanese] did come and we had a bit of a

19:30 skirmish there in this area, it was called Jemaluang and then the retreat started and we dropped back, fairly quickly into Singapore. Looking back now a missed opportunity for me was we had to go through a little village called Kota Tinggi and there was a customs depot there for the

20:00 Malayan or British government and it had fair stock of spirits. I was directed to take two or three other fellows and smash all that liquor, so it wouldn't fall into the hands of natives or following Japanese. We did take quite a bit of it in our water bottles and our concealed bottle, but it was a tragedy to see

20:30 these gallons of whisky, gin whatever lying all over the floor. I had a bit of that brandy that was left, I had to surrender my water bottle, got out to Changi [Prisoner of War camp] with me but it didn't last long. Well you know the rest of the story, we got back onto the island and the Japs got ashore and on 15th February the word went out

21:00 that it was all over. Actually I saw, I was getting back in, we had lost a lot of telephone cable and there was never any replacement you had to scrounge around to find more telegraph wire. I was, or two or three of my fellow signallers were out scrounging wire around

21:30 at Bukit Tima and down below us was the road went to across the causeway past us and we saw these cars going past with white flags and we said, "What's going on?" and I said to all the other guys, "It's all over". I got back and spoke to our OC [Officer Commanding] there and said to

22:00 him I'd seen this here, "How are we giving it up?" He said, "I don't know, but don't tell enemy watchers." I actually saw General Percival and his cohorts going up to beg for armistice from the Japanese. Well they held us for 24 hours and the Japs marched us out to Changi where we occupied the barracks which

22:30 was used by the British troops in earlier times, not in earlier times prior to the surrender. We were only there months and we moved off to Burma. Although after the truce, the Japs did call for the allied command to get certain working groups

23:00 to come into the city of Singapore to clean up the mess, and it was a mess, and to help load the loot they were sending back to Japan and clean up everything. Myself and three or four others had formed a little clique and I'd always resisted those until eventually the Japanese decided to send a group

23:30 of soldiers away, we were never told where we were going, some extravagant rumours got around that imprisonment was being exchanged for a bale of wool and we were going on a holiday to easier places and this and that. So that was called A Force. We were the first group to leave Singapore. It was

24:00 composed of Australians naturally, certain number of British troops, some navy, some air force were left

behind when we first got out of Singapore. They put us onto an old rust bucket, which had been a Japanese troop ship. It was called Atoyahasi Maru and

24:30 we loaded onto the ship down in our hold, and the only access to fresh air was up a ladder onto the deck again. The Japs only allowed two or three people up at a time. It was terribly hot down there. The only redeeming feature they had a bundle of lifebelts, which provided a bed for most of us to sleep on. Well

25:00 forgetting the discomfort of this trip, they sailed from Singapore across to Medan which was a port in northern Sumatra where they picked up in the convoy. There were two or three ships by then, a lot of Dutch-Indonesian troops, they were mostly white officers and coloured soldiers.

25:30 Two or three ships moved off north and they broke up the number of people on the ships into three groups. Some got off for Victoria Point, which was in southern Burma, the next one was in Mergui and finally they threw the balance of us off

26:00 at a little port called Tavoy. They took us ashore, there was no wharf there, the ship just anchored out and the Japanese version of what we now know as a landing barge used to come up beside and you had to scramble down a scramble net with whatever you could carry and as the barge

26:30 come up and down with the swell of the boat you got in or you didn't get in or you were pushed in or you fell in. They took us ashore then, eventually marched us off to this aerodrome. There was, from memory it wasn't that far, but we straggled in there and found it was an aerodrome that the British had been building but was not completed before the Japanese took

27:00 northern Malaya and southern Burma. The first night was shock when we moved into the hangar, which was punctured with machine gun holes in the roof and all that. The floor was of heavy metal, a bit like railway line ballast, and we, it was about

27:30 six inches deep and apparently they intended rolling it in later and laying concrete over it. It was terribly hard to sleep on. This is where my boy scout training of many years prior came to the help. We went out in the surrounding area and cut lots of little shrubs and made a mattress for ourselves. I think we were the only ones that slept comfortably in that

28:00 hangar. Later they moved us into a very comfortable barracks, which was going to supposedly house the airmen and ground crew, but they were quite comfortable. We were then put to work to complete the aerodrome, the Japs intended to use naturally. The rains came while we were there

28:30 and did it rain. The job, they laid a miniature railway with skips on it and you had to load your skip in one place and wheel it to another place to extend their runway. You'd put soil in it at one end, by the time you got to the other end it came out like thick chocolate, it just ran all over you. So

29:00 it took a hell of an effort to try and build up an embankment while the filling was rolling away like chocolate. A very interesting thing happened there. When we left Singapore on the Atoyahasi Maru, we were supplied with a Japanese-speaking interpreter. He was Captain Bill Drower, his name appears in a lot of

29:30 publications. He was a diplomat or so we were lead to believe. I always thought he was British Secret Service but I never found whether he wasn't. He was a Japanese-speaking gentleman, but as we learnt later had been taught Japanese, Japanese exists in two languages, high Japanese and common vernacular Japanese.

30:00 The nearest would be speaking to a Pommy gentleman the way he speaks with a Cockney. Well he spoke the high class Japanese where the average Japanese soldier was the Cockney in language. So he had a very difficult time with the Japs. They resented this Pommy talking Japanese talking gentleman if you can get

30:30 me, they thought talking down to them. He was there. Later on, getting back to the aerodrome, we were told to clean up the whole place that a very important Japanese officer was arriving, first plane to use the aerodrome. So they had us out there pulling grass around the airport office place or whatever you like to call it

31:00 where the Japs lived. They had no equipment to cut grass and we were picking up bits of paper and grass here. Well the plane came in and although it appeared to have its undercarriage down one wheel collapsed on its landing, the plane skewed around and ran into an embankment on the side of the airport. It was a write-off.

31:30 Afterwards Captain Bill Drower said to us, "That's shows you the power of the mind. We were all hoping or praying for the plane to crash and you made it crash". That was thing he told us and we all got a great kick out of it, that we'd made the plane crash. After that they moved us back onto another coastal steamer, I don't know that it had a name

32:00 to take us from Tavoy up to Moulmein where Rudyard Kipling's song 'where the sun comes up over China across the bay'. Moulmein we were railed down to a place called Thanbyuzayat, whether that's correct pronunciation, which is the start of the railway, which was to link Burma to

32:30 Thailand or Siam as it was known then. That started our time on the railway line where everything went from bad to worse. I think you know enough about the stories of the railway line without me repeating it.

I don't know actually, but we will get into more detail, Alan, later in the day. So don't worry about any specifics but you worked on the railway?

We were the first prisoners. We

33:00 left Singapore to come up to Burma in May '42, by the time we spent at the aerodrome at Tavoy we got the railway line about August '42. It had started then the railway

33:30 embankments, the path it was going to take but there was no lines or equipment had been there. So they took us about 18 km from Thanbyuzayat and we started then building the track on which the railway line had to be built. That went on with frequent change of

34:00 job. Sometimes you were a bridge builder, sometimes you were a coolie just soil to build up the embankment, other times you were actual railway track layer. You had to get the sleepers and put the railway line and drive them in and build up the ballast to keep

34:30 the thing. At one stage they had to cross a bit of a creek, I'd call it a creek, and they had Japanese there with a piledriver, which they were using, attempting to use an elephant to lift the pile and drop it. Well they say an elephant never forgets, those elephants not only never

35:00 forgot and they knew a thing and they wouldn't pull. They wouldn't pull their weight and let it drop. So it came the lot of the prisoners. We had to pull the weight up the gantry and let it drop as they drove the pile. Well you could almost see that elephant going away with a grin on his face, he got out of that job. But the other part about elephants while they had them there, they

35:30 a lot of the time camped us beside, we'd call it a creek in Australia, where they used to draw their water and the elephants used to have to have their wallow there every day for and you'd end up in mud. So we got to dislike the elephants for that reason. We never saw them again after that couple of incidents where they wouldn't drive the piledriver. They must have taken them away.

36:00 Well I had all the jobs I had on the railway line, I was a coolie, a railway measurer - they had a thing to keep certain the gauge right - they had people driving spikes in railway sleepers, well you think of it, we did it all. Of course when the rains start, that's when the real trouble started.

36:30 The embankments got washed away, sickness started out, cholera came, the Japanese did, after the cholera, did become very serious. A lot of people died. The Japs did take stool tests of us and did give us what they claimed

37:00 was an injection, whether it worked we don't know. The cholera losses were high and the Japs were really worried it would spread to them; they were panicking with the cholera. But we got through all that. Saw the railway join just across the border into Thailand, or

37:30 Siam as we used to call it then, in fact although I never saw it later, I and a couple of others appeared in a Japanese newsreel of the joining of the two lines, the one that came from Burma and the one that came up from Bangkok. Naturally, it's in the Japanese archive whether it's been passed to us we don't know.

38:00 A lot has been written about the conditions of the railway line and all that, there's no need to go into all that. You can see that it's written countless times by people who are better at explaining conditions, by Dr Roley Richards is one them who just quietly you might have seen his name mentioned. He was our doctor. The poor fellow had only been through medicine for two or three years and

38:30 he was stuck. Anyway he came through trumps. Well after the railway line was finished, I was evacuated down into Thailand, as we know it now. I had developed tropical ulcer in my upper leg and it spread so rapidly that I was panicking how would they ever fix it because a lot of others who had

39:00 tropical ulcers amputation was the only remedy that saved their lives. Mine was in the upper thigh which meant you couldn't amputate it up near my hip bone, so I was in the hospital at a place called Thanbyuzayat and you had a doctor who

39:30 appears in many other books, Colonel Coates, he later became Sir Albert Coates. He was a doctor at the time. The treatment at that time for a tropical ulcer, a tropical ulcer consists of some germ that is decaying the flesh and the bone and

40:00 everything in its path in the legs. They used to try to get rid of the dead [flesh], to arrest its movements. Well, Colonel Coates used to come along on these occasions, he had a little salt spoon and they used to try and clean the wounds by scraping

40:30 the decayed flesh away to reveal the healthy flesh below it. Those occasions in those hospitals in places like Thanbyuzayat was just hell. You'd find people from daybreak starting to sob because they knew he'd come about eight o'clock. It was just straight torture.

41:00 Strong men would break down into sobbing messes because that was the only treatment they had, they had no chemical, they had to get rid of the decaying flesh to give the natural flesh a chance to regenerate. I used to look at this thing on my leg and I thought, “Gee. Can’t amputate because there’ll be nothing left of me”

41:30 but apparently nature smiled on me and gradually it returned and recovered. Colonel Coates went off and another surgeon, Colonel Hamilton took over and I recovered from that.

Tape 2

00:38 **You were telling us how you would go down to the little stream?**

All the different treatments that they tried on. In these jungle streams, a little fish, it would’ve been I suppose two or three inches long,

01:00 and they would clean the decaying flesh from the, I wouldn’t call it a wound because it would have a big open area, but it would pick it clean to a degree. But Colonel Coates’ system was to go in with a salt spoon into the raw flesh and scrape the decayed skin flesh away.

01:30 If all the nerve endings are all exposed underneath that was torture beyond anything the Mongols ever thought of, I think. I’ve seen strong men in normal times, break down babbling like, uncontrollably like kids because it was straight-out torture. That was the only way they could attempt to arrest the spread

02:00 of it. Of course it spread, a tropical ulcer could spread from a little, it usually started from bamboo cut, whether the bamboo carried some germ or whether bamboo was antagonistic to the body, but if you got a bamboo cut, there was about a 100 to one that an ulcer would develop. They seemed to with the diet spread

02:30 rapidly. The ulcer I had when they evacuated us from the railway line, they took the sick or when the railway line was finished they didn’t need all the slaves, so they only kept a working party along the line of the fittest men. Those with any tendency to malaria,

03:00 suffering ulcers or other things, they shipped back to what is now Thailand, Siam is what we called it. That’s how I got back into civilisation. I’ve lost the train of my thought.

You were talking about tropical ulcers.

Tropical ulcers.

03:30 When they put us on the train to ship us back into Siam, we got on in a place just over the border from Burma into Thailand called Nieke I don’t know the correct pronunciation, I think it’s N I E K E. but I’ve seen several pronunciations and they railed us down in these cattle trucks to

04:00 another little railway siding and we had to march from there back into Kanchanaburi. Well when I got on that train I was really a malarial case but after I think it was about 24 or 36 hours in the train I must have had a nick that turned. By the time I got into Kanchanaburi after doing quite a

04:30 kilometres on the march where they put us off the train into the camp it was going bad it had reached a saucer size, it reached the size of a dinner plate, that’s no exaggeration. The only treatment that they seemed to have was saline bathing, scraping the dead flesh away to save it infecting the sound flesh.

05:00 Or just praying to God that something would happen. Well I went through the scraping thing, Colonel Coates, who I mentioned earlier, moved off to another camp. I had a Colonel Hamilton then the doctor and he started a different treatment, not so much a treatment but a different approach to it. He still had it cleaned

05:30 every day but he got somehow or another a supply of Elastoplast, sticking plaster, and he tried to draw the flesh in and it seemed to stop the spread of the infection, if it wasn’t an infectious disease it grows, it healed up and left something like that. Anyhow that’s the tropical ulcer.

If we could just continue you on with a summary of what happened to you after that?

06:00 In this camp once I was discharged and reasonably fit I got a job in the prison camp canteen. To tell the truth, in this camp at Kanchanaburi by conditions on the railway line we weren’t doing it too badly. The Nips [Japanese], it was a hospital camp admittedly,

06:30 but the Nips had no immediate work for us; they were still trying work out what they could get out of us for the food they gave us, I think. I got into the prison run canteen and I’m afraid and not un-proud to say soldiers being soldiers a little bit pilfering went on and we lived perhaps a little better than the average chap outside.

07:00 Then they start sending us out as work parties around the area. As you got fit, you were allocated to that. I was moved from there with a very small force of Australians down to a, I think there were only 20 or 30 of us, down to a place Nong Pladuk, that's the Siamese pronunciation

07:30 I don't how to spell it. There we only had 24 hours and we were moved into an adjoining camp Nong Pladuk 2, it was right on the railway line, the railway line ran right beside it. We'd hardly got into that camp, this would have

08:00 been late '43, when we experienced our first allied bomb. They came over just prior to sunset, there were only four planes, prior to this we'd never seen any evidence of Japanese fighters. They came in reasonably low and of course everybody was out in the yard.

08:30 When they saw, we could tell, I don't know how we did, but they were our mob, blow me they start bombing us. There was a lot of wounded but no Australians killed in that bombing. The fellow beside me had half his bottom taken by a flying

09:00 bit of shrapnel from a bomb. Well up until that stage, the Japanese had not felt disposed to build slit trenches for the prison camps. You can imagine at that stage slit trenches, we were forced to dig like mad. Well from then on, on and off, we were bombed by our own side because, the railway line being beside the camp,

09:30 we believe that the allied forces considered the camp a Japanese staging, of course you follow the railway line they're taking troops up. Incidentally while I talk about that, we happened to experience a train coming back from Burma, it was carrying Japanese wounded. It pulled up; it had been sitting there for many hours in this railway line beside the camp.

10:00 A working party that I was on was outside there and here they were, Japs who had apparently been wounded in the fighting further up in Burma and apparently they have no proper hospital facilities around and close to the front line. They were shipping these poor wrecks of soldiers, I don't know where they were taken, but

10:30 nobody was worrying about them. I suppose it's credit to our Christian upbringing, the prisoners even took them water to help, their own people would do nothing for these poor people. Eventually the train pulled away. Whether they survived or not, I don't know. But we had to work there and the bombing became, not frequent, but spasmodic. We couldn't understand

11:00 how any bomber captain, on the first occasion we were waving like mad, would open his bomb bays. That story goes right through prison life. Up on the railway line, they religiously machine-gunned and bombed trains through there. I know one incident, I was told by a

11:30 survivor that of those people left behind, they were moving on a train up in Burma and this fighter came over and just strafed the whole train and there were quite heavy casualties, many dead. This happened right throughout. We were later moved from this camp in Nong Pladuk to Bangkok. We were

12:00 housed in the big sheds on the wharves. We didn't have to unload or load ships, because there was no evidence of Japanese ships in Bangkok while we lived there for some months. We were given work in Bangkok itself. Well they bombed us there too. The allied

12:30 underground working in Thailand then, this is in 1944, seemed to, didn't exist, or let the Allies down. Yet when the war finished the day after the war, after 15th August, an underground

13:00 American soldier came in and told us that he'd been living in the country for some months organising resistance and that they had their own agent living in Bangkok, living in the Thai air force headquarters. Well I found that hard to believe, that's just a bypass. After spending five or six months

13:30 on the wharves in Bangkok, they moved us by rail up to a place called Ubon. Now, Ubon appears in the Australian history some 30 years later in the Vietnam War. The RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] operated from an airfield in Ubon, for the bombing of

14:00 the Vietnamese. But we were taken beyond Ubon. We seemed to cross a very broad river, which we believe was the Mekong, which runs down into the sea outside Bangkok, no Saigon. That's where we finished the war.

14:30 We were taken there supposedly to complete an airstrip for the Japs, but after several months building the airport suddenly the Japs decided they didn't want an airport, so they started building big trenches across it. Supposedly to stop allied planes from using it, they were quite deep trenches. That's where we finished the war.

15:00 We were in this place called, well east of Ubon, which I think was, what is now known as Laos. We were, the day after the 16th August, the Japs said, "No work today. All men rest." We thought, "This is funny".

15:30 Don't often say that. Then they suddenly started to disappear, the guards around the camp. Eventually in comes this Yank accompanied by about 30 or 40 Thai or Laotian or whatever they were, all heavily armed to take command of the camp. It turned out he was an American

16:00 officer who had been living behind the lines and preparing the way for Mountbatten when he came through from Burma on his way to the China Sea. Well he hung around with us for a while, through his offices he got word apparently from some allied command somewhere or another then the bombers, food bombers

16:30 and they started off with food. But at that stage, we were reasonably in pretty good nick. We hadn't been working hard on the Jap airfield and the discipline was fairly light for Japs. At one stage, we had Japanese sailors as our guards out on the working party. They had apparently lost their ship somewhere in the China Sea

17:00 and knew the war was over or was the type of person, the Japanese solider who was the scum of the Japanese nation, they were quiet decent fellows and they didn't enforce any discipline. As I said, suddenly the war was finished. They didn't leave upper Ubon until war finished in August.

17:30 We didn't leave up there until about late October, Apparently two days after the war finished on this partly destroyed aerodrome in comes a little thing, a little I'd call it a single plane not a fighter but more a spotter plane.

18:00 It was the Yanks on board, they'd come to pick up the three American prisoners we had in the camp. They took them. The rest of us, the Dutch I suppose about 50 Australians three, we had to stay until late October because a railway bridge on the line from Ubon back to Bangkok had been cut and there was no way they could get us transport.

18:30 But those months were spent on just recovering. They dropped us food, which we really didn't need, but were grateful. Of course it was different. Eventually they got us back to Bangkok. Had a few weeks there, flown back to Singapore, a week of two there, got on a troop ship for Moreton Bay and got home here

19:00 early December 1945. It was a case of one week's leave and back into hospital for physical check ups, on leave for Christmas and then in January I was sent into a convalescence camp, I took my discharge in February '46. So that's the war story.

Wonderful.

I don't know about wonderful.

