Australians at War Film Archive

Griffith Spragg (Griff) - Transcript of interview

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Some parts of this interview have been embargoed.

The embargoed portions are noted in the transcript and video.

Tape 1

00:36 **Griffith, I was wondering if you could just start by telling us a bit about your parents, where they came from, what they did?**

Well, my father was born in New Zealand and my mother in Goulburn. They met in Fiji, when my father was a pharmacist. My mother was over with her sister running a boarding house, he boarded there. So the most unlikely romantic couple ever seen. Very shy, but

01:00 they must have got together because there are five kids and many attempts, at least attempts … well, let's not go into that. He pursued mother back to Haberfield where she was living at the time and they married. He worked as a pharmacist in Sydney, first and then Waratah and then eventually Maitland where I was born.

01:30 He was a very good fellow, very highly principled but a little bit bigoted in many ways. He was … my sister describes it well, she said, "He's tolerant, he rams tolerance down your throat." But he was a very good father and my mother was a very sweet lady and very astute.

02:00 So I really had no problems growing up.

Do you have any idea what took them to Fiji in the first place?

Well, my father, when he … he worked for his uncle at one stage in Wellington. His uncle, Wesley, from whom he got his second name, which he didn't like, that was his first name, Wesley Finnick, he always used the second name.

02:30 He didn't like him at all, but Wesley was an interesting guy himself. He was reputed to have discovered the Kauri pine for making butter boxes in his factory. And Dad walked out on that job. I'm not sure whether he did pharmacy after that down in, I think that's what happened, down in Dunedin. But in between time he just did roustabouting [general labouring] and cutting flax,

03:00 which is the hardest thing, he said. And then eventually he wandered over to Fiji.

Was that a period, though, remembered with fondness, living in Fiji?

Yes, mother was an anxious person, she picked up a little bit of Indian, the Indian language there and she tells the story of working down at the Quay in a bookstore, I think it was the New South

03:30 Wales Book Store, and some Indian seamen trooped in, none of them speaking English. And she felt very threatened by them for some reason or other so she took up the courage and said "Jau." which meant "Go." And they all trooped out again, just as they'd trooped in. What was it that you asked me in the first place?

Oh, whether they had fond recollections of the time in Fiji?

04:00 Well, that's hard to say really. They didn't speak very much of it. Must have been all right, though, they were getting together.

Did they have a strong sense of the Empire, then, was that an important concept to them?

It was never verbalised but I think it would be … it just happened. We got it at school, we just accepted it. We saluted the flag, all British born.

04:30 Yes, so they certainly had that attitude. That was something that he didn't ram down our throat, didn't have to, I don't suppose. Come to think of it, he was very angry with Churchill [Prime Minister of Great Britain in WW2] after World War II. When we were coming home from the Middle East, we sailed out of Aden one morning and turned up back in Aden the next morning. I believe it was Churchill and

05:00 Curtin [Australian Prime Minister during WW2] arguing, and the compromise … Churchill wanted to send us to Burma. Thank God we didn't go there. And to be compromised by putting us on Ceylon. We had three glorious months, garrisoning in Ceylon. But Churchill was obviously prepared to sacrifice us for a time being, but it was expedient I guess. And I had a lot of time for the old boy, really. But Dad used

05:30 to get a bit heated about him, though.

Can you tell me what it was like to grow up amidst the Depression?

Well, we didn't suffer really. My father was earning ten pounds a week. And that wasn't princely, it sounds good, it was certainly comfortable, you didn't want for anything. But we were on the middle strata of society there. My siblings were forever aspiring, particularly

06:00 my sister, to ascend to the social stratosphere. And there was a bit of a phobia about the unemployed and people of the socio economic group five. I can see in retrospect now, my mother used to get horrified if we played with them, etcetera. It was a funny attitude which at the time we didn't like it, and we ignored it as much as we could. But we didn't think anything

06:30 of it, it seemed to be the thing to do, they were common people.

Where were you living?

In Rutherford, out of West Maitland.

So there was quite a mix of classes in amongst that area?

No, they were mainly working people and just a few … there was a school teacher … these were our circle … and the manager of the South Maitland

07:00 Railways lived in that area. But mostly they were unemployed or battlers.

And was it a nice area as a boy to …?

Oh, yes it was a lovely area. It's not anymore, it's been urbanised or sub-urbanised.

So what sort of activities did you enjoy?

Roaming the bush, swimming the river, cricket, football all those things. A bit of shooting. Yes, so there are

07:30 about three or four houses in our street, well that was First Avenue, when I was growing up and the street was quite a short one. From there, there was a large paddock that went down to a dam at the bottom and rose the other side to a quarry, which now constitute the Maitland Bowling Club. And bush started around about that area and went all the way out to the river, and it was great. There's a lot of bush around that area.

08:00 **How old were you when you finished school?**

Sixteen, I was finished at the end of '38. Sixteen and I turned seventeen in January, '39.

And what sort of career goals did you have or ambitions for the future?

My father wanted me to be a journalist. So I caught that, and yes, I want to be a journalist. But

08:30 I … when I finished doing the Leaving Certificate, I went down to Sydney, stayed with relatives at Brighton Le Sands, lovely people, the Galstons, mother's sister. And I started looking for a job then and I was trying journalism. My father had connections with Barry Bowman, or "Freddie" as they used to call him.

09:00 His father and Bowman's grandfather were friends in New Zealand. And on the strength of that I went and interviewed him. He was an interesting guy, but he said I was overqualified … that was roughly what he was telling me. I had a Leaving Certificate, or I was about to get it and that was too advanced to be a copy boy. And that was it. So I eventually got into the Commonwealth Bank.

09:30 **So during the early part of '39, you were working for the Commonwealth Bank?**

Yes.

And what were your duties there?

Oh, I was a junior, checked sheets. The teller would do the transactions and pass the pass book through to me, the savings bank passbook, and I had to enter it onto these sheets where there was a strip down the side you tore off and they had to reconcile the balances. The boss once described my

10:00 check sheets as “Like a battlefield.” So I thought, “Well, if that’s how you feel about it, I’ll go to war.” in a sense.

Can you tell me about the day in which you heard that war had broken out?

Yes, I remember very clearly. When Robert Menzies [Australian Prime Minister at the outbreak of WW2] performed his “Melancholy Duty.” We were round at the home of friends in Brighton Le Sands, the name of Holmes, and

10:30 their father Mick, they called him “Red” Mick, he was a fellow traveller [a communist] I think, he was a good old guy, but he’d been wounded in World War I and he’d seen plenty of fighting. The tension was so great at that time that when Menzies announced that war had started, there were three of us there, my cousin, his youngest son and myself, we all gave into a cheer. And he was so angry, the father was so angry with us. He said “You bloody

11:00 young fools, you don’t know what you’re getting into.” And of course we didn’t, he was right. But it was a relief. It had been hovering over our head. And I think that was it.

Can you describe that tension to me? Was it an awareness of the greater political machinations?

Oh, yes it was. I was finally a student at Maitland High, I had to give the address on

11:30 Empire Day, and I spoke then … I didn’t realise this, but the centenary edition of the Maitland Boys High School, “Magpie.” magazine reflected on this, apparently. And I’d got all these ideas from my father, but I certainly gave Hitler a serve. And we all gave Chamberlain [English Prime Minister at the outbreak of WW2] a serve over his attitude to Hitler. I think at that stage we realised that we

12:00 could’nt let this go on. And the first thing that upset me was in the mid thirties when I read of a ... Jews, a line of Jews had been lined up and put through a … what do you call those things … when you run down a line and Nazis on other side belting with shovels, they went. And then we started to hear other things and then

12:30 refugees started to arrive. And I suppose that’s what really disturbed us most.

So your family and friends had quite a strong political awareness and consciousness?

Yes, my father was … oh, not mother, but she just had to tag along in the background. But my father was the secretary of the local UAP, United Australia Party, which eventually became the Liberals. And Jack Lang [Premier of New South Wales] was the real bogey in those days.

13:00 He paid my younger brother and I a shilling each to go around and stick posters on walls. There’d be this little blue modest poster which says, “Stephen’s basic wage, two pounds eleven and six.” and we used to have to stick this great red thing on that said, “Lang’s basic wage, the dole.” But when eventually BSP Stephens had defeated Lang in that election, my father

13:30 didn’t take to him at all. And he suddenly deserted the right and became a fellow traveller himself. He’d read some literature on what Stalin [Premier USSR] was doing, and he thought “This is a pea.” That worked out rather well for me. The day war broke out, or the Sunday after war was announced, we had that special delivery of a telegram. I’d joined the militia, the 45th Battalion at that stage and I had put my age up, and I went

14:00 with a notice in one hand and the key in the other. We were being called up to a camp at Cape Banks and the boss … I got him out of bed actually, he said “Oh, you can’t go, you’re under age.” I said “Don’t worry about that.” “No.” he said, “No.” By the time I got over to the Drill Hall, the adjutant knew and the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] knew and I was out, I was promoted to cadet at the beginning of it all. And there I stayed until I turned eighteen.

Can I ask you about that decision

14:30 **to enlist in the militia? Was that something you were very keen to go as soon as war broke out?**

Oh, war hadn’t broken out. I don’t know, it’s hard to say what motivated me there. I know money had quite a bit to do with it, you got paid. That’s why I was no used being a cadet. I think that was probably the greater motivating factor, but I enjoyed it.

That was during 1939 then, that you joined?

Yeah, early ’39.

Early in ’39.

15:00 **And you lied about your age?**

Oh, yeah. You had to do things like that to survive.

And so once they were aware of your age, you remained part of the militia but as a cadet?

Yeah, that's right. Until I … actually I was only September to the following January, I turned eighteen. And then I had to serve for another eighteen months, and when Stalin

15:30 was invaded by Hitler, my father … oh, they'd brought the age limit down to nineteen, I still needed parental permission to join. And the bank just sat on you, you didn't have it. My father relented, because he was in [UNCLEAR]. He thought I should go and give Uncle Joe [Stalin] a hand I think.

What were your parents' initial reaction to you joining the militia?

Well, they were back in Rutherford and I was in

16:00 Sydney and we were corresponding. And Dad just signed the papers. Oh, he did tell me later, in conversation, I realised why he signed the papers. And mother was always apprehensive, very apprehensive.

Were they aware that you'd signed up to the 45th Battalion, though, in early '39?

I don't know, really. I wouldn't have kept it from them if it'd come up.

16:30 **What about family down here, were they supportive of that move?**

Oh, they were lovely people, the Galstons. Yeah, they let me get away with anything.

What about your uncle? Was it your uncle, sorry, who had been angry at your …?

No, this was my friend's father.

Friend's father. Did he say anything about you …?

Oh, no, his two sons joined the navy. No, he was quite happy for us to go off and serve, I think. He just thought, he just didn't like the war, , oh, I don't blame him,

17:00 poor fellow.

What sort of training were you doing with the 45th Battalion?

Infantry. Normal parade ground stuff and the weapons. We really didn't get … oh, and lectures. It didn't become at all serious until we got into camp. And the lectures were World War I based, of course, as the weapons were, Lewis guns, etcetera.

And was that quite an

17:30 **intensive period of training? Was there an urgency?**

Oh, once the war had broken out and once I'd been admitted to the army place, as a full blown militia man, yes the training was pretty intense. It was quite rigorous.

And could you tell me about any of the tensions that may have existed between the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] and the militia at that

18:00 **stage?**

Yes. Well, from the first place, there was tensions in the unit between the volunteers and the UTS - Universal Trainees. Just a few of them, but they were great union men, they organised a strike on one occasion, which I got tied up in, much to my chagrin. I joined them because I thought that was safer than sticking with the army, but in the army, as I'd more or less sensed, didn't really

18:30 do a thing to me, they protected me in the long run.

What was the socialist attitude towards the war as it was unfolding?

I don't think … they couldn't openly oppose it. But they would buck the local system as much as they could. But most of them settled down and were quite decent fellows, really, good fellows. And they later on,

19:00 that battalion was split up and they went as reinforcements to other units. Some of them went to one battalion that didn't perform terribly well in New Guinea. But others joined units and did their job.

Do you recall the public perceptions of the AIF versus CMF [Citizens Military Forces] at that stage?

I don't know that … I didn't notice any. I don't know that they had any great perception. There were

19:30 things said, such as when they first started to enlist when war first broke out, "There's five bob a day

butchers." and "Economic conscripts." But a few people, apparently, but most people were very anxious about invasion. We hadn't really thought … oh, actually, I must have felt worried about the Japanese myself, long before war. There was a mountain

20:00 that looks volcanic called Hudson's Peak, which is out beyond Anambah in the Hunter Valley, about ten miles from our place. We used to hike out there and I could see, I remembering sitting up the top of this and looking down and imagining how you could ambush or deploy an invading Japanese force? And I wasn't doing it for any other reason other than the fear of the invasion. So somehow or other, I'd cottoned onto that idea then. And I remember in

20:30 high school, going down to Newcastle [swimming] Baths on a Wednesday afternoon and going over the docks before we caught the train home, and seeing a Japanese vessel in there. And these Japs with the strange sandshoes with the toe, the great toe separated from the others, and I had a funny feeling then about them, somehow.

So had you been following, through the press, what Japan had

21:00 **been up to with China?**

Oh, yes.

And expansionist policies?

Oh yes, yes, certainly. That's when we anticipated.

Did you know anything about their culture or did you know much about the Japanese?

No. Only that they were vicious.

What about the Germans, what did you know, as a child growing up, what did you know about the Germans?

They were our enemy in World War I and I don't think we'd quite got over that when World War II broke out. No.

21:30 **Was there a realness to your feelings towards them or was it quite abstract?**

More abstract towards the Germans. There was a, in fact Goering was a local man who had been manager of Foggett Jones before it went bust during the Depression, and then he started up on his own. And he was a good business man and a hard toiler and he started to make a

22:00 pound or two and he was held in certain, well with a degree of respect, not all that much, and he was known as "German Jack." Although there was not a trace of an accent, but he must have been probably second generation Australian. But there was just that attitude.

So you said after your eighteenth birthday, which was January '40, you had about another eighteen months

22:30 **with the militia, with the 45th?**

Yes that's right. I transferred to the AIF in July, fall of the Bastille Day, 14th July, '41.

And can you tell me of that process of swapping over? Was that difficult or quite smooth?

Oh, no, it was very easy. I was just afraid, that I'm not very big, I'm not very robust and I was afraid I might get knocked back, that was all. I was dead keen to get out of the militia.

23:00 **Can you tell me about what those motivations to swap were?**

Well, I didn't feel like a real soldier, I suppose. And that's what kept me in the infantry and kept me out of ordinary things if I could possibly avoid them.

Why didn't you feel like a real soldier?

Well, we were just training, nothing was happening. Already the battalion I was to join had been involved in the Western Desert in the fighting. This was round

23:30 about the time that strike occurred in the 45th Battalion.

Do you think that just … your feelings about not being a real soldier came from within you and within the unit, or was there outside perceptions influencing that as well?

Probably a little of each, I don't know. There was never anything said, or no pressure put on me from the outside, not at all. When one's friends are joining up, the ones that are a bit older,

24:00 and you feel a bit isolated.

So was morale quite poor amongst the 45th then, at that stage, with a strike going on?

Yes. Well, it wasn't marvellous amongst the conscripts there. It wasn't all that high, they were

disgruntled. The strike was over them being … the notice that they weren't going

24:30 home for Christmas, the camp was being extended. In fact, they were in forever, then. That lot just stayed there in the battalion instead of having a three months camp, that was indefinite there, to stay. And that's what they were worried about, but that's not the reason the strike, not the excuse for striking. They were … it happened to be a cold morning in late November or early December and they were …

25:00 the order of the day was just ordinary KDs [Kitchen Duties] and they insisted on their greatcoats, wouldn't take them off. And that's what it was all about. If they'd been thinking, I think the powers would have said, "All right, stay in the greatcoats and march around in the heat of the day." Because it didn't take long for the sun to come up. But no, no, no, you've greatcoats on, you've won.

25:30 **So they transfer to 2/3rd Battalion …?**

I transferred to reinforcements, 113 reinforcements, went to Tamworth.

Okay, so that was … so where were you based with 45th?

In Ingleburn.

In Ingleburn. And you shifted to Tamworth?

Yes. I went into GDD [General Details Depot] in the showgrounds. And I think I went home

26:00 for the day or two it took, then I was inducted in and shot up to Tamworth.

And did you notice an increase in the quality of the equipment or the training that you were receiving there?

Well, I noticed a much better spirit amongst the recruits, we were all keen and buoyant. Shaving our heads, and they managed to shave my head and leave a "V" in there

26:30 with hair. Others were having a "V" painted on with indelible pencil, but my barber, he was more of an artist. But I remember, I got some leave, I think it must have been before I'd joined the AIF, at some stage anyway. Of course, I enlisted in the middle of July and I was

27:00 aboard the Queen Mary on 3rd September. And at that leave I said briefly I said to my mother, "Well, the next leave I come up will be the final." thinking "It would probably be months ahead." it was about a fortnight off. And mother was in this little pharmacy Dad had at Barmedman and I walked in off the train and she had a tray in her hand and she dropped it,

27:30 she got a hell of a shock. She always kept it to herself. She used to write to me and tell me to remember I had a weak chest and to keep my feet dry and that sort of thing, and this is in the Owen Stanleys [ranges]. I spoke to her about it later, she said yes, she admitted she was petrified but she didn't want to show it.

Did you have to retake a medical to transfer into the

28:00 **AIF?**

Oh, yes.

And you were concerned that you wouldn't get through there?

Yeah, I didn't think I was big enough.

And did you mention asthma, was it asthma that you said …?

No, I suffer from it now, but I realise I was getting it then too. I had pneumonia, bilateral double pneumonia, as it's called, as an infant, probably eighteen months, two years, something like that. And from then on I was said to have a weak chest. But every now and again

28:30 I'd have this raging temperature, and they put anti-congestion poultice on me, and I'd be in bed. Obviously, I was having an attack of pneumonia, I would think, somehow I would get over it.

You were a relatively sickly lad from your growing up?

Yeah, oh yes. No, the asthma wasn't troubling me at that stage. The first sign I had of it, and I didn't realise it was asthma, was in the camp at Ingleburn. And I had

29:00 a couple of bad attacks which I cured with rum. No more after that until well into … just before I left Canowindra, that was about '62.

So how were you responding to the training at Tamworth? Were you on top of the physical side of things?

Oh, it was pretty light. We did a route march to Manilla,

29:30 Manilla, that's a couple of miles down the road, there'd be a sole sergeant who was an ex World War I fellow, very benign old guy, he'd take us on this route march. But it was mainly being equipped and brought up to draft one standard.

What sort of equipment were you working with?

I don't think we even had a shoot, pretty sure we didn't have a shoot on the range. Yeah, I would have been issued with a rifle there.

30:00 84735, yeah, that's where I got that, took that over, and webbing, and bayonet, and tin hat.

Was there concerns about the adequacy of the equipment you had?

No, oh no. No, the unit was well equipped too, when I got it, with Bren guns and sub machine guns. And we didn't lack at all for equipment at that stage. The militia had been,

30:30 well they were training with Lewis guns, but I think everyone had a rifle when it was needed.

And so you spent three months in Tamworth?

No, oh, yeah, September, October, I went there in July. July, August, September, no only about six or eight weeks, six, yes all of August and two weeks of July,

31:00 about seven or eight weeks.

And you were then attached to the 2/3rd, or to be sent as a …?

Yeah, that's right. I went to the training battalion in Nusarat in Palestine, the battalion was then up in Syria. I eventually joined the battalion in January of 1941, oh, '42, '42.

Did you know who you were going to be attached to when you …?

Oh, yes, yes. We had the coloured patches too, but they weren't the same as the originals,

31:30 they were chocolate and green and the chocolate was more a brown, a dirty brown and you could tell a reo [reinforcement] by his colour patch.

So was there a large group from Tamworth that you'd made friends with that you'd travelled to Palestine with?

Yeah, there was … the reinforcements was about thirty, our platoon strength about thirty with an officer. Fred Norrie was our officer, he was a very good fellow.

32:00 He went to hospital unfortunately, when we were coming home, and he got posted to the 9th Division and was killed. I met his sister later on who was married to a contemporary of mine and she knew I came from … I was in the 2/3rd Battalion and she said her brother was due to go there and told me the story, said Fred Norrie, he was my draft officer. He would

32:30 have been a very good soldier too, I think, Fred. And the other … the 11th and 12th reinforcements went over together. The 12th, Alex Scully, whom I still see, old Alex, good fellow, he was the OC [Officer Commanding] of the 12th Reinforcements. I mentioned him in my memoirs.

And you boarded the Queen Mary to travel to …

Oh, yeah, that was a thrill.

Tell me about that day?

33:00 Well it was … we came down from Tamworth by train with the train cock-a-doodle doing and people, I imagine, cheering. And it shot down to Darling Harbour, I didn't know you could do that in a train. Took us down there and we got aboard a barge, the [Queen] Mary couldn't dock, it was at anchor. Went out and boarded her and that was pretty late in the afternoon or at night,

33:30 I can't, now I just can't remember whether it was dark or not.

Tell me your first impressions of the ship?

Oh, magnificent. Oh yes. I had seen it before because it and the [HMS] Ulysses had been in the harbour. But being on it, of gee she was, it was great.

Was there a feeling of strength or a boost to your morale that involved travelling on such a strong ship?

34:00 I don't know, I don't know that I particularly had those … no, it was more a feeling of luxury that I would never have been able to afford.

And you shared a cabin?

Yes. There was the two berth cabin made into four berths. We were a bit lucky because most of the troops were down in the hold. But somehow or other we drew … I was a corporal too, salt water stripes

[a promotion just for the journey], which I lost as soon as I got over there.

So you were a corporal

34:30 **by that stage.**

Yeah. Coming from the militia, you see, I'd been a sergeant in the militia and I dropped to corporal. At least, I came in as a private and I got two stripes, but they were whipped off me as soon as I got to the reinforcement battalion.

Can you tell me what the atmosphere was like onboard?

Oh, it was pleasant. The food was not

35:00 very varied. It was kidneys and boiled eggs, alternating, and rock cakes that weren't too bad that we bought from the crew who made them with our rations, no doubt. But yes, we explored this ship a bit.

Was the mood of morale of the troops overall quite positive?

Oh, yes. Yes. There were occasional frictions

35:30 but on the whole it was very positive. And it was great to just be aboard a ship, any ship, but particularly that one. It was mighty. I remember going around, we were crossing the [Great Australian] Bight which was pretty rough and there was a hell of a headwind blowing, and I was hanging on the rail trying to get around to the bow, so I couldn't, so I fortunately gave up. I would have been blown overboard if I did. But I'd

36:00 never been to sea before, never been on a ship.

Did you have any concerns about submarines or German raiders or anything like that?

We were aware that they could be on, and one night there was a sudden acceleration of the Mary. It was thought, it was in the Red Sea, that she was submarine dodging. I was more aware of it when we came back from the Middle East.

Well on your way across, how aware were you, at that stage, of what was going on in the war, in a broad sense?

Oh, I think we were well briefed. We

36:30 were getting newspapers and the radio. Japan had not come into the war at that stage, so I think that made a difference.

Were you well aware of