

Australians at War Film Archive

George Fernando - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 5th December 2003

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1308>

Tape 1

- 00:42 **OK George if we could start off with a discussion about Sri Lanka and what your early life was like?**
- Well as you know I was born in Sri Lanka in 1945 and I often tell people that I was born on the 25th July 1945 and that
- 01:00 was days before Hiroshima was bombed. So I started life as a war baby. I was born in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka to a middle class family. My father would have been of Portuguese background, that is to say Sri Lanka was colonised by
- 01:30 the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. The Portuguese, Dutch and British descendants, some of them did remain and we were I guess descendants of these people. I went to school in Colombo, primary school, and just like any other kid I loved to play cricket and football and
- 02:00 I excelled in my sports and studies, and I enjoyed my primary schooling. From there I went on to high school and went to a school that was regarded as one of the finest schools in Ceylon. I suppose you could say it was the equivalent of Melbourne Grammar.
- What was**
- 02:30 **the name of the school?**
- Royal College. It got its name during Queen Victoria's time I think. I found it very interesting when I came to Melbourne to find that Melbourne was founded in 1835 and my school was also founded in 1835. It is still one of the oldest schools in Asia.
- 03:00 I finished my schooling at high school and then the family decided to migrate to Australia. At age 18 I set foot in Melbourne, a couple of days before Christmas in 1963.
- Can I ask you a bit more about those early years in Ceylon? You say you were born in Colombo and your parents were of**
- 03:30 **Portuguese heritage.**
- Hence my name Fernando.
- What does that mean in Sri Lankan society?**
- Well I had better explain to you then what our community was all about. The Portuguese colonised Sri Lanka or as it was called Ceylon then in 1500 approximately, and remained there for 150 years.
- 04:00 And by coincidence the Dutch followed them, ousting the Portuguese and moving in. They came to Sri Lanka in 1650. The Portuguese ruled for 150 years and the Dutch ruled for 150 years followed by the British for 150 years. So you have the Portuguese for 150 years, the Dutch for 150 years and the British for 150 years. So it has been colonised since 1500 to 1950.
- 04:30 So it's only in the last 50 years that it's been independent. Now, my people on my father's side were ... my descendants would have been the Portuguese who arrived in 1505 to be precise. People who remained in Sri Lanka, the descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch were called "Burghers"
- 05:00 from an old Dutch word meaning citizen. And the Burgher community during British times I suppose became English speaking and they were of very high status in the country. So I guess that, along with the highly educated
- 05:30 Singhalese people, who are the original people in Sri Lanka, and the Tamils. The Burghers enjoyed the life of what I would have referred to as the privileged classes in Sri Lanka. They were the people if you like on the top of the pyramid of the socioeconomic structure in Sri Lanka. Hence I went to the best

school and lived in the best neighbourhood

- 06:00 and all my friends were similarly disposed. The boys I went to school with excelled themselves and today they are politicians, bank managers and CEOs [Chief Executive Officers] and managing directors all over the country. Top class lawyers, doctors, surgeons, professors etc. And we still meet. We have reunions. The boys
- 06:30 who were in my class in high school, we formed... we call ourselves "The Boys of '57". That's the year we entered Royal College, and we have regular gatherings. There were 130 of us to begin with and we formed A, B, C, D and E or something like that.
- 07:00 About 30 boys in each class. And that 130 has whittled down to about 115 now, and we've worked out that we've lost more than 10 per cent of our boys in car accidents and drowning and illnesses and heart attacks and so on. So we meet in Sri Lanka and people gather there from all parts of the world.
- 07:30 Some of us go to Sri Lanka from Australia and others come from America, the United Kingdom and other parts of the world. We have a fine luncheon and bus trip around the country. It's a very very beautiful gathering of the clan and we follow up with newsletters and
- 08:00 there's a lot of emailing going on, thanks to email these days. This particular group is a very close knit, strong group.

What was the medium of instruction in Sri Lanka, starting off in primary school... English or Ceylonese?

I grew up... my mother tongue was English, however I grew up bilingually because I also spoke Sinhalese.

- 08:30 And the medium of instruction for me in school was English. There was an English stream and a Sinhalese stream and a Tamil stream. So you could have been educated in either English or any one of the other indigenous languages. Most of the Burgher children entered into the English medium.
- 09:00 So I received my education in English. Later on of course these things changed dramatically with the British leaving in 1948 and Independence being granted. There were lots of movements within the
- 09:30 politics in the country to change things drastically and English started to get tossed out the door, and lots of other changes. Anything that was English or British was being thrown out and there was a kind of a upheaval going on and a reintroduction to Sinhalese Buddhist culture. The Burgher community naturally
- 10:00 then found themselves being ousted by these new political moves and they started to head off out of the country and a lot of them migrated to England or United States or Australia. And that was probably the reason why we left as well.

So are you saying there was a prejudice after independence against

- 10:30 **the Burgher community?**

The minorities felt that they were being ostracised because the government and successive prime ministers were getting more and more nationalistic, and there came a time in the '50s and '60s when the minority groups, the Burghers and the Tamils in

- 11:00 particular started to feel that they were being pushed into a corner because the Sinhalese Buddhist culture was being brought back as it were and there was a lot nationalist fervour. After 450 years of foreign rule the time had come to reintroduce a sort of Sinhalese Buddhist ethic back into the country.
- 11:30 Sadly, this ostracised the Burgher community. They were a tiny tiny minority. Because they were English educated they were able to migrate to countries such as Britain or Canada or the United States and Australia and get on quite well in those countries. However the Tamils, who were a larger minority, they had their backs up against the wall as a result of
- 12:00 the Sinhalese-only attitude. So they formed a sort of resistance to that ethic, and what you're seeing today is that resistance manifesting itself in a war where they have established now a rebel group who are fighting for
- 12:30 Tamil independence and more power for the Tamils, especially in their part of the country. And now you see... I mean, the Australian press is full of it now and has been in the last ten or 15 years.

Are you able to tell us a bit more about your parents and what

- 13:00 **they did and what your family life was like for you?**

I was one of three children. I had a brother who was six years older than I was, and a sister a couple of years younger than I was. We had a very happy childhood growing up in Colombo in our home by the beach. Dad worked for the... what was then called? The Cable and Wireless

- 13:30 Department. Our equivalent to that here used to be the Overseas Tele Commission, OTC, which was taken over by Telecom. And in fact that's where he fitted in here. When he came to Australia he worked initially for the OTC where he retired from eventually. Mum was a very capable
- 14:00 secretary who worked for a registered company. Her background was English. She had an English father and Sri Lankan mother, so I have a real interesting mix of Portuguese from my father's side and English and Sri Lankan from my mother's side. We were a happy family I guess. My brother went to boarding school.
- 14:30 He was an asthmatic as a child and we were advised he should go up country so he went off to school in a place called Kandy. The township that the Aussie cricketers now know well. In fact Steve Waugh broke his nose in Kandy and the surgeons there fixed it up for him. Very happy childhood.
- 15:00 I learnt to play the piano and I was a fine cricketer. In primary school I won the prize for the best batsman in the school and I take great pride in that. When I came to Australia I was very quickly signed up to play for a club in Glen Iris, where I enjoyed my cricket. I guess some of my early
- 15:30 interests that came to me from Sri Lanka have remained... music and cricket for example.

Can you tell us... cricket for example is obviously a passion of yours, how popular was cricket in Sri Lanka?

It was very popular. It was a legacy of the British.

- 16:00 The English language and cricket were certainly... the game of cricket was the one thing that was not thrown out the door, labelled a British item, when Sri Lanka became nationalistic. The statues of all the former British governors were being pulled down and chucked on the rubbish
- 16:30 heap. The one thing that didn't get chucked out the door was cricket. My father and I and my brother are all keen cricketers, and my father in fact played for Ceylon. He was a very fine cricketer himself and that's how my brother and I took up the interest very strongly. We always
- 17:00 felt that we were good enough to enter the world stage and play test cricket against Australia and England etc, and it took a long time before that finally happened. I remember cricketers in Ceylon then who were good enough to play in any test side. They were not known internationally and finally it was many many decades later
- 17:30 that finally Sri Lanka became part of the test cricketing world. Now I'm happy to see my boys playing here.

You said your father played for Ceylon. Would they play international touring teams?

At that time he used to be the captain for a leading club in

- 18:00 Sri Lanka and they used to play against other clubs. And occasionally they would tour abroad and he takes pride in the fact that he represented a Ceylon side and played against... he toured I think Singapore and Malaysia, representing Ceylon. He was our wicket keeper and opening bat and
- 18:30 he has left behind some wonderful photographs of that whole tour. The trip on the ship and all the fun they had and the games abroad. You mustn't forget that when Australia toured England in the '40s and '50s and '60s, they travelled by ship.
- 19:00 They do it today by plane. And one of the ports of call was Colombo. There was always a match. The Aussies played a match in Colombo against a Sri Lankan side and we all gathered around... thousands of Sri Lankans flocked the little oval to watch the Aussies. And my father can remember [Sir Donald] Bradman playing.
- 19:30 And I can remember people like Bob Simpson and Colin McDonald and Bill Laurie and Harvey and guys like that.

Where did you bat in the order?

I was opening bat... following in my Dad's footsteps. So there we are, and my young son now plays cricket for Glen Iris, the same club I played with. So that legacy has remained with the family.

- 20:00 Our love of cricket.

Do you remember your finest innings?

Yes back in primary school I remember I made 42 runs and that was like a man making 200. And over here I congratulate myself for making a century twice. I take great pride in that.

- 20:30 **Now you were born as you say 12 days before Hiroshima was bombed. Now had you family been involved in the military or any of the services during wartime?**

This is the irony of it. We are not a military family at all. My father was born in 1906 and always claimed

he was too young for the First World War and too old for the Second.

- 21:00 So Dad having been a totally non military person because of his age, I didn't think about military affairs at all myself, and we were a totally non-military family, and therein lies the irony of my story. In fact we had a strong cadet corp at school, again a British legacy.
- 21:30 All the top schools had cricket and rugby teams and certainly the cadet corp. And I used to have a cynical and sarcastic attitude to cadets. Likewise, they thought that the non-cadets were wimpish fellows, and somehow they felt they were tough guys.
- 22:00 I used to laugh at them and ridicule them, just marching up and down the parade ground and going off on their camps and one thing and another. It was funny that not long after I left school I was called up and soon became a warmonger myself, much to the
- 22:30 amusement of my classmates. When my old cadetting friends found out that I had been called up and was to serve in Vietnam, I had quite a flood of letters from them. They saw the irony and funny side of it. Here was the non-cadetting guy who's now
- 23:00 become a full blown military man and how is he going to cope? In fact one of my closest friends suggested that the best position for me would be the chaplain. He couldn't envisage me handling a rifle at all.

Was your family particularly religious?

Yes we grew up

- 23:30 Anglican and went to church every Sunday. We went to the local church where I sang in the choir. We were part and parcel of an Anglican background certainly. Singing Christmas carols at Christmastime was all a part of it, certainly yes.

Is it possible for you to paint a picture of what Colombo was like in the '40s and '50s?

- 24:00 I remember Colombo I guess... in the '50s and '60s it was always to me a busy crowded city and all you ever heard was the honking of car horns and traffic jams. And little did I know, when I finally made a trip back to Colombo, after I had been in Australia for 20 years, the traffic and noises had grown
- 24:30 and were ten times worse. I got a real shock. And busy Colombo had become even more busy. We were a close-knit community. If you went to visit a friend who was three or four or ten miles away, that was a very long trip. So I was
- 25:00 more or less... all my friends lived within a distance of just a kilometre or two. So I never had to venture far. My friends were all in the neighbourhood. We were close to the beach, which was handy. The people who lived next door had a big backyard so that's where all the 'Test' matches took place.
- 25:30 A tennis ball and all the local children would gather around. And we somehow managed to make up two teams.

Was there much in the way of poverty in Colombo back then?

Yes there were always the beggars and the poorest people. It was a country that had its extremes of

- 26:00 wealth and poverty. The very wealthy people on the one hand and right down to your beggar man on the other. And all those people who fitted in in between. It was very much a class structured country where people who were I guess working class would be dressed differently
- 26:30 and they would have to behave differently to the people who were privileged. They wouldn't walk into your house through the front door. They wouldn't sit on your chairs or have a meal with you in your dining room. They had to remain in the background and enter through the back door.
- 27:00 So there was a distinct class structure. When I came to Australia I moved into a country that was egalitarian where everybody was of the same class. I found that very interesting. I can remember, before coming, I was told that the office end-of-year Christmas dance, you had the managing director dancing with
- 27:30 the cleaning lady. That was a concept I couldn't understand or even envisage. It wouldn't have happened in Sri Lanka.

So would your family have had servants?

Yes. We had servants and took that lifestyle for granted. I came here never having polished my shoes or washed a cup and saucer.

- 28:00 That soon changed when we had to learn to do the dishes and clean the floor and cut the lawns.

So in your home in Colombo, how many people would have been working there? What would the specific duties been?

We weren't especially well off. We were certainly

28:30 a middle class family. We may have had just a couple of domestic helps. But in the neighbourhood there were always the people who provided the services. You'd have the vegetable man coming past and you would buy your vegetables from him. He would come passed and so forth. Then the barber would come along

29:00 and he'd drape me with a sheet across my shoulders and give me a haircut right in the middle of our front lawn. So I didn't have to go anywhere. All the services were there and available to us. There was always the local carpenter or electrician or plumber always handy in the neighbourhood.

29:30 They would come along and do their fix ups. I guess we were lucky because during those days all these people provided you with these services. Today their children and children's children are now educated people in their own right and they're moving obviously to being a more equal egalitarian society.

30:00 Still 100 years away but at least those times are changing for the better of course.

So was that a vestige of the colonial structure or was it something that had been there pre-colonial times?

Well pre-colonial times you would have had a very strong caste structure. You would have had... there was royalty where there was kings and queens,

30:30 then the various people who served the kings belonged to a particular castes. There were the fishermen who belonged to the fisher caste, then there would be the hunting caste. So there was always this caste structure where you were born into a particular family or trade or occupation. Then add to that the British being there and naturally

31:00 they would have continued on with... certainly they would have been the people right up the top end of the structure, then there would have been various other communities who fitted in. Certainly there was a strong social structure where you had the guys at the top and going right down to the

31:30 office boy who did nothing else but carry messages from one office to the other. But all that has changed.

So when you were at school what sort of path had been established for you? Where would you be expected to head after school in terms of a career?

Had I remained in Sri Lanka I suppose

32:00 I would have been in a typical white-collar profession. That was not to be because the family [and] Ceylon [changed] when I was just out of school and 18 years old. My brother had been through university and he came here and became a teacher. He completed

32:30 his Bachelor of Education at Melbourne University and then proceeded to teach, which he had done for his entire career, and just retired. My sister completed her high school and matriculation. And I started working. I went straight to work and joined the... what was then the SEC or the State Electricity Commission.

33:00 That's now become defunct if you like and has been split up into other organisations.

Before we come to that point where your family does migrate. Can you tell us a bit about your schooling years and what academic life was like and the structure of schooling for you at Royal College?

At Royal College

33:30 I went to school with boys who were the best from all the primary schools. So I was amongst the best students in Colombo. These were guys who would later become professional men. It was a boy's school and it was very much in the old British tradition. Our former principals were

34:00 scholars from Oxford and Cambridge and that tradition had remained in my time. The teachers in the school were totally dedicated to the school and had often taught the fathers of some of the current pupils. For those of us who have seen the film Goodbye Mr Chips, it would give you

34:30 an idea of what our school was like. It was that sort of school where the boys and teachers were all totally dedicated and proud of being part of that school. We had a very fine cricket team and we used to play against another top-class private school, and when that cricket match was played

35:00 Colombo came to a stand still. Very much like the atmosphere during the Melbourne Cup in Melbourne. The whole of Colombo took an interest in that match. The Royal College boys who had been playing against St Thomas's for well over 100 years, and that is a long tradition and a long battle that has been going on historically... like the Oxford-

35:30 Cambridge boat race. Royal College playing against St Thomas' is something very big in Colombo. You think about Australia and England, who have been playing each other for about 120 years, so this big

match historically, when you compare it is in terms of cricketing history, I don't think any other school anywhere else in the world

36:00 has played against another school in a big grudge match for that long. So we had this wonderful match to look forward to. We also played rugby and we played against a school called Trinity College in Kandy. That was our big match in rugby and that

36:30 match has been going on for well over 50 years. So we had two big battles to fight against Trinity in rugby and against St Thomas's in cricket. When our boys meet, the rugby players and cricket, they reminisce and talk about

37:00 those battles against St Thomas and Trinity. And that takes up a lot of time in our conversations when we get together. But academically too the school produced some of the country's best students. I can give you the names of some people now who are well known worldwide. We produced an astronomer who

37:30 worked in England with the famous astronomer who's name escapes me [Chandra Wickramasinghe, Nobel Laureate 1983], Fred... [Hoyle] He excelled himself in astronomy. And so some of our boys have done brilliantly academically throughout the world.

38:00 **I've got a similar passion for cricket. The big grudge games you were talking about, would that be broadcast on radio or... you said the country came to a standstill. If you couldn't get to the ground, how did you hear about the game?**

Yes it would be broadcast on radio and now with television, certainly the people at home would watch the match on TV.

38:30 **Would you go to the ground or how would you get involved? Did you play in any of those matches?**

I didn't play in any of those matches but I certainly got to the ground with all the other boys waving the school flag and doing that sort of thing. Yes we certainly were the cheer squad.

What was discipline like at Royal College, was it particularly strict?

39:00 Yes. A cane was certainly used and sometimes you got six of the best. We were certainly highly disciplined. We respected our teachers nevertheless. Apart from receiving the cane a few times, we

39:30 still loved our teachers. So I can remember when I did make my trips back to Sri Lanka, some of my visits to meet special people on those occasions were to visit some of my old teachers. And we used to talk about some of the things we did during those

40:00 scout camps etc. And some of the outings where we climbed up the mountains etc.

Now it was a boy's school. Were there opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex?

Certainly, because there was a famous girl's school just around the corner and our boys certainly had their eyes on the girls from that school.

40:30 And certainly a lot of those boys ended up marrying some of the girls from that neighbouring school. So certainly, yes. Girls were always near by.

So would there be much fraternisation out of school hours? Was it the done thing to date during the high school years?

Anything like that had to be discreet and done on the quiet. There were strict rules regarding dating and things like that. It wasn't like here in Australia. Ladies were very strictly brought up and marriages were arranged. So you didn't see guys going after the girls. There would be a quick conversation here and a letter passed on there. So very much like here 100 years before.

Tape 2

00:32 **OK so we're back on. Maybe if we start where we left off. You were talking about girl-boy relationships. Were marriages generally arranged and particularly amongst the Burgher community?**

In the Burgher community marriages were not arranged.

01:00 The Burghers, because of their European heritage and their strong British influence, they were not bound by the rules Singalese and the Buddhists and the Tamils. Most of their marriages were arranged but the Burgher community were a much freer community as far as that was concerned.

01:30 We did meet girls in church for example and we did communicate fairly freely with our girls. However, the Singalese and Tamil communities had a far stricter code of ethics where their girls were very

protected and ended up in arranged marriages...

02:00 according to all their traditions.

So what would that mean in terms of intercommunity relationships?

There were such relationships but they were rare. The Burghers communicated with themselves and so did the Singalese and so did the Tamils.

02:30 However in school we were a multi-racial school, so the Tamils and the Burghers and the Ceylonese and the Muslim boys communicated very very freely. Royal College particularly was a sectarian school. We weren't an Anglican school or a Buddhist school. So in that respect the boys who went to Royal

03:00 grew up with other children who were from various other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. So amongst my friends were Singalese Buddhists, other Burgher Christians, Tamils who are Hindus and Moslems. And I grew up with them all. They were all my buddies and still today we communicate very very freely and we're all strong friends.

03:30 That was a marvellous legacy: to be able to be in a school environment where all the communities mixed very freely. But then I think in later life, people... I think people shifted in and out of their communities. Cricket clubs for instance. You have the Singalese cricket club, the Tamil cricket club and so forth. So

04:00 even at that level there was some segregation. So in school you mixed and then went back home to live a life with your particular community. And I think when it did come to marriage, mostly Singalese Buddhists married Singalese Buddhists etc. In my time when I was a schoolboy, inter-race marriages were rare.

04:30 In fact I can remember one boy in my class whose father was Singalese and his mother was Tamil. That was something special and the rules had been broken. That was something that was rare in those days. The communities did stick to themselves

05:00 when it came to things like marriage. Otherwise they mixed freely and took part in each other's festivities.

George, can you tell us about your family's decision to move to Australia. What lead to that and then as you had just left school, what your reaction to that decision was?

As I said to you earlier, the Burgher community found themselves

05:30 in a situation where they had been educated in English and then Singalese became the official language of the country and English was denounced and that sort of thing, and the Burghers were finding themselves out of step culturally. So they decided as a community to move and migrate to countries like Australia. My father was

06:00 one of several boys. Two of his brothers had also migrated to Australia in the 1950s and they were an influence on him. So they spoke highly of life in Melbourne and my brother too was adventurous and wanted to come here. So the family made a decision. My father paved the way. He came ahead in 1962 and my

06:30 brother. And my Mum, sister and I followed in 1963 after Dad had established a job and found a house. So my Mum, sister and I followed and arrived in Melbourne on 23rd December '63. There were rules about people leaving the country,

07:00 about not taking too much cash and there were restrictions and limitations on taking wealth out of the country. You had to spend it or leave it behind. So we decided to have a splash there. And I travelled first- class on what was one of the finest liners then, Oriana. There I was

07:30 18 years old, and I found myself in first class. We were waltzing to Strauss waltzes as the orchestra played and dancing [with] very wealthy people who were travelling from England to Australia. I found that a very fine experience from a rather shy boy. Here I was wining and dining and

08:00 dancing. It was quite a wonderful experience, which I will not forget. Our first port of call was Perth and we left the ship and travelled through the suburbs of Perth. And I remember the very pretty houses and gardens. They struck me as being neat and pretty and beautiful and my

08:30 first impression of Australia was a trip through the suburbs of Perth. And then Adelaide and Melbourne. And the only other bit of land we saw on the whole trip was the Cocos [Keeling] Islands which then belonged to the Clunies-Ross Family. We just waved to them as we passed by. It was a wonderful voyage.

09:00 People travelled by ship in those days. Migrants came on the ship and they were greeted at the Princess Pier. Dad's brother's welcomed us, and their cousins and wives also.

It sounds like you were quite open to the idea of making that big move?

No. To leave

- 09:30 one's country and friends and neighbours, especially when you're a teenage child, I think is a big jolt. It was I guess... I was reluctant. I mean if you were to take any 18 year old guy and say, "Pack your bags, we're going to leave this country for good and head off to live in another country," it would be
- 10:00 quite a shock, and quite a different... certainly a big jolt. So, I certainly had left my heart behind. Like all migrants do I guess. And certainly for my parents as well. They felt that by making the move, it would be better for my brother and sister and myself.

- 10:30 We would have had problems there, whereas here we would have been able to start afresh and having an English-speaking background we would adapt very quickly. So we settled down in Glen Iris in 1963.

Just going back a half step, how problematic might it have got back in Sri Lanka for the Burgher community?

A

- 11:00 great many Burghers remained. I guess at a rough guess, a good 80 to 90 per cent of the Burghers left, but the ones that remained, I don't think they were in any way ostracised too badly. They survive today quite happily. It was very fortunate that there was no violence.
- 11:30 The Burghers found themselves in a position where they were culturally out of step when the Sri Lankans became more nationalistic and were moving in a direction of restoring their own culture back into the country. And they left voluntarily. They were not chased out or anything like that.
- 12:00 It was a friendly departure where most of the Burgher community left the country. It is a funny irony that Singhalese and Tamils also moved out of the country in the decades that followed, because they were looking for
- 12:30 places where they could prosper economically. So they too started to migrate to Australia in the 1980s. The crunch for them was that the White Australia Policy that prevailed until... I'm not sure of dates, but say the '50s and '60s prevented
- 13:00 non-European migrants from coming to Australia. The Burghers in Ceylon qualified. They somehow were able to prove that they were than 50 per cent European and hence qualified. So the Burgher community was able to migrate to Australia and my Singalese and Tamil friends weren't able to do this. They didn't have the need of course.
- 13:30 However in the '70s and '80s and '90s, they too have been moving away from... there's been a brain drain leaving Sri Lanka and now they are also citizens of Australia. It's a funny thing that when I said goodbye to my Singalese and Tamil friends in the '60s, I thought I would never see them again. A great many
- 14:00 are now living in Melbourne and Sydney and once again our friendships have been restored. I now fraternise with about a dozen of my former classmates.

You mentioned your first impressions of Australia...the suburbs of Perth. You finally made it to Melbourne. What were your first impressions of this place?

- 14:30 We took to it very positively and we were welcomed in the neighbourhood here, and we became parishioners of St Oswald's in Glen Iris where we were welcomed also. Then a person who is a strong cricketer in the Glen Iris Cricket Club here,
- 15:00 soon got my brother and I to join the cricket team. So very soon we fitted into Australian life. In the church, in the neighbourhood, at work, and we were broadly speaking, highly welcomed. We took to Australia quite well.
- 15:30 **What struck you most culturally in that early period when you first got here?**
- Well we had to adapt to some of the things that were different and I suppose the Aussie culture. I suppose like all migrants we had to adapt to life here. I mean we had to listen careful to the Aussie accent and get to learn to understand it.
- 16:00 We certainly misunderstood a lot of things. A chap asked me, "How are you going?" and I said, "I'm going by train?" And there were lots of mistakes like that that I now look back to and have a nice little chuckle. Some of our guys who saw the 'No Standing' signs on the footpaths, they promptly sat down on the footpath. They thought that referred to people.
- 16:30 They didn't know it mealy referred to cars. There were lots of funny moments and all migrants I think will share these incidents with you.

What was the most difficult thing to get used to?

I can't remember any great difficulties. We had to sort of settle down... one

- 17:00 had to acquire a house and then had to buy things. You had to learn to shop around and you didn't know where to go or what to do. But with help from neighbours and friends you sort of got by. They'd point

you in the direction of... go to Myers or what not. Catch that train or that bus. So we soon learnt the ropes.

17:30 I guess we left a part of us behind and one always yearned to go back some day, and of course that never comes and you end up becoming good Aussie's yourselves after 40 years, like myself. In fact I'm celebrating my 40th anniversary in Australia in a month. On 23rd of December which

18:00 is only two weeks away I will have been in the country for 40 years.

Was there a swearing-in ceremony? Like a citizenship ceremony that you needed to attend?

Because Ceylon then was a British country or a Commonwealth country we were then regarded as British subjects,

18:30 hence we didn't have to go through the nationalisation ceremony that Greeks and Italians and other southern Europeans had to go through. So like the English migrants we didn't have to be nationalised. We were automatically deemed to be British subjects. However, all we had to do voluntarily was to become Australian citizens,

19:00 and that we did in due time. I still have my certificate with the Queen's coat of arms at the top.

Did people seem to know much or anything of where you had come from? And were people curious as to your background?

They knew I was a migrant straight away. The accent... which I still carry would have given it away. I guess I would have been regarded as a "New Australian"

19:30 as we were called. There was never any discrimination. We were never ever ... because we were different, harassed or anything like that. I suppose one advantage we had was that we came here with a fluent English background and that helped us to communicate properly. And

20:00 I think that migrants who were non-English speaking had a much harder time. In fact, they may have been seen as somehow different. Once you speak the language fluently I think you overcame the biggest barrier. Once you could talk to people, then they became my friends and vice versa. I was never ever in trouble

20:30 for being a migrant.

So what was the situation when you arrived? Your father had already found work ...

Yes he was working for the OTC. He arrived here and the very next day he was in. People who came here in the '60s got jobs fairly easily because we needed labour then. There were labour shortages in every department everywhere. So the SEC, the OTC or anything.

21:00 A bank or whatever. You got in straight away, so that was good. That's why were there, to fill all those unfilled niches. So Dad got a job and somebody at work said Glen Iris was a good suburb. He rented

21:30 a house in this very street here, in Kerferd Road. We were in No 26 and then No 39 came up for sale, so we made a bid and negotiated a sale and we've been in this house since 1964.

And what did you make of Melbourne. You've talked about the people, but just the feel of the place, the climate, and all that?

Well

22:00 Melbourne, we found it very cold. Having come from a country that was like 30 degrees Celsius every day, 12 months of the year. Luckily we came in summer. We were advised to come in summer. But certainly we found the winters very cold. Heating was very poor. I can remember that we welcomed the invention of the electric blanket.

22:30 To us that was the greatest invention. We soon adapted. A great many of the migrants from Ceylon ended up in Melbourne. I think the first Ceylonese must have come to Melbourne and the flow on happened from there. But now there's a fair smattering of Sri Lankans in Sydney and Adelaide and Perth.

23:00 My impression of Melbourne was that it was big, the streets were big. Our main street in Colombo was hardly wider than Curford Road Glen Iris. Everything here seemed much bigger, especially the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground]. We went there to watch the first test match and we were in awe of the largeness of the stadium.

23:30 We soon adapted to Melbourne life. I used to work in the city and got used to travelling on the train. The old Red Rattlers in the '60s. I did notice that there was 1st class, 2nd class and 3rd class trains in Australia, but

24:00 very soon that got knocked out thankfully, and we had the one-class trains throughout. Something I wouldn't have had in Colombo. It was strictly 1st, 2nd and 3rd class there.

You talked earlier about the difference being the rigid class structure in Ceylon and then the egalitarianism in Australia, can you recall any moments when that difference was highlighted?

24:30 Well I guess one accepts whatever one's confronted with. When we came here, everybody was equal and we just welcomed that and adapted to that. That was wonderful. Certainly we had to put our past life in

25:00 the past. So there were no real challenges or difficulties.

You got work not long after you got here, is that correct?

Yes. Everybody was calling us "mate" which I found amusing. I call my brother "mate" now. That became my nickname for him.

25:30 Everybody was saying "G'day, mate" and tongue in cheek I would say, "G'day, mate" to my brother. That stuck and I still pick up the phone and say "G'day, mate." He knows it's me. So that's stuck for 40 years and I call him "mate".

So where were you working?

At the SEC and that's where I worked for 30 years. I started off in Richmond at the SEC workshops there. I was

26:00 in their admin section there, in accounting. And then I put in 15 years there and then went into the city and then worked another 15 years at 15 William Street. When I got called up for National Service [compulsory military training for young males] I was very much a young man at SEC Richmond. My boss,

26:30 who was in the next office, opened the glass shutter that divided us, said he had some news for me. "Your Mum's just rung me to say your call up notice has been delivered. You've been called up for National Service." That's when the shock was announced. It was regarded as bad news. If you got called up -

27:00 nobody welcomed that I don't think. I guess the shock was greater for us because here we were adapting to a new country and now we had to adapt to another new situation which Aussies would have found bad enough. But I took it on the chin and decided to make the best of it

27:30 and so it was off to Puckapunyal in February 1965.

When had you received that news?

It would have been... now I can't remember. I'm rusty here. By the time I got the news to when I walked into Puckapunyal, it could have been two months, three months, six months, I'm not sure.

28:00 But it would have been no greater than six months. So I got the news.

So had you registered? You needed to register beforehand didn't you?

Yes. Anybody who was then between the ages of 18 or 19 and 20 had to register for National Service. So I

28:30 would have done that. Then the call up was based on the drawing of a date. So they were drawing dates out of a hat, and the 25th of July must have been plucked out of a hat because all the guys then born on that date were called up. And I guess they would have drawn dates until they got the quota.

29:00 So the guys that didn't get called up it simply meant that their date wasn't drawn.

What did you think of that system?

Well it was fair because if they were pulling out names, people would say that they might have pulled out a name and then found out he was somebody's son and then put it back into the box.

29:30 Whereas nobody could complain. If they were drawing a date then there would be no discrimination then. The system was utterly fair as far as recruiting names out of a hat or getting people at random was concerned. It was a truly random selection. However there were exclusions. People who were studying or just

30:00 on the verge of entering university or just got into university or whatever. They were excluded and this straight away discriminated against the system. And I found that by leaving out people who had entered university etc, they were straight away leaving out if you like, an elite group. I found myself there

30:30 with mainly working class people, country people. A lot of country guys, farmers and so on and so forth.. Certainly I didn't see any Scotch College boys or Melbourne Grammar boys there. So in that sense, what was truly a fine selection process became unfair because certain people certainly got excluded by virtue of the fact that they

31:00 were studying or something like that. So if you like the elite was excluded. I thought that was unfair.

Had you yourself thought of furthering your education?

Well I started off by going straight into the work force because we had to pay the house rent and we all had to chip in.

31:30 Looking back on it I would have preferred if we had been in a better situation financially initially, I would have liked to have gone to university myself and into a professional life. However this didn't happened to me and I remained if you like in a low white collar

32:00 profession for most of my working career, which I do regret. I should have taken the initiative there to get some tertiary education. Later, out of interest, when I was in my forties, I got a Bachelor of Arts degree just out of interest. All too late. I guess I was a very

32:30 timid and very shy child and I took a long long time to adapt and I guess I feared going to school in university here and that has definitely gone against me as far as career is concerned.

Did you have any friends at the time who may have conscientiously objected to the cause?

33:00 The conscientious objectors were few and far between and the ones who did conscientiously object were perceived negatively and most of the ones were called up, even though it was a shock, accepted the call up. I respected

33:30 the ones who were conscientious objectors. I suppose more and more in later life I look back on them with a very high degree of respect and almost said to myself, I wish I had the courage to be a conscientious objector myself. They were a tiny minority and they suffered.

34:00 I think the Fraser Government chucked them in the clink for having burnt their draft cards. I certainly remember that they were given a hard time. I view that very sadly now, 40 years later. But they were the times. I guess the Second World War fervour was still there in the '50s and '60s where

34:30 going to war and fighting and concurring was seen as a positive thing. You were a hero if you went out to war and knocked off some other lesser guy somewhere else in the world. However the guys who came back from Vietnam were to learn a different lesson because they were not heroes and not

35:00 welcomed back. But we'll get to that later on in the discussion. I'd like to give you my views on that.

What did you yourself know at the time of what was happening in Vietnam?

Well at the time of call up? Well like everybody else we knew there was an American involvement in Vietnam. Lyndon B Johnson [President of United States] and then we had Harold Holt [Prime Minister of Australia] here... going "all the way with LBJ".

35:30 The famous words that have stuck and remain with us 40 years later. It was apparent that where ever there was going to be an American involvement, we were going to form a rearguard to that, and that's not changed. I guess that legacy will be with us for a long time as long as we're dependant on the US for our security.

36:00 So there we were about to be a part of the American scene and I guess I was one of the early ones. The first lot had gone about the year or two before I did. So I consider myself one of the pioneers of that war. One of the early recruits.

And what did your family think of this?

36:30 My call up was as great a shock... particularly to my mother and my family, [more to] them, [than] it was even to me. Our first reaction was, how do we get out of this one? Our poor George has been called up. We found that the only way you could get out was if you were in tertiary studies or something which sadly I

37:00 hadn't done. If you were in some way... for ill health reasons. And here I was, a very fit fellow. Had been playing cricket and regular squash with cricket team members. We used to play squash in the evenings too. So here I was fighting fit and I couldn't find an excuse. I did suffer from migraine and I used that as an excuse but they said that

37:30 wasn't good enough. So I did get called up well and truly and much to my mother's horror.

So tell us about that period. Your number came up and ... how did you get to Puckapunyal?

38:00 Well, nine o'clock in the morning on whatever that date was in February 1965, I had to turn up at the Melbourne Army depot somewhere in Batman Avenue I think it was, where a bus would be waiting to take us all. I was farewelled by my family and good luck and into the bus with my suitcase and that was it. Off to Puckapunyal where I spent my first three months doing what was then

38:30 called "basic training" where you learnt to be a soldier. You had to adapt from civilian life to military life. We found ourselves living in what we called "huts". There was 10 or 12 or 16 of us in a hut and we

were then in either Platoons A, B or C.

39:00 We had to adapt and we were recruited to military life. Up at 5 o'clock in the morning, roll call, then on the parade ground and learning to march, weaponry. I found we spent just as much time in the classroom which was very interesting learning about theoretical things.

39:30 Compasses and one thing and another.

Do you remember what the mood was like, particularly in the bus up to Pucka [Puckapunyal]? The sorts of characters you were sharing this trip with?

There were some wonderful characters because you put 16 guys or whatever in a hut, there will always be a diversity of interests.

40:00 We had the bible basher, a chap who would read his bible in the evenings. Other guys who were quite the opposite. Guys from the country. Fellows who loved their footy and cricket and one thing and the other. We all had a common interest and that was to survive Puckapunyal and that kept us together and there was a kind of camaraderie between us. We were all the best of mates straight away. We had a common enemy, the sergeant that looked after us.

40:30 By and large I found the guys who were with me great fun. I got to know them better and better and we became the best of friends, and I rather liked military life because I was a fit guy and I used to love the jogging and the runs, and I found it very easy to scabble up those walls and jump off the top

41:00 and I did use a little air rifle as a boy in Sri Lanka. I used to shoot all the crows in Colombo, and on holidays I would take my gun along and take the odd pot shot of birds. I was a very good shot and I was privileged to learn to use a rifle by one of Victoria's finest marksmen, one of our sergeants. I loved the shooting and very soon we were able to dismantle the rifle with its bits and pieces, even blindfolded... in seconds. I couldn't believe I would become so fluent.

Tape 3

00:32 **So you weren't a citizen of the country and you were being called up to fight for this country?**

Yes I found that rather strange. You would have thought that the number of Australians volunteering to fight for the country would have been

01:00 in high demand that there wouldn't be a need for the Johnny Come Latelys [new citizen]. But that was not true. Just as much as I was not happy about my call up, nor were any of the other Australians who were called up either. No one wanted to be called up. So there I was, by virtue of the fact that I was a migrant,

01:30 I qualified, even though at that stage I was not a citizen of Australian. And in fact that was a worry for me because prior to my departure to Vietnam I made a very rapid... I rapidly took steps to get my Australian citizenship.

02:00 I quickly filled in a form and sent it off to Canberra and I got my Australian citizen because I did not want to find myself a prisoner of war in some Vietnamese jail for the rest of my life and not an Australian citizen because that would be a terrible predicament to be in if steps were being taken

02:30 to somehow get Australian citizens back home. I may have been deemed a non-Australian and may have been overlooked. So I took the steps to become a citizen very quickly prior to my departure.

Were you advised to do that?

No. It came out of my brain. I thought I had better do this in a hurry.

Were you given much information prior to being bussed up to Pucka about

03:00 **what you were in for? And of that possibility that you could be taken prisoner?**

No none of that. That sort of thing was not a part of ... it didn't come into the discussions. I mean, first things first, we were taken off to Pucka in the knowledge that the idea was with the National Servicemen being recruited for

03:30 a two-year period, the idea was to serve in a training capacity for 12 months and then overseas in South Vietnam for 12 months. That was to be the ultimate fate of a national serviceman. So there we were at Pucka as I was saying to you, doing the basic training, three months at Puckapunyal.

04:00 For seven days a week and towards the latter stages of our three months they started to give us weekends off. That was warmly welcomed. We were able to come home and spend Saturdays and Sunday mornings with the family and then return. That was quite lovely.

Can I take you back a little bit to that point before

04:30 **it was confirmed that you would be a recruit, and that's when you went for the medical and you went through that process. What was that like for you? There was some sort of hope there, wasn't there that you would get off on medical grounds?**

Yes I thought I would get out on medical grounds because I suffered from migraine headaches and I was plagued by migraines. But the doctor didn't think that was a good enough or valid reason,

05:00 so I found myself passed medically fit and every other way fit. I think we were given other tests and I passed them all, and I was rather surprised that a great many boys were failed on medical grounds for all sorts of complaints that excluded them. They were valid complaints, bad eyesight or half

05:30 their teeth missing and all sorts of basic things that I took for granted. These were guys inflicted with all of these things and I was surprised because prior to coming to Australia, my concept of an Aussie male, was that guy at Manly Beach. Six foot four tall with broad shoulders, bronzed and really the tough bronze ANZAC [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps]

06:00 was my concept of an Aussie male. But I found that during the medical tests and the selection process, these guys weren't there and a lot of them failed the medicals and all the other tests. This Sri Lankan Johnny Come Lately, myself, 8 stone, fragile guy got called up and passed all the tests. If found this someone of an irony.

06:30 **How did it make you feel in terms of your Australian-ness. You were sort of transforming into an Australian?**

Well it certainly helped the process because for the first time I guess, apart from the neighbourhood at Glen Iris and my work mates at the SEC and in the local church and the guys in the cricket team, I guess

07:00 I was seeing a broader cross section of Australian males, particularly guys from the country who I hadn't known before. I did meet some West Australians, South Australians and Victorians. Guys who were telling me they came from Stawell and Dimboola, and places like that. I found that quite fascinating. In fact Dimboola in Victoria was named after the town with the same name

07:30 in Ceylon. We had a Dimboola in Ceylon and a British governor here must have seen some likeness and Dimboola Victoria was named after Dimboola in Ceylon. So when I met a boy from Dimboola I was quite charmed. There I was with all over the places with all these wonderful backgrounds. But we were strongly united, and very friendly.

08:00 There were no problems like fights in the huts at night or anything like that.

Did that surprise you?

What? That we didn't fight?

Yes. Did you have some expectation in your mind that you might have to in some way defend yourself?

Not really. I think I must have been a very open-minded guy with no prejudices or preconceived ideas. Now I've got a million and one preconceived ideas.

08:30 I think these are things that come to you in later life. But then my mind was open to anything and I was very adaptive. So I didn't have the problems that you might envisage I had. I adapted very quickly to the life in the camp at Puckapunyal. I was just like all the others. We did have some sports to play

09:00 and I got into the cricket team. That's when all rank was cast aside and I found myself opening the batting for B Company with our major who was the other batsman. I didn't know whether or not to say, "Let's go for that quick single, sir." I found

09:30 that the poor major wasn't able to run as fast as I was running and he had to slow me down. My quick singles were not working too well for him. He was an older man and for a 20 year old like myself, a 30 year old guy seemed like an old guy and pretty slow. But we had a lot of fun there as well. They were good times at Puckapunyal.

10:00 **So the setting is country Victoria up there at Pucka...**

Well Pucka is only about an hour away north of Melbourne beyond Seymour and I haven't visited it since I was a recruit there in 1965 and I've been meaning to go back there and have a look at the camp and make a sentimental journey. I've yet to do that.

So how was it for you spending time in the country like that? You were doing exercises

10:30 **and training out there in the field?**

We were there in the summer time so it was quite hot. We were doing all our runs and jogs and one thing and another... up and down the hills there. I don't remember being in any sort of difficulty with those sorts of things. I was quite agile and I felt sorry for some of the guys who were overweight.

- 11:00 We had some rather big guys and it was a tremendous strain on them when we had to do those five mile runs. I felt sorry for them. But I adapted quite well. And then from there we were all allocated to various corps.
- 11:30 This was important because if you got into the infantry you were likely to be a front line combatant person. In some of the other corps, if you were sent across to Vietnam you were more likely to survive. For every combatant person in the field there had to be another ten or ten support people that looked after the soldier in the field.
- 12:00 When somebody... the public concept of a soldier, is that guy with the rifle out there shooting and being shot at, they forget that there are the engineers and the doctors and the medics and the ordnance people and the mechanical engineers and all the others. The artillery people and all the
- 12:30 other different ones. So when I was leaving Puckapunyal I was told I had been designated to be in ordnance, and I didn't know what that was. And I was soon to learn that our nickname was "blanket folders". We were the guys who looked after all the equipment.
- 13:00 All the bits and pieces that had to be stored and looked after. Off I went then to Puckapunyal further north. I moved it appears, progressively north. I was off to Bandiana near Albury on the border of Victoria and New South Wales and there I did a further three months training... and here I was recruited to be a proper ordnance
- 13:30 person. One of the first things they said to me was that in Ordnance Corp you had to be a soldier first. That meant I still had to be fluent with weaponry and that I enjoyed and liked. So we definitely didn't put down our rifles just because we were in ordnance. But
- 14:00 we certainly learned to take up our role as people who procured and looked after and dealt with all the equipment. I suppose we were the stores people for the military forces. I was a good ordnance person. Then my next step was further north again. I ended up in Sydney... that was after three months at Pucka and three months of corp training. We were
- 14:30 now ready to perform the duties of a military person. It was here that I was then cast into a general ordnance corps. There I was in Sydney, in Moorebank working in an ordnance corps role. There, for the first time,
- 15:00 I met the regular army people because up to this point in time I was a national serviceman with other "Nashos" [national servicemen] as we were called and here we were now cast into the roles of being in a normal army unit that consisted of regulars, "Regs" [Regular Army] as they were called. Herein lay the first
- 15:30 division that we had... Regs and Nashos. The Regs didn't take to the Nashos too well. We were now also trained soldiers and most of us better than they were in some respects. We were guys who came from middle class backgrounds etc and somehow
- 16:00 we found ourselves beating the Regs at their own game. And they resented this. There was a slight bit of Reg-Nasho thing. I don't think it worried the Regs and Nashos too greatly because at the end of the day we were all comrades together. So I found myself with regular army men, sergeants and officers who
- 16:30 had been in the military forces for a long time, and they were my mentors. I found myself with other Regulars who had been trained in places like Kapooka in New South Wales. So here we had the normal regular forces being supplemented with these characters known as National Servicemen or Nashos.
- 17:00 So the Nashos now had to adapt to the life of normal regular soldiers and be part of their lives. Once again the Nashos had to adapt and as I said, we adapted well. We were certainly second to any regular. We had learnt and learnt well and we were as good as they were.
- 17:30 **That's very interesting, that in six months of training you had reached that point where you were a trained soldier and worthy of your place in the army. I'd like to just go back over some of that training. You had come from a very well educated background,**
- 18:00 **so you were used to education and you were used to training. You're in this situation at Pucka which is perhaps like cadet school but more so. What did you think of the training and the standard of it and the skills you were able to develop?**
- I enjoyed it. In fact I forgot to tell you something. There was an opportunity for the Nashos to go into officer training and I put in for this.
- 18:30 I was told that I just failed to get selected, so my career could well have been as an officer. So some of the National Servicemen did end up as officers. Otherwise they ended up right at the bottom, servicing as privates and some of them moved up and at best becoming corporals or sergeants.
- 19:00 **So did you see a career prospect there for yourself?**
- Certainly. At the end of the two years I was strongly invited to remain in the army. Strongly. They just

hated to see me leave. I just felt it was another world that I really didn't want to be a part of. I really wanted to get back to the real world.

19:30 My interests in the civilian world I think were far too strong. I did want to return to my family and to come back to Melbourne and go back into a commercial world and not be part of this strange military world. It is definitely a world apart. And my decision was to leave it, but I was strongly invited to remain.

20:00 So I could have ended up spending the rest of my life in a military career certainly.

You said you enjoyed the physical training at Pucka. Did you find the theoretical training stimulating?

Oh yes. We certainly had to do things like map and compass. I found that

20:30 fascinating and enjoyed it. I can't remember a great deal of the theory, but I do know we were in a classroom environment as much as we were outside.

And who were your teachers?

They were sergeants. Mostly sergeants. And first lieutenants as well... in some of the more intellectual concepts.

21:00 **What war experience had they had?**

Some of my teachers had served in the Second World War. I remember one of them telling me about his time in Japan and marrying a Japanese girl. I remember that vividly. He was a very friendly sergeant and we were

21:30 very fond of him and he was telling me a lot about his Japanese wife which I found interesting. So these were Second World War people.

So moving on to Bandiana, you were doing specialist training in ordnance there. But also...

22:00 **you were having combat training there as well?**

Yes we still had to be skilled with our weapons and that side of it. As I say, they said we were soldiers first and ordnance second. I remember that being said to us. I think that was a good thing. I would have hated to have been in an office environment or something and

22:30 had to put my rifle aside and lost that skill.

So tell me about the weapons training?

Basically we were trained to use what was called an SLR... self loading rifle. Later on I used an Owen machine carbine,

23:00 which was a semi-automatic weapon and we also used machine guns as well. So there weren't a great number of weapons to become familiar with. Our main weapon was the SLR. In Vietnam we found the Americans were using a far superior weapon, which was the M16 and some of us did... I remember using one just for practice. And I found the M16 far better.

23:30 But all the Aussies were trained with the good old SLR.

So can you tell me how you were trained to use the weapon? Can you take me through the training process?

Well one of the things you had to learn was safety. And at all times you had to never ever point your weapon at another person.

24:00 This was drilled into you... if you ever pointed your weapon at somebody you would be in very serious trouble. The safety aspects were just absolutely well done and we became very skilled in that routine. You had to look after your own rifle. And if you called it a "gun" you were in trouble.

24:30 It was a "rifle" not a gun. And you had to look after your own rifle and when you returned it for safe keeping at any time, you had to remember its number and you would then ask for your rifle back. So you always stuck to your own rifle. So you got used to it and that particular rifle became yours. You knew every piece.

25:00 You were taken to the rifle range and shown how to load the thing. Then if things went wrong you were given all the... what was known as immediate actions or IAs. So if your rifle failed to work you had to then put it through its immediate actions.

25:30 So you would put it through immediate action number one, which was to take off the magazine and see if there were bullets in it. And so on and so forth. So you went through these drills so often and for so long that all the immediate actions became part and parcel and part of your routine. So that in a real situation,

- 26:00 if your rifle didn't work, you would automatically go into your immediate actions, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 and make it work again. You wouldn't panic. You would just go through the IAs as they were called. So this was all a part of the training, and of course you had to be accurate. So we had our targets to shoot at and we would practice under the best supervision and the finest marksmen.
- 26:30 So we became very very good and competent with our SLRs. And we could dismantle them and put them back together again. So we knew every bit. And we had to clean it. At the end of the day you had a bit of rope. You put a bit of cloth up the other end and pulled it through the rifling.
- 27:00 Your rifle had to be spic and span [clean] because it was inspected every morning. Overnight you cleaned it. Every bit and piece was cleaned and oiled to perfection and put back together. So the following morning at inspection, the sergeant inspecting you... not only did he inspect your bed. It had to be made to perfection and all your clothes in the cupboard had to be
- 27:30 exactly... singlets there and shirts there and the boots had to be polished. The hut had to be swept and then it was time to... there was the weapons inspection. And the sergeant inspecting your weapon would hold it up and look through the barrel. If there was the tiniest speck of fluff or dust in there you were in deep trouble. So there was a tremendous disciplining. That rifle
- 28:00 was kept in perfect functioning order and this became part of you and we took that for granted after a while. The training was just magnificent in my view. We were superb with our weapons and we learnt to respect our rifle. And we learnt the safety side of it. You never handed your rifle to another person
- 28:30 without telling them the state of affairs regarding the rifle. In other words you gave it to someone else and you said to them, it's loaded or unloaded or whatever. In your rifle there was a thing called a bolt and quite often you removed the bolt for safety reasons.
- 29:00 And that made the weapon ineffective while the bolt was removed. So if you were not going to use the rifle for a few days, during that period you took the bolt out and kept it separately. That would ensure that if someone picked it up and accidentally pulled the trigger, it would not harm anybody. So safety was a big factor. I can remember being shown how to use a hand grenade
- 29:30 for the first time. This was quite daunting because if you dropped it you were going to blow yourself and your trainer up. So we had to be absolutely fluent and learn the instruction and not make a single error. You were handed this thing that looked like a little pineapple, metal and about the size of a tennis ball,
- 30:00 and it had a little lever and a pin. You held the lever down and squeezed lever and grenade firmly, grasped in your hand. Whilst the lever was down, it wouldn't go off, and there was also a pin that you removed which made it come alive. So, once you removed the pin... there was a hook at the end of the pin so it was like
- 30:30 a person removing the top of a beer can. You would pull the pin out. but whilst the lever was down, it wouldn't go off. But once you hurled it, in about two or three seconds it would explode. So when the big moment came, you grasped it, pulled the pin and sweated a bit
- 31:00 and then hurl the thing and then duck behind the sandbags and wait for the explosion.

So were you training with dummy grenades first?

I can't remember but I think we must have thrown a few dummies before the real one. We had sandbags in such a way that if you dropped it accidentally, you would leap over to the other side of the sandbags and go down and escape the explosion.

31:30 **So that part of the training with - dropping down behind the sandbags - was critical?**

Yes critical and always down. We had to go under barbwire and

- 32:00 learn to jump in and out of water. There was a thing called the "bear pit". I don't know why, and you would dunk yourself. You would leap off the wall into a pit full of water and then you would have to scramble out of that. So we were quite fluent in running around with our packs and
- 32:30 zig zagging out of narrow barbwire enclosures. Well conversant at manoeuvring ourselves and rolling. If you were down and behind cover and still wanted to move from A to B you would just roll. Gun and all. So we were quite good at these manoeuvres.
- 33:00 Then we had a lot of military exercises that happened out in the bush. We had pretend war scenarios where we had to camp out somewhere and build our trenches and what not and other guys played the roll of enemy. Your trainers did that and we had to learn to alert the others. All night we would
- 33:30 be up and take it in turns to sleep. All this sort of thing we did and we did our training out in the bush.

So the trainers were the enemy?

Yes, they would play the roll of the enemy and they would take us by surprise. We had to retaliate and shoot at them with dummy bullets of course.

34:00 And form various formations under control. Then we'd have a post mortem afterwards and they'd say we did that wrong or we could have done that better. That was part of the training.

So were you allocated to particular roles in those exercises?

Yes. You would be part of your platoon and you had your leader and instructions. It could have been

34:30 a pretend situation where you were walking through the bush and you had to know what to do if you were ambushed. You'd have another set of people who may stage an ambush then you would have to go down and decide to retreat or attack in a particular fashion. So we did all these training exercises. A lot of pretend stuff.

35:00 That was where we got to learn how to react in what could have been a real live situation one day. So the training was good.

How were your comrades going through this training? Were these the fellows you had been in Pucka with and moved on to Bandiana with you?

No some of them didn't of course.

35:30 I only met guys at Bandiana who were the Ordnance Corp. The others who had gone into other corps had gone elsewhere for their training. So this is where you lose about 90 per cent of your friends straight away and pick up a new lot of friends. Then when I was at Bandiana as an ordnance person I was put into a regular unit

36:00 where it was just nine to five stuff then. You just fulfilled the role of being in a particular unit. Then came the news that we had to go to Vietnam. Our unit was designated to form a part of a contingent

36:30 and at that stage we were looking for volunteers. We were to be a part of 102 Field Workshop, 102 Field Workshop R.A.E.M.E., the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. 101 Workshops had already been in Vietnam for 12 months and their 12 months were up.

37:00 So 102 was to replace them. That workshop consisting of about 100 or 150 guys needed an ordnance component to look after their equipment. They were mainly electrical and mechanical engineers: fitters, turners, welders, mechanics. Somebody had to look after their store.

37:30 And they needed to have about 15 ordnance guys. So that 15 was going to come from somewhere. The ordnance unit that I was working in in Moorebank Sydney had to provide this. And our lieutenant interviewed us all and he said,

38:00 "We have plenty of guys who are willing to go voluntarily, we need 15 guys and x number of people interested to be part of that 15. So any of you who think you would rather not go, I'd be happy to exclude you." So we had some exclusions. Guys who said that "no way known would I ever go to Vietnam. That's the last thing I would do."

38:30 There again guys who I perceived to be quite tough and quite brave surprised me when they pulled out. But it was not for them. I remained and volunteered and I told them I wanted to remain in this unit and be part of this team.

39:00 So I'm one of those who wanted to serve. And I was welcomed. He said, "You are welcome to be part of the team."

Did you have time to think about it?

I'm sure we were. I'm sure we were given three or four days or whatever or a week or two or whatever it was. It was a fair thing. There were a lot of guys in other ordnance units who were also interested in being a part of this team. So we were given first priority, the ones who volunteered.

39:30 So you had guys... the one's who went were all volunteers. We didn't have any unhappy guys who didn't want to go and were forced to go. So that was a neat situation.

But for you personally, did you have to think twice about whether you wanted to go or not?

For me it was a clear decision to go because I was up to this stage, you know, a person who had been training to

40:00 be part of this and then it would have been, for me, a disappointment to pull out. I look back on it and think, "Was it foolhardy or what?" It was my decision to continue on. I knew that I wouldn't be in serious trouble because I was in

40:30 a non-combatant unit. And I knew that one or two field workshops, R.A.E.M.E. and the ordnance attachment to them would be in the background in Vung Tau. And not in Nui Dat, where most of the action was happening. So I happily volunteered. I knew I would adapt to the terrain. I had

41:00 just migrated to Australia from a tropical country, so I knew that Vietnam wouldn't bother me. In fact I looked forward to being back in the tropics again. So off I went. But before that I had to pass the jungle

Tape 4

00:36 **Did you feel at all patriotic?**

Yes I guess. From the inside the old God, Queen and Country thing was apparent. You felt you were doing the correct thing. But in the outside world there were certainly objectors

01:00 to our presence in the Vietnam war. I guess as a 20 year old I wasn't so much aware of the moral implications of ventures such as this. You just took at face value your own situation. You didn't think too much. I suppose the military people

01:30 saw the objectors of being out of step, whereas now, 40 years later I would be more on the side of the objectors than the military fraternity. It's an aging process. Your leanings change with age. And as a young 20 year old I guess I was thinking that this was quite an adventure.

02:00 And the moral implications I suppose came second. But now I would look at it totally differently. I would be advising my son not to rush off into any war. In fact I would be advising the very opposite.

You mentioned before that there was a certain amount of indoctrination

02:30 **and that war in a way gave licence to fuelling racist attitudes. Were you aware of that? Was that something that came through?**

Well of course. Once again we were at war with an enemy that we had to undermine and somehow we had to turn them into monsters,

03:00 lesser people. So here were these evil, slanty-eyed, slope-headed gooks that we somehow had to kill, seek and destroy. If those people were seen in the same light as yourself, you wouldn't do that. So somehow they had to be undermined. That is the way any war is justified.

03:30 They've really got to be the bad guys. I can remember... I had a difficulty here. A very good friend of mine, a prefect at Royal College where I studied and spoke you about earlier, he was out here completing a Master of Science and PhD [Doctor of Philosophy] at Melbourne University. He was one of our most scholarly students

04:00 and clever thinkers. A man who I would describe as being highly moralistic and intelligent and one of our... really, a very very clever thinker. When he heard that I had been drafted to serve in Vietnam he rang me on the phone and he said, "Do you realise what you're doing here.

04:30 You're going out there to shoot guys very much like us." By "us" he meant Sri Lankans. And these Vietnamese people were fellow Asians. That for me certainly was a dilemma, whereas to the Aussies these guys were "slope heads" and "gooks". To me these guys were fellow human beings.

05:00 Therein lies what was for me a difficulty. I guess if I was to serve in a combatant area, that difficulty would have been greater. So there was a contradiction there. Morally I was opposed to my presence there, but I still volunteered. So

05:30 part of me didn't like the scenario, and part of me... my adventurous side and my team spirit thing, and part of wanting to be with mates and be part of that, and some other moral side of me didn't like the fact that I may have to shoot a person who would be a person very much like myself.

06:00 **You spoke before about having contact with your friends in Sri Lanka... when they heard that you were conscripted...**

Yes the boys, especially the ones who were cadets. When I was in school I didn't join the Cadet Corp

06:30 and the cadets saw me as a wimp and somehow not a very brave person. And now those same guys realised I was a soldier in the Australian Army and about to fight in Vietnam, and straightaway my status changed from wimp to being their hero. They couldn't accommodate me. They couldn't believe I could actually be a military person.

07:00 One friend fronted up to me and tongue in cheek said to me, "I think the only role I can see for you is to be the chaplain." I had a lovely laugh and I had to tell him I was capable of being much more than the chaplain.

Were you having contact with them during your training period?

Yes I did maintain

07:30 a correspondence with my old school mates, whilst I was in Australia, and the one who thought I should be the chaplain, was one of our finest boys. I would describe him as Dux of the school. He ended up

becoming a surgeon. He got the highest marks in the exam,

08:00 and he with his cadetting background appreciated my role here. In fact in Sri Lanka he continued to serve in a voluntary capacity, helping the forces there when troubles broke out in Sri Lanka in the 1980s [Tamil independence fighting]. So he had a role as a surgeon in helping the wounded especially. And he took part in some of those

08:30 adventures over there.

Did you feel a need to talk to them about what your experience was?

I guess my main communication would have been with my family. They wrote to me very often when I was in Vietnam and sent the local newspapers... they bundled up the Age and the Sun and the [Melbourne] Herald

09:00 and sent it up to me. Here was another funny irony. I was in a situation where I was confined to a role to play and I was a small cog in a small wheel. And the broader picture escaped me. So the only way I found out what was happening in the war was

09:30 by reading these newspaper two weeks later. In order to find out what was happening in Vietnam, I had to read the Australian press. Being there didn't help. I thought this was quite funny.

So the Army didn't keep you very well informed?

Not at all. The broader picture didn't seem to relate.

10:00 Our main concern was to fulfil our particular little role. There I was a storeman looking after the bits and pieces and the greater picture of our involvement in the war and how it was progressing was just going completely above my head and it was unknown to me until I read the Herald two weeks later.

10:30 **So let's talk about learning how to be a storeman. At Bandiana you were introduced to that. That's where you got your ordnance training...**

Our nickname was "blanket folders". The guys in the tanks were known as "turret heads". So we were the blanket folders and our

11:00 role was to look after the... we had to be trained to either be storemen or clerks associated with the store. And all the military procedures: we got to know there in full force. When an item was procured there was a form that had to be filled in

11:30 ... I remember well... in five copies. Copy 1 had to go to so and so, and 2, 3 and 4 to another place. Now here we were indoctrinated into a very strict formal military procedure. It would have left any public servant for dead. There were sometimes up to five copies of something. And the right person had to end up with one of those five copies.

12:00 So these military procedures were very detailed. You can look back on it now and laugh but that's the way the Army was. Very precise and very detailed.

So were you allotted to a particular department within this area?

There were big ordnance areas...

12:30 ordnance units that operated as ordnance units. A whole unit full of ordnance guys who looked after equipment. Then they also got split up into little groups and they were placed within the unit of another corp. So you could well have been an ordnance person functioning in an ordnance unit, or you could have been an ordnance attachment

13:00 to another corps. That was my situation. Here I was, really working for the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. I was in a R.A.E.M.E. unit, but I was part of a little ordnance group of 10 or 15 and being part of that.

13:30 Say you were in the Medical Corps, you would be in a similar situation. Either you were in a hospital where everybody was either a doctor or a nurse, or you would be a single medic in another unit to look after their medical needs. So they had corps acting solely and wholly as that corps or a

14:00 fragment in another corps. So you had more than one corps forming a unit. So it might be 99 per cent R.A.E.M.E. and the other 1 per cent would be other guys fulfilling other needs. Like we had one medic and the rest ordnance guys.

14:30 **So when they came to you and asked if you were interested in joining the R.A.E.M.E. group, had you had any training in electrical and mechanical engineering?**

No we didn't have to. We were going to be their storeman. That was our role. They were the electrical and mechanical engineers. We had to run their store. So we had about 15 ordnance guys being part of this R.A.E.M.E. unit

15:00 because they wouldn't have had the skills to run a store. So they needed us to do that. And they wouldn't have had the medical skills. So they had to have a medic to do that side of it. So that was how you would be, one corps interspersed with another. So here we were 15 ordnance guys being cast with a R.A.E.M.E.. unit. So when I'm asked where I served, I say 102 Field

15:30 Workshop R.A.E.M.E.. and I was an ordnance man.

What I actually meant though, as part of your training at Bandiana in ordnance were you trained in what sort of stores would be needed for a unit such as that? Was it that specific?

No, I was trained to be a general ordnance man, but now I had to adapt to being an ordnance person within a R.A.E.M.E.. unit.

16:00 So the equipment I was looking after, enough blankets and sheets and pillowcases, but also mostly vehicle spare parts. So there I was spending my day with wheels and differentials and carburettors and what not. Looking after these bits and pieces. So I had to go off to the airport when a plane was coming in with supplies

16:30 and load up the landrover with all the bits and pieces and then all these items had to be recorded and then entered into the books and put on the shelves. So when a R.A.E.M.E.. was repairing a broken-down vehicle, he would come to us and we would issue him with the parts.

17:00 So that was our role.

So were you happy about ending up in ordnance?

Quite happy with ordnance. The last thing I wanted was to be with the main body of soldiers.

17:30 So I was happy to be in one of the corps, non-combatant corps and I adapted to being a good ordnance man.

What was the set up at Bandiana, in as much as the training area, sleeping quarters?

Very similar to Puckapunyal. Just the usual huts and beds.

18:00 Like a common dormitory and of course it was much more relaxed than Pucka was. You didn't have a sergeant screaming at you every minute of the day. So it was slightly better in that regard. You had less to do with marching up and down a parade ground and more to do with a

18:30 particular skill. That we did well and then off to Sydney where I joined a regular ordnance unit. And that's where for the first time I was cast into a general situation. I joined a regular unit where we were supplementing the man power, and that's when the national servicemen

19:00 met the regulars for the first time.

Ok, so let's talk about that. What job did you have to do once you were in that situation in Sydney? How long was that for first of all?

I didn't get called up to go to Vietnam until

19:30 June 1967. So I found myself at least almost 12 months in Sydney. So I had six months training, 12 months in Sydney and then I went off to Vietnam with only six months to go for my two year National Service.

20:00 **So Sydney was before you went to Canungra?**

Yes. Oh yes, prior to my departure to Vietnam I did the jungle training course in Canungra. When I did the course I really didn't appreciate where Canungra was.

20:30 That became quite hazy. Recently I was in Brisbane and I was going up into what they call "the Hinterland" travelling towards a national park, and then I passed Canungra. I had a look at it and then it dawned on me and I knew where I was. I popped in there for a minute and realised where the jungle training course

21:00 had taken place. I was consciously more aware of its location only recently. Otherwise I was just piled into the back of a truck and taken to location A, B or C where we did an all-night bushwalk here or a jungle training session there. And I really didn't know where I was, but being a newcomer to the country,

21:30 I didn't know where these places were. But now I have a better knowledge of the terrain, so I now know where Canungra is.

So that was entirely combat training?

Yes. Nobody was allowed to serve in Vietnam, whether he was an infantryman or ordnance, come what may,

- 22:00 you wouldn't be allowed to serve in Vietnam unless you did a jungle training course at Canungra. So that knocked out quite a few fellows again because they were unable to pass that course. They were either not fit enough or good enough with their weapons or the many, many skills and tests you were put through there.
- 22:30 They were rigorous. If you could pass Canungra you could pass anything. For instance, I remember one of the things I had to do was leap into a river from a huge platform that had been constructed especially. It was about 20 or 30 feet up, about 10 metres.
- 23:00 I had to leap into the river and swim out of it again. This was all part of our training. As they said to us, we're putting you through a worse-case scenario so you'll have the confidence to know you could just about do anything. Leap off something into a river or scramble through barbed wire. We
- 23:30 had to learn to use a little sub-machine gun as well. That was good training. So having passed the Canungra training course then I was fully fledged to go off to Vietnam. I hopped on board the Hercules,
- 24:00 a big aircraft. I think we travelled just by normal [flights], Ansett [Airlines] I think it was, from Sydney to Darwin and the Hercules took us from Darwin to Vung Tau. I remember the doors of the plane opening and a draft of very hot air hit us. And that's when you knew you had landed in the tropics somewhere.
- 24:30 It was like being through into an oven, very hot. And then you started to see different looking people. My first sight of a woman sweeping a runway with a primitive looking straw broom. Then I knew I was in Vietnam and that was it.
- 25:00 We were camped in Vung Tau by the beach. I remember our lodgings. We took over from 101 Field Workshops and all they had were tents and sleeping was just on those very low stretcher beds. I can recall my first horror, I think, one night when a rat scrambled over my face waking me up. So I thought this is not the best.
- 25:30 This is not five star stuff. But we adapted very well and very quickly with local Vietnamese tradesmen's help. We were able to construct proper accommodation. They were huts with a
- 26:00 concrete floor and wooden construction. And the Americans gave us proper beds with legs on them. Normal beds and then in next to no time we became quite comfortable. In fact we didn't have proper showers and there weren't proper toilets. They were quite primitive.

With 102 Field Workshops

- 26:30 **were you in that unit with anyone you had trained with... gone through Bandiana or been in Sydney with?**
- There was one guy I met up with and he was to remain my lifelong friend. He was a medic. He did the Pucka training with me. He was in the same corps with me in Puckapunyal...
- 27:00 the same company in Puckapunyal, and then I met him in Vietnam. He was in civilian life a male nurse and naturally he was put into the medical corps. His job was the one and only medic assigned to 102 Workshops. We
- 27:30 used to call him "Doc" short for Doctor, and he looked after our vaccinations especially. He was the in-house medic for us. He became a lifelong friend. So I met up with him and he was the only guy I knew from Puckapunyal who I finally met up with in Vietnam. He still comes here and has dinner with me on a regular basis.
- 28:00 He works in a hospital and is still a medic.
- There's a lot of time there prior to getting to Vietnam. Like 12 months in Sydney and the Canungra training, which I think would be good to explore a bit more?**
- I used to take the opportunity to fly home.
- 28:30 I made Ansett and TAA rich... every other weekend just about I would fly home. But I did spend weekends in Sydney. I did know some friends in Sydney and I would visit them. I got to know Sydney very well as a result. I had a little Volkswagon Beetle and I was allowed to drive this vehicle. It came in handy when we went into town
- 29:00 from the Liverpool area. All the boys would pile into the Beetle [Volkswagen] and I would drive off. I can remember with horror now when I look back on my driving then as a 20 year old. I would come to a T intersection and there would be a car coming from my right and I'd then zoom off. I look back on that
- 29:30 sort of thing with horror. The boys in the car would applaud me. They loved those dangerous manoeuvres. Now I know how a 20 year old and his passengers think because that was what I was then. But I managed to get them into town and back safely. I was the one that remained a non drinker and brought them back to camp safely. So I did

30:00 fulfil a good role.

So you were based at Liverpool?

There were two places that we served in. One was Moorebank and the other was in the Liverpool area. All that area there was just vacant paddocks and just vast

30:30 expanses of land. And all that is suburbia now. But that's where we were, Moorebank and in and around Liverpool where the army barracks used to be.

So what was your day to day work there?

Typical ordnance corps work. Looking after stores.

I don't know what a typical...

31:00 It remains hazy for me. I've forgotten what the day to day life was like in the units. I guess I was doing what any other storeman would be doing. Ordering stuff, getting it delivered, housing it, keeping a record and doing

31:30 spot checks and making sure the stuff was there and then issuing it out and delivering it. I would have been doing something like that. But nothing stands out for me that was interesting in that regard.

Where would it have been delivered to?

I guess to operate... I mean all the vehicles and all the tanks.

32:00 They would have needed to be regularly maintained for parts and including everyday things like beds and sheets and pillows and blankets and shirts and trousers and hats. All that was being looked after by us.

32:30 and issued. So we were the storemen, army storemen... including weapons and everything.

So these were stores that were going directly to Vietnam?

No. While we were in Sydney we were serving the units there, and then when we went to Vietnam we had to take up that same kind of role over there with different things. So Ordnance trained us to be storemen.

33:00 And keepers of all the gear and all the equipment. Basically the Ordnance guys were either clerks or storemen. That was our role.

Was it busy work?

I can't remember being very busy in Sydney. It was just nine to five, but in Vietnam it was difficult

33:30 because we were establishing things from scratch. We had to build things that were not there before and really establish the place. I mean what was established there was built by us. We were working seven days a week, 24 hours a day on call.

34:00 But we were always making better for ourselves. We even had some help from locals. For instance one of the secretaries of our chiefs was a Vietnamese girl and she was a typist because a lot of the boys didn't have that skill.

34:30 And that meant building a ladies' toilet in our unit. Something we never had to do before. So we took great pride making the best toilet in the whole place and we had a lovely sign saying "Ladies Toilet". And we took great pride in doing a really top job just for one young lady.

35:00 She I believe has migrated to Australia. Her name is Susie and she lives in Sydney and has been doing so for a long time. My medic friend visits her and knows her well and I'm looking forward to meeting Susie one day, and asking her whether she appreciated the toilet we built. I think that will be the first thing I'll discuss with her.

35:30 **That's interesting because it's about actually constructing, not just about ordering and supplying goods. Was that a bit frustrating for you, working in Sydney in the store area... did you find that frustrating and limited?**

I guess I looked forward to all the other

36:00 activities on the weekends. Coming home. But I can't remember being in any way restricted or frustrated while I was in Sydney. And because the pending trip to Vietnam was always getting postponed, there came a time when I thought I would never go. My two years would have come and I would have been sent off

36:30 because national servicemen were meant to serve for two years only. But finally the day came and with six months to finish my two years I was sent off to Vietnam, and we were meant then to go for a year. Everybody served for 12 months. 101 Workshops had done one year and we were sent to do one year.

Then I

- 37:00 had a dilemma. I would have had to seek permission from my employer who was holding my job to get an extension of another six months. So I wrote to my employer, the State Electricity Commission of Victoria and said, I would be serving in Vietnam for 12 months, and my National Service finishes up in six months time and I'll need to stay another six months, and would
- 37:30 they be happy to extend my job for a further six months. They wrote back to say that would be in order and with pleasure. As you well know national servicemen by law [employers] had to retain the jobs of those national servicemen. So when they came back after two years, those employers had to give them their jobs back.
- 38:00 So I was merely asking for an extension. As it turned out I left after six months and I didn't need the extension. But I did appreciate my employers giving me that opportunity if I needed it.
- So why was there this postponement going on?**
- Well, it's not easy to get a whole unit
- 38:30 over there. I think nothing was going to happen until probably all the plans were well and truly put into place. We finally left and I had 12 months to serve, but it became six months. That happened as a result of a change in plans
- 39:00 where instead of one unit serving for 12 months and then another unit then coming in and taking their place and serving for 12 months etc, we found it was very hard after all of the others had returned to fill in their shoes without their knowledge. We found that for the first two or three of those 12 months,
- 39:30 we were struggling to pick up the threads. To overcome this difficulty, we decided that we wouldn't all serve the whole 12 months. That at the six month mark we would start to send guys home and replace them. So the newcomers would be able to adapt without us being there to help them adapt. It was a good plan.
- 40:00 And I started to see newcomers arriving and other leaving, and what was rather funny was that you could spot the newcomers when they took their shirts off. We were mostly working there with just our trousers and boots on. We didn't know anything about slip slap slop,
- 40:30 and we were out in the sun without our shirts. So we were all dark brown in colour and the new guys were absolutely brand spanking new fresh white. They felt embarrassed because of their whiteness because they weren't a part of it and they were very keen to rapidly get their tans going on so they could look like the rest of us. Then I volunteered to be the first lot to leave because at the six month mark we were going to send about 20 guys home and replace them with 20. At the seven-month mark we replaced 15 or 20 with another 15 or 20 and so on. And ones who arrived were then happy to put in a full 12 months because the staggering process had now been put into place. It meant that one unit had to start doing their staggering at six months. So I volunteered because my two years had expired. I had seen and done everything over there and I was ready to leave. I had no particular yearning to stay on.

Tape 5

- 00:34 **OK George. Let's concentrate on the Vietnam experience for you now. You told us a bit about landing at Vung Tau...**
- And the heat and finding ourselves sleeping on the primitive camp bed, and then we improved on that. And the toilets. We had no toilets.
- 01:00 All you had was a 44 gallon drum.
- Can you take your glasses off. That's OK. That bit can be edited out. So can you describe what the set up was when you got there? You said it wasn't in a great state. Can you describe what had been left there for you?**
- All that was there were the canvas tents, stretcher beds and then we improved that
- 01:30 to a proper dormitory with a concrete floor and a building with proper beds etc. And the toilets, which were non existent, were built and showers put in. So we made life much better for ourselves and as comfortable as we could. And as time went on we were able to have some free time
- 02:00 like on a Sunday morning we could venture out and have a look at a bit of the countryside. Our boss, the major would sometimes take me with him because he was a keen photographer and so was I. We used to go around and give the children lollies and chocolates and take some photographs of the countryside
- 02:30 which I love to do. I owe my photographic skills to another sergeant. A chap from Western Australia, John Tillbrook. He introduced me to the usage of a camera in those days. There was nothing automatic.

You had to learn to use speeds and apertures and the relationship between the two. He taught me how to do that and to this very day I owe my great love of

- 03:00 photography. A single weekend doesn't go by without me taking photographs. Our holidays and what not, and portraits of people. I owe that to John Tillbrook, and my who love of photography started at Vung Tau. I used to photograph roaming around the countryside. I regret that I did take our own camp site
- 03:30 for granted. I was more interested in the Vietnamese people and the countryside, but I should have taken more pictures of our own soldiers on the job, in their work environments and in and around the campsite. So I've got very little of that and more of the countryside. The pictures are there and think I should make an effort to present copies
- 04:00 of at least some of them to the War Memorial Museum in Canberra, or any other archive that may require footage, or the slides that I've got. I can remember a big moment for us came when General Westmoreland, who was visiting our camp in Vung Tau was to
- 04:30 present himself to visit our troops and a guard of honour was being given, and John Tillbrook said, "George, someone had better photograph this event. That's you and me." So John and I went off to the airport where we awaited the arrival of General Westmoreland.
- 05:00 The biggest name in the war for the American troops, and I have a wonderful photograph of the guard of honour and a wonderful photograph of this General Westmoreland to be given to the War Memorial in Canberra one day.

Yes it sounds like they should have a copy of that. Now

- 05:30 **I definitely want to talk about your experiences outside the base, but before that can we talk a bit about the set up there and the field workshop? And if you can, the hierarchy that you were part of there and how it all worked?**

Well we were set up in Vung Tau where we had to look after ourselves and our own security. So

- 06:00 we always had our particular area well patrolled. Whilst some were working, others had to patrol. Especially at night we took it in turn to maintain a watch and establish a machine gun. So security was something of a high order. Life in the camp
- 06:30 was well structured and orderly. Each section had their sergeants and officers in charge, and the ordnance maintained their scene. I can remember we were close to the hospital and I can remember visiting the hospital because it was in our area. And I was saddened to see some of the effects of the war on some
- 07:00 the guys. There were guys there who had been affected by mines and other injuries. They had legs missing and it was very sad sight to see. And being R.A.E.M.E. people we sometimes had to bring back vehicles that had been ambushed. And I can particularly remember... I've got some good shots, photographs of one of our Land rovers
- 07:30 which had been ambushed and all the occupants in it had been killed. There was a bullet-ridden vehicle which we had to go and bring back. That was a sad and sorry sight. Apart from that life went on in the camp day to day and we all fulfilled our particular tasks. In the evenings and on weekends we were given passes to go into town.
- 08:00 The little township of Vung Tau provided us with a different sort of break where we could go and eat at a restaurant or go to the shops, or bring back what we used to call a Vietnamese roll... which was a large French stick
- 08:30 with salad or whatever inside it. We always brought one back to camp; otherwise it was camp food. The boys would visit the bars and have a few drinks there and be entertained by the bar girls, and then at a certain time, the vehicles would come and pick us all up and take us back to camp. So
- 09:00 we started to have some recreation during our stay once we were better established. And we had our beach front and next to us was the American beach and then further up was what was called the "local beach". But the Americans and the Aussies were all segregated and had their own part of the beach.

So there wasn't much intermingling?

- 09:30 We used to visit the Americans in their section occasionally and we would get invites to their functions. Otherwise we stuck to our own beach, and being with the mechanics and so on we were able to make things like go-carts with a proper engine and do a bit of driving on the beach and do a few wheelies in the sand. That was fun,
- 10:00 and we made our own fun on the beach.

Was there some security... I mean, you said you had to do your night patrols, was security ever an issue there?

It didn't become an issue there. We soon realised we were pretty safe because we were one amongst a lot of others. So security, I never thought was a big issue but we were always prepared and if anything ever happened we would

10:30 have reacted in an appropriate manner.

Can you tell us what the basic day to day was. If you can give us a blow by blow description of a typical day? Were you a clerk or a store keeper? What position did you have?

I was a store keeper. We would be accommodated in

11:00 a hut with about 12 or 16 guys in it. We would get showered and changed and off to work. We'd work nine to five and then in the evenings we would have a few beers in our local bar. Other people had other duties, whether they be security duties or other assignments.

11:30 And that sort of became our routine. We would always be disturbed by the aircraft and the helicopters hovering all around us all the time. There was some local contact as I said in the evenings. It was quite trouble free.

12:00 That became routine. We would spend time writing letters home and receiving mail. So there would be things to look forward to.

You said before lunch when you were talking about that scholarly friend of yours who said you were going over there to fight against "us". Were there any experiences during your time in Vietnam that in a way confirmed and

12:30 **reiterated what he had been saying?**

Yes I can remember that some Vietnam people recognised me I suppose from my accent and because I was a darker complexion. They said to me, "You're not an Aussie or an American." So I explained to them that I had

13:00 originally come from Sri Lanka, and they were able to relate to that and they viewed me as being very much akin to them. They sort of had a fondness for me as a result of that, and they were quick to perceive that fact. But apart from that I was acting and behaving and carrying out my duties as an Aussie soldier. And

13:30 would not have done any differently.

It's strange because them seeing you that way kind of puts you in a peculiar position doesn't it... seeing you almost as one of them but you're one of the boys in the Army? Was that a difficult paradox to deal with?

I guess I glimpsed something there that was different for a moment. But broadly speaking

14:00 I was a part of our set up, our war, and acting in accordance with that. So I don't think I would have been greatly influenced. But then again in any war, any time, any place, it's one group of human beings against another and even if they're ethnically different

14:30 I think at the end of the day you sort of realise that they're human beings too whoever they are. And you're affected by that. I know many of our First and Second World War people were greatly affected by their roles in wars that they had fought. Even though the enemy may have been portrayed as being somehow different.

15:00 Or evil or undesirable. At the end of the day they had to come to terms with the fact that they had killed another human being, and obviously this affected them all. And no doubt it wouldn't have been any different for our boys in the Vietnam campaign. I mean not for me, any differently just because those people happened to be from the same part of the world that I was, more or less.

15:30 **You were saying that in training the enemy had obviously been demonised. Did you see amongst the Aussies there any change in attitude once they had made contact. Or was in fact that attitude a myth anyway?**

Well I can remember in our training we had to... especially at Canungra,

16:00 you would have to walk through the scrub with a sub machine gun and they were able to trigger off a dummy which you had to fire at, and invariably that dummy was an evil looking person with a triangular hat and wearing a black dress. So certainly they were being portrayed as being demons or

16:30 evil. I guess the contradiction would have been when we were in contact with a lot of their people in South Vietnam and ethnically the North Vietnamese were no different at all. I guess the ultimate irony now is that a lot of the Vietnamese people are now part of our community. We see them and perceive them and know them to be

17:00 good people.

And it seems that was also an irony at the time. You going off to fight the "gooks" or the

“slanty eyes” or whatever. You hear people using that label for the enemy, and you’re also fighting for those very same people. They’re all Vietnamese. So there’s a contradiction isn’t there?

Yes there was, because we didn’t know the difference between the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese.

17:30 In fact there was no difference. They were the same people just divided by a border and that made it difficult for us because the real enemy could have been just a peasant in the field. Even a little eight-year-old boy... When I say that I’m reminded of a young boy

18:00 about six or eight years old who was captured by our boys in Nui Dat. He had been trained to come along and leave some grenades. He was certainly doing things that were harmful to us.

18:30 Here we had a prisoner in our midst who was a child of about eight years old. He was brought along to the concert when the Aussies troops were being entertained in Vung Tau. There he was in the front row. He was our mascot and also our prisoner.

19:00 That was quite ironic. He was an innocent little eight-year-old child.

We’ve heard some stories from some people that those stories that we’re talking about almost seemed to necessitate this general suspicion.

19:30 **Who can you trust basically? Even when you’re out of the camp in particular. Some people were saying that you could never be sure who was VC [Viet Cong] and who was not. Was that something you felt or saw amongst the men?**

Not in Vung Tau. That would have been certainly something to come to terms with in Nui Dat and beyond but in Vung Tau I don’t think

20:00 we would have expected a VC lurking around there. Thankfully we were never ever attacked. So we were there with genuine local South Vietnamese people. I don’t think the VC ever got down south to Vung Tau. All the fighting was up north. I made one trip to Nui Dat and

20:30 there again under very pleasant circumstances. The Kiwis [New Zealanders], who were also part of this war don’t forget, invited us to a game of rugby. The Aussies playing the All Blacks in the middle of the jungle at Nui Dat, and we got a good thrashing, about 50-nil and after that the barbecue followed and I really saw some

21:00 wonderful New Zealand hospitality. They pulled out their guitars and there were a fair number of Maori guys too. They were very good at this sort of thing. They put on a spread, played their music and they were entertaining us. And we felt really good. I was talking to one guy and he said he was looking forward to going back home in a couple of weeks, back to his wife and two little kids and all that sort of stuff.

21:30 All of a sudden there was a skirmish in the distance. We saw some smoke and artillery fire. These guys were artillery. They had to provide support and they said, ‘Sorry guys, the barbecue’s finished we’ve got to go.’ Off they went and still to this day I think about that guy who was having a drink with me and telling me about how he as ready to go home to see his kids and wife and I still don’t know

22:00 whether he made it. So these are the little stories that still haunt me if you like. There were lots of incidents like this where you could never tell what may happen to somebody from one minute to the next. Circumstances could change. And that was my one and only trip to Nui Dat.

22:30 We were sort of safely cocooned in Vung Tau, which was quite a safe place. In fact it was an R&R [rest and recreation] centre for many. They would go there to rest and recuperate or whatever. So there we were in a beachfront place which was almost idyllic. There were times when

23:00 you didn’t believe you were in a war environment because Vung Tau almost became quite safe. But we still had to have our wits about us.

So what were the reminders that in fact there was a war going on? You talked about the hospital...

Well yes, the hospital. That was a reminder for the Vung Tau

23:30 guys that this was really a war, and the aircraft. They were flying very low sometimes. The Canberra bombers would just come... just a few feet above your head it seemed like. You’d jump out of your skin because of the noise. I guess there was an awareness that there was real action up there. So

24:00 we were always I suppose fearful that something could happen. But by and large we were fairly secure in Vung Tau.

So how did you find out about what was actually happening?

They were briefing us about the war generally. It may have happened and I can’t remember actually being briefed. So either it happened, and I’ve forgotten about it, or it didn’t happen. I

24:30 did come to terms with the war proper by the Aussie newspapers that were sent to me by my family. They very religiously packed the Herald, Sun and Age every day and mailed it to me. So I was well up with the press and well up with the views of people

25:00 back home. The objectors to the war etc. We were well aware of that happening.

Can you tell us about the people you worked with on a day to day basis?

My particular team were just excellent. We had a wonderful sergeant in charge of us. He himself was the father

25:30 of five children and a very understanding man. He looked after us well. I can't remember any incident. Nothing disruptive happened. We were a very ...the ordnance boys were a top team and we accomplished our tasks. I think the R.A.E.M.E.. guys generally, I think we were all very happy. The only time we had an incident I think was with our cook.

26:00 Somebody assaulted him. Maybe he didn't like his dinner. But apart from that life was quite peaceful. There weren't too many bad incidents.

Your ordnance unit? Was it unit? How was it designated? You were 102 Field Workshop...

It had an ordnance section within its unit which was us. About 16

26:30 of us. We had a lieutenant in charge of us and a couple of sergeants and the rest of us were corporals and privates and we were managing the store. We did a very good job.

What did a typical day entail? After you got to the store...

Issuing guys with bits and pieces.

27:00 Like a mechanic would come and want something and then sometimes off to the airport when a new consignment of stuff was delivered. I remember lifting a huge box of oxy-acetylene with another guy taking the other end, and my hand slipped and I put my hand underneath to recover it and the jar squashed one of my fingers.

27:30 I have a little scar to prove it. My finger swelled up like a sausage and fortunately that was the only accident I had in the whole war.

So what sort of things... I'm just trying to get a really clear picture so I'm hoping you could tell us about the detail of the job, even though it may feel as if it was just run of the mill. But what those things in fact were. What you were supplying, to whom you would be supplying, where those supplies

28:00 **would be coming from, if something had gone missing how would you manage to track it. The real nitty gritty of the work.**

Unfortunately Colin [interviewer], the detail of my day to day stuff has become hazy and disappeared. For me I can only remember vaguely what I did from day to day.

28:30 There was no major incident so I'm scratching my head to remember what I did on a day to day basis. I know I must have been working with vehicle parts and storing them and issuing them out to people who needed them and looking after the bookwork accordingly. I can't remember any details. Anything that went wrong or got

29:00 lost or anything. So it must have been a very routine, deadly dull and boring day.

But it sounds like it worked and ...

Yes it went well. We always got our stuff and issued it out. I can remember the details of that at all.

So you're dealing solely with R.A.E.M.E..

29:30 **So I'm just wondering... you're talking about more mechanical stuff, car parts and trucks...**

Yes the R.A.E.M.E. guys were mechanics, fitters and turners, welders and general repairmen who fixed up radios or vehicles or guns or whatever. Anything that needed repairs had to be done by the R.A.E.M.E.. guys

30:00 and we would issue them with the appropriate parts to do that.

And R.A.E.M.E.. would be working for the entire battalion or all of the Aussie's services?

I would say so. I would say that any vehicle that broke down or needed to be serviced would come to the workshops. I can't remember if there were any other

30:30 workshops or mechanics or guys of that same sort in Nui Dat or elsewhere. I guess we were the major workshop unit there and probably the only one in Vung Tau.

Were the supplies totally Australian supplies or were some American?

I think our stuff was totally Australian to

31:00 the best of our knowledge because we had our own vehicles and all our parts came from Australia.

And you mentioned you would need to go to the airport at times, what was that for?

Well we had to pick up new stuff that had arrived. We had to replenish regularly, and

31:30 I can remember going to the airport to pick up supplies. That's where we got our stuff from, straight from Australia. They would send it all in a big Hercules. And someone had to go and pick it up and bring it back.

What would you be driving? Would you be driving a truck then?

Depending on whether it was a big job or just some little thing we had to pick up.

32:00 Quite often it was a Land rover with a trailer. Trailers were always there permanently behind and so invariably there would be something to bring back.

And you mentioned there was still some guard duties that had to be done at night, is that correct? So what was the schedule with the sentry duty?

There would be a roster and I can remember myself having to be on with another guy at night.

32:30 Sometimes I would do the night shift or sometimes during the day. Even a Sunday morning I can remember myself on the machine gun post. But as I say we didn't perceive any serious threat to ourselves at 102 Field Workshops. But nevertheless we did go through all those routines

33:00 of looking after our security quite well. We all carried a rifle at all times. So we were on the ready at any given point in time. Your rifle was no more than a metre away from you. They were always clean and spic and span.

Now you mentioned some of the characters there. John Tillbrook...

Sergeant Tillbrook. He taught me how to use a camera.

33:30 **Who were the other officers there? Did you mention the commanding officer?**

That was a Colonel Ronsley who was in charge of the whole unit and there were several lieutenants. We had a lieutenant in charge of us. Lieutenant Bruce Hamson looked after the Ordnance group. He did a brilliant job.

34:00 **How would you describe his style of leadership?**

He was a very careful and considerate person. I can remember him refusing... I wanted to visit Saigon this one weekend and he refused. He thought it would be too dangerous. "What will I say to your mother if you got killed?"

34:30 So he was a caring person and he certainly [carried out] his responsibility of looking after us extremely well. He was a very thoughtful person.

You said there were about 16 men in the unit, is that correct?

Yes 16 of us I think it was.

What sort of age group? Were there any younger than you?

35:00 Yes the national servicemen would have all been in their 20s and then the regular guys would have been older. There were guys there who were 30 and 40 and 50 years old. So we had like any other office anywhere, we had guys from all different age groups etc.

And you were training earlier during training days when you had done your six months of training

35:30 **and you meet the Regs and how there's a bit of tension between the Regs and the Nashos. Did you experience any of this in Vung Tau?**

None whatsoever. I think by that time in Vietnam, I think all that had gone and disappeared by then. I don't think we perceived ourselves as Regs and Nashos any more. We

36:00 all got to know each other and work as one, and I think that Reg and Nasho thing disappeared. I can't remember that influencing us over there. By then we were all pretty much one. The Nashos had certainly by then got past their Nasho stage I think

36:30 The differences certainly had all disappeared by then.

Can you tell us about Colonel Ronsley?

He was a wonderful man actually. I can remember going into the countryside with him on one occasion and he always had a bag of lollies and when ever he stopped, lots of little kids

- 37:00 would come rushing around the car and sure enough... they must have known that Colonel Ronsley was on his way, because he would give them all lollies. I did also make a trip or two just out of camp into the village with my friend Barry Nagel who was our medic
- 37:30 and being a medic he seemed to get around more than us. He must have had a ... being the only medic in our unit, I think there was a ... he was a man of more independence than us. He was able to get around more and he was able to tell me things he had seen outside. He had a met I think a Roman Catholic clergyman who was
- 38:00 running an orphanage and Barry said he would like me to see this orphanage. So off we went, Barry and I. All of a sudden we were greeted by the kids at the orphanage, and each kid grabbed one of my fingers. And within seconds I knew I had 10 children around me. Everyone of my fingers had an occupant at the other end of it.
- 38:30 I was very touched by this scene. Something I guess our boys who only fraternised the bars and the beach wouldn't have seen. And I came to terms with what was a very sad place. Orphaned children who were obviously yearning for some human contact and some love, and I guess even for 10 minutes
- 39:00 Barry Nagel and myself were able to give them something. So we played with them and returned to our camp. I will never forget that orphanage. So that was a touching moment for me when I really saw some of the other side of Vung Tau which most of us wouldn't have. And thanks to Barry, having met some of the local people and had been influenced by some of the deeper aspects of life in Vung Tau.
- 39:30 **That sounds a bit unusual. As you say a lot of soldiers would spend there time at the bars and living it up while they could. Did you have any other experiences like that? Was there anything else about the people that left a lasting impression on you?**
- I have photographs, tell the stories. I was particularly charmed by the children. I have that
- 40:00 photograph of me with the 10 children each grabbing one of my fingers. And I have lots of photos of children on the beach and I remember seeing a boy with a little catapult. He was showing off to me. There were these little lizards or chameleons which hide in the greenery. But not to this young boy who would pull out this
- 40:30 little catapult and shoot these ... knock these chameleons off with great skill. Of course, there he was in his best outfit and I took this photograph of this child and I look on it with mixed feelings. I see this child in clothes that were really rags. He had his best shirt on but it was quite ragged and torn
- 41:00 but he was a typical child. I used to also do a run to the tip. We'd off load... if we had an old crate or something. Some gear might come in a crate and we'd dump the empty crate. Of course there were guys there who needed this timber. They would almost fight with one another and we would look in awe. Here was something that was refuse or junk to us, and that was going to be someone's house. Someone would collect lots of crates and build four walls.

Tape 6

- 00:32 **Where shall we start. You want to tell us about the Americans and your experience of them. What did you make of the Yanks?**
- Well they were very different I thought in their attitudes and values and their lifestyle to us Aussies. They used to get paid monthly whereas we were paid fortnightly. And within about two or three days
- 01:00 of getting their pay they would have it all spent. They would... they were more easy going than us. We seemed to be more astute if that's the word, and more with our money and more prudent. They were sort of slap dash and
- 01:30 do anything because "tomorrow we die" sort of attitude. I was perceiving them to be almost foolish and naive and extravagant. But that was the nature of them. However they had hearts of gold and they were very kind and very hospitable. We always got received and always welcomed
- 02:00 when we visited their camp. They're the ones who gave us our fridges and beds and what ever. You could exchange a bed for a slouch hat quite easily. They had all the gear in the world but what we had was limited. So we were able to get things from them.
- 02:30 And we were eating their food. A lot of stuff that was quite boring, meatloaf stuff, cold chicken sliced up.
- OK, can you give more examples. You talked of them just living for the moment. Can you give any examples of where you saw that sort of behaviour?**

03:00 Even in town, they'd spend more and get drunk more. They would make our worst job almost seem smart if I could say that. I suppose they had a lot of money and they'd spend it just as fast. Our people had the need to be wiser and more prudent.

03:30 They had to make a little go a long way and when you're used to doing that, I think you do a better job of it. Otherwise they were lovely guys and very fond of us and likewise.

When you say you would eat the American's food, was that in their mess...

No no. I think we must have made an arrangement to eat their food.

04:00 We must have been... I don't think food was sent from here for us. We hopped in on their rations. I'm quite sure we were eating American rations. There must have been an arrangement that they give us their stuff. That was my recollection. When we went out and got a French stick and salad, that came as a bit of a treat.

04:30 This was also known as the "hepatitis roll". A roll which was fraught with some dangers because obviously somebody had bought one of these once and got sick. So the Vietnamese roll was commonly called the "noggy roll" or the "hepatitis roll". So we had to be careful of what we ate. I can remember very clearly

05:00 being told about the Vietnamese fish sauce. It was called "Nookman". I remember the name. We were advised by our guys not to touch this Nookman because it was horrible. It was made from boiling up some dead fish or something like that. It smelt awful and tasted awful. So they said when you go to a Vietnamese

05:30 restaurant ask them to exclude the Nookman. That is firmly embedded in my brain because I think I was at a Vietnamese restaurant recently and the guy gave me a meal and he said, "Can I bring you the sauce?" I said to him, "Is that Nookman?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "No thank you promptly." So these little rules, as silly as they may be,

06:00 can firmly embed themselves in your brain.

What other food did you try? You mentioned the Hepatitis Roll. What about other local food?

Not a great deal. I think I remember eating some of their other delicacies at a restaurant. But I guess there were the fears of getting ill.

06:30 I can't remember wining or dining on a big scale. The odd meal out. Otherwise we stuck to our own food. Even if it meant buttering up the cook to get better results.

Can you tell us a bit more about that. You said the cook was assaulted by someone. Do you know what that was about?

I never took the incident too seriously. But if there was one person

07:00 any army guy hated it was the cook. I can remember that famous expression when someone said he was the son of a sea cook in an insulting way, I think the army cook was just as bad. They always had a reputation of taking good food and turning it into something horrible.

07:30 That was a standing army joke. But otherwise we had a beer in the evenings.

What beer were you drinking?

I'm sure it was... I think we got our own stuff up there. So that was welcome. It was much cheaper than here.

08:00 I think we got stuff at ... no sales tax, is that right? Something like that. So we were enjoying Aussie beer. And occasionally we'd have American beer at very cheap rates.

So when you were out in the town you'd be buying local food. Were you using the local currency?

I've still

08:30 got some of it. Yes there was local currency and there was also military currency. I think the locals took either. I still have a dollar or two or whatever of that currency, which I can show you.

While we're talking about matters pertaining to food and beverage,

09:00 **tell us a bit more about the night life as it were. You said the guys would go to the bars with the bar girls and that sort of thing. Are you able to paint a picture of what that aspect of life was like?**

Well there were the bars that the boys frequented. They would spend say an evening having a beer or what they used to call a "wicky-coke," meaning whisky and coke.

- 09:30 Chat to the girls all evening, and then there was a cut off point where at 10 o'clock or something like that, the vehicles came round to various checkpoints. I can remember flushing out a few fellas who were hovering about where they shouldn't be. I can remember one
- 10:00 particular fellow who I had to rush out of a place where he shouldn't have been at. He was always frequenting bad places. So I had to remind him it was 10 o'clock and got him by the scruff of his neck and threw him in the Land rover and got him home. I was very very... my heart was warmed when
- 10:30 I met him again recently at a R.A.E.M.E.. reunion. Every second year in the last weekend of September, early October, we meet at a place called Koondrook near Echuca, on a big property owned by one of the R.A.E.M.E.. guys. He makes his home available
- 11:00 to all the R.A.E.M.E. boys. They gather there on Friday and drink steadily Friday, all day Saturday and Sunday and I popped in there on one of those occasions. Briefly I visited them on the Saturday, had a beer with them and met this same guy. It was good to see him. I reminded him
- 11:30 of the bad days when I had to get him home. It was good to see them all. I have been told that at the last function, which I missed sadly, I meant to go, that the boys had slowed down a lot, drinking less and literally slowing down. So obviously the Viet Vets [veterans] are aging a bit now, and slowing down literally.
- 12:00 And of course their numbers are decreasing. Every year we hear of another obituary. There's always one less guy at the Koondrook reunion and Anzac Day march. I guess there will come a day when there will be none of us left. But we are a very close knit fraternity and
- 12:30 I'm talking about all the Viet Vets as a whole. There is tremendous bonding. When you meet another Viet Vet at any corner of Australia there's an immediate bonding when A and B discover Viet Vets. They become instant friends and chat away. So there's that very strong bond between us. I guess the bad welcome we received after
- 13:00 we got home, has, in a funny way, even strengthened that bond even more because now we have only ourselves I guess. Because the greater public didn't welcome us as well as they could have or should have. That came later I think and the situation now is a lot better.

That bond you speak of:

- 13:30 **was it as strong as that during your time in Vietnam?**

Yes there was always that wonderful bond because we knew that we had a tough job on our hands and that invariably makes the people engrossed in such an activity... it brings them close together. So that has continued on I think. The Viet Vet

- 14:00 are generally speaking out as a very strong force I feel. It's a wonderful thing. So out of a war comes this mateship. So one sad thing leads to another I guess. It makes you want to philosophise whether wars

- 14:30 are meant to be. They do tend to bring not only the worst out in us but also the best. And the friendships that follow, which is very much a part of our culture I guess.

It sounds like... you were saying when you were in Sydney you were the designated driver when the boys had had a few. It almost sounds like in Vietnam that you had a similar role, looking out for them in the bars or the brothels or

- 15:00 **where ever it was. You were the one...**

I guess being a conservative sort of guy and the person least likely to break a rule and so forth, I guess it was my strict upbringing and my schooling which was very rigid and so forth, I think I carry a lot of that with me still. So

- 15:30 that was a good job for me to sort of be the person playing the looking-after role. I did that well.

How difficult was it trying to extract your mates from...

I can only remember this one chap that had to be dragged off. Once you missed the 10 o'clock deadline,

- 16:00 when the last Land rover came around and picked up all the guys, then you were on your own and you had to wander back into camp. And the risk was that a trigger-happy sentry would knock you off. And the rule was carry a lantern and sing "Waltzing Matilda" as loud as you can on your way back home.

- 16:30 I think a lot of the chaps made it at odd hours of the morning and went to work the following day.

And you were always...

I was always back at 10 o'clock being the non-rule-breaking conservative sort of person. But I enjoyed it all. I looked back on all of this with a lot of... I do a lot of reminiscing and the memories

- 17:00 are warm and full of meaning. They stand out. It was an experience all up and it was one of my most significant experiences. Fighting a war and go off to a strange place every day. I guess
- 17:30 I will always remember those incidents and places. I'd like to go back to Vung Tau. I believe it's changed and I just wouldn't recognise it at all. I guess the best... the biggest surprise I had whilst I was there was on my birthday. It was my 22 birthday so it wasn't important, but nevertheless I think Sergeant John Tillbrook
- 18:00 could have been one of the instigators who decided that I ought to have a big party and it ought to be a big surprise. The boys had organised a massive party and I was not to know about it and they were meant to keep this top secret while the arrangements were being made. Huge posters and banners... "Happy birthday George" was splattered across one of our buildings.
- 18:30 The food requirements were being made. A huge cake was being made by the Americans and we got food from the Vietnamese people. A big party was happening and then they said to me, "You've been called up at 7 pm. You have to report to (such and such). You're on duty." So I said, "Fine." I went
- 19:00 up there at 7 o'clock. I walked in the door and there were a hundred guys there singing "Happy Birthday". I was deeply moved and I thought it was a wonderful wonderful occasion. A wonderful surprise. The officers, when the speeches were being made said
- 19:30 that this was the best kept military secret. They were able to actually do something on a big scale like this and not have me know about it. They thought it was a top military exercise carried out to perfection. They had never done something like that before. It went without a hitch. And for me it was a birthday to remember, and I can safely say that may well have been
- 20:00 the best birthday for any Australian in the whole Vietnam war and by some quirk of fate it happened to be mine. And I'm very proud of it.

How old were you?

I'm sure I was 22 and they may have mistakenly believed that I was turning 21, so they decided to celebrate it anyway. But the upshot of it was that

- 20:30 George Fernando had a top birthday. It was done in secret. Just one of those things that happened I suppose.

You've said yourself that you were reasonably conservative with a strong sense of morals I guess. How did the stuff going on in town, the drinking, the bar girls and all that, confront your sense of morality?

- 21:00 I don't want to put myself apart or be above anyone morally or ethically speaking at all. I mean I come into this very humbly. I was just another guy there. I guess I was a little more prudent so I never did anything in excess. I mean I certainly went there and enjoyed a drink.
- 21:30 But well one has to sort of debate whether I didn't do what they did because I was more prudent or more scared of the consequences. See I didn't want to find myself in a ditch somewhere literally in the middle of the night
- 22:00 So I always made sure I got back to camp on time, and I guess what I did has paid off because some people would have had bad experiences of staying away and who knows, getting beaten up somewhere or picking up a strange disease.

Did your unit have much to do... first of all with the other units within R.A.E.M.E. and beyond that people within other sections like infantry?

- 22:30 Did we have much to do with them? Occasionally we'd see others. Basically we were together and didn't fraternise too much. I can't recall going outside our tour of duty much.
- 23:00 I do remember the doctors and nurses that worked in the hospital. I do remember seeing them. I can recall going hither and thither with some others. Getting a lift here or getting a ride there. I can remember, I think he was a lieutenant from some other unit,
- 23:30 he gave me a lift from one place to another. He was having an affair with one of our nurses. So there was even, I suppose that was the only romantic touch that I can remember during my entire war. One of our lieutenants was having an affair with a very beautiful
- 24:00 nurse, and I can remember them seeing each other often. And whenever I see the film "Ryan's Daughter" I'm reminded of this incident. Because the guy in the movie and "Ryan's Daughter"... somehow that affair reminded me of this affair.
- 24:30 There was a likeness. And I did take a photograph of the handsome young lieutenant and the beautiful nurse only to find that I hadn't wound that roll of film into the camera properly and I had taken 36 glorious pictures and none of them had turned out because the film wasn't advancing at all.
- 25:00 These are things you do once in your lifetime as a photographer. And that was my time. And I never did

it again, so I missed out on some good shots, like the fisherman who tells you about the best fish. These were my 36 best shots.

So you were permitted to have a camera and take photographs freely?

Oh yes. I'm sure

- 25:30 I bought that camera whilst I was there. I think there were duty free arrangements that we could avail ourselves of. I was happy to learn from John Tillbrook. In fact we had a little photographic competition and my picture of a Vietnamese fisherman was judged the best photo. And I'm sure I saw a little
- 26:00 column in the Army newspaper in reference to that. So yes we were allowed to have such things as cameras. I remember travelling to Singapore on my R&R and that was quite a trip because we were allowed to spend one week away at ...there were about three or four given destinations we could have gone to.
- 26:30 Back in Australia; Bangkok; Singapore; and maybe Hong Kong. There were several destinations. I chose Singapore because I had ... I knew a person... a gentleman married to my cousins. I think he was the port commissioner or senior man in the Port of Singapore. He invited me to his home
- 27:00 and off I went and spent a week with him. I'm sure I bought a radiogram and tape recorder and a few other goodies which I brought back. And on the plane travelling to Singapore, they were all Americans... I think it may have been a Pan Am flight... no, it couldn't have been. I can't remember. I was in my
- 27:30 slouch hat and Aussie going away uniform, and I was the only Aussie on board the flight. So that made me unique, and air hostesses certainly recognised this fact...that they had one Aussie on the plane. They must have been intrigued with this Aussie with the Sri Lankan accent. They must have thought that we all spoke like that.
- 28:00 They certainly gave me the best service and I had a good week in Singapore and then back to camp.

So were there many Aussie's in Singapore doing their R&R?

I didn't notice that. I was... I guess I spent a lot of my time catching up with my cousin's

- 28:30 husband and just went out to do a bit of shopping and buy a few goodies. I can't remember... there may well have been other Aussies there at the time in Singapore. So R&R was something that people looked forward to because here was the opportunity to go and see Bangkok or something.
- 29:00 It was a good excursion while you were there.

How long were you in Vung Tau before you were entitled to R&R?

I can't remember. I only spent six months there so I'm not sure if that was an entitlement irrespective of how long you had been there. I think you were entitled during your stay to have one R&R. So I certainly took mine

- 29:30 within that six month period.

Before you were talking about your photography. I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about other pursuits you may have had outside the camp? Like entertainment for example...

The only entertainment we had was an American outfit on the beach near by. They would occasionally have some entertainment,

- 30:00 like singers. Other than that there was no local entertainment as we would know it. And then we had the big concert and I think the Aussie trips were entertained by Little Patty and... I can't remember the other singers. Normie Rowe perhaps.
- 30:30 And we were entertained at a magnificent concert. Every Aussie in Vietnam was there, or it seemed like it anyway. The most wonderful concert. And absolutely appreciated. Anything like that as you can imagine, to have entertainment like that from home was something top notch for us.
- 31:00 We relished it and revelled in it. That one night was a terrific night. For them and for us. There were lots of jokes and lots of good singing and a bit of interaction with famous entertainers from Australia. They always loved that concert... any digger abroad. You're more or less starved of entertainment. We had to make our own entertainment.
- 31:30 Little things like the go-carts on the beach that we made, going up and down the sand dunes in our armoured personnel carriers and destroying the bush a bit, but we didn't know any better.

So that was OK with your officers and superiors to be able to shoot across the dunes like that?

As long as things like that weren't done in excess. I can't

- 32:00 remember us making that a daily occurrence. That was a real one off if you like. We were mainly

seriously pursuing our tasks. There wasn't any unnecessary revelry or skulduggery or irresponsible behaviour by and large. I remember one other incident that I thought was a bit

32:30 different. One of our boys fell in love with a local Vietnamese girl. Now that came to us as quite a revelation. Nobody would go that extra step and here was one guy who did and I don't know if they got married or whether he brought her back home or whether it was short lived. I can't tell you the end of that story. But at least I saw the beginnings of something. Something then that was seen as

33:00 very different. Today you see our boys arm in arm with an Asian girl every day on the streets. It was something that took us aback then but nothing to write home about now.

What about films or that sort of thing? Was there a theatre you could go to?

Nothing like that. I don't

33:30 think... I can't remember movies. I really cannot remember if the local Vietnamese were watching anything from Hollywood in their own little village. Probably not. I don't know if they had their own movie industry or whatever. So they provided their own entertainment. I don't know

34:00 if I'm wrong here and whether I've been missing out on stuff and whether there were concerts and nightclubs and cabarets and this were happening and I just wasn't patronising them. And whether I was just too much a stay at home and not indulging much. If there was anything good and worth while I would have heard about it and been part of it. But I see... the entertainment we got was only

34:30 from the bars and chatting to the girls at night and that was it. And then of course, what we shared with the Americans... if they had a concert on. I remember there were a few of those, but few and far between. So, very little entertainment as such.

35:00 **About the Aussie bloke you talked about who had fallen in love with a local girl. How would they have met? Would that have been in the bars or somewhere else?**

I would have thought so. She may not necessarily have been a bar girl but she may have been related or connected with... he'd met, have to have met her somehow. And there was definitely something happening there and I don't

35:30 know whether that reached some kind of fruition.

Was there any policy you knew about about any fraternisation or non-fraternisation and developing relationships?

There was no policy because what ever happened was within the bounds of what was expected. You would go out and have drinks at the bar and then come home, having left the girls behind. So

36:00 apart from that I think we would have been discouraged because had we patronised with locals, that would have left us open... any kind of knowledge of our existence and our doings may have got inadvertently passed on down the line. So I don't think we were encouraged to have any sort of dealings

36:30 or relationships. But then invariably, as I said, Barry knew the Roman Catholic clergyman who led us to the orphanage. So there were... I can't remember being forbidden to talk to or be friendly with a local. Generally speaking we accepted the fact that the locals there were all non VC.

37:00 I don't think the VC wanted to have any sort of penetration into Vung Tau. I don't think there was a need for them to do that.

Now just getting back briefly to the work you were doing, you've mentioned how well supplied... we've heard this from a lot of people, how well supplied the Americans were. And they were quite generous with it. Was that ever of benefit

37:30 **to the ordnance boys in terms of supplies?**

I can't remember relying on them for the procurement of our bits and pieces. The only sorts of things we needed from them were for personal usage, like a bed. We certainly needed little things like that.

38:00 And they were happy to give us anything like that. They might have thrown in a vehicle here or there. They were very generous. One day I must go back and have a look at Nui Dat and Vung Tau and Long Tan, where the battle was fought.

Now you were there...

38:30 **Long Tan was a bit later wasn't it, '66 I think. You said you got a lot of your information from newspapers from your parents. It seemed like you were getting better information from the papers than you were getting from...**

What the talk was?

39:00 I guess we weren't talking much about the war. What was happening out in the front line I don't think was necessarily being relayed to us. It was probably seen by the military as not our particular concern

other than to be... it wouldn't benefit our role. I can't remember being briefed.

39:30 Now this is either my bad memory or it may be a fact. I don't know. You'll have to get more information from others. But I certainly remember that when I read that Herald or Sun or Age, I was getting a lot of interesting stuff that wasn't being told to me by my own peers or superiors whilst I was there.

40:00 **What about just general morale at that time. How did that feel?**

Our morale in Vung Tau was good. I can't speak for the guys in Nui Dat. Their story I think would certainly be vastly different. We were in far more comfortable circumstances and more secure circumstances. I

40:30 would love to hear the stories of the guys who were in Nui Dat. Certainly they went on patrols and carried out military operations and some certainly fatal to them. We fortunately were in a safer environment in VungTau. Have I said anything so far that has either enhanced

41:00 what you've heard before or contradicted it maybe?

Enhanced yes, contradicted, no. As we were saying everyone has had a different experience and we're here to hear that particular side of it. So we're not comparing or contrasting. Although we do pick up some snippets of information it does help inform the interviewer.

Tape 7

00:36 **You said before that you had a camera and you took a lot of photos, not so much inside Vung Tau, so did that mean then that you were taking that camera with you when you went outside the base. Where were you taking photos?**

01:00 Most of my photos were taken on the Vietnamese beach. I was interested in the beautiful children. Also in and around the countryside. I was taking photos of people and places and things. Occasionally a shot or two in the camp where we stayed. I've forgotten. I haven't looked at my photographs for many many years. I should look at them one more time and make some copies.

01:30 In case the originals get lost or stolen or whatever.

You said you discovered photography in a sense in Vietnam...

Sergeant John Tillbrook... when I purchased my camera... I guess without him I would have struggled along, but he I guess enhanced what for me was a better and quicker beginning.

02:00 And I appreciated it. He got me off to a flying start by explaining the workings of the camera and photography. So that gave me a better appreciation of it, and the beauty of the whole thing is that I've not put that camera down over the next 40 years.

Did you like taking portraits?

02:30 Yes, I've developed into... first of all I've documented our family's outings on the weekends and holidays The scenery and the fun stuff. Then I have a special interest in portraiture. I like taking portraits of nephews, nieces, uncles and aunts, then

03:00 I have an interest in flower photography. I'm always photographing... I'm a member of the Australian Native Orchid Society... I have an interest in our native ground orchids etc. So I'm always in the bush photographing them. So that's an interest, identifying and taking photos of them because they're very rare. In years to come some of those orchids I've photographed won't be here again. That's the sad part of the story.

03:30 And I have another photographic leaning. A friend of mine, a professional photographer became ill with a bad heart and he wanted me to learn to do his wedding photography work. He gave me a good grounding, and good equipment. Medium format camera etc. Then I was introduced to the wedding scene. I've shot

04:00 about 150 weddings and done a lot of my own since then. I've had beautiful results, which have given me a lot of satisfaction. And more than that, meeting and making lifelong friends with the couples who I've photographed because they come back when their child is born and the child's christening and the next child's christening. So I get to meet them again.

04:30 So I do see some of these people afterwards. The wedding stories that I have to tell... I can tell you some wonderful stories and funny things that have happened at weddings. That's a whole different ball game.

Maybe we'll have time for that. I do want to go back to Vung Tau. You said

05:00 **you had won a prize or you had been recognised for one of your photographs of a Vietnamese fisherman. What's the story behind the photograph? How did you come to take that photograph?**

There was a calm ocean so you had like a mill pond. Like our Port Phillip Bay on a calm day. There was this fisherman almost waist deep in water.

05:30 He was very interesting. My photo of him is nothing more than this man in a black outfit I think and a blue sea in the background. And you see him intently with rod in hand. It just captured the feel of that man fishing I think lots of people other than myself

06:00 were also taking photographs, so we decided to have a competition. Somebody judged my shot of the fisherman to be the best one. It was informal one and just amongst us army guys. I don't think it happened again, but somehow a report of that did get into the army rag [newspaper].

Were the local people you were photographing interested or

06:30 **curious or indifferent?**

What, me photographing all these beautiful children? They responded positively. I think they were charmed to find that I thought their child was beautiful. So there was a mutual win-win situation going on, me finding their child endearing and them giving me a shot.

07:00 Some of my shots are of mothers and babies and playing on the beach. They're gorgeous children. The little ones. I mean any child under five years old from any part of the world is gorgeous.

Did you have any friendships with any of the local people, I guess because you were seeing them so often?

07:30 No, I wasn't meeting the same person over and over again. So there wasn't a lasting or fulfilling or significant friendship made. No sadly. I don't think our connections were strong. They were mainly superficial and there were just fleeting moments with the locals:

08:00 the fisherman on the beach or the chap at the tip or the restaurants or the bar girls or the little urchin boy selling what ever. That was it. I don't think we met their middle class as such. They were just street people or whatever.

What was Vung Tau before the base was there?

08:30 It must have been a tiny little village by the beach. Just like Inverloch in Australia or something. So I don't know how significant it is to them, whether it was their best beach or best town or whatever. I don't know if they had other better beach towns.

09:00 But it certainly became a popular spot for the Americans as well They had their Vung Tau associations and it was an R&R centre so people came from further afield to actually have one week's holiday and recuperate before they went back to the war. So here I was in a funny sense spending all my time in an R&R centre of a sort.

09:30 It just happened to be by the beach and our camp segregated us from the locals. But the five minute trip into town brought us in contact with the local people. I had my haircut or whatever done in the local barber.

10:00 We did need them.

Did they speak English at all?

Quite well. As I said one of the girls was able to sing all four verses of "Waltzing Matilda". I couldn't do it to save my life because I wouldn't know the words.

How did she come to learn "Waltzing Matilda"?

Some Aussie guy must have taught her and he must have spent a lot of time with her.

10:30 **It seems to me for whatever reason the girls were there at the bar... were they sex workers?**

Yes. The bar girl could have been negotiated with. Oh yes.

But they were also a link to the community and the culture?

Yes... the soldiers when they visited a town,

11:00 I guess they were the only people they met... the bar girls and the prostitutes and whatever. And apart from that you wouldn't meet the dean of the faculty of medicine or something like that. Unless you went to the same bar, which was unlikely. Those bars were there for our purpose.

11:30 They weren't patronised by decent local citizens.

Did you come across any hostility in the local community?

Not that I knew of. You mean whether they resented their girls being used by us for those purposes?

Yes I guess. And whether they thought that your presence there was corrupting their community?

I guess

12:00 there would have been people who would have resented us for those reasons. I can imagine it happening here. I guess when the Americans were here during the Second World War. I'm sure a lot of our people would have been worried about our girls. There will always issues like that.

But you don't recall any specific situations?

12:30 I guess they were accepting. I think in the end they must acquiesce where they think that while these guys are here, some of our girls are going to service them. And someone maybe a bit more cynical would say, it's a bit of revenue for our village. I mean we've only got to look at our own mining towns and the services that go with that. So it's something that happens.

13:00 **What I've read about that period from June to December, is that there was a build up of Australian troops, including the hardware and vehicles etc. So with your job were you aware of that? Did that impact**

13:30 **on your job?**

No I couldn't remember an influx of additions. I guess I was just a small cog in a small wheel and I didn't sort of say, "Oh there's more guys here." I can't remember it much. But certainly I knew that the numbers had started to grow. See we were the early ones and then there was a big escalation

14:00 of our troop involvement and then the downside must have come in the '70s. And then finally the end. But I was one of the early ones and it was certainly developing in the year I was there, '65. Correction '67 I was there. My National Service started in 65 and my last year was '67

So do you recall having very

14:30 **busy periods of work, where there may have been an emergency situation and you had to get supplies up to Nui Dat or somewhere?**

I can remember any unusual or different circumstances. If that was happening it happened in spite of me. I can remember though that we did work

15:00 hard in the first few months. That I remember, and then it sort of evened off once we got into the routine of things. But certainly we were working long hours. Our call of duty there was seven days a week and it was later on that we were given time off in the evening on a Friday night or Saturday night.

15:30 It was like a special privilege. Once we were on top of things we were able to do things like that, otherwise we were very dedicated to getting on top of our work and establishing ourselves in the place. Just to get basic facilities right like our bedding and toilets and showers. They were substandard. So the first guys who went there... I cannot think how they managed. And we took it to the next level.

16:00 As I said from beds on the floor to proper beds with legs; from a 44 gallon drum toilet to a dunny. The next level up, and similarly the showers were slightly better.

You were saying before that when you came back you had nightmares about being ambushed...

16:30 **did you experience that fear, the fear of the threat whilst you were there?**

No oddly enough. You felt safe while you were there and then you had the dream later. Explain the psychology of that. Rather bizarre yes.

17:00 **Can you tell me what the dream was about?**

It was this dream that I was being ambushed and we were being outnumbered and somehow being gunned down and my fate was inevitable that I was going to be knocked off. That when I had my nightmares.

17:30 I would have that sort of dream, the same dream, the same sort of circumstances in all of those dreams. I can only say that that was the Vietnam War, otherwise why would I dream of being ambushed and being outnumbered and then gunned down? So there it was. It must have been something at the back of my mind.

18:00 I must have felt subconsciously that I could have been in some kind of dangerous circumstances which may lead to my death. That may have been at the back of my mind subconsciously whilst I was there and then after I returned, I would say that was all coming out. So I had that same dream over the years for many years. Occasionally.

18:30 I mean had I had that same dream once a night or once a week that would have been horrific. This is something that may have happened once every six months on something. It wasn't something too bad

that I couldn't put up with it. Eventually the dream went away so I must have finally got over any fear that I may have had.

19:00 **What about when you had to go out to collect vehicles that had been hit by the VC?**

Fortunately that was not the Ordnance Corps' job. But the R.A.E.M.E.. chaps had to do that. Tow back any vehicles that had been damaged as a result of some sort of incident.

19:30 But there was one case I remember. This was not an everyday thing. I remember one Land rover of ours being brought back and it was bullet ridden and all the occupants had been killed. So that was a frightening one and I certainly have photographs of that Land rover at all angles. That's the sort of thing that I should pass on

20:00 to the War Memorial archive in Canberra, when I finally get round to it.

Just on your ordnance responsibilities, to what degree were you involved in any decision making?

I was just a private, taking instructions.

20:30 I would say the two sergeants and the lieutenant would have been the ones making the decisions. I can never remember having to make a decision. I was carrying out orders. It was a small role.

Was it consultative at all?

I can remember the odd meeting. Our sergeant would brief us about something.

21:00 So and so is leaving and will be replaced with so and so. Teach him that or let's do this better. We would have friendly discussions and there was nothing untoward on the job front. It was very harmonious.

OK, so that leads me to what you were saying earlier about having this sort of overlap because you realised when you first arrived there you hadn't had any time with 101

21:30 **Field Workshops. And they thought it would be a good idea to have an overlap for the next group that came in. How was that set up?**

That decision would have been made right at the top, and whether this was 102 or whether that was happening with other units, I'm not sure. But it was certainly an idea that would have caught on.

22:00 Everybody in the second year of our presence there would have felt this. That here they were walking into the shoes of the other guys not knowing the ropes. So the obvious way to get over that problem was to stagger the replacements.

So were you involved in training some people or briefing people?

Yes I can remember some new guys, but being one of the early ones to depart,

22:30 I didn't see too much of that. I was one of the ones that volunteered to leave and be replaced. And my colleagues would have had to train those guys. I didn't do too much of that. But I do remember a small number of new comers were looked after by us and shown the ropes. So that was a good system to stagger the thing instead of

23:00 150 guys all leaving on the same day and another 150 guys coming in. That was foolish. So they got that right with us and it would have set a precedent and it would have been ongoing. Everybody would have been staggered after that.

What was it like having new people?

Well it was good

23:30 because they brought news with them and they could tell you what was happening back home. It was interesting. You felt... it was good to be able to teach somebody the ropes with the knowledge you had. You sort of felt you were on top of it and it was nice to be able to feel like that and pass on your knowledge to the next lot who came.

24:00 **So they were sleeping with you in the barracks?**

Yes, they came in and they were welcomed.

Were they nervous?

They had a different disposition. You could see in them... they were looking around and wondering what everything was about. We were so settled, and it was certainly good to have the whole thing staggered. So

24:30 you don't have a whole 150 people not knowing what was happening. Yes it was a good thing to have the new comers come in gradually.

You had a choice to stay on or not stay on,

25:00 **how did you come...you may have said this in detail before, I'm not sure. How did you come to that decision?**

Well I had got to a stage where I had missed my family over a two-year period and whatnot. So I had felt I had done enough.

25:30 There was no particular need or nothing further to fulfil. It was the same old routine and I felt I had accomplished whatever I had to accomplish. The thought of returning home was greater than wanting to stay on. So when they were looking for volunteers with the staggered system coming in, somebody had to volunteer to be the first to leave at the six month mark.

26:00 So I thought well my two years has now come up and I've been away from home for two years, so this is a good time for me to leave. The others were happy and happy to stay, so I thought by volunteering I was really do them all a favour. A lot of them did want to stay on and were happy to stay on.

26:30 So I made the first move along with a group of others. Somebody had to be the first and I was happy to do that.

What happened when you got home?

It was a question of readjusting to civvy street [civilian life]. I got my job back

27:00 at the SEC. I was welcomed back. My mother was certainly happy to see me back in one piece. I was happy to start again.

So you went back to your job?

Yes and I carried on from there. It wasn't long before I went

27:30 overseas again representing if you like Australia one more time. In 1972, five years after coming back from Vietnam, I went off to Port Moresby where the electricity commission there needed some secondees to help them run their scene there until they got their self government and then finally independence.

28:00 In 1973 they got their self government whilst I was there and independence followed a few years later. So I did a straight 12 months there. And once again they wanted me to stay on and continue with them but I made the decision to depart after my 12 months and return once again to the SEC

28:30 where I continued on for 30 years.

That's a long innings.

A long innings with the SEC. But the SEC being such a vast organisation I wasn't 30 years sitting at the same desk. I was in many departments all over. I worked in Footscray and the City and Richmond in varying capacities.

So can you tell me how you came

29:00 **to get that position in Port Moresby? What qualified you for that and what sort of work was it?**

It was just another appointment and vacancy sort of thing. I looked at the appointment and vacancy gazette and there was five guys to go to Port Moresby and serve with the Electricity Commission in Port Moresby. They were in New Guinea. Some were going to remain in Port Moresby and others

29:30 in the outskirts. There were 30 applicants who put in to get the five positions. I was one of the lucky five. And I felt that having served in Vietnam must have added to my chances of getting this particular appointment which necessitated serving

30:00 in a difficult country.

And was it difficult?

Once again I was in the accounting department. I was the fellow who was recording all their assets and the costing of all that.

30:30 My main role was to keep that organisation flourishing and to train local people to take on our jobs eventually. And I made a lasting friendship with one of the boys who was training. He

31:00 invited me to his village where I met his family. His father was a chief and I got a very warm welcome. He invited me to his village and I thought I would just be going to meet him and his mum and dad and that was it. Here I was greeted by the entire village, and his father happened to be the headman and I didn't know about that.

31:30 There was a big feast put on for us and that boy is now a very senior person and still maintains contact with me. He was a shy boy then who could hardly add two and two together, is now a very senior man in the public service. He comes to Australia occasionally to further his studies, and

32:00 I've sort of watched him grow from that shy boy who didn't have the confidence to staple two pieces of paper together to being now a senior public servant. I've followed his career and he's maintained his friendship with me. He's come and stayed with us here and I'm looking forward to the day I can make a return trip to Port Moresby and visit him and his village.

Did you have a certain status with your position over there?

32:30 It was a low ranking job but I was able to win the hearts of some of the local people which I thought was a good thing because most of the people there were not interested really in the local people's welfare. Perhaps they went to earn a salary that was attractive and pay less tax and

33:00 come home with a pot full of money. But I took it the one step further. I was trying to show an interest in the local people there. And this boy particularly didn't think that I was being sincere because he had not seen any kind of sincerity like that. Finally he believed me and that I was really interested in him and his family. He finally invited me and this wonderful

33:30 big reception that I got. And then my car on the way back was filled with all the things that they could get together. They gave me mainly fruit. Lots of breadfruit and pineapples, until my boot was full. And that was the hospitality I got from, not only his family but his entire village. I was very moved by this welcome.

34:00 And our friendship has lasted for 35 years or whatever.

Do you speak Pidgin?

The odd word or two or sentence. And I've been chasing up other guys who I served with over there. I caught up with a guy who returned to Queensland and I visited him

34:30 and he was miles away from Brisbane in a small country town. I know there was another guy who went to Canberra and I'm hoping to visit him one day. So I'm chasing them all up now, those guys who were with me and amongst my small circle of friends. And this wonderful local boy. I can remember going to the wedding of another local guy

35:00 a fellow from Rabaul living near the famous volcano Matapit on Matapit Island. They've recently had another eruption. This chap was getting married and somebody had to represent his office and the boss was away and I was it.

35:30 I was called to propose a toast to the bride and groom. And to say a few words about my colleague. If ever there was an impromptu speech that I had to make, that was it. Two minutes' notice and away I went and I extolled the virtues of my friend. He's now a very senior man. I think he's now their chief finance officer or some thing now. But they had humble beginnings and in just one generation

36:00 they've moved from villages to CEOs or chief financial officers.

So did the company itself... with self government on the doorstep, did the company have a policy of employing the local people?

That was the whole idea of our presence there, to skill the locals there and give them independence. And we agreed to that. Australia didn't want to stay there forever.

36:30 So happily we relinquished our role and handed it over after skilling them up. But they've had their upheavals. They're not flourishing and they have all their troubles there.

So the company was SEC?

Well it was SEC here but they were a different body again. They were called

37:00 ECPNG, the Electricity Commission of Papua New Guinea, and naturally they got their recruitments from SEC Victoria and probably Sydney and Brisbane. So they harnessed their resources from engineering and commercial staff from I guess the electricity commissions in all our capital cities. There were a few Queenslanders, Sydneysiders and Melburnians

37:30 serving there and all from the electricity commissions. All our engineers and accountants were there and we were able to hand it over to them.

Was that a satisfying feeling?

Very satisfying to see a guy who couldn't staple two pieces of paper together suddenly developing into a top

38:00 class person. There was nobody above them so they could only go up once we left. So that as a very fulfilling role. I felt I had played two good roles for Australia, in Vietnam and in New Guinea, in a short space of time.

38:30 And I would say those two events have been my greatest influences. I've learnt a lot from both of them. They were really the two cornerstones in the building of my character I feel. And I really got to know so

many people as a result of both of those exercises. Otherwise it's a more

39:00 parochial home and office, and local football club and that's it. It was a far broadening different experience to have. And I think one led to the other. I'm sure the person interviewing us for the New Guinea positions must have felt that because I had been a Viet Vet that I would cope in this other position as well.

39:30 **Do you have any abiding friendships from your time in Vietnam?**

Yes one person particularly. The man we called "Doc". Our doctor within inverted commas. He really wasn't a doctor but he was a trained nurse. He became our medical person.

40:00 He was the medic at 102 Field Workshops, and his friendship with me has now lasted all that time. From time to time I see him at the Anzac Day march and I certainly... he visits me quite often. He joined my wife and I and son in a holiday up in the [Victorian] high country and we've

40:30 had some fond memories together ever since. He has two sons who are now grown up, and he's seen my son grow up from the day he was born. He's a very close friend. So I have one Viet friend and of course the others I meet at Anzac Day, and not again. But Barry has become a friend.

What's Anzac Day like for you?

It's a very moving experience. And it's sort of lost its sting and I thought it would be something that would fade away and die. But all of a sudden we've seen a resurgence of public interest and it's suddenly grown again in the last five or six or eight years, and it's a warm reception that you get from the crowd. As you walk through you get applauded and with comments like "Well done." "Good on you!" and that's very moving. Like 30 or 40 years later it hasn't made a difference to the public appreciation. That's quite marvellous.