19:30 **Your telling of it is. Alan could you give us a bit of a snapshot what you did after the war?**

After leaving school and my family, prior to leaving school I mean, the Depression was on my family, although my father was never unemployed during the Depression,

20:00 money was tight, and they couldn't afford to send me on to higher education and to matriculate. I left school with only a junior pass. A lot of people would call it intermediate, it doesn't exist now the junior. To get to university you had to, those days, two more years study until you got your senior pass and then you matriculated

20:30 if you were good enough and went to university. When we got back here in 1947 that was, after I resumed work with a bank as I had before, I took my year's study, evening student, and took a double matriculation that entitled

21:00 me to get into university. In 1948 I started at Queensland University and started a five-year course in commerce and graduated in 1952 as a Bachelor of Commerce. After I became a Bachelor of Commerce, I thought I was going to set the world on fire

21:30 as a new graduate. I made many moves to leave the bank. I was interviewed by BHP [Broken Hill Proprietary Limited], in passing I mention now, later on, in those days perhaps I was a bit too sensitive of my wartime prisoner of war experience, I always felt that we were held in a certain amount

22:00 of disrespect, a lot of us held that. We sort of let the side down. All the other contemporaries who stayed in the forces have gone on and reached high officer standards, got medals, but these poor prisoners of war got nothing in regard to advancement. I mean I was taken a prisoner of war as a bombardier,

22:30 I came out as prisoner of war three and a half years later still as a bombardier. Well my contemporaries had risen a few squadron leader or so and so, majors in the army, but anyhow I found this, perhaps I wouldn't call it an inferiority complex, but an embarrassment. My wife used to tell me that

23:00 I was critical of her when she mentioned to anybody I had a prisoner of war history. To a lot, we sort of let the side down, if you can follow. I found that came out in one interview after I took a degree with one body, I won't mention, but a big Australian institution. He said, "You were

23:30 in the war?" "Yes." "What rank did you get to?" I said, "A bombardier, that's a corporal" "Oh," he said, "You were in the army for five years and you didn't rise above a corporal?" Well that sort of hit a bit. My contemporaries who weren't prisoners had risen on and been commissioned and all this. This fellow seemed to take a derogatory view of that in five years I hadn't risen. I hadn't told him at that stage

24:00 my prison history. I tried other fields, I won't mention the companies, and I found with one of them I was too old at 33 as a graduate, "You see I've got lads coming through from university that are only 23, you can't compete," this is the word of one executive, "You can't compete against a 23 year old". So I stayed with

24:30 the bank, had reasonable success there, rose to a middle management. The family was never short of a bob. Retired in 1981 and since then I've been living in the lap of luxury. That's a quick resume. Now you pick up the pieces and ask me what you want.

25:00 **Thank you very much Allan. I'll take you right back to growing up as a kid in Brisbane. You would have experienced a bit of the Depression?**

Yes.

Can you paint us a bit of a picture of what life in Brisbane was like during the Depression?

Money was always short, as I said we were never an unemployed father family, he always had employment.

25:30 Money was tight. I think I never went without any basic needs, clothing, food, housing by the same token too we never had the extravagant waste of money.

26:00 How shall I express it, he never had, money was always scarce, I never suffered a lack of clothing or food or anything like that, it wasn't that bad. I witnessed though men coming around and begging

26:30 trying either for food or work. I even remember a gentleman who had a very, we thought, fine voice he used to come around Ascot there quite early in the morning singing in the streets hoping that somebody would make a donation to him. I used to get the princely sum pocket money of three pence a week.

27:00 Of course three pence a week could get quite a bit in those days, not much but that's all I'd get. How else can I explain it?

What would you spend your three pence on?

Lollies. You made your own fun. I had to thank the scouting movement in those days which was much more influential on young people's lives than it is now.

27:30 Scouting in those days gave you an outlet to, I feel, good clean healthy fun. Nowadays, yeah well you know enough coming along behind me, it is hard for a parent to bring up a kid where they didn't have the outlets that we had in those days. We used to play sport in the local park, Ascot Park.

28:00 Nowadays, you try to play sport there, the council will kick you out and send you somewhere else. The scouting movement was very good to me.

What did you do in the scouts?

We used to go camping a terrific lot. Those days Brisbane not being as extensive as it is now,

28:30 the Pine River practically undeveloped. It was like really going out into the bush, it was a river then and not the polluted mess it is now. We used to have camps along the Pine, upstream a bit. At Easter time the whole Brisbane area used to have a very big camp there and go to

29:00 places like Mount Edwards, or up to the source of the Brisbane River. It was good clean fun.

Was it a big group of lads?

I was in Hamilton scouts in those days. When I first joined the scouting movement we used

29:30 to meet in an Anglican church at, if you know Brisbane, Racecourse Road, Hamilton, Saint Augustine's. Later on through our benefactor, Hornibrook the builder, he, I don't know how it was induced, he built a very, for those days, a fine scout hall

30:00 for our group down near Doomben Racecourse, it's still there the scout thing. It was a good fellowship, we had good fun, there was, drugs weren't known of, you learnt a certain amount of independence, you had to do certain tests, which put you on your own initiative. I feel,

30:30 my later days in the prison camp were helped by the times I had at the scouts. We got up to silly pranks and things like that.

What was a prank in those days?

Well nothing like you see of kids now. Graffiti was not one of them. Perhaps I better not

31:00 repeat some of them. It was good clean fun. I had hoped my two grandsons, I had tried to induce them to go into it, but I'm afraid for the modern lad of the distractions now, scouting has lost its hold on lots of kids. Neither of them stuck it more

31:30 than about six or eight months. They're both now men in their mid-20s. Which is a pity, I think it gave me a good basis for later life.

Did you have to do particular things for various badges and merits?

Oh yes you had to. Your capabilities were graded into first class and second class. You had

32:00 simpler tests and Morse code either by key or semaphore, tests like that. Useful. Why I mentioned that particularly, in the army I was NCO 6. I was in charge of the group of eight

32:30 whose responsibility was to supply the information from the observing officer at… Artillery works, it can work two ways, it can work off a map which if it's a 100 per cent accurate they work by grid bearings, or it can work by visual sighting by an

33:00 observation officer. When it came to the war in Malaya, they first of all triangulated the whole area we were operating on. They worked out angles. It was all done in theory first which later when the Japs did come they used.

33:30 But what they worked then, there's no good when you had to leave that position so then you had to rely on your observation of somebody watching and working out by angles where the shells were supposed to land. Am I simplifying it too much for you? It was a case of trigonometry, everything was done by trig. You had to get information from the observation post

34:00 to the guns so they could, to simplify, point in the right direction, given the right range so the shell landed somewhere close to where you wanted. Getting back to my experience in the war in Malaya, we were not sent overseas

34:30 properly equipped. Of all things in a jungle, what can you do with a heliograph? Do you know what a heliograph is? It works off the sun. It's a set of two mirrors; one is set to the sun it reflects on to this one where it sends a ray to the person watching it. By altering the position of this mirror you can get a flash of light.

35:00 Now these heliographs were used in the desert, in the First World War by our light horse and what we were using was left over from the First World War. Now to send a force away to a jungle-clad country with heliograph was useless. Similarly the radio we had was built by AWA [radio/electronics company], because this was a unit about half the size of that, next to it was a transformer which was almost as big and the power came from a car battery. Now you imagine in a jungle situation where you've got signallers trying to set up that and that

35:30 and that in a jungle, it didn't work. Apart from that, there was no reception, the trees, so all the reliance was put on lines. Our job was to lay a line from the observing person up in a position where he could see the target

36:00 back to headquarters and then into the individual guns so they could aim the guns in the right place. Well that was alright until you had to move. We were only equipped with X [a fixed amount] miles of cable. Well, if you had to get out in a hurry, you lost your cable. So after about the first or second engagement, you had no cable left. So your telephones became a bit useless.

36:30 So I feel the artillery didn't play in the war in Malaya the part it was designed for, because of lack of equipment by Australia. Sending us heliographs, flags, radios that couldn't work, that was my experience of the Depression.

37:00 **Were there other families or kids in the street that you were mates with that weren't very well off?**

Not so much in the street. In those days you never had school buses. If you had to walk a mile to school

37:30 all the good because on the way you'd pick up your mates from different areas. On the way there or on the way home, you might have a fight or you might pinch somebody's mangoes when they're ripe or peaches, kids in those days didn't seem to have any respect for property like they have now. We didn't look upon it as crime if you pinched a mango over somebody's fence. Actually I got caught once pinching fruit, by a dog.

38:00 There were four of us pinching these mangoes and he said, "Come down the tree" and he put them, "You won't go home until you eat all those. I'd tell your mother and father if you don't eat them all". He punished that way. He made us eat all these mangoes. I found my other boy friends not so much from neighbours

38:30 but scouting movement. I started as a cub, I started from about nine until I was about 17.

Tape 3

00:30 **One thing that occurred to me was how you got demoted a little bit to being a gunner after the militia, were you much of a shot?**

With a rifle?

Yes.

I hadn't used a rifle since I got into the militia, no. Only

01:00 the proper militia, generally only commissioned men, that's officers, carried their rank over to the AIF, the rest of them had to enlist in the AIF at a low rank and then get it back again later in the AIF. They had to do that because the militia was their supply field for non commissioned and

01:30 commissioned officers. You have got the realise the army was expanding so quickly, the military schools like Duntroon couldn't turn out enough officers so they had to take officers and re-commission them in the AIF and the same with NCOs. Usually they all got them back pretty quickly,

02:00 but you had to enlist as a gunner.

It wasn't actually difficult going from the militia to the AIF?

No they'd grab you, but they took you as a gunner and the AIF would give you the ranking.

What about the scouts, was it a natural progression to go into the militia from being in the scouts?

It seemed to be because a terrific lot of

02:30 officers that I struck in the AIF had been scouts. I haven't got it here but a group of six of us who clicked and they were scouts with me too. You have got to realise in those days the outlets for kids was nothing like it is now. They had done a wonderful job

03:00 giving this outlet for kids, let the kids experience the non mum and dad control and responsibility. In the scouts, you had to take a lot of responsibility as a young silly kid or yet take the responsibility of having hikes

03:30 what was not a known area. They weren't explorers, they were dangerous but it taught you initiative.

Your training in the scouts helped you later when you were a POW [Prisoner of War]?

Yes.

What about when you went into the AIF did the bivouac training help you with AIF?

I think it did. One little incident as prisoners of war,

04:00 there was one occasion when we were near a stream and the Nips apparently they want to change the diet so they told us they were going to throw a grenade into the stream to kill the fish. We were to grab them and bring them to them they would have the pick and we'd have the tiddlers. As prisoners we got the tiddlers

04:30 and some of them said, "What are we going to do with them?" but I knew from the scouts you can cook a fish by packing it in mud and putting it in the ashes of the fire and they cook beautifully. There's one incident where I said to the others, "We can pack a bit of mud around this and put it into the ashes" and we had a good bit of fish, all the skin came away from it, you had to clean the gut out naturally. The Morse code I knew

05:00 that's how it followed that I was a sig [signaller, signalman] in the force, I did Morse code in the scouts. There was leadership to a degree, we use to take young kids, when I got older and young kids went on hikes and

05:30 I think they were only eleven or twelve year olds and their mothers had entrusted them to us. Looking back now, I wonder why there wasn't more child abuse, but it didn't seem to happen that much in those days of older scouts with younger lads. I only knew of one incident in all of my scouting career where it happened, you would of expected it though with younger boys.

06:00 **Anther time that helped you was collecting the scrub for your bedding in the hangar?**

Yes little things like that.

It's good to know about the fish though; it's like a mini hangi [Polynesian method of cooking in a covered pit]?

People still do it, pack the fish in the mud but they do it other ways now, a more sophisticated way. They put leaves around them and wrap them in banana leaves and put them in hot ashes

06:30 and call them a hangi don't they, when you go to Fiji.

Was the training that you did in the AIF much different from what you had done in the militia?

No exactly the same. Getting back to militia days, there were only two bodies of

07:00 artillery in Queensland prior to the war, Kelvin Grove there, the buildings have gone now. As I mentioned before, old 1914 or 1918 equipment. The theory was still the same but we had a motorized tractor that was all

07:30 they used to drag it. But the theory of gunnery didn't alter whether it was 1914 or 1942, the guns were all the same, and it didn't alter much.

Obviously you were use to the daily discipline as well?

Yes but I don't know how I would of taken to the Japanese Army discipline but the Australian Army discipline was not terribly strict

08:00 or overbearing when you saw what the Japanese discipline was. The scouting movement gave you a little bit of that, the responsibilities for the others and the younger ones.

I've heard about the Japanese officers being allowed to smack or slap the ranks lower than them?

08:30 The ordinary Japanese soldier is the lowest form of life. This is what I understand to be the Japanese Army, they had the common ordinary soldier, he's usually a peasant from around somewhere in Japan and you have three grades of being an ordinary soldier. Each grade you go up gives you

09:00 power to rout over the one below you. As you get up and by the time you get to a commissioned officer he has all the power over the equivalent to a sergeant major, corporal, lance corporal down to this poor little Jap, which I did feel very sorry for. It would go through the officer ranks too, if you are a lieutenant and there is a captain above you,

09:30 he hits, belts you up or abuses you, until you finally get to a tojo [General Tojo, Japanese Army Commander], a tojo could do anything to anybody, perhaps not the emperor but he could. They had a terrific steps and stairs, and we use to witness a more senior officer abuse and even slapping

10:00 a junior officer, but he didn't touch or slap quite as hard as he got down the ranks. With a sergeant hitting a corporal, they really hooked into them. They transferred that to our forces too. In the Japanese Army, a

10:30 corporal would think nothing of slapping a captain in the prison camp. The first camp we had, we were only with the Japanese up on the railway line and our Japanese commander being a corporal yet he would slap a captain or a senior rank in the prison, they had a terrible form of discipline but it seemed to work.

11:00 **Would the Aussies slap him back?**

No, I mentioned Captain Drower once, I wouldn't say he slapped him back but he had the cheek to disagree with the Japanese corporal and he got a hell of a belting from the corporal,

11:30 against a captain amongst the prisoners, they didn't split rank amongst us.

Makes you think why the Japanese would want to join the army?

They had no choice. They had a very high rate of discipline. It worked to a degree. I think if the positions had been reversed

12:00 in Malaya that we had been the invading force and they had been the defenders, I don't think that Singapore would have fallen as it did and it would have been a holy massacre before the Japs finally threw it in. The discipline would of held them I think against that, I may be wrong.

12:30 **You're not Robinson Crusoe [alone] there, some other veterans had said similar?**

I think I better stick to my story.

That's alright, thank you for telling us that. Becoming a gunner and you said that you hadn't fired a shot before the AIF, had you actually picked up a weapon prior in your childhood?

13:00 As a gunner that refers to big guns, a gunner was your rank in the artillery. I hadn't fired a rifle. My first rifle I fired was in the AIF after being in there about three or four months and in my whole army career I only fired five bullets from it, from a rifle.

13:30 They were the ones that we did at Redbank in your preliminary training. I have fired a revolver and that was when I was working in a bank when you went for gunnery practice, they used to train the staff for hold ups. That was the first revolver I ever

14:00 tried and that was when I was forty odd years old.

You mentioned going over to Singapore on the Queen Mary, what did you know about the Queen Mary before embarking on her?

Only what we read in the press, she wasn't a new ship when she came

14:30 as a troop ship, I think she was launched about 1935, I think. She was around for quite a long time before the war. I don't know whether I'm right in saying it, but I don't think she was ever contemplated as a troop ship, I'm sure. What a wonderful job she did later on

15:00 when it took us Australians to Singapore, there were five thousand seven hundred soldiers onboard. During the height of the war and the build up of the invasion of Europe she carried twenty thousand troops across the North Atlantic to Britain. To the British war effort she was a wonderful

15:30 valuable ship, a whole division in one go but conversely travelling with five thousand seven hundred onboard of it, the ship was hardly altered. A lot of the NCOs had first class cabins, or what was first class. I happened to be in a group

16:00 that was bedded down in what they called the 'Palm Lounge', one of the upper decks which in it's early days was a beautiful lounge with palm trees and all that sort of business, but as a troopship they put in a series of double-decker bunks. We dined down in the ship's main dining room; they didn't have the individual tables

16:30 with all the fittings, but it was a beautiful place.

Did it look like a ballroom?

It could have been, it was about three stories high and had a beautiful dome in the roof, on one wall it had a big mural of the Atlantic Ocean on the Trans-Atlantic run, like it was travelling across the wharf displaying where the ship was at that time.

17:00 **Wow.**

She was beautiful in those days and the deck space was absolutely tremendous.

What about seasickness, did you have any of that?

No not on a ship that size. We got a little bit of heavy weather going across the Great Australian Bight, it was our group's turn to use the swimming pool which was internally down in the

17:30 inside of the ship. The ship was moving just enough to get a swish of water backwards and forwards in the pool. It hadn't been filled completely; it didn't get much motion from it because she was just far too big.

Being the youngest child and the only son, were your parents against you signing up?

Strange to stay, no. A funny thing

18:00 when I told my employer that I was leaving on a certain date and joining the AIF, the man who was incidentally a First World War digger said, "I can stop you going, you are under age." I think they weren't taking you at that stage of the war until you were nineteen, and I wasn't nineteen and he said, "I can stop you",

18:30 but I said, "but my parents agree". They didn't object but I think it broke my mother's heart, as I said the only boy in the family and the baby and nine years behind my next sister. I think she did suffer a couple of strokes during my internment and I'm sure it was because she was worrying about her baby.

19:00 She didn't live that long after I came back.

Do you still think you did the right thing?

I think so, but I think in those days we are not thinking people, when you are seventeen or eighteen you're thinking, "What a big adventure to go out into the world", and a certain amount of peer pressure,

19:30 if your mates are going, you don't want to be the one left behind. I had no qualms about joining up. To a degree even though my experience was unfortunate, I enjoyed the army life, there is something about it, a sense of discipline, which the kids don't have now. You make some pretty close

20:00 relationships but conversely it saps your independence, somebody else is doing your thinking for you, but I didn't mind it.

I like that idea of somebody else thinking for you. Did you observe any kind of reactions of society to the blokes that didn't sign up?

No I never

20:30 experienced that. I left Australia in February 1941, the Japs hadn't come in, Australia didn't feel threatened and the people were living in a fool's paradise. If anybody had suggested petrol rationing in January or February 1941, there would have almost been a revolution in Australia.

21:00 It was only after the Japs came in that Australia woke up to they had been living in a fool's paradise. There was no feeling against the others that didn't come, I wasn't aware of it anyway.

You mentioned that both of your parents came from Scotland, did you have grandparents growing up?

Yes. Had maternal

21:30 grandfather, grandmother, I didn't have a paternal grandfather he died very young, they called it consumption in those days which was TB [tuberculosis]. I had a paternal grandmother, all Scottish, my mother was born in Scotland and my father was a first generation

22:00 Australian but his parents were all Scottish.

Can you tell us about going to Singapore, were you under the impression that you'd be heading off to the Middle East?

No, once we got on the ship we were more or less told Singapore. This leads onto another point, I believe and I've never had it contradicted,

22:30 that we were only going to Malaya for garrison duties for twelve months. I've been lead to believe that if that had been contradicted that possibly early in 1942 we would have been moved over to the desert and another division which they hoped would have been raised in Australia would come over and replaced us.

23:00 That's what we were lead to believe and one of the things that I said earlier about the silly equipment they were giving was fitting into the army's thinking would have been in place. All the other things I said about radios that wouldn't of worked in the jungle but would of worked out in the desert. I think that was what happened we were only there for twelve months and then moving on. The whole of the

23:30 8th Division wasn't there, some of the 8th Division were still in Australia and some when the war broke out were sent to Rabaul and the islands and they were only there for a few weeks and they were captured.

I wonder why the division was split up?

You would have to ask the powers at be.

I would. Can you explain for us

24:00 **what garrison duties are?**

When you have troops there whose mere presence should make the so-called enemy hesitate starting a fight because they think the troops are there to resist them, it's a big bluff. It's like a game of chess you move a

24:30 restricted piece there you hope it stops that bloke moving his troops somewhere else, it was a big bluff which didn't work. I think British should agree had been marshalling it's overseas forces back to England for the fighting in Europe before France collapsed, they had to drag their troops away.

25:00 Contrary to that over in Mersing, which I mentioned earlier, we had an anti-aircraft artillery group who had been in the battle for Britain, the battle for Britain was over before the Japs started. This anti-aircraft group had been sent out to the east

25:30 which seems to contradict what I said earlier that they were withdrawing troops to Britain but they did sent anti-aircraft artillery unit out to Malaya.

Did you make mates in Australia during your AIF training that you kept with throughout the POW?

Strange to say, they were all ex militiamen, the six of us who all came over

26:00 from the militia artillery.

Are they still alive?

No only three, two didn't survive the imprisonment and one has since died, there are three left.

Can you tell us your first impressions of Singapore?

It was a rainy day,

26:30 we had heard of the naval base, it wasn't as impressive as I would have expected it to be, and I don't know what I expected to see at this great Singapore naval base. I knew there would be cranes there and

I had known that Singapore had one of the biggest floating docks

27:00 east of Suez, I don't know whether they saw a lot. It's hard to tell, I didn't see metropolitan Singapore for many months later, as I said we disembarked from the ship onto a train overnight up to Malacca and that would have been late February 1941. I didn't see Singapore until about

27:30 May 1941 three or four months later. Singapore itself it was an education, I was immature I must admit and to an immature youngster first of all the smells, oh the smells, not necessarily objectionable but cooking smells

28:00 and all sorts of smells.

Like fried oil?

Yes that type of smell coming from their cooking. I was impressed with Singapore, I liked it, and it was alive and bustling. I was very fortunate because

28:30 when I first went to work in the bank, there was an older lady who had left the bank and married an Australian who was living in Singapore at that time. She knew when we arrived and took us under her arm, she and her husband. On our first leave to Singapore she

29:00 mothered us a lot and he took us around places and introduced us to people, fellow Australians, expatriates. She was one of the workers, at that time they had established an Anzac Club in Singapore, which was a get together place for Australians, it had some eating facilities and it was manned generally by expatriate

29:30 Australian ladies and their husbands. I liked Singapore and like every young red-blooded lad you had to see Lavender Street. Lavender Street was the red light area, everybody had to see it, and you had to see the various amusement areas

30:00 of Singapore where they had Chinese opera and they had this and that, I liked it.

Did you go into see the Chinese opera?

We had one in Malacca where we were stationed, when we tried it out, it seemed to me like a lot of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s having their necks wrung, squealing noise, Chinese singing.

30:30 I won't attempt to describe it but we watched half an hour of one and that was it.

I'm personally curious to know what Chinese opera is, is it men singing as women, or is it just regular opera but a different sound?

I can't answer that, whether the man was a man or whether it was a woman. They were heavily made up in quite extravagant costumes.

31:00 In the Chinese language, they seemed to be singing in a high treble all the time, a lot of banging of cymbals and noises. To the Europe ear it was a bit hard to digest but by the same token when we were stationed

31:30 in Malacca, this will open big new field of stories to you, shall I pursue it?

Yes.

We had an officer who was at grammar school ahead of me, Murray Harvey, and he was a couple of years ahead of me at Brisbane Grammar School and he had been in the grammar school artillery cadets

32:00 and he became a lieutenant. Murray was a good Christian man, a good churchgoer and he had discovered that there was a Presbyterian church in a town called Muar is about two hours drive south of Malacca. Through some avenue we had,

32:30 he made contact with a Presbyterian church there which conducted church services of a Sunday afternoon. The church services were followed by entertainment in the homes of Australian and or British expatriates in this town of Muar.

33:00 After a while in Malacca, he gathered together a few Presbyterians for a trial visit to a Presbyterian church in Muar. Of course when we got there and later we were in these homes for dinner, so the word had spread around that this was a good thing and the Presbyterians came out of the woodwork and

33:30 everybody could get on the free list went. That lead onto another thing, one of the highest mountains in Malaya, this officer thought it would be a good idea and good exercise for us if some of the tough

34:00 in good condition Australian soldiers climb this mountain. So we organised with some of these churchgoers down in Muar over one weekend and drove down there and we were to climb this mountain. We were supplied with native porters and I think they were Tamil [people originally from southern India]

34:30 but apparently the Australians in Muar rounded them up to climb this mountain at Muar. We all arrived down on the Saturday morning, we started to climb this place, it wasn't a difficult climb but we tough Australians couldn't make it.

35:00 First of all the Tamil bearers took all the gear we had off us, any haversacks or packs because we were to sleep out at night. We got a certain distance up the mountain, we slept overnight and the next morning all refreshed we thought we'd tackle the mountain so we started off and couldn't make it. It transpires that at the top of this mountain there was a Tamil shrine, the Tamils left us behind and raced up the mountain and said their

35:30 prayers at the shrine, came down again and took us home.

I'm curious why the Australians couldn't make it over the mountain?

It was too steep and we weren't in good enough condition, too soft living and to think we

36:00 were supposed to repel the Japanese.

Yet the Tamils went up?

Yes the Tamils went up. Have you seen a Tamil? He's about that thick, tough and as skinny as you come, they were tough those boys.

Did they go up with your haversacks?

No that was all left behind but I've still got photographs of the incident.

36:30 **I would ask you about Malacca, you said it was an old Portuguese town?**

It was in its day.

Was it beautiful?

37:00 In past time?

No, when you saw it?

I don't whether you know Roman Catholic missionary history, you have heard of St Francis Xavier? He was a Portuguese I understand, or was working with them.

37:30 He was Spanish but working for the Portuguese. He was working in that area and they built this quite impressive building and it's in decay now of course and his remains are there, he apparently must have died and was buried St Francis Xavier there. There was also a

38:00 very old Dutch church that dates back to 17th century. I think St Francis Xavier's Church dates back to the 16th century, the warehouses that were built by the Dutch are still standing. It was a trading post in that era of the Portuguese-Spanish

38:30 domination of the world.

Did it vary quite differently from the main streets of Singapore that you had seen?

These things were mixed up; they weren't normal streets, except the church of St Francis

39:00 Xavier was on a hill I suppose a kilometre away from the little village, it was only a little village then, it wasn't very big. Whilst the Dutch church was right in the centre, I think down the road was a Chinese temple only about from here to two or three doors away. It was a very interesting and clean little town for

39:30 that side of the world. It had quite a coloured, not Malay, but coloured population of mixed Portuguese and dark people there. They became very good to us those people,

40:00 they actually took us into their homes, tried to fraternize a lot. It was a funny thing when we arrived and got out of the train after getting off the Queen Mary and arrived at the railway station and trucks took us down to the outskirts of Malacca, where we were supposed to march to where we were barracked.

40:30 We went through the town just on daylight in the morning and there wasn't a soul about, no evidence, no people at doorways, there was dead silence until we reached where we were stationed. We were stationed at a Chinese high school, which was taken over and made into Australian barracks. During the day you'd see odd people passing the front of the barracks where we had a guard mounted and an old rickshaw.

41:00 They gave us leave after we settled in that night to go into town and somehow we took the wrong turn into town and we were down a side street and we were having a bit of trouble trying to get a rickshaw to take us back to where the town was, the six we spoke about. We ended up where a European came outside and he was an Englishman

41:30 and he greeted us. First of all he said, “What’s your trouble?” We said, “We can’t get this fellow to understand what we want him to do.” He said, “Come inside and meet us”. He took us inside to meet his wife, and he turned out to be the chief of detectives for the little village.

Tape 4

00:30 The Englishman took us inside and introduced us to his wife, asked the usual things, “Are you from Australia?” even though he knew we were from Australia. He was aware that we were coming to be stationed in the town and he said, “Somehow the rumour has gotten around” whether it was Japanese quisling [turncoat] or what we don’t know, “the Australians are ill disciplined,

01:00 shocking behaviour, gun crew creatures”, and all these people by not appearing when we marched into town were physically a little bit frightened that ‘Attila the Hun’ had arrived and there was going to be hell in the town. After twenty-four hours, after the lads used to talk to the kids going past

01:30 all that disappeared. As I was mentioning earlier, a lot of the Chinese, not so much the Malays but the Chinese and the cross-Portuguese people, they use to take the Australians to their homes and entertain them. The Englishman ended up a good friend to us and occasionally

02:00 one or two that used to pop in to see him. We never struck him officially as the chief of detectives. That was the experience of arriving in Malacca.

Where were you all holed up, what about your quarters?

They moved us into what was a Chinese high school; they took over the upper level of a two-storey building.

02:30 The lower level was kept for the school that was still operating as such but it was a reduced intake of students. We occupied the upper level and a big open area around when the equipment arrived from Australia so that the guns were all parked. Up until then, except on the Queen Mary, we slept on straw

03:00 palliasses but the first time we experienced proper beds, that was in the barracks of the Chinese high school. I think I mentioned earlier that they tried to put us on siestas but the lads wouldn’t take it. We enjoyed our time in Malacca,

03:30 everybody did I think, but we paid for it later.

Were there any particular customs or rituals that were strange to you being in a foreign country for the first time?

Funerals, it’s good to see a Chinese funeral go past, all the banging and clanging of cymbals and the screaming. I believe a Chinaman when he dies

04:00 has to have as many mourners as he can to satisfy his status of what he was and to get him into whatever the Chinese place is. In front of these high schools, there was the occasional funeral coming past and they were clanging and making all the noise they could and behind were twenty or thirty hired

04:30 mourners who were crying and tearing their hearts out. I said about going to the opera and that didn’t really take on amongst the Australians. They had a picture theatre there and it didn’t start showing until nine o’clock at night. We’d be sitting there watching a picture and you’d go click like that and a boy would bring

05:00 you a glass of beer, you had to pay for it. Attached to the picture theatre was the dance hall where there were quite a respectable dance hall orchestra. Chinese taxi dancers, first of all you bought a lot of tickets and then you paid a girl a ticket

05:30 to dance with you, there was no suggestion of intercourse with the girls there. What the girl did when she came off duty was a different matter, but they could not while they were dancing there,

06:00 and there were no rooms about. There was naturally a brothel in the town and we were taken there in smaller groups: we were conducted around by the police saying it was ‘all the dens of sin’ sort of business. The unit, being the only forces in Malacca, had to supply a

06:30 town patrol each night and go around to make sure that everybody was behaving themselves and one port of call was always the brothel. She would always have a bottle of beer there for the picket in case the town patrol wanted to interfere with her business. There was quite a nice

07:00 cricket ground there, a European swimming pool which we had free access too. We use to go sailing there; I mentioned earlier that I was keen on sailing. We use to hire these small Malay

07:30 skiff-like things and it had one sail and we use to take sail them and sail them in the Malacca Strait outside the township. That’s about what we did with our time, it was a very easy life.

Did many of the fellows fraternize with the local girls? Did they take on girlfriends?

Yes.

08:00 Every soldier had a secret crush with a Portuguese-cross girl that worked on the local farm. She was a beautiful girl. Slightly tanned, not dark, a beautiful body, beautiful-looking, she wasn't for the boys, but a couple of officers attached themselves to her but some of the other

08:30 Portuguese-cross took up attachments with the lads.

Did the lads frequent the brothels?

Yes they certainly did. At that stage, they

09:00 had been so frightened because they had the lectures we had in the army life about the transferable diseases, sexual diseases that I was too bluff to embark on them, but some of them did. Most of us I think were too young mentally, you kids now at your age post-war don't realise how puritan pre-war Australia was, and really it was.

09:30 The thought of a venereal disease, you thought it was worse than being castrated or something. The modern age with all these medicines, a venereal disease is not the fear now that it was then, well that's how I feel anyhow.

Was there a

10:00 **medical check set-up?**

The regiment, 2/10th Field Regiment consisted of about eight hundred and fifty men, it consisted of a doctor, medical assistants, wherever the regiment went they went. The regiment consisted of three batteries and each

10:30 battery had four guns, that's twenty four guns. Each battery often operated independently to the others. One battery might be seconded to work with a certain infantry battalion or one of the others might be to another battalion. When the war started, it wasn't often that the three regiments were

11:00 altogether in the one spot, they were sort of mobile. When it got down to the defence of Singapore Island, by that time there were two regiments in Malaya, the 2/10th from Queensland and the 2/15th from New South Wales, they weren't all set together as forty-eight guns side by side. There might be a

11:30 battery there, a battery here and a battery over there to cover different aspects of the attack.

It leads me onto one of my other questions. Did you have much to do with any of the British forces or troops before the Japanese got there?

No not much unfortunately. We were at Malacca. About thirty miles distance was

12:00 another two of our Australian infantry battalions. There were no British anywhere near us there. When we moved to Mersing, there were no British; the Australians were left to the defence of Mersing. We didn't really come to get in

12:30 cahoots with any of the English forces until we got onto the island. I think there was a certain amount of friction between Gordon Bennett [Major-General H. Gordon Bennett, commanding 8th Australian Division] and the English commander, I think that comes in elsewhere and I'm not telling any secrets. I think to a degree both leaders kept

13:00 their forces apart, but I maybe wrong.

That would lead onto the question, was there any tension between the English and Australians troops, on the ground level?

I don't know but I think there were occasions when there were troops on leave in Singapore there might have been a few fights. I wasn't really aware

13:30 but I think we got on with them reasonably well at the prison camp. The finest soldier I ever served under in those years was with an Englishman and incidentally Colonel [Philip] Toosey is his name. The Bridge on the River Kwai, the song [film, Colonel Bogey is the song or march], Alex Guinness plays the role of a

14:00 British colonel, who is responsible for supplying the troops to help the Japs build that bridge. This Colonel Toosey is a two way and how Guinness portrays him on the screen bears no relationship at all to what actually happened. He was one of the finest soldiers

14:30 and how the incident portrayed, it is all fiction but I think everybody realised that, but they should of anyhow. Personally I'd say that I got on well with the Poms [English].

What about training in general, when you were actually doing some training before the Japanese arrived, what were you actually doing?

15:00 There wasn't a feeling of urgency and I feel that again will reflect on our officers, our training was inadequate. In an artillery regiment you have different categories of responsibility, you have drivers who drive the tractors, that's what we call them but they are only trucks,

15:30 very high off the ground big wheels. You had gunners, signallers, to me a properly trained force would have been one but if a gunner was killed, and this is in combat, there is a driver capable of taking his place or a signaller taking his place

16:00 and filling his position or vice versa. If two or three gunners get killed, to man the guns they can pull in sigs or if the driver gets killed, they can pull in gunners to drive the trucks. That didn't apply in the training and I don't know whom to blame whether it was the CO [Commanding Officer] or the whole Australian military set-up.

16:30 In our regiment, no two men were interchangeable; you had eight men to service a gun. If an enemy shell came over and killed those whole eight, short of robbing men from other guns and making them inadequate, you didn't have a reserve of drivers who could act, which to me is basic, but

17:00 it didn't seem to apply. I was NCO for sigs for a troop, that is four guns, and that's with eight men. As I mentioned earlier if you reached the occasion where you had an observation post a mile or two ahead of the guns to observe the fall of fire, and to correct it if it was wrong. If for

17:30 some reason the officer was shot, was incapable of continuing, there should have been somebody else, not necessarily an officer but somebody who was capable of continuing or if his assistant was shot the signaller who was up there with him could step in. That is what I would of called 'great training', but that didn't exist. I've got a funny feeling

18:00 we weren't taking the war seriously then, our powers at be. I don't blame the unit officers; I think it would of come from the top. But as for the training they'd take us out on manoeuvres, Malacca is bounded by rubber plantations there wasn't much true jungle there. You always had the direction you

18:30 weren't allowed to damage a rubber tree, the government would have to pay X amount of dollars to the planter if you ruined his rubber trees. That means we took a tractor and a gun through the rubber trees and you hit a tree and it was damaged it reflected, so that's no way to train. We used

19:00 to have combined exercises with the infantry, I was captured on two occasions, they had these makeup battles and if you had one armband one colour and the other with another colour and you tried to do your job and you got picked up by somebody from the other side, it was a bit joke but we paid for it. I think for the little

19:30 bit that we saw, particularly talking about the artillery, in the few scraps they had prior to falling back to Singapore, I would be quite proud of their performance, quite proud. But I would of hated to think they were in the desert against the Germans, I think that would have been a different story.

20:00 **You were an NCO of eight men within your regiment, what specifically were your duties and responsibilities?**

The signalling section of a troop or a battery is responsible for getting all the instructions about firing and going from observation posts.

20:30 If an officer who is sitting up on a hill and sees something over there which is the enemy and they want the gun to fire, he has got to be able to tell the guns, he's up here but there are other officers back at the guns translating what he says into instructions for the gunners. That has either got to be by telephone, radio or visual.

21:00 The visual you have a light on a hill and directs back to you just like the navy do. Then you have got to provide communications from the troops to the battery headquarters, back to your next form of command. At the battery headquarters, your responsibility starts and the Royal Australian Corps of Signals, that's a body

21:30 completely independent to take over the communications from the battery to regiment or to army headquarters all on. What the NCO has to do, he has got to train his men first of all; there is a thing called 'artillery code'. Instructions for a gun had been condensed

22:00 into code words, like 'XZ' might mean 'you do this or do that or something else', it's just simplified to get quick transmission either by voice or visual. He has got to be proficient in Morse code, he's got to be able to handle

22:30 telephone laying and maintenance. Telephone wires in a wartime situation can be cut by shellfire or by enemy just coming past and cutting. They had to know everything to maintain communication, that should sum it up.

Your range of skills had to be fairly broad?

Yes and no, you've only got to

23:00 know Morse code, artillery code, know certain procedures like how to get a radio to work in a jungle, which it didn't. Why you needed eight was you needed two signallers down

23:30 with the officer who is in charge of the forward guns. You might have one signal person up at the observation post. Laying of telegraph lines, you might take three or four and for repairs. Eight seemed a lot but there was always a replacement duty, particularly if you were

24:00 in a situation where you went off duty and somebody had to replace you.

Did they try to acclimatize you to the jungle at all as part of your training?

Not in the artillery. They did the infantry but again perhaps I'm speaking from a voice of ignorance, I don't think

24:30 the infantry command did enough.

You were telling me before about the uniforms that you had to wear, I was just wondering if you could talk us through that again?

It got to the stage where they withdrew our heavy uniforms in about November 1940 and they issued

25:00 you with what they called a 'tropical kit'. They were all khaki and if you know khaki is the desert, there was none of this multi-coloured uniform that you see the soldiers wearing now, which is supposed to blend in with the jungle background. It had shorts

25:30 if I call them that, or trousers if I call them that, are what the girls use to call 'puddle jumpers' later on. They came about mid calf down your leg and the theory was at nighttime you tucked them in your long socks and putties on your calf and that gave you protection from mosquitoes.

26:00 The shirt had overlapping long sleeves attached to your epaulette that is a thing that is cut out. On your head fitting over your slouch hat, you had a net like a beekeeper when he's raiding a beehive. That's how you were supposed to go, I imagine in somebody's mind into war.

26:30 First of all, with the thing over your head you couldn't see out, and if anybody put a torch in your face you saw less, you were completely blind. With the telephone if you were a signaller, how could you use the thing if you had a net around your neck and your ears covered? So some colonel I would imagine somewhere back at Victoria Barracks

27:00 got a real trend up on designing those clothes. Immediately when we got to Malacca the lads were down at the Chinese tailors having shorts made and they never saw those things worn again, they weren't enforced so they got the name 'shit catchers' being crude Australian covering.

27:30 **Wonderful. Just talking amongst yourselves did you expect that you were going to be staying in Malacca or Singapore?**

It came out much later that we thought we were destined for the desert.

28:00 I don't think any of the Australians had the multi coloured jungle uniforms.

But you did think that at the time?

Later on it came generally accepted,

28:30 it was never officially announced but generally accepted.

Did you have any pre knowledge or thought of the Japanese before they actually hit?

No. I mentioned earlier that we were equipped with

29:00 AWA radios. Strange to say you could not use them in the rubber plantation or the jungle even from here across the road, they were useless. On our set, we used to be able to get some station somewhere in California. We used to get at nighttime mainly when the reception was best, we could pick up

29:30 some radio station that were reporting movements in China and reporting what was going on in the Pacific, the war hadn't broke out, but all this business about American stopping the oil, or stopping all the shipments. We didn't know

30:00 that there was a war going on but the fact that we were moved from this holiday-style of living in Malacca across to what they called 'action stations' at Mersing and Jemaluang. It seemed to indicate that something was going to happen but whether it was a big bluff on our side to try and bluff the Japs out so they wouldn't get us. But no it came as a surprise. As a matter of fact

30:30 I was in an army hospital in Johore Bahru, I had gone down with malaria in late November 1941 before the war broke out and I was in the 13th AGH, the Australian General Hospital. With countless other malaria patients in the hospital, I think

31:00 that was all that they had there was malaria. On the night that it happened, I think the early morning of the 8th December it must have been about three o'clock in the morning when this terrible row of bombing started and that was the first indication that any of

31:30 us ever had that it was on or even happening. In passing, all the sisters ran around and was telling us all to get under the beds because the war had started. That's, in my case the only warning that I had, but the signs were there.

In what way?

It has come out since. Malaya Command knew that the Japanese had

32:00 landed an invasion force just north of the Siamese-Malayan border up north and every indication they were nearly ready within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours to cross the border and attack.

32:30 **Was it a bit of a shock for you at the time being in the hospital and suddenly finding that you were getting bombed by the Japanese all of a sudden?**

Actually they didn't bomb the hospital, Johore Bahru was just across the causeway from Singapore, as the crow flies it would have been more than twenty miles. We only heard the sound of the bombing but they didn't bomb the hospital.

33:00 It came as a shock but at last you are going to see a bit of excitement, at last you are going to see a scrap, not knowing what a scrap was going to be like. They quickly started to evacuate the hospital then, they knew they would be needed for possible war casualties. We were sent to a

33:30 place called Balikpapan which was an Australian army convalescent camp. Looking back now that was a terrible extravagate waste of manpower that the Australian command was doing. You would have expected they would of sent us back even though we weren't completely recovered, back to our units. I would have done it if I had of been Gordon Bennett.

34:00 We stayed there for about a fortnight and got back to the unit up in the Mersing, I think in the middle of January.

What were you told when you got up there?

We heard what had gone on while I was in hospital and what precautions had been taken and all that sort of business. But the Japs hadn't landed near us then

34:30 we were still waiting up there for the first onslaught. The Japs were up on the western side of Malaya and our sister regiment the 2/15th was in a very big action on the west coast for which the only Australian Victoria Cross was awarded to Charles Anderson who you might of heard of.

35:00 There was a state of emergency but no great panic back in the unit when I got back.

Were you anxious to get into it?

Yes, even though I had mentioned that we weren't as highly trained as we should have been, we wanted to have a crack.

35:30 We had been fed in the preceding months by some responsible person who should have known better, higher-ranking Australian officers, that they weren't a formidable enemy. One, they were afraid of the dark, I've never heard of such rot, anybody or soldiers being afraid of the dark. They were only equipped with twenty- two rifles [.22 calibre], which wasn't much more than what the kids back in Australia called

36:00 Daisy air rifles. A lot of silly things like that. Quite honest their propaganda, I suppose by our officers in confidence building, was absolutely stupid, to suggest that they are going to be frightened of the dark. Little men and they couldn't see and they all

36:30 wore glasses and their bullets wouldn't penetrate a rubber tree, that was what we got. But we soon found out that it was complete absolute rubbish. The Jap as I could see later was better prepared than we were. He travelled lightly, he had no heavy boots, he wore sandshoes,

37:00 I called them sandshoes they were rubber soles with fabric-topped shoes. He had light rifles, and they did only carry a twenty-two but they had a hell of a punch behind them. They carried their provisions, no stupid gas masks and things like that. To a degree our high command,

37:30 of course you can't blame them but they should blame them, because the Chinese had been fighting them for fifteen or twenty years. We had plenty of British and American observers with the Chinese troops, they should have known more about the Japs than they did.

It would have made sense?

It would have made sense.

Tape 5

00:35 **Allan I don't know if it was you or the office that said that when you got a job in the bank initially you were a ledger keeper?**

No. I didn't mention what I was doing. I mentioned that person that was going to object, interfere with my going to war underage, or what he considered underage.

What is a ledger keeper?

The old days everything was

01:00 done by hand. Machinery was of a minimum and no computers. Banking transactions were recorded in a book called a ledger. The person who wrote it up was a ledger keeper. So if you had an account there, I'm going back many years, and you deposited a hundred pounds, it was written up in the book, a hundred pounds,

01:30 in there at the bank's records.

No wonder it was easy for Ned Kelly [bushranger] to rack off with the bankbook.

You're going back much further again of course.

Did any of your sisters sign up?

No they were all at work throughout the war in ordinary domestic commerce.

02:00 No they weren't in any other forces.

Before we get into Singapore, can you tell us about Cosmos?

I'll tell you about Cos. Freleagus was a well known family name in Brisbane before the war, both commercially and in the Greek community, in fact Freleagus was the

02:30 Consul for Greece pre-war and one of the Freleagus's is still the Consul for Greece now, one of the family. Cosmos was my age, I was about 19 or 20, he was silly as a two bob watch whichever way you look at it, or a very brave man. I first came in contact with Cos in the unit.

03:00 Now back in that time that was in 1940, on one weekend there was a disturbance in the city and the Grand Central Hotel was down on the lower side of Queen Street about opposite where DJs [David Jones retail store] is now. Some soldiers on leave on a Saturday night pinched two or three barrels of beer from the

03:30 Grand Central Hotel and took them up and drank them on the floor of the post office. Well, it got a terrible reception from the citizens of Brisbane. So on the Sunday night we were called down on picket that was supposedly to maintain the police, why the police didn't think they could do it by themselves I don't know. So we arrived in Brisbane down from Redbank about six o'clock at night.

04:00 I don't know what we were supposed to do, we just sat in a truck. Cos says to me, Cos at that stage had been appointed a driver of one of the signal trucks. He said to me, "Macka," he always called me Macka, "Macka, this is silly here, there's a Greek wedding on up at the Tivoli Café." The Tivoli Café was up where the Reserve Bank is opposite the square in

04:30 front of the Town Hall, so he said, "How about we go in there, they'll make us welcome". So Cos gathers up myself, Russell Savage, we arrived at the Greek wedding. Of course at that time, Germany had just about overrun Greece in Europe and of course we were received like long lost

05:00 saviours of the world, "Here comes the cavalry" sort of thing, They made quite a fuss of us and we had been told that the trucks would assemble down near the Central station in Brisbane at 11pm at night to go back to the camp. It comes about twenty past eleven and I looked at my watch and I thought, "Gee we were supposed to be back

05:30 20 minutes before". So we chased back to the vehicle, which was waiting, got a tongue-lashing from a captain that was there. That started a story about Cos. That man was in every stupid behaviour that went on for the next three and a half years. When the Japanese,

06:00 oh there was, in late 1940, there was a gathering for the Highland Games in Singapore and we were up in this place Mersing, which I've mentioned before which is three hours drive away, but leave would be granted to anybody of Scotch decent to attend the Highland Games and transport would be provided. Of course, McNevin gets into it and

06:30 Cos Ferleagus fronts up to the officer and says, "I want to go to the Highland Games." He said, "But you're a Greek, Cos." "Oh yeah, but my grandfather MacFreleagus" this was the sort of behaviour that goes on. When the action started, I had mentioned earlier that there was an anti-aircraft unit that came over

07:00 from Britain, had been in the Battle of Britain and came over operating in Malaya. They were stationed near us and we started to get a bit of dive bombing from the Japanese planes up there and one of the fellows from the anti-aircraft units said, “If we could only entice those, that plane’s low we might be able to get one with the gun”.

07:30 So unbeknownst to me, he grabs the truck races down the road where the plane was expected to come and waited for it and when it did, he got a white towel and waved it. And of course the Japanese plane, I don’t know if they thought he was madman or not, turned down towards him and the Bofors opened fire to drive it away, didn’t do any damage. After we were taken prisoners, the next day we had

08:00 moved out to Changi, he borrows a motorbike from the, that had been handed over to the Japs and drove into the city of Singapore which has only then been occupied 12 hours by the Japs, drove around finding out what was going on, talking to people and back to the unit. The next incident he’s involved in, he goes on a working party in Singapore

08:30 and they were taken to the Singapore brewery to do some work there and he and the guard get drunk. These are all facts. You are going to laugh, this couldn’t have happened to a man. What was the next story, after that working party was finished, they were brought back from Singapore and they’d only been back not many days and apparently a Jap

09:00 turns up at the gates at Changi and he wants to see the Monkey Man. “Who’s the Monkey Man? Somebody’s got a pet monkey here?” No, they couldn’t help with the Monkey Man. They said, “The man that is covered with black hair”. He had a heavy growth of black hair, so he was called the Monkey Man. Well the stories go on.

09:30 He’s dead now the poor fellow, if you had recorded all that, you people would never have believed it. They were only a few of the incidents he was involved in. Now he was either stupid or had the cheek of the Irish and got away with it or was a very brave man, I don’t know which is which. But he needs to go down in history. Cos Freleagus.

Absolutely. Was he a mate of yours?

Oh not a close mate but he was my driver sort of business.

10:00 **Did people used to scratch their heads when they talked about him?**

He was so well known, not only in the unit, but his behaviour and reputation spread right throughout the Australian prisoners. I think you could find a West Australian second machine gunner heard of Cos Freleagus or a Victorian infantryman. They would have heard of Cos Freleagus or knew of

10:30 him. He did the most remarkable things. You’d have to say that nobody would ever believe it.

Did he survive the war?

Yes he came back. He only died about, in the last two or three years. He unfortunately came back, he was in the Greek, Greek is a bit like arranged marriages,

11:00 and when he came back he had an arranged marriage with a little convent girl, 16 just out of convent. He was too worldly and too mad. Unfortunately he had two or three kids before it broke up and he remarried later and died two or three years ago. So well known, if any you others strike prisoners of war, ask did they ever hear of a person named Cos Freleagus in the prison camp.

11:30 You’ll get a strike, one or two. Just remember that for future reference.

Oh I will. I won’t forget his name now. What about any other characters that come to mind?

Not the extent that he was. There were characters, but he’s outstanding.

Were there any wildcards besides Cos?

None that I can pull immediately out of the air for you, no.

12:00 But you will of heard of Bill Drower. He was not a wildcard but a well-known figure who was known to everybody.

12:30 **Not sure if I’m chronological so interrupt me at any point. I wanted to talk about the Japanese landing in Singapore and the fighting that took place with our infantry. You were in the artillery so you were behind?**

We’re well back.

Showing support for the infantry. Can you tell us about that first set on conflicts you had there?

For a humble bombardier I wouldn’t know half of what had been going on. I only know that when they dropped back to the island they gave, there were two Australian infantry brigades over there.

13:00 Each brigade consisted of two battalions each one and each brigade has a unit of artillery to support it.

We were within the 22nd Australian Brigade we had the 18th and 19th Battalion infantry and 22nd artillery. We took up a position on one side of the causeway.

13:30 Have you been to Singapore? It's an island as you know and it's connected to the mainland of Malaya by an artificial roadway called a causeway, which extends across I suppose it would be about a mile perhaps two miles to the mainland. One section closest to Malaya where ships can get through it opens; the rest of it is a roadway built on an isthmus there.

14:00 We were put on one side and the other Australian Brigade the 23rd was put on the other side. Now it was all low-level mangrove swampy land both sides of the causeway.

14:30 I stand corrected I think it was a distance of about four miles they had to protect. Where our guns were sitting was just about opposite where the Sultan of Johore lived, he had quite a palace on the mainland. For some reason, it's never been explained since, the

15:00 guns were never allowed to open fire anywhere near that palace. It was known from observation that Japanese officers were up in the palace surveying where they had to land. Well when it came it came under the cover of dark, apropos my early statement that Japs won't fire in the dark.

15:30 I think it was heavily repulsed at the start but they kept coming but they just overran it and we started to retreat all the way back into the centre of Singapore. That's how it finished up. That's a very quick picture.

16:00 **Even though the British forces knew the Japanese were landscaping the scene from the palace, you weren't allowed to shoot the palace?**

I understand the direction came from the Governor of Singapore, that they didn't want to antagonise the Malays.

16:30 That sounds a weak explanation to me.

Are you or not insinuating that the Japanese were allowed into the palace?

They were in the palace. They might have come in under the protection of arms, forced their way in, but they were using the observation post, the tower in the palace. It was known that the Sultan of

17:00 Johore was a little bit anti-British; whether that explains anything we don't know.

That would make him a Japanese collaborator?

Yes. Of course they got a lot of collaboration from a lot of people, you know, against the white man, Asian for Asian business. I mentioned earlier we were talking about Malacca and

17:30 had the cabaret dance hall with the taxi girls, well there used to be, we thought, a Chinese boss there. Others claim they came across him after they were prisoners in a uniform as a Japanese officer. I can't substantiate that, but he was another quisling there.

18:00 **Do you think he was running the club on the side?**

I think he was set there as a spy, sort of business. I don't know. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it.

There would be a lot of cases like that in the Second World War.

Oh yes. But as I said there was a lot of sympathy for the Japanese amongst those people. I think they saw it as a forerunner of them getting their independence

18:30 10 years later. All that area. They all got freedom, independence later '40s early '50s last century. I think the anti-British sentiment there was shown in the Indian Army who were with us. We had quite a lot in the forces there. The Sikh particularly

19:00 turned Japanese, went pro-Jap, and switched sides after surrender. The only one I believe that stayed loyal to the British crown was the Ghurkha [regiment of Nepalese fighting under British command]. He wouldn't switch. Talking about the Sikhs, Sikhs are a tribe or caste of Indians, very big men, fine upstanding men,

19:30 they have a separate religion I think from the rest of India. Later, two or three years later in Bangkok, out on a working party out in the city, we happened to come across a group of about 10 or 20 Sikhs in Japanese uniform. One of them actually told us off shockingly,

20:00 derided us for, we got what we deserved, this and that. The Ghurkha was the only one that stayed true to the British crown. In that area there was, particularly getting towards Thailand and Burma, there was an army formed, the free India army, Indian National Army, INA.

20:30 They were a lot of dissenters, ex-British Indian troops. A fellow named Chandra Bose is their leader and he was going to be the puppet Viceroy of India after they captured India. That, I'm not telling you anything new, that's well known in history.

21:00 **When the Sikhs did change over to support the Japanese, were you aware of that happening straightaway?**

Oh no. As time went on, it started to come out. We didn't know the next day that was happening. I don't think a lot of Indian troops changed alliances overnight, I think they were worked on by the Japs, talked into it kind of business.

What about the Ghurkhas did you…?

21:30 I didn't have any contact with them, only these few that we met in Bangkok on a working party.

Now I know you were close with the five other blokes from the militia, were you friends with any of the infantrymen from Australia?

Not until we were prisoners. You didn't have much intercourse with them. They were stationed 20 or 30 miles away. You might run into some of them periodically

22:00 when you come down to Malacca for leave or bringing the trucks down or something. They were in the battle stations of Mersing; they were stationed not necessarily near us to intermingle except in sport. They used to have a football match, cricket match, inter-service sort of business. We had no contact with air force at all.

22:30 No Australian sailors. Didn't run across them too.

Can you walk us through this nighttime conflict that occurred there. Obviously you were in the artillery and you were back from the front line fighting. Can you tell us what your orders were? Can you describe the night battle scene for us?

23:00 It might be spasmodic, they might call for artillery fire for one or two hours and then position you were up fighting might be such that you were a danger to our troops, so they'd stop the guns for a while, we might have to move, then they be making us

23:30 stand further down the road where they wanted the guns to help them there. It wasn't necessarily at night. It was going on all the time.

For how long, Allan?

About I might only fire for half an hour, then quickly load up and get out of it down to the next place. See most of the events, most of it, down the Malaya Peninsula was along the roads because, or the railway line,

24:00 you couldn't take a tank or a truck through virgin jungle, you couldn't. Soldiers of course can go through it but you couldn't take equipment. So the fighting was always coming down roads. The two main roads, the one down the western side of Malaya, that's on the Indian Ocean side, was where most of the fighting was going on. The one on the eastern side, the road from there

24:30 along the China Sea back into Singapore was where the minor skirmishing was going on. So it was really around the roads. You might be driven out of this position out on a road and you drop back a mile and try and make a stand there. Of course they always wanted artillery to try and break the back of the concentration of Japs coming in.

What about the air raids? Were we getting support from British forces?

25:00 Not much. Of course they didn't have much. You've heard of the sinking of the two big battleships, there was the Prince of Wales and the Repulse. They were sent out to bolster the naval balance of power in that part of the world and they were useless.

25:30 The first time they went into action, the Japanese bombed them. We witnessed at Mersing at the time, didn't realise until later, a flight of old what they called Swordfish bombers [British marine fighter aircraft]. They were not as bad as the First World War old things,

26:00 but they were a bi-plane not unlike Tiger Moths. Well they sent those poor fellows out against navy Zeroes [Japanese fighter aircraft]. We never saw any came back. That doesn't mean they didn't survive, they might have come back a different way. I think there was a group of about a dozen of them, sent out to fight the Japs in there in their big Zeroes, which were a pretty good plane, better than anything Australia had at the time.

26:30 **Were there any thoughts during this, at the time of this battle, that Australia, Britain would fall?**

Oh well after the fall of Singapore and as news filtered through of the Dutch-East Indies, and landing in the Solomons and all that, we fully expected it, or wouldn't have been at all surprised if that

27:00 happened. You didn't think that was anything that could stop them; they were on a roll sort of thing. Surprising, in those years in prison camp you might have heard from other sources, there was always little snippets of information filtering through from sometimes from secret radios and sometimes from information fed by sympathetic local people, I mean by the natives.

27:30 There wasn't much we weren't aware of, maybe not immediately but within a reasonable time after it happened. We knew what was going on in the desert. Of course the battle for France was over before we were taken prisoner. We knew about the German drive on Russia and on Moscow. We didn't know immediately, but it filtered through.

28:00 We knew about what was going on mostly in Australia, or around that area. We knew that there'd been a big battle, which later turned out to be the Coral Sea Battle, and as the war went towards the end, we knew a lot more. At one stage we had up in Ubon, the last place we were, we had for a while there naval guards. They had been naval

28:30 personnel from the Japanese Navy who'd lost their ship somewhere around the Philippines and apparently to use them they sent them in as guards. They were good guards as a matter of fact; they weren't terribly vindictive or hard at all. They were doing a job they hated, the same as us.

29:00 **So at that point the conflict on the Malayan peninsula, was there a great deal of fear for you?**

No then. Oh we thought something would happen at the last minute, we'd get reinforcements. We'd be saved; Singapore would never fall, no. That didn't enter us until I think the last few days most of

29:30 us knew we couldn't get out of it because the bombing was incessant and you never saw a British plane over, in fact none were sent over I don't think. Any planes left were over in Java by then. They got them out, what for I don't know.

You talked about the artillery having to be extremely careful about the infantry and friendly fire. Do you know if that did happen?

30:00 No. No instances of where we shelled our own people. No, the artillery carries the nickname of 'Drop Shorts'.

Drop shorts?

It comes over from the First World War. Where perhaps if the Germans were advancing and they were trying to repel them by shellfire and the

30:30 guns were all the time dropping their range back to keep the Germans back, sometimes they'd take it too far and hit our own people. That's how the reputation came in, 'Drop Shorts', they'd drop the shell shorter of where they should have been. Well I heard of no instances where our own people were shelled in error or not. Actually we weren't engaged that much.

31:00 **Was it a few days?**

On the island, about three or four days. On the battle coming down from Mersing, I suppose on only two occasions and that would only be for a few hours I suppose, that's all. The method of defence on our side was to have a series of ambushes. They'd try to ambush the Japs coming down the roads

31:30 and they got a good ambush laid down, they might have wiped out a few hundred Japs which would have stemmed the advance forward for a while and give them a chance to find another ambush site. Ambush sites were usually where the road had perhaps cuttings above them, where they could shoot down

32:00 or heavy jungle. But the Japs soon woke up to that technique. They always had scouting troops coming through the jungle so if an ambush was put down, the scouting troops would continue.

What was your opinion of the Japanese as fighters?

Oh I think they were good. At that stage of the war, as fighters man for man, better than us. What

32:30 a Jap through his hard discipline lacked was initiative. I mean if a Jap was told to do that, he'd do it right to the end whether it was fatal or not. Whereas I'd like to think an Australian and or American would use his head and think, "We're mad to do, if we do this and this and that", the Jap wasn't capable of doing that. He was so well disciplined.

33:00 **I suppose lucky for us the Australians weren't as well disciplined?**

Yes and no. There are two sides to that. I think us and the Americans were more, perhaps we are a bit more inventive and imaginative. Our discipline didn't stop us from seeing another solution

33:30 that we could take, but the Jap was, as my experience, I am only a humble corporal, if he was told he'd stay there and shoot and shoot, even if he knew he was in a no-win situation. A normal intelligent person like us would say, "This is no good, we'll start the fight somewhere else."

34:00 **I have heard that, by the way, that Australians really had quite a bit of ingenuity, inventiveness and adaptability and took initiative.**

Possibly heavy discipline wipes it out of a person. A lighter discipline might give it. But then again, a light discipline was the cause of the bad reputation we got

34:30 for deserters. You've heard of that.

What do you mean?

Before the end was over, they were sending over not conscripts, hadn't come in in Australia then, but they were sending over youngsters who had been in the army six weeks, completely undisciplined. We had to

35:00 scrape the barrel, that's all they had to send over. Having any lack of discipline at all imbedded into them in that short period in the army, they just couldn't take it and there were quite a few incidents of straight-out desertion and where they tried to get onto departing ships to escape.

35:30 You haven't heard that? It happened.

These are young boys?

Yes recruits. Six weeks in the, hadn't even fire a rifle a lot of them, and they were infantrymen. To scrape the barrel and send them over there, the Australian high command should be ashamed and that reputation has stuck. I happened to have a,

36:00 through my friend Russell Savage, he wrote a book that's why I mention him. Have you ever heard of it? Guests of the Emperor, that's the person I'm talking about, when he launched this book at the launching I was invited to the after, to a dinner to which there was a retired

36:30 Lieutenant-General, I would mention his name if I could think of it but I can't, and at the table there was about six or eight of us, all bar two were ex-prisoners. He threw into the centre this business of desertion in Singapore towards the closing days

37:00 of the war. The major of our unit was at that meeting and he tried to discount it, but this retired General said, "We have actual evidence. You don't know anything about it?" Well it was established.

They were sent into Singapore to try to help with prisoners of war?

37:30 No. We weren't prisoners then, this is while the fighting is going on.

Right. This is before Singapore fell and these are the new blokes?

New recruits.

No I didn't know.

You will if you strike men who are 80-odd and were prisoners.

38:00 The point I'm trying to make is they lacked even the basic discipline the army gives you, they just, understandably, couldn't take it. Now I know the 2/10th could account for every one of them on the day after war finished. I think most of the infantry battalions, it wasn't amongst them, it was

38:30 these raw recruits, sent from Australia in the eleventh hour, or eleven and a half hours as it turned out. Still you can't blame the kids. I'm not saying they were all youngsters, but they were completely untrained.

It seems it's unfortunate way back to the top level?

Well I suppose

39:00 panic was rising in Australia at the time and there was no guarantee from America that they were going to step in to save Australia as such. MacArthur hadn't arrived by then, I think Curtin was then Prime Minister and I think anything to put a hole in the, your finger in the hole in the dam, sort of business. They sent what they had from the pool.

39:30 Of course the rest are over the desert somewhere.

The conflict that occurred over those three or four days with the Japanese and then you were pushed back to where?

We were firing from into the Kranji area, which I mentioned earlier, which was where originally they were supposed to resist but the Japs didn't land there

40:00 and we had the guns actually in what they called the botanical gardens, almost in the centre of Singapore. It was from there that the guns stopped for the last time.

How did you get word to stop?

It came down through the grapevine from army headquarters that the guns were to stop, I forget what time it was at night.

40:30 Everybody was to, this is as I understand it, to remain where they were, there was to be no damaging of any equipment, by that I mean by spiking the guns and making them useless, making the vehicles no

longer run and then of course it was dead quiet. Nothing happened.

Was that extremely depressing for you and the men?

In lots of ways it was, because of lack of sleep, it was a relief

41:00 to get a bit of sleep, but it hadn't sunk in then. I know a few of our unit tried to make a break then, this is after the stop. They thought that if they could get through to the coast around a bit from Singapore, they might be able to get a barge or a ship or something. They got as far as the water and rounded up by Japs and sent back.

41:30 Japs made no effort to punish them just sent them back. The Japs probably thought they were lost or dislocated from the fighting. Anybody that got away after that cease-fire is telling a story, nobody got away. The Japs had it bottled up completely. They may have left beforehand. There are stories of their escape before.

Tape 6

00:30 **You mentioned many times that the artillery were there to support the infantry but I'm just wondering in the defence of Singapore when things got fairly hairy did you come close to any of the Japanese at all?**

I didn't see a Jap until two days after the war had finished, that was the first Jap that I saw, I personally hadn't, no.

01:00 I had a brother-in-law in the same unit, a gentleman who turned out later to be my brother-in-law, he was sent up to an observation post, which I explained the use there of, to this area where the Japs were expected to land, and came under the Japanese invasion then. I think they were under

01:30 this heavy infantry engagement and Japanese shelling for two or three hours, he was never the same, even when he came back to Australia, it broke him. That was the closest I got to the Japanese and that was when the war finished, and in the prison camp.

02:00 **Was there any feeling amongst the Australian troops that part of the surrender was partly responsible that the British had something to do with it, just in terms of not allowing the Australians to do what they wanted to do?**

02:30 In the immediate days after the surrender, there were a lot of stories around. One story had it that Gordon Bennett demanded that General Percival the supreme military commander [GOC Malaya] supply him with all the ammunition that he could get and the Australians would take it from one end of the island right to the finish,

03:00 and all this sort of thing. But no, I don't think there was any undue criticism of the British command except I think Churchill copped a bit, the fact that he denied air cover to that part of the world. In defence of Churchill, he didn't have it to give it, so that was the point.

03:30 Percival, and this l learnt later, we went back later in the 1990s to Singapore and we were taken on a tour through the headquarters

04:00 of the British command at port something in Singapore. We were told by the guide, who was an Englishman, a little bit about Percival as a man. He was a poor choice for the position he was put into. Me not being a military expert but I think there would have been better men

04:30 who would have done a better job if they had been given the job that he got. He was a very unimpressive man to meet him, this is terrible to speak of the dead, but he had a very weak face and a very receding jaw and it didn't make him look like a very strong character, to any degree and that's how most people saw him, as not a strong character.

05:00 Apparently a brilliant staff man but not a leader, he apparently was too right down the centre, there was no sideways. I'm not an expert at that and I shouldn't be quoting that.

Can you tell us your experiences with the surrender and the march to Changi?

It was a hell of a long way, I can tell you that.

05:30 When we were told we had to leave our equipment, guns and trucks and all that in the botanical gardens and proceed marching, I think twenty-three miles to Changi. It didn't seem much at the time so we practically filled our haversacks and whatever we had

06:00 with tinned food, a bit of liquor that we nicked further along the line when we had to destroy the customs point that I mentioned, a few bottles of brandy. The first few miles were good but when you got to the fifteenth, sixteenth they got heavier, heavier and heavier. I think getting into Changi,

06:30 we thought we wouldn't last but and we wouldn't throw the food away and we wouldn't throw the grog away. The six of us that formed that group, there was only five there, the other one was in that group that I mentioned earlier that tried to make a break after the finish, but got rounded up by the Japs. The five of us lived on that tinned food or netted the rice for about two months after that. Almost

07:00 the time before we left Singapore to go up to Burma, we were still using the tin stuff that we carried out there.

You were able to hang onto that in Changi?

We rationed it out, only to ourselves, we were terribly selfish, and we had tins and tins of it.

You weren't searched?

No not at that stage, they just lined us up and marched

07:30 us between the local population, feeling sorry for us or some of them feeling glad to see us in that situation, practically unguarded at all, where could we go, what could we do? They allowed us around the troops two or three ambulance vehicles with the march and any of them

08:00 that couldn't keep it up, we had quite a few First World War diggers still in the AIF and a lot of them couldn't take it. The ambulance was doing a shuttle to wherever they could pick people up and take them out to the camp and come back and get anymore, the Japs allowed that. The Japs weren't very vindictive at that stage. I think they were relieved it was over for a while, any men that had been fighting.

08:30 You're glad for a break no matter, probably the victors gladder than the vanquished, but it was a great relief that the guns had stopped, it was quiet and you could get a decent sleep and I think they were in that state, thankful to us too. I believe in every army the front line fellow is a different breed to behind the lines,

09:00 I believe the Germans are the same. A better understanding fellow, he's not the vindictive one, the little pip-squeak well back behind and that happened in the Japanese Army too. I think it did anyhow. It was just a long slow grind; it took almost twelve hours to get there, twenty-three miles. The average soldier can march

09:30 three miles an hour and do it in fifty miles and have ten minutes break, it took twelve hours to do, not two miles an hour.

You were loaded up with liquor and food though?

We hung onto that, I don't know why, later on you would have given anything for a bit of steak, you would have given all

10:00 the liquor you had for a bit of steak.

What happened in the first few days or the first couple of weeks in Changi, what were you doing?

It was like an anticlimax, nothing really happened, you were just lying around. These barracks were very nice, I think one of the highland Britains [regiments] had it before we moved in. They were three storeys high,

10:30 all the internal stuff had been stripped and I don't know where it went, and it was just a concrete floor. Some might have had a blanket but most of us didn't, and the concrete floor after the first couple of days when your sleep caught up, it's hard. The hygiene became the first problem, no proper facilities there. They had to get in and build some latrines,

11:00 because there was a big risk of disease. The barracks had been bombed so they were damaged, so water wasn't available so there might have been one tap somewhere that might of worked, so the first week was trying to make the place habitable. The Japs we never saw, they didn't come in amongst us at that stage. They might have been outside forming

11:30 a perimeter, but they didn't come into the barrack area. During those first three months, and since I didn't go onto a working party into Singapore, the Japs I came across, I think this was about the second or third week after the surrender, we were detailed to go down to the beach just near Changi as a

12:00 burial party. We got down there and found that the Jap military police had lined up all the anti-Jap sympathizers their underground had told them about in Singapore, some of them were Chinese professional men, some were merchants who were definitely Chinese-pro

12:30 anti-Japanese. They had machine-gunned them on the beach forty-eight hours before we got there and they were laying and some floating in the water, some were at advance stages of decomposing. There were two Japanese guards there; they didn't make themselves officious but just telling us where to dig a mass grave to bury them in. They were the only Japs

13:00 that I saw until we moved up to Burma.

How did you manage to avoid going out on working parties prior to that?

At that stage, it wasn't compulsory, you were volunteering. Some were straight out stubborn and didn't want to work for the Japs. Other were thinking that there might be good pickings here and there were good pickings, as I told you, there was one got drunk in the brewery

13:30 and places like that. They were often working on the wharves and there was always a great opportunity to steal food because we were starting to get hungry then. They would just steal food and things like that. Three of us of the six of the group hung out against that and we just detailed when the Japanese told the

14:00 prison commander that they had to get X number of bodies to go north, they didn't tell us Burma but that's where we were going. Looking back now and this is terribly callous, those Chinese bodies that we were burying, some of them had watches on, they had been in the water and they had jewellery. There were Japanese guards there and I suppose a sense of

14:30 respect for the dead, we never touched that jewellery. You would have done it twelve months later, you would of taken it to flog it for food, and it just shows how your values alter.

Why is that story callous, that you didn't pick off the dead to start with?

You respect the dead no matter what they are but I would say twelve months we would have been pinching their

15:00 watches. It wouldn't have helped them but it might have helped us. That's how the sort of degraded prison life gets you; you are down to the basics then.

It's a matter of necessity, survival?

When you are not undernourished, it would take something for you to remove something off a dead body, you would be a bit callous I would think.

15:30 **I've heard a few stories about how cruel the Japanese were against the local Chinese at this stage, and stories of bodies all over the place on the way to Changi. Were you seeing anything of that?**

I can't remember seeing any on the way to Changi, there may have been but I can't speculate on that, these were all Chinese that had been rounded up

16:00 and machine gunned. How they came to do it that way and not make their prisoners dig the mass grave first and then shoot them like the Germans did, I don't know. To me it was a comparatively unintelligent way for the Japanese to kill people. To just take them down to the water and shoot them and hope that the tide would take them away.

16:30 The tide did possibly take some away but I don't know how many there were in the first place.

You said you were supplementing the food that they were giving you with the rations you had kind of flogged. What were the Japanese offering you in those first few months at Changi?

The Japanese supplied us with rice at the raw stage and our own cooks

17:00 had to prepare it. To be quite honest, they were completely out of their depth handling rice, first of all they were given no cooking equipment to handle the rice. They were given a little bit of vegetable and a little bit of meat. They were

17:30 scouting around the barrack area and finding old things like forty-four gallon drums and cutting them in half to make them into a cooking pot. The proper way of cooking rice, which we found out later from the natives, is to use something like a wok,

18:00 that's how they eventually found was the only way to cook rice was in a wok. In those early days the rice use to come out like, it's hard to describe, horrible compressed thing that looked like warm ice cream but hard.

18:30 Funny as it sounds now, practically all the regular cooks were all chucked out and laymen were sent in to start to cook until the end. To the best of my knowledge within the group I was in, there was no army cooks allowed in the kitchen, it was cooked by ordinary people. Sergeants were cooking

19:00 and they were all fed out of the one source. The officers were with us, there was no mess as such in those days, you lined up and just got a plonk of rice, and you might get a little bit of grass which could have been Chinese cabbage. Gradually we got more hungry and more hungry, gradually the talk of

19:30 sexual matters slipped out of your vocabulary and was replaced by, "What are you going to do when you got home?" and "Are you going to have your first meal at this restaurant or that restaurant?". I say at the end of the day 'sexual conversation' was non-existent, you weren't interested, you were only

interested in food. You would tell these fantastic stories to each other,

20:00 the first music that you are going to listen too, it was extravagant. I think when the time came I don't think any of us ate any of it.

I bet. Given your experience in Changi for those three months I'm just curious to know what you thought if you saw any of the series of Changi,

20:30 **the drama series on the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] of Changi?**

No, I didn't see that series, so I cant talk. Those first three months Australian command did try to keep us occupied. People tend to get vicious when they have nothing to do, so they

21:00 use to overlay the discipline a bit I think. They started a university I called it, they would get fellows who knew a lot about this subject and that subject and they would give talks. We'd have talks on steer raising, poultry farming, and making toys for kids, something to keep us occupied

21:30 because we had no such duties. The gardens hadn't started then in those first three months. They organised concert parties to try and entertain, anything to keep us occupied to realise 'empty minds get into trouble'.

22:00 **Did that extend to physical exercise?**

We use to have PE [physical education], we couldn't have routine marches although we were confined in a small area, and it was quite an extensive area where they had it. It's very hard to say; we never knew quite what our boundaries were because in the barracks we could walk

22:30 about ten minutes and we'd come to the big much-spoken-about heavy guns in Singapore that was going to keep all the enemy away. You have heard of them, they wouldn't face this way they wouldn't face that they. They were in our area, so we had quite a big area to move about freely. I wasn't really aware of any fences around us, but there must have been a Japanese patrol somewhere but they didn't

23:00 come and impose in the inner area. They found some half-bombed out old trucks and admittedly they couldn't get them to go, but they use to strip them down to a chassis. They'd do anything to keep themselves busy,

23:30 which was a good thing.

So as prisoners there was a fair amount of freedom?

There was at that stage. About this film, it covered Changi when they were in Changi jail, but when we left to go north in A Force, the Changi

24:00 jail was still holding civilians and the prisoners hadn't been moved into it, so I don't know anything about Changi jail. I saw it in the early 1990s, this was when we got back, but I don't know anything else about being in jail. I think that series wrapped around that, that jail time, it doesn't wrap around when they were out in the barracks.

24:30 **Can you tell us about the formation, about A Force?**

The Japs called the prison command that they wanted X number of bodies to be moved to a good comfortable camp where there was plenty of food blah, blah, blah. The prisoners only had to bring their personal belongings

25:00 and they would get everything else at the other end. This was how they gilded the lily; we were going to work up on the railway line. So the different sections of the Australian Army filled their quota of who was to go and that was it.

Was it your decision to join part of A Force?

No, you were told that you were on that party,

25:30 there was no volunteering. The ones that went earlier to work in Singapore volunteered but once they started these forces on the railway lines. It went through A, B, C, and D and up to F the different forces and that was the name that was given to the body that moved at that time to that destination. They all didn't go to Burma or Thailand; some of them went to Borneo

26:00 and some went to Java, Sumatra one of the force numbers. A was the first one away from Singapore proper and it ended up at Burma.

Did any of you believed what the Japanese were saying about the meals?

Yes and no, you get to a stage if you think it's going to be good, you believe it.

26:30 No, I don't think we were completely convinced but we thought that it might have been better. The Japanese had control of a lot of the rice growing areas where the food must be plentiful. It must be

pretty hard for them to keep the provisions up to the civilian population in Singapore and the prisoners, so I thought they were

27:00 dispersing their prisoners to different places to where the food was. Undoubtedly, Burma had ample food and Thailand had ample food in their rice outfits. I think the Japs there could get enough rice to supply their own forces and to feed their prisoners and in turn eat, so get them away from Singapore. They kept a certain force in Singapore

27:30 as labourers on the wharf and eating their head off in their mind and doing nothing in return, to make them work, I think that was what was going on.

Can you tell us about that trek up there and the reality of Burma?

28:00 They put us onto what we thought was one of our own troop ships, a rust bucket and went to Medan and in Sumatra we picked up some Indonesia and Dutch troops and up and calling into one of three ports along the coast. I think Victoria Point, Mergui and Tavoy then up to Moulmein and then down to the railway line.

28:30 There's not much to tell you, only we had some British prisoners from the [HMS] Prince of Wales or the [HMS] Repulse one of those two ships in the China Sea with us. There was wild talk about how we would take over a ship and steam away to India and escape,

29:00 but it was just a kettle in the sky because in the distance was a Japanese destroyer, it was just wild talk.

It would keep your spirits up though?

As a prisoner you're easy meat for rumours, you get to a stage where you half believe a lot of things.

29:30 **Can you talk about the reality of the work setting in and what you were actually doing on a day-to-day basis, perhaps with your first few days?**

30:00 They moved us down from Moulmein to a place which was to be the turning point of the line from Siam or the start of the line to Siam whichever way you look at it. The British always had a line from Moulmein down to Tavoy

30:30 along the Indian Ocean coast. This road we were to tap into that and turn east and go towards Bangkok and that then gave you the direct route so that they could bring their troop and supply ships to Bangkok and ship it right through up the front in India which they certain were going to win.

31:00 They took us out I think eighteen kilos [kilometres] because the camp was called 'the eighteen kilo camp', where the first bedding of the railway line had been done by the natives, they had recruited all over South East Asia. They had apparently offered them fantastic returns and this and that but they were just another form of the slave labour too,

31:30 so we had to extend it from there on. The Japanese equipped us with a bamboo pole, a rice bag with ropes on each corner and a chunkle, which is what we call a hoe now. You were given a quota of a cubic metre per man per day, to be dug out beside

32:00 the railway bed and carry it either up if it was an elevated bed lay it out where there was a flat bed and after that had subsided it would take the railway line proper. I think I mentioned earlier, some of our stupid Australians instead of doing their work quota last all day, did it a bit more quickly thinking they would get back to camp and have a bit of free time. Carrying out the conclusion, the Japanese thought that us buggers could do more, so the quota was built up to a metre and a half per man per day. They still didn't wake up to the fact that they were still playing into the Jap's hands until

33:00 they gave you two metres a day which is a lot of soil, two cubic metres to be carried sometimes up embankments ten or twelve feet high with one man holding the front of the bamboo sticks and the other at the back and the soil was all in the rice bags. If there had been a bit of rain, it was terrible slippery and you couldn't get up, you would be like a frog on

33:30 a greasy pole, you'd go up two and go back one. Then two cubic metres became quite an ordeal. Digressing for a minute, when we got to this Sambasi, the Japanese divided us up into groups of fifty depending upon rank, even the officers

34:00 that came with us were in groups of fifty. The senior WOs [Warrant Officers] were in a group of fifty, the junior WOs were in groups of fifty, the non commissioned officers were in a group of fifty and finally the ordinary soldiers were in a group of fifty and that was called a kumi. When an Australian officer was given in charge each kumi, fifty men and they worked

34:30 as a group. As I said, they might be carting the soil up to build the railway bedding, or the next day you might be drafted to bridge building, where you had to help them build these bridges over little creeks, or do other engineering jobs. Hauling timber, which was used for the bridge structure. They didn't always leave you on the same job,

35:00 you might be doing bridge building for a week and then suddenly you would revert back to carrying dirt

and somebody else would get the bridge job. The Japs were quite inventive people; they built these bridges because they had plenty of experience in China I think. There wasn't one bolt in them; they had used what we would call a big staple, a U shaped

35:30 bit of mild steel sharp at one end and driven in. It is remarkable what they would hold two blocks together, it would hold a beam onto a post, and a pile and then they built gantries for their piledrivers to drive the piles into the creeks. They had elephants there before we arrived. I think the elephants were more cunning than the prisoners.

36:00 The elephants use to grunt like mad when you pulled the rope. The idea was you would pull the rope and let it go and the pile driving a big weight. They made us work with the elephants and the elephants would pull it up and we would hold it until they got the elephant out of the road and let it go into the pile. The elephants didn't like that either, so eventually we got the job of pile driving.

36:30 That went on until they got far enough ahead so that they could start to lay the track. Apparently they were ripping up the track, from railway lines in Java and the Dutch East Indies, shipping up to Burma and then carting it out and it would reach us where we had to lay it then. You would have to lay the sleepers

37:00 then you'd have to lay the steel track. Drive the little things in to hold the railway line to the sleeper and there hangs a story too. As the line progressed, the Japs got a little bit mechanized. They somehow or another acquired a petrol-driven power drill to which they fixed a

37:30 big auger to drill the holes for the pegs to hold the railway line. Of course, they left it under the control of the prisoners to operate. The prisoner went along to look for a bigger sized auger, drill a bigger hole and come along with the pin and just tap it, instead of driving it through the timber.

38:00 That was very funny at the time but later on when the locomotives started to come over it the line used to spread and we ran the risk of get yourself killed if you happened to be on when the track was pulling. They got away with it for a long time. Other people had to lay the ballast to hold the sleepers in place. It went on that

38:30 stage nine days out of ten, on the tenth day you rested, they improved on the seventh day Christianship. I think from reading reports that happened on the Siamese side, we weren't under the pressure of the Burmese side because I think there was always a delay in

39:00 getting the steel around via Singapore up to Burma. In fact, we weren't laying as much line as quickly as the equivalent number of men who were in Siam, which didn't have to drag everything all that distance. The pressure wasn't as strong until getting into the middle of 1943, then the big high commander

39:30 said to hurry up and then they started to put the pressure on, the Japs, and they abolished the tenth day so there was no time off. No matter how many were sick on sick parade, the doctors or the camp commandant had to send out the required number of workers. The rains came and didn't it rain. What you did today,

40:00 you went back the next day and the rain had washed it all away. The further you got up towards the mountains, what they called the Three Pagoda Pass, the more distant you got from the supply area where our food was coming from, the rice and all of that, and the food would never get through and when it did get through it was soaking. The bridge had been washed away and the trucks couldn't get through so that's when the pressure

40:30 was turned on, and that's when cholera hit and all the time dysentery was hanging around. Cholera really hit. Intermingled with us were camps where there were Asian workers were billeted.

Tape 7

00:30 **You were just talking to Chris [interviewer] before about cholera coming in after the rains, can you tell us what the first symptoms of cholera are so the men could look out for it?**

The rains had come and your living conditions were water and slush underneath you. We were housed in bamboo long huts,

01:00 which were bamboo supports which were raised above the ground about eighteen inches with a platform of bamboo again and a grass roof, it was palm leaves knitted in to make a thatched roof.

01:30 The water used to come right through under these platforms. They moved us into this camp, which had not long been vacated by these Asian coolies who had been working on the line too. Their hygiene was nothing like the white man's one, I must pay great respect to our doctors and senior officers for the high

02:00 hygiene they tried to impose in these conditions. Everybody had dysentery but cholera seemed to be a step further until you not only passed mucus, your internal body must have been breaking down, with blood and everything, and you wasted away and finally you went into a state

02:30 of semi-consciousness and just passed out. It was transferred I think in food and or person hygiene. Our medical people demanded, they used to keep at it. Any mess time you had to immerse your eating utensils in boiling water

03:00 for a minute to sterilize it, they knew to do that because that's why it spread. The Japanese were equally concerned about it as we were, because there was the risk that it would spread to them after quite a few deaths in Burma that I learnt later which was nothing like what

03:30 happened in Siam or in Thailand. Their concern started taking stool tests in groups of three people, how they got three onto one spatula I don't know but they did. They sent them to some Japanese laboratory somewhere and if it came back negative

04:00 those three were isolated to see whether it was going to develop in anyone of them. If it came back OK, you didn't have it but it didn't always work that way. There is no drug supplied by the Japs to counter it, your body just had to fight it itself, and if you came through, OK, but if you didn't you found yourself

04:30 in a little plot in Burma. It died off after the wet, or it appeared to anyway. That supported the theory that it could have been waterborne too. It picked up the infection from the infected faeces and then passed into your water supply, but it passed off. After the railway line, I didn't hear of any incidences of cholera

05:00 in any other prison camps, it might have been but I don't know, but I never heard of it.

At Thanbyuzayat, was that when you and your mates were split up by the Japanese?

That was when they divided us into the groups of fifty.

You said that two of your mates didn't make it through to the end of the war?

They weren't necessarily with us, that was of the group

05:30 of six, only two didn't not survive prison life. If I incorrectly gave you the impression that they were at the railway line with me, they had earlier during the piece gone a different way.

Thank you for clarifying that. Those two mates of yours that died, did they die from cholera?

Yes, but

06:00 they didn't get into A force, they came up to the railway line from the Siamese end by Thailand. If I keep saying Siam, I mean Siam; it was Siam at that stage.

But now it's Thailand?

If I switch, it was Siam in those days.

That's alright, because I also understand that Malaya is Malaysia.

The King and I [musical and film],

06:30 was Siam. If it was made today, it would be 'The King of Thailand'.

Did you see the revamped one with Jodie Foster?

Yes.

Do you think that was better than the original?

No, I liked Yul Brynner [actor who played the King of Siam]; he was made for it and it was made for him.

I agree. On that note did you happen to see The Bridge over the River Kwai with Alex Guinness?

I saw the film.

I know you weren't there but

07:00 **do you think that was an accurate description of the Japanese?**

Weren't you there when I said I served under a British officer?

Yes.

He was the real one. There was nothing factual about it at all. It was a figment of their imagination. There was a bridge and it was built by the help of prison labour, but no it was entertaining, it was completely far fetched, it was good entertainment.

07:30 **Perhaps you may of thought the same about Changi had you seen it?**

Weren't you listening?

Yes I was listening.

I think that was based on the prison but I was never in the prison, I was in the barracks.

You said on the tenth day you rested, which is not the biblical way because that's the seventh day, but on the tenth day you rested and this is

08:00 **before the pressure came on?**

Before the pressure started.

Can you tell us what rest meant?

You didn't go to work.

Did you just sit in the camp?

You did cleanup jobs, you cleaned up your habitation, I don't know whether we organised any sport because there was no sport to organise. I think straight-out rested, or washed any clothes that we might have had but none of us had much, or

08:30 attempted to wash them because we had no soap at that stage. Later on, when they started to pay us five cents a day or whatever it was, we were able to buy soap through the sponsored canteen on the camp but on the railway line there was no such thing as that. Just straight-out rest. Sometimes there might be an impromptu

09:00 concert, not planned, but singing or something like that.

Did you have any idea that the work that you'd be doing at Thanbyuzayat

09:30 **would be such a long and arduous job?**

No I don't think we had any appreciation of the length of the railway line and at what rate and speed that it was going through. It was a case of living the day thereof and hope that you'd see it to the next day. We had no idea what was the planned finishing date or anything like that,

10:00 we just did it, and hoped for the best.

I had heard before that the bigger kind of bushmen, Australian men were the ones that got sick and died before the skinny blokes?

That might be a generalization; the big man has more to lose hasn't he? For a big

10:30 man, he's got to lose more body fat or more muscle than the slim man who was to lose the same amount he wouldn't cast a shadow. Yes and no, I can't generalize on that and say that it was. I think the survival was all up here. If your

11:00 mind could control your living, the bloke who was determined to live he would come through more than the bloke who chucked in the bundle, but that happens everywhere in life.

I've heard of books from the Jewish survivors that it was hope

11:30 **that kept the ones alive and willpower?**

That was what I was trying to get at, willpower.

It was the same kind of incarceration using hope and faith?

Hope. I have witnessed a few men who willed themselves to die and they died. One in particular, he had cerebral malaria.

12:00 There are three types of malaria, TB benign malaria, malignant malaria and finally cerebral malaria, that is when the malarial infection goes to the brain. This poor fellow had what transpired later

12:30 and what they believed was cerebral malaria and he just will himself to die and he died, quickly like that. I could imagine there would be another person in the prison camp that I didn't know who also had cerebral malaria and said, "It's not going to beat me" and is probably at home now looking at his grandchildren, that's what I'm trying to get to you.

I understand, I think it part of the

13:00 **human condition really isn't it?**

Yes.

The half-glass theory, half-empty or half-full.

Yes.

It was during this time that you developed the ulcer, is that correct?

No, that was when the railway line had finished.

That was linked together in August 1943?

I think that's right, I stand corrected whether the timing, in the second half of 1943,

13:30 you've got to remember that was fifty years ago. Incidentally our little kumi by just happened to be in the joining up ceremony where the two lines came in and linked and they were bolted together. It was recorded on Japanese newsreel, which I haven't seen it since.

14:00 Its somewhere if the Americans grabbed all the Japanese things and I appear there, but I was with one of the groups that actually joined the railway line and linked it and it had all the Japanese bigwigs there. It was after that, when they realised that they didn't need all the workers, that I picked up the ulcer and then afterwards we were moved into Siam,

14:30 the Japs retaining only a basic force just to maintain the railway line. They then had plans, as they did later, shipping them to Japan to be menial workers in mines, that's where most of the prisoners ended up.

When you were talking about the blokes who found the bigger holes to make,

15:00 **was there a great concern that you'd be sabotaging?**

It was conscious sabotage and I'd, wouldn't say fifty-fifty being terribly selfish, but I think sixty percent to save you a lot of hard work and forty percent sabotage but there was a conscious sabotage by others.

15:30 The jungle area there along the railway had termites that were pretty plentiful, which is natures way of disposing of the rubbish, as the tree feel it rotted and the termite turned it into soil and the cycle started again. They'd get termites in a tin or something

16:00 and when they were building the bridge they'd put the termites in amongst the bridge bearers, hoping that the termites worked quickly enough for the bridge to fall down before the war was over, that might be exaggerating but conscious purpose to get rid of the bridge.

Did you ever travel on the railway?

Yes. Sometimes you were taken up to the head of the line if you can,

16:30 situated some kilometres back along the line. To get a full day's work out of you they'd carry you. They weren't proper carriages, they had bogies linked together with a railway line and that made up a platform. It might only be two railway lines on the bogies and you'd balance on that and that would take you up. Or in the evening to bring the bogies back for the morning,

17:00 you might get a ride again. You didn't always have to walk to and from work. Sometimes you'd get a lift and sometimes when they were taking a load of sleepers up, you'd get a ride up there, up to the head of the railway laying gang. Perhaps in the evening, there might be one going back empty so they'd give you a ride back but other times you walked. Those big railway

17:30 crowbars they had. To get these bolts that held the railway line onto the wooden sleeper to extract them, when they are properly driven they are terribly hard to move. They have a very big type of crowbar; they must have weighed about twenty pounds

18:00 and they'd try and get it under the edge of the pin to lift them out, if you had to alter anything. When you were walking back after working all day, those crowbars weighed about twenty pound but felt like a ton, gee they were heavy, or they got heavy.

18:30 **How much did you weigh at the beginning of enlistment at service and when you came out?**

I don't know.

Had you lost a lot of weight?

You had no way of weighing yourself, we didn't have any scales.

Did you have a medical before you went in?

Yes but that is somewhere in the army records, I couldn't tell you what it was. I know I was a very slight little kid,

19:00 guessing I wouldn't of weighed no more than nine half to ten stone. When I came home from the war, I was in good condition. After the railway line finished and after I had recovered in the hospital in Kanchanaburi

19:30 and after I hung around the camp while doing different jobs and eventually went down to Bangkok and up to Ubon, that's the history I gave you earlier. I think I was in pretty good health then, and most of us were. When we got up to the east of Ubon, the war was in it's last stages and we were in a food basket with plenty of food, the Japs couldn't get the food out because

20:00 the railway line was closed because the bridge was blown out. We didn't fare too badly, so I think I came home a shock to everybody, they were probably expecting to see a couple of ghosts. I think I told you earlier, the day after the war was officially over an American came in. About a

20:30 fortnight after, the British sent in a medical team, there were a few medical orderlies, a doctor. Apart from the Dutch, the bulk of the people in the camp were British. They came in and they told us later they got the shock of their lives. They were told that they were coming in

21:00 to see a group of skeletons all half-mad, I'm not joking, and they had to be treated very carefully and nursed back to health. They were only in the camp twenty-four hours and they realised we were all healthy. The prisoners took on this group with a game of mock football and beat them and beat them at basketball,

21:30 the ones who were regular medical corps people. So when I got back to Australia my condition was quite good and I shocked the people back in Australia, but others didn't of course.

What was your experience with the Japanese brutality along the line there during the railways?

Their behaviour; within their own organisation, the Japanese Army,

22:00 the brutality was ingrained in every starter and that extended to us.

Were you personally involved in any beatings?

A few instances when I got on the wrong end of their spite.

22:30 Once I upset a Japanese guard for some reason or another out at the railway line and he was standing on a railway bogie about this far above me and he left fly with his rifle butt and he got me in my back. That gave me trouble until after we got back to Australia and it has only been in latter years that that has cleared up.

23:00 For minor things you'd get into trouble, but I never had the full treatment by the Japs in the state of running berserk, as some of them did. They were terribly excitable and they could become excited beyond reason, the Japs. They'd work themselves up to such a state

23:30 that they would let fly with anything, if they had an axe or any metal thing and he would let it fly and if you were in his way you would get it. I never did anything that was ever detected by them to give them a reason to pick on me, by that I mean, any of the people who were working on the radio were ever caught, they were taken in by the military police, that's the Kempetai,

24:00 and they were subjected to extreme torture. To a degree perhaps I played it cool and cunning, comparatively minor things now, no I never got belted up. I stole food like the rest but luckily I was never caught.

Were you aware of any executions in the camps at all?

No executions as such. Along the railway line, there was

24:30 one incident that could of turned nasty, which all the prisoners were involved in. There was an English officer interpreter for the Japanese, there was an incident where one of our sergeants

25:00 was taken or forced away from the working section of the railway line into the jungle. It's believed the guard was about to commit sodomy, or did commit it but he executed the sergeant, a little man. When it got back

25:30 to the camp, I don't know how it came about but somebody had challenged the Japs about this incident, and of course they flew into a flurry about it and they started belting up this interpreter in front of us on parade this time. It was almost a spontaneous reaction from the prisoners, they started

26:00 to move forward aggressively, foolishly to have taken on the Japs, seeing what he was doing to the sergeant. But for the cool direction of Colonel Anderson who I haven't mentioned before stopped it in its path, that could have been a very, very nasty incident and I think a lot of us would never of survived it, the Japs had guns. I never witnessed anything.

26:30 But when the war was over, this American officer that came into the camp, this story that I'm about to repeat was repeated a couple of times by some other officers. He came into the camp, "Are there any of these guards who you feel you want to have punished for their behaviour in

27:00 your prison life?" He said, "If not done now, it will probably be dragged through the courts and they might not do it", this is in fact what they said to us. I know for a fact that one particular American

officer took the ones that were so accused by the prisoners away and executed them outside. Apart from

27:30 that no, does that answer the question?

Yes, thank you. Something we haven't talked about is the military police?

I had nothing to do with them but it would have been hell if I had of. The Kempetai was the Japanese equivalent to the Gestapo.

OK.

28:00 Knowing the history of the Gestapo, you know more or less what I could know, I believe happened with the Kempetai, such ruthless thugs you might were responsible. If the Japanese guards had something that they couldn't control or that it was beyond them, they'd hand

28:30 you over to the Kempetai and very few of them rarely survived it. This is moving away from the railway line, but they had a big base in Singapore, Outtrim Road, you might come across that from others, that was their hellhole for the Kempetai. If anybody got into their hands there,

29:00 they would be lucky to come out. Personally I didn't associate with them fortunately.

The time that you were a POW did you see any women or children?

Yes, the natives and then in Bangkok, we saw white women and children. The Vichy French, when we were in Bangkok on working parties, the Japs

29:30 after France fell the French colonial leader in Indochina swung to Vichy French which was virtually pro-German and the Japanese I think being their allies didn't

30:00 interfere with them, so we use to see French women and children and the natives. In one camp we were at, we had no water supply and the water had to be brought from a neighbouring camp, which joined our camp. We had to take across a forty-four gallon drum on little trolleys,

30:30 go-cart things to get water. It transpired that was a 'happy girl' or the Japanese Army brothel, and they were Chinese or Korean lightly coloured people, but oriental and they were the only other women we saw. They were very good to us

31:00 as far as they could, sneaking us food when we got the water filled up, they'd somehow sneak over quietly and put it in under a false bottom in the water tank and we'd get it back into the camp that way, and apart from the natives. I never worked in Saigon

31:30 during the prison days, but some of the lads that ended up there working on the wharves when there was a German U-boat [submarine] tied up there. While there was no white women or white children there, they were all white men naturally. One report that came to me was that the Japs were ill-treating a prisoner on the wharf.

32:00 The German sailors from the U-boat intervened to protect the prisoner, whether that's a bit of a romantic talk or whether the Germans did do it. I could imagine Germans doing it, I think, in respect because they didn't like the Japs even though they were allies. No white women.

32:30 There were white women in Singapore; I think they were in the jail before it was handed over to the prisoners of war.

They weren't with you in any camps?

No.

Australian or British women?

No, nor our nurses.

It must have been nice when you went back to Australia and saw some nice women?

We saw some women before them, in Singapore.

33:00 It was full of Red Cross workers, young girls when we came there on our way home.

After the war was declared over?

Yes, there were plenty of white women around then and having a great time.

It would have been nice to see them I'm sure. You mentioned earlier today about the wounded Japanese coming in off the trains from India and that the Australian blokes were giving them some water?

33:30 Yes.

What fighting was going on there?

A few thousand miles north of where the railway line was, the Japanese Army was trying to invade eastern India and they were having great success.

34:00 In late 1942 and early 1943, the Japanese Army drove well into eastern India and weren't that far from Calcutta until the British rallied their forces and Lord Louis Mountbatten was named supreme commander and he had a general who later became a Governor-General of Australia, Slim,

34:30 have you heard of General Bill Slim? [Field Marshal Sir William Slim, then Commander 14th Army]

Yes.

He was a governor general about twenty or thirty years ago but gradually push-started where the British pushed back and the time I was talking about, they were fighting around Rangoon, have you heard of Rangoon?

Yes.

They recovered all that territory and we were lead to believe and I don't know if it is fact or not, but he would continue

35:00 coming eastward across the top of Siam to Indochina, this is General Slim and his army, to reach the China Sea and all of the south where a lot of the Japanese forces were still tied up, would have been neutralized and then they could of gone into Japan. That was the theory so I've been told. You would have to ask

35:30 some general about that.

Can you hook me up? This may be a bit out of chronological order here but you mentioned the man who was killed two feet away from you?

He lost both of his bottoms.

The buttocks, he wasn't killed?

He survived.

That was from one of the raids?

That was one of the RAF [Royal Air Force] raids.

In Thailand?

Yes

36:00 at a camp called Nong Pladuk which I think I explained beside the railway line which was where the incident with the Japanese was, which we have tried to get a reason why the British would have chosen it as a target, I don't know why.

Through your reading and your own interests have you read any books

36:30 **that may explain why the RAF was strafing?**

No. I did strike in later years an Australian who was serving with the RAF over there and his excuse was, "We never had any information of where your prison camps were, the Japanese never marked them." I can't swallow that with what I heard later. I think I told you about the American who came

37:00 into our camp when the war had finished. Did I tell you that he told us that one of his fellows was in the Siamese Air Force Headquarters a couple of hundred yards from the Japanese in Bangkok?

No you didn't tell us that part?

He told us that there were American agents that were scattered all

37:30 through there, so you can't tell me if there were American agents scattered all through there that they didn't know where the prison camps were, so I don't think you can believe it.

This was the time when the work party was on top of the train?

Yes.

Were you waving?

The report that I got was they were going back to camp after a day's work, it wasn't a train as such it was these two bogies that they put together

38:00 and they would get a ride instead of walking like we used to do.

Right. Then you went onto Bangkok?

Yes.

When were you in Bangkok? That would have been 1944?

That was late 1944.

This might sound like a trivial question but were you

38:30 **given any special treatment on Christmas Day?**

Along the railway line, I seem to remember, or was it down at this camp Kanchanaburi, they had a bit of a celebration I cant remember it in 1944. There may have been something but no great feasting at all like that.

39:00 **No turkey with trimmings?**

No turkey with trimmings.

This is a personal question I wanted to ask you, not talking about sex but talking about food, what did you eat when you got back to your family?

We were conditioned back earlier in the piece before the war had finished because we had been reasonably well fed.

By the dropping?

Reasonably

39:30 fed and then after the war finished, they had the biscuit bombers come over and drop food. Then gradually we were back on normal Australian Army rations then, from Bangkok to Singapore, home on a ship, normal rations.

What about in Australia you didn't go and visit The Black Stump [restaurant] and have a big steak?

No I don't think so,

40:00 I think food had lost it's importance in our lives then, once you got it and ate it, it's not so important, its when you haven't got it, that's when its important, even with money.

It's like anything.

Tape 8

00:40 **Allan, I wanted to ask you if as prisoners the Australians mixed very much with the other prisoners, the Brits, the Americans?**

Well you were mixed up and generally you hung with

01:00 your own, but we mixed a little bit with English. I mixed a little bit with two or three Indonesian-Dutch white men, actually they weren't Indonesian they were South African Dutch that happened to be in the Indonesian Army. In our last camp, we had four Yanks with us, Americans. So to a degree

01:30 they were integrated with us. Generally you stuck to your own race, your own mob sort of business. In the last six to eight months of the war the crowd I was with, the number was very small of Australians we were in the minority. So you couldn't help being in close association with Dutch, and or British.

02:00 **Did the different forces at a prisoner level operate differently? For example, you mentioned the Australians tried to be disciplined with hygiene.**

From my observation, the Indonesian coloured Dutch troops' standard of hygiene was questionable; they could have been responsible for a lot of those.

02:30 There weren't enough Yanks to make an opinion about it and I think the British were a little bit more sloppy with their hygiene too. That's the only way I can answer that. The Yanks seem to really take to the Australians easier than the Poms did.

03:00 The six Yanks that we had they were all Texans, Bush's mob, they were in what they call the equivalent of our militia, the National Guard, and soon as war broke out they were called up and shipped to Australia and spent Christmas Day 1941 in Ascot Racecourse,

03:30 which had then been turned into a camp. They were only there a fortnight and shipped off to Java and captured in Java. Now, reason defies me why such a small regiment, they were artillery troops, were sent from America at that stage then sent into a hopeless situation like Java, I don't know. They had some characters amongst them.

04:00 They had an American doctor he had a broad way of speaking, a bit like the people from the Deep

South, and up on the railway line he was taking the sick parade one day and this lad came in, one of our mob who was pretty bad with malaria, and he said, “Lad that’d be good if you could take some quinine,

04:30 lad” and the doctor’s assistant said, “Doc. We haven’t got any quinine”. “It’d be wonderful if we had, ha, ha, ha,” he was quite a character. I don’t know what became of him. While I’m still on these Yanks, one was a sergeant, there was two I remember privates, one lad

05:00 was very dark-skinned he claimed he was of Indian decent and he said, “My uncle was Holy Smoke ha, ha, ha”. Yes we did get friendly with them, some of them.

Was mateship something that became very important?

05:30 Yes it did. It’s been played up in all the books you’ll read about prison life, attributing our lower death toll in prison life compared with other forces. It seemed a fact that everybody you had a mate by that, it mightn’t have been friendly before but gravitated towards each other, and in times of

06:00 distress one helped the other and the reverse situation, the other reciprocated. Of those six in that photograph for the last two or three of the war, neither of those was my mate, we were separated and I picked up with another bombardier with whom I continued a lifelong friendship until he died, in the last

06:30 two or three years. He was a man 10 years older than me too. He sort of took me under his arm as a kid. Everybody had somebody.

Do you think it was true then that it was because of the mateship that helped the Aussie death toll?

I think it was. Yes. The Pommies seemed to be terribly cold-hearted at times, some of the Poms.

07:00 If you both came from Blackpool it’d be alright, but if you came from proper Scotland you didn’t get friendly with a chap from London type of thing. Yet the Australian interstate rivalry disappeared. They were there in pre-prison days, New South Wales seemed to hate each other, not so much hate each other but

07:30 there was a real grudge in any organised football or cricket match between the Victorians and the New South Wales, but the Queenslanders and the South Australians seem to not care, intermingled more freely. But in the prison camp, you’re all Australians.

08:00 **Even under such dire circumstances, the English would still not mix or lend a hand to each other?**

Perhaps I’m exaggerating. But the class system seemed to be stronger in the British; I don’t think we have a class system in Australia. But the Eton boy who was the officer seemed to be condescending talking to Joe from the London docks, I think a London

08:30 dock lad felt an inferiority complex to the Eton [prestigious school] boy. Perhaps it was my imagination. That is the only way I can explain it, why they didn’t bond, whereas Australian if you came from Western Australia or Tasmania, if circumstance threw you together, you both happily bunked in together. That’s my explanation for that.

09:00 **You mentioned Colonel Anderson in high esteem. Can you tell us what it was in him that…?**

How am I going to take this because I might be up for libel later? Colonel Anderson is dead, the other name, perhaps I better not say it.

You can talk about the events but not mention names.

09:30 Different senior officers of the Australian Army that I came in to contact with had different approaches to the way of handling the Jap. Colonel Anderson was undoubtedly a brave man, a VC [Victoria Cross] winner, but a lot of us, I one of them, not doubting

10:00 his courage, were inclined to feel that he was too ready to come half-way to meet the Japs in his desire to do the best he could for his prisoners. Whereas another gentleman, Colonel Williams, fought them all the way to the point, you’d never give an inch, you’d never

10:30 lower his anti-Japanese feeling. Well I felt that he was doing a better job as an Australian soldier in that situation than Colonel Anderson. I might be up for libel having said that.

It’s just a matter of opinion, really.

I hope it is. Colonel Anderson is dead; I don’t know whether Colonel Williams is. They were two different

11:00 COs of different army units. I don’t know with introspection now which was the best approach if I was in the situation with the Japanese. I could see Anderson’s point of view: bend a little bit and get the, save as many lives as I can if I can. Then there’d be anti-Japanese all the time

11:30 and only spiting the lives of friends. I don't know.

Did the actions of Colonel Anderson help keep his troops safe?

Well I can't give any specific instances. Japanese were very demanding of their prison administration of the number of workers they had to get; if they wanted a thousand out tomorrow

12:00 it had to be a thousand. Now the MO [Medical Officer] had decided that the 1500 of the 10,000 were too ill to work, what are you going to do? Are you going to meet them halfway of Colonel Anderson or be like Colonel Williams and say, "No. They're not fit to work"? That's

12:30 the situation. It's very hard for us to sit back and say it shouldn't either compare one with the other, but that was the two different approaches. And it was very hard on the young doctor sometimes, to know a man is sick and know that he shouldn't be sent out to work that day, that if another person in trying to

13:00 take the middle way along sent him to work, he threw a lot of unnecessary responsibility on that young doctor and I'm talking about Roley Richards, who appeared in somebody else's stuff. That poor little fellow at the time was only five or six years older than me and he was under, he was only two years out of med [medical] school when he was faced with this situation.

13:30 How would you like to be faced with that situation and in your mind, "That fellow is really sick and shouldn't be out there" and the other gentleman who thinks he's doing the right thing and with all the goodwill in the world says, "You've got to send him to work."?

Could've been dead by the end of the day?

Could've been. So that's one person's point of view. I don't know what I'd have been in their two situations at all. But as for Colonel Anderson,

14:00 he went into parliament later, he was a Member of Parliament for one of the electorates down in the Riverina. I don't think he set the world on fire as a politician, not any blame to him.

Was the Japanese guards or treatment of you predictable in a certain way? And were there things to do or not to do to help yourselves along?

14:30 Never cross them. Don't get caught pinching food, don't get caught, or in any situation do it and get away with it, don't get caught. And don't try to stand up to them in any punishment, take it. Don't be the brave man of, "You can't bend my will",

15:00 flop down and act dead. It might hurt your pride but it'll save your body. I don't think in our situation there was any brownie marks in being the hero and being the gladiator in that situation, let your head rule your heart sort of thing.

You used to nick a bit of food where you could and never got caught?

15:30 I could tell you some stories about stealing some food. Towards one period in our prison camp, clothing was just about worn out and they didn't replace any clothing unless they had to.

What did you have on your bodies?

Had a G-string and possibly a makeshift hat. You may not have a shirt on, if you had a shirt that was to sleep in at nighttime because it used to get a bit cool.

16:00 Imagine a fellow in a G-string, which is a bit like a girl's bikini bottom, smuggling a pineapple with its top on, past a prison guard at the gates. Don't laugh. It was done. I don't know how we did it and I don't know how comfortable he was for the next 48 hours. It was done. You always ran a risk coming

16:30 not so much on the railway line because there was no chance of pick-ups along the road stealing stuff. But when you worked in places like Bangkok, you were around and there was always a chance to whip something. I remember Gerry, the other friend mate I had there, we used to whip solder. You may say, "What did you whip solder for?" Well solder is so that they could make eating utensils in the camp.

17:00 You could get a good price from the camp administration for the solder you nicked because they could mend eating utensils. Oh yes, you always ran the risk with the guards on the gate. I'd say we got through with them 60/40 or 70/30; some guards just didn't care. Others just liked to be the vindictive just for the sake of being vindictive.

17:30 **How would you for example get past the guard?**

You wouldn't have it in your hand, you'd have it concealed. If you had a pair of shorts on you'd conceal it in your clothes, under the hat often, but the Japs woke up to that, pretty soon they used to knock your hat off. Any ingenious way you could think of. Carrying a Japanese tool back into the camp, you'd disguise it in the tool, that sounds hard to do, in the end you invented ways

18:00 to come up with. I can't give you any specific guide to future wars on how to beat the guards.

I'm finding it difficult to get the pineapple image out of my head. You were telling us about tropical ulcers this morning and I understand that at times you were also using maggots if

you could with the ulcers?

18:30 I didn't have to. I believe it was done. Feeding them with the maggots to eat the decayed flesh, other ones used to take their wound down to a nearby creek or watercourse and there used to be a lot of little fish in there and they used to nibble

19:00 it off for you. It used to hurt too, the fish used to bite into the sound flesh or you had doctor's spoon system or some of them used charcoal, I don't know what the charcoal was, whether they thought charcoal would absorb something. They tried everything and anything. They really had no

19:30 effective cure for them until a bit of what they called M&B powder [May & Baker therapeutic drug (M&B 693)] found it's way in through the Red Cross. When we got to, off the railway line, into Siam, we had occasional visits from the Swiss Red Cross and they used to come to the camp and endeavour to get the Japanese permission to bring

20:00 in any medicines or drugs we could get, but their hands were pretty well tied. They didn't get much in but once this M&B drifted through to the camp the ulcer problem started quickly to abate. But on the railway line, you had no access to that. You just had to hope that somebody up there would protect you.

Was it the M&B that helped you with your ulcer?

20:30 Yes there was a scattering of M&B and the question of a skin graft arose and skin grafts were impossible then. I mentioned earlier the name was Colonel Hamilton was the doctor who took over from Colonel Coates, he decided that he'd try to drag the skin from the outside of the thing, how he

21:00 was able to get some Elastoplast and gradually the skin must have got the message and it started to grow.

Were there any times during your whole time as a prisoner that you thought you might not make it through?

I think we all went into a state of despondency quite often.

21:30 I'm not too proud to say I prayed every night, the last thing, whatever time we got bedded down, I'd say a silent prayer I can't say that it put me in the state of mind where my body was better able to handle things I don't know. Yes there were times when you despaired. But I repeat,

22:00 in most of your waking moments, food was the thing that was never off your mind, never. It seemed to dominate everything, yet the thing that you forgot most quickly when you had a full stomach. Yes there must have been times. Under the air raids, bombing, I'm not too proud to say really frightened that a bomber would get me. But luckily I came though.

22:30 **Looking back on it, do you think that someone was looking after you or do you think it was luck?**

I think it was, lead me into a belief in Christianity and otherwise I don't know how to answer that

23:00 one. I think that 70 per cent was luck, I was never the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time, or I was less often the person in the wrong place in the wrong time. Perhaps there is a divine spirit that is watching. But why was he watching over me and not the next bloke? You're getting into a question of ethics and religion there.

23:30 **It was more a question towards personal faith and whether you had this to get you through?**

No. I'll leave it at 70 per cent luck as I said, the right person in the right place that sort of business.

Being a keen observer?

Yes

24:00 **After the railway when you were in Siam, were the guards as strict?**

Different stages. Now I mentioned at one stage in the last camp, we had Japanese naval guards. Well they'd known that the war was lost and

24:30 they were quite easy. Coming off the railway line, we got rid of the Korean guards. The Korean guards, anywhere I was in Siam I don't know where they were, they only seemed to be on the railway line. Again, the Korean guard was a fellow who was more to be pitied than castigated.

25:00 I'll deal about the Korean guard first. You had the different levels of the Japanese in their army strata from the private up to the top boy and each one had the power of life and death on the one under him. Well, below the ordinary Japanese soldier came the Korean soldier. See Korea was annexed

25:30 by Japan in the early 19th Century and they were a subject nation to the Japanese, second class person. Well the lowest level Japanese could take his spite out on the Korean guard. Now the Korean guard looks around and says, "Where am I passing the buck to?" So he passed it to the prisoners. He found that he gained stature with his Japanese boss if he was cruel

26:00 to the prisoners , than if he was sympathetic. So I feel that the Korean guard was in a cleft stick, because if he didn't belt us up, he got belted up from the Jap if he got in the Jap's bad books. If he did belt us up, well he was to the prisoners he was a killer. Now I've generalised. There were in all races the

26:30 exception to the rule. We had in my experience two Japanese guards. One was called 'the Russian', don't ask me why he was called the Russian. What did we call the other one? They were big, gave you the impression of big country boys who as long as the cows came in at five o'clock at night then everything was all right with the world. That's the attitude they took to us.

27:00 They never got unduly worked up. Whilst they enforced the regulations as the guards, there was no malice in it. The other extreme you had, the other guards it was straight-out horrors. You can tell by the names they get, one was called 'Hitler', another one was called,

27:30 always German names, cruel names. They seemed to take a, disregarding what I said about being subject to the Japs above, they seemed to take it in their own right of being cruel. As a matter of fact, two or three in the railway line I was lead to believe never reached the war trials

28:00 in, I think they held them for South East Asia in Manila. They were just quietly disposed of by the occupying forces without any trial; just taken away, if they were nominated by the prisoners, "Yes that's one of them". Again although things were tough,

28:30 from Christmas, early 1945, where I was things looked up and neither the guards, there were no Koreans then, nor the living conditions extremely bad. But of course you know that since the war there's been a lot of

29:00 talk by the anti-nuclear body of people, what a shocking thing it was, what they did to Japan, those two atomic bombs. Well it certainly saved my life and I think most of our lives. It has been established since that the Japanese had set September 7th 1945 as

29:30 the start of execution of prisoners, to save any risk of them being supplied by allied forces being forced behind their back, not that they'd be very effective. Secondly after saving my life, it must have saved about three million lives dropping those bombs. I have read, and have on record there,

30:00 I don't know if you know, the American-planned invasion of, you've read that? I need say no more. Did the bomb do the right thing or not? It saved I'd say five to six million including Japanese lives at the expense of what, a quarter of a million killed in two bombing raids.

That's the one thing it did do, it prevented a mass conflict in Japan where everybody felt that the Japanese would fight til the death.

30:30 Yeah. That's what I'm getting at. That's where the six million; at least six million would have gone. So I've got that. In passing, even though we weren't too badly off in this camp up near Ubon, which I said I thought was in Laos, in the last two months of the

31:00 war, and I think this happened in many other camps, the Japanese started building machine gun posts on the perimeter of the camp, pointing in, not out. Now that can only have one explanation. That was going to be the execution, which I've read was supposed to be September 7th.

You were talking about that amongst yourselves at the time?

No.

31:30 But the gun pitch being built pointing into the camp created a bit of uneasiness. We couldn't imagine in our wildest imagination that they would wipe us out, couldn't imagine that.

Even with all the treatment that you'd been subjected to?

Oh I didn't think that they'd come at mass…the Germans might have done it to the Jews,

32:00 but I didn't think the Japs would come at it to such an extent. They were holding at that stage, including Americans who hadn't been released in the Philippines, this is before the Philippines had been completely taken over, they must have been holding close on a million prisoners. So I couldn't see them doing that. I didn't for one minute relate it back to their treatment earlier.

32:30 **By the time you were in the camp in Ubon, you weren't too badly off comparatively. Could you describe it?**

There was no standover work party demands on you. Once they decided to tear up the aerodrome, cut

33:00 big trenches across it so it's no use to an invading force, there was no pressure. The food was not generous, but adequate. The canteen facilities the Japanese allowed us to spend our meagre earnings.

What sort of things would you buy in the canteen?

Fruit. Bananas or synthetic sugar,

33:30 I won't call it synthetic it came for palm tree sugar, from the sago family. For those that liked it, coarse tobacco, vile stuff; little things that augmented your basic rice and vegetables, rice and weeds.

What would they be feeding you on a daily basis?

Still rice and there

34:00 seemed to be no limit on the rice and fortunately on the camp, you were talking about mixing with other troops the Japs had a piggery just on the camp, on the boundary of the camp with their own supplies and we were, a couple of Australians and a Pommy, were appointed

34:30 the pig men responsible for the feeding of them and general care of them. Well they had huge sows there, when the sows throws, gives birth to piglets, if she's a big sow she

35:00 often rolls onto them and kills them. We weren't above taking those piglets two and three days old. Well I think that augmented the food, and we got a reasonable amount through the canteen by fruit and vegetable, reasonable not much meat, meat was never on. Generally in good condition.

35:30 **What was your accommodation like?**

The same you'd get all around the prison camps. Thatched roof structure with bamboo struts holding a platform on which you slept. Bamboo is one of the greatest gifts that man is given those people in that area. There's nothing you can't do with it, build with it.

36:00 I'd seen in one prison camp, one of the fellows made one of these pumps with not a bit of metal in it all from bamboo and it worked. Necessity produced many inventive minds among the prisoners, the things they could do. To turn out a bamboo pump! It poured water up from about ten

36:30 feet down. Don't ask me how he did it. I don't know how he did, but there was no metal in it.

Did you know that the war was drawing to an end?

No. I think we went through this before. It wasn't until actually the morning of 15th August that was the day that it finished.

37:00 Although I think, I might be wrong there, I think it was the 16th August, 15th in the United States. Same as the war started in Honolulu on the 7th December, started the 8th December. On the day after it would have been the 15th for the Americans. The Japs did a morning roll call; there was no

37:30 going out to work, you were just back to your huts and that started to think "What's going on?". We didn't know about the atomic bomb then, we didn't know what had happened. Someone suggested perhaps the Emperor had died. Well then that moved on. The second day after that, they still fed us, the Japanese camp

38:00 commandant paraded us and through an interpreter told us that the Imperial Japanese Army had decided that the war was silly and it should stop. Something to this effect, not that they had lost, but that, "The war was silly and should stop, we're not going to fight anymore. In due course you'll be sent home to your people, to your loved ones".

What was the reaction amongst you all?

38:30 It didn't stun us really. I'm trying to remember, we didn't get up and cheer. I know that there was a mad, not a mad but an avid determination among the nationalities of the prison camp to build eight flagpoles to get their flag up first. The Poms won, however they made a Union Jack. The Dutchies tried to put up a

39:00 Dutch flag. It was going to be a bit high, and that nearly started an international incident. No there were no hats in the air, we didn't go mad. By that, that was the second day, the Americans and I'd mentioned it had come in and told us what had happened and told us about the atomic bomb. He didn't know what it was himself, some bomb, but he was the one

39:30 who told us to be careful, the allied command doesn't quite know how Japanese troops as distinct from the Emperor and the War Party in Tokyo, are going to take it, whether some of them will rebel and fight on, don't go outside the camp because there are 40,000 Japs

40:00 domiciled in the area so we took his advice, that only lasted us three or four days, the Japanese guards on the gate disappeared so we started to wander out then and nobody took much notice of us.. Then they went, they wandering around trying to find villages, to get something.

Tape 9

00:30 **I understand you came back to Australia by ship?**

Yes.

Do you remember the name of it?

Moreton Bay.

Moreton Bay, that's right you did tell us earlier. It was about three months after the war had ended?

It was in December, the war finished in August so it was four months.

Where did you come in initially?

She came down dropping off

01:00 prisoners at Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, at Sydney they were let off and all the Queenslanders were put on a hospital train up to Brisbane.

At that point and I know you said that you were in relatively good condition, but how was your leg?

That had all healed.

Do you have a scar?

Yes.

Oh yes.

It went around here.

It would have been massive,

01:30 **like ten inches or something?**

It was like a big soup plate. My great worry was if it gets into the bone and that's when you have to do the amputation, when the infection gets into the bone you have to chop it off at the bone. They can't amputate there, that was the real worry, and I'm not joking.

Yes I know.

If they couldn't rescue it, they couldn't

02:00 amputate it, it probably would have moved into my spine the infection, if I had of lived that long. I'm not a medico man but it did travel up the marrow of the bone the infection.

It wasn't uncommon for amputations to take place?

But usually below the knee.

That's right.

Our mutual friend, his was just above the knee his amputation,

02:30 he was one of the five that was in that.

Which we will be taking a photo of later. Was there any of your family there to meet you when you came home?

At Clapham Junction they were all there. The train came in at Clapham Junction and it's about near Moorooka.

I know Moorooka but I don't know Clapham Junction.

Around there was where the interstate train came into. In those days the normal passenger train

03:00 came up to South Brisbane behind the performing arts studio, the passenger train. This one, because it was a troop hospital train they stopped it at Clapham Junction which is around Moorooka near Rocklea.

When you say troop hospital, do you mean that all the troops no matter if they were sick or not were on it?

All the troops, they were all healthy but they used

03:30 the hospital trains, we had bunks at night. The rest of the people on the train were apparently sit up passengers overnight, but we four prisoners were put into bunks on the trains, the normal passengers sat but we didn't sit. The ones

04:00 that didn't come home on the Moreton Bay, they had been flown back. They used the Royal Navy for a lot of them; a couple of aircraft carriers brought most of the sick back to the east coast. We were one of the few returning ships that came by the west coast to Perth first. At Perth, they threw open the post office for calls to any length for prisoners of war

04:30 anywhere in Australia, that was when I first made contact verbally in person with my family. They knew that I was safe in Singapore by letters but then in Perth a certain section of the post office, as a prisoner of war you could go in there and talk to your family anywhere in Australia. That was the first time that they had heard my voice, and they believed it I think.

05:00 **They believed that you were alive?**

Yes.

Can you tell us what were your parents' and your sisters' reaction to you stepping off the train?

I think they were completely elated, my mother particularly, as I mentioned earlier, her baby had come back, they were elated. My future brother-in-law, the one we mentioned earlier,

05:30 had been back for some time before I got back and he came back by a naval ship too. I think he was home before I even reached Singapore on the way home. They were all greatly elated. After a period

06:00 they moved us into open cars or jeeps with their hoods down, incidentally I saw my first jeep in Bangkok in November 1945. I had never seen a jeep before that; the Japs didn't have an equivalent vehicle to a jeep.

06:30 Our armies in Singapore before the surrender didn't have jeeps. They put us into these open cars and drove us back through the city up to Albert Park where you were handed over to your family. After that stage you greeted your family at

07:00 Clapham Junction but you were handed back to your family up there and then it was home.

Was it a bit overwhelming for you, these family's members being so elated?

No, I was just as excited as them. I can't remember the reception being emotional or upsetting.

Everybody wanted to hear you talk, hear your stories?

Not then.

07:30 I got rid of it all about the second night home to Dulcie my sister above me, she was eight years older than me and that night I gave the whole story, only to her. After that it was hardly ever mentioned again. She got it all and whether she

08:00 circulated it around to the other members of the family, that was it. I didn't want to speak in front of them then and they didn't seem to want to pry into me about it. Of course it was a bit of a shock then to find out how the few letters the Japs let us write that got home. I think to the best of my recollection, the Japs allowed us four

08:30 and I think only one never made it back to Australia. After that it was back to normal, not back to normal but back into the family fold.

How long was it until you started looking for work or going back into society?

Continuing on with my military history, they allowed you back to your family for a week and then you had to report back

09:00 to the military repatriation hospital at Greenslopes, which is now a private hospital out there. There you were supposed to have been thoroughly checked by Australian doctors, to see if you had brought any disease back, or whether you were still suffering from any diseases, in other words they put the rule over you. Most of us were first class health

09:30 and I think we gave the matron there a hell of a time, I know they did. One who they nicknamed 'the fuehrer' she was a bit of a martinet because matrons in those days were, but matrons these days are softies aren't they? She tried to stop the lads and keep them in the hospital to at least after ten o'clock because at ten o'clock the pubs up the road was opened,

10:00 so the doctor could do his rounds. I stayed there for only four or five days and went on leave again for Christmas and we were due to report back on Boxing Day, to go to a convalescent camp at Burleigh. I went AWL [Absent Without Leave] for five days, reported back to the army base at Moorooka,

10:30 where I was dressed down by a Colonel Murray [Sir Hubert Murray, late Administrator of Papua New Guinea]. That name I mentioned mustn't mean much to you but he was one of the last Australian persons to judge New Guinea before they gave New Guinea its independence. I got a dressing down by him and he said, "Who do you think you prisoners of war are, you think you've had a bad time, blah, blah, blah." He was a really tactless man and he really went down in my estimation.

11:00 Had three weeks at Burleigh, which was one of the best things that I ever did, I think. Amongst other things, they lined you up at six o'clock every morning and the first thing they put a quart jug of milk in your hand and you couldn't get off parade until you got rid of that milk, they were really trying to build us up. Life was easy then I came back and I was discharged in February 1946

11:30 with my friend Harry, the one who had the amputation. We went on a trip to Melbourne, I was down in Melbourne and had word from a bank that if I was coming back to work for them I had to report to them in July 1946 to attend the re-training school so I started my bank career again.

12:00 **What about girls?**

What about them?

Did you start meeting girls when you came back to Australia?

No there were a couple that maintained correspondence with me prior to the imprisonment; we sort of established a brother-sister relationship. One of them had gone into the RAAF

12:30 and she, after a reasonable time I think, let me know that any plans we might have had wouldn't of happened because she had another boyfriend. The other one, we remained great friends, there was really never great emotional attachment, but then I started to play the field. Until eventually I got hooked.

13:00 **How did you meet Irene?**

She worked in the bank too.

You came back in July 1946 back up to Queensland?

Yes.

You started work back there?

I went to a school, they had a school to reindoctrinate ex-servicemen from the air force, navy, all the services, then they sent you out to a branch and I was sent to Stones Corner for five or six months

13:30 as a supernumerary to get into the feel of being back in the commercial world, you were one of the staff. After that, they brought me back and gave me employment in Prince Street and that would have been in late 1946. After a few months I was transferred to a department, which dealt with the building of banks,

14:00 which was going to become the big thing now that the war was over. The bank was going to expand and they need new branches. Her ladyship was secretary/typist to the chief architect in the building who had close contacts with the bank section where I was building branches. One thing lead to another and then there was one occasion when I was stood up

14:30 and I needed a partner so I put the hard word on her and she came out with me, from then on things developed.

What do you mean your whole courtship was skimmed over a bit, what do you mean one thing lead to another?

After I was stood up, she came out with me one night.

Who stood you up?

I was stood up by another woman from the field

15:00 I was playing in and I needed a partner for a ball that night, or a couple of night's time.

Yes. So how did you know to ask Irene?

We would smile at each other when we were passing by. She had occasion to ring our department quite often, I think she made the occasions purposely. At that time, the bank was building up quite a fleet of motor vehicles

15:30 for it's different services, things started to move then in post-war. I had the allocation of motor vehicles, a driver for any outside duties for any bank staff, and her architect always seem to want a car, so that's why she rang me. The architect never rang me, she rang me.

16:00 **How did you get hooked on Irene?**

After the first night we seemed to get along pretty well and then we started to go out a bit, then a little bit more, there were others still hanging around and gradually they died out of the field and she had me all to herself.

Where would you take her for dates in Brisbane in those days?

16:30 Dancing, Cloud Land, that was good. Ballroom dancing was more popular in those days than it is now, I'm sure if you were to open a ballroom place now you are not going to make money but there used to be numerous balls. If it wasn't a ball

17:00 it was a dance.

Were you much of a dancer?

I taught Fred Astaire [famous dancer] all he knew.

What about Irene could she dance?

She was Ginger Rogers [famous dancer] too.

Why do I feel I might be getting some fibs [lies]?

I wasn't so hot, but before the war I used to, like all the teenagers, I used to go to dancing lessons in a building behind

17:30 the post office in Elizabeth Street, but I would never of gotten into films with Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly.

But you had the courage to go and ask the girls to dance?

I got by, I had one step that was all sort of Pride of Erin.

You were versatile?

The one step did all things.

18:00 **How long did you court Irene before you proposed to her?**

Six months. Earlier I explained during the depression years the family couldn't send me on to university, I hadn't matriculated. So in post-war Australia for ex-servicemen they did make things a bit easier but you had to

18:30 have matriculation level in maths and English. In 1947, I went back to night school and did what they called adult matriculation, which gave me the right entries into the Queensland University. In 1948, I became an evening student in commerce and took out a degree in 1953 as a Bachelor.

19:00 Within that time we got married, built a house had two kids, so those five years were very full.

So you were studying at night and working full time?

Yes.

With two kids?

Yes with two kids.

You were going to tell me about the [SS] Ormiston deal?

We were both married on one Saturday and I had arranged to give her a big

19:30 thrill for her honeymoon, we were going on a boat trip from Brisbane to Melbourne. In those days, it used to be an old passenger coaster who travelled from Brisbane to Melbourne, the Ormiston and the Arundel I think and they operated pre-war and one was sunk during the war years I think. We had a week to put in after the marriage and then we were to sail the following Saturday.

20:00 We got onboard and we left Brisbane about midday and we got down Moreton Bay outside Cape Moreton and the sea started and we went down to dinner and the cheeky steward was wetting the tablecloth. We looked aghast at that and thought, "What is he doing?" apparently if you wet the paper cloth then things won't slide. Apparently

20:30 I must have been looking a bit green in the face because the steward said to Irene, "He will be first" pointing at me, she said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "He's going to be sick before you". I don't think I got through dinner but we came down for breakfast the next morning and I reached the door of the dining room on the ship and retreated back upstairs and spent

21:00 that day and most of the following day on my back. The funny part was there was another honeymoon couple on the ship and the other husband suffered the same way that I did. There were these two brides from a week old marriage spent their time entertaining the officers while there husbands were downstairs, so that was the funny part about our honeymoon.

21:30 **Where were you married?**

In Brisbane, at St Paul's Church there.

That's a lovely old church.

Yes.

You stayed at the bank until you retired in 1981, how did they treat you all the time you were there? Were they good employers?

Now I think it is a shocking organisation

22:00 being privatised, it's a public company now. I think if any employer has no heart, it's that one. But the bank was a good employer; it was a government institution then. It was independently controlled apart from the government. But for the ex-servicemen, they put us through a school to reorient them with banking and

22:30 some had to take them out of the military field and put them into the peacetime field. They were under the control of a Dr Coombs [Dr H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs] he was the first governor post-war of the bank. He introduced great reforms for the staff; they were the first to introduce health schemes where the outside world didn't have it. They were pretty generous

23:00 on how to finance the staff for housing and things like that. On the negative side, there was a culture I felt that grew up in the bank that the more senior level to which the returning soldier or serviceman rose was the more favoured person. If you

23:30 had been a serviceman and risen through your service to this level and if you were a serviceman like in my circumstance, left Australia as a bombardier or corporal and came back as a corporal, you seemed to be thought as 'he probably didn't make the grade', 'he hasn't got the leadership for in the bank'. To a degree I did become disillusioned

24:00 and after I graduated, I made several efforts to move out from the banking field into commerce, until I had myself crushed by one big employer who interviewed me. First of all, I was thirty-three years old then and he told me, "You're thirty three. We have kids coming from university twenty-three. How do you expect to compete with them?" Another one told me,

24:30 "You were only a corporal in the army, you didn't rise to another rank" in other words again you didn't have it.

Why didn't you tell them you were a POW?

It didn't register to them. At that stage the general public didn't know what prisoners of war experienced, they were completely unaware of it.

25:00 That only came about when the first book, Russell Braddon was one of the earlier ones that hit the market with prison life, which opened the eyes of Australians. While we were in a prison camp for three and a half years, the government did not have to pay the seven dollars

25:30 a week which cost to keep a soldier. The ex-prisoners' association which quickly formed up after the war wanted to help these poor fellows, "That money was never spent during the war, give it to them to help them rehabilitate themselves". One member in Canberra whose name I should mention got upset and said, "No if we do that, it will create

26:00 a precedent and in future war the soldiers wouldn't fight. They will become prisoners of war to get the money when they come home", that's a fact. He was a Labour member and of course Labour was in power then. The nation was completely unaware of what we people suffered, I know there were a lot of other servicemen who suffered terrible situations.

26:30 The air force had shocking conditions in these bombing raids over Germany, but it wasn't consistent non-stop for the three and a half years. Another employer said, "You never rose above corporal so apparently you haven't got it", so I reconciled myself to staying in the bank and I got to middle management and the final ten years of my life was in

27:00 internal administrative duties and finished in 1981.

Once there was a sense of consciousness about what had happened to POWs in the Second World War by then, were you alright about staying in the bank?

Yes, I had got to the stage then I had a vested interest in the bank, I had a home, a wife, we did have to move a few times but we had two daughters who

27:30 we had to educate, we put one through university. Perhaps it wasn't that bad because we did quite well, we never went without much.

Were you given any money from the government for being a prisoner of war at all?

In the last two or three years, the American Government and the British Government had made payments.

28:00 First of all the prisoners tried to sue the Japanese Government in an international court for compensation for the slave-like labour they had extracted from us. Which the Japs broke all the Geneva Convention, they didn't recognize it, and they got nowhere in the courts. But America and Britain gradually

28:30 after a bit of pressure from the prisoners of war organisation paid up compensation which the Japs wouldn't pay until [John] Howard [Prime Minister of Australia] was in a situation where he hadn't done it for Australia. I think in the last few years, he paid twenty five thousand to the surviving prisoners or their widows, so that's all we got.

Rightly so.

Perhaps yes or perhaps not.

Have you joined

29:00 **any organisations or affiliations with the Second World War?**

The unit formed it's own association and I soon joined up with the RSL [Returned and Services League]. I was on the committee for some years until we left Brisbane, so I kept a finger on the pulse.

29:30 **What about Anzac Day, do you march on Anzac Day?**

I've only ever done that once and that was locally when I was an office bearer in the local sub-branch at Wellers Hill, we lived at Wellers Hill and had a local march out there but I've never taken part in

30:00 any of these ones in Queen Street, or locally. I was a JC of the Lions [community service club],

30:30 but now we are Probus [club].

Why don't you march in the Anzac Day marches in Queen Street?

You have put me in a hard spot and how can I express it to you. First of all, I've never worn my service badges, medals. An award is only

31:00 worth having if it's something special that you get above others. Every Tom, Dick and Harry got those medals up there, they mean nothing, absolutely nothing at all. I've never worn them. Except we went home to a fiftieth anniversary in Singapore in 1992, I wore them then. As for the Anzac Day march, I think there is a lot of

31:30 hypocrisy about that. The government around Anzac Day gets out there as our representatives and make a big fuss of the so-called ex-servicemen fellows, half of them never left Queen Street to march, I'm not joking. The ones that did anything about the war are either not there or won't have anything to do with it.

32:00 Secondly, having made a big fuss, the next breath DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs], I'm talking about the people who are making this, make it difficult for some people to get legitimate recognition of their conditions. But I'm the first to admit that there are plenty who rort the system, particularly after Vietnam, and I'm prepared to admit that.

32:30 But the politicians are two-faced, I will not be party to helping them in their two-facedness by attending Anzac Day, that might sound silly to you.

No it doesn't sound silly. I was just thinking, what about the pride that you must feel that you survived a Japanese POW camp?

Now you are touching another funny point.

33:00 I came home and I think a lot of us came home with a sense of feeling of disgrace, 'we have let the side down' sort of business. Many years and even now, I was very reluctant to tell anybody about my war service. I use to have differences of opinion with the ladyship and I'd tell her to shut up when she mentions prison life. I think a lot of us felt

33:30 a feeling of guilt. The 8th Division did a wonderful job, the 9th Division did a wonderful job that they did at El Alamein, and the 7th Division that did a wonderful job at Tobruk, the lost 8th, that's what they call us the lost 8th, write them off. Whether it was the press or the way it was enforced in the press, it affected me and I think a lot of the

34:00 other prisoners the same way. They didn't have the pride of saying, "We are wonderful blokes, we will march down Queen Street and nod at the crowd", you must think that I'm a queer person don't you?

I do in a way I suppose because I think to be a survivor shows a great deal of tenacity and I suppose I respect that.

34:30 Christianity, which I was talking about before, was it faith up there or the right person in the right place at the wrong time which ever way you want to look at it, or was it luck.

I don't know, I suppose on that note I also think for instance rape victims and the fact that they survived and they are going on with their lives shows a great deal of strength.

Thank you.

35:00 If accepting it is a great deal of strength then why do you have to go and flaunt it out there and wave flags around?

You mean like on Anzac Day?

Yes.

I don't know, I'm talking about willpower I suppose, something we were talking about before.

Yes.

If a young bloke came to you today and said that he was thinking about joining the army, what would you say to him?

35:30 Right now with President [George] Bush and the trouble in Iraq and our choosing to go with America, I would say no. I'm not a pacifist by any means, if there is a fight and you have a real valid cause to be in it, go. But I think now we are being led by the noses of the situation both in Afghanistan

36:00 now by ill-advised government and I would say, "No, don't rush in. In my mind, you won't be a coward if you don't. But if there was any suggestion that they were to invade Australia or any other people invade Australia, well yes go into it". Having said that, I feel that it could be a good career

36:30 for a young man. Army life has something, it does seem to get into you, whether it's the discipline, because discipline in the modern generation is lacking, it makes you feel good. I don't think any of these young kids today feel good about themselves. I use to have pride in the

37:00 pre-war days of wearing the king's uniform as it was then. No, I would not advise either my grandchildren at present while we are in this situation worldwide.

Have you had any nightmares, negative thoughts or behaviours since the war?

No. Yet another friend of

37:30 ours, not one of the six, for many years after the war gave his wife hell, he suffered nightmares every night. I don't know whether he's grown out of it now but it ended up so serious I think he became a TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated] when he was in his forties.

Has your family taken an interest in your war service?

38:00 Not as much as you would expect, I don't know whether my four grandchildren have ever read many of these stories written by prisoners, my daughters have, particularly my eldest daughter Leslie, she has a lot to do with ex-servicemen and many of them are prisoners. I don't know whether they have, it's a different generation.

38:30 I don't think it means that much to them. Perhaps it did to my generation with the First World War, things are moving too quickly now, you can't have that.

What does your daughter Leslie do?

She's a speech therapist in private practice and also does work for the DVA at Greenslopes. After she graduated, she was there at Greenslopes

39:00 when it was still part of Veteran Affairs but now she's out in private practice.

What about your other daughter?

She's in the Department of Education, in the office with an inside job.

What is her name?

Janet.

Do you think Australia is going to become a republic?

Yes.

39:30 The main reason I think is Britain will be a republic before the middle of the next century, so what's the use of Australia being one when the monarchy won't live in Australia. I think I was a loyalist and a royalist up until about ten years ago but I'm not a socialist

40:00 by any means by begrudging them there state of living. I think the royal family as role models, particularly the newer ones but I wont include the Queen, have not set an example and it's no longer respected. I wouldn't mind that much if we became a republic tomorrow, except in the appointment of a broken-down prime minister

40:30 like [Paul] Keating [Former Prime Minister of Australia] and others as the President, that's a big miss.

But you think it will happen?

It will definitely happen.

Thank you very much Allen, you have been a gem all day.

Thank you very much, do you want my autograph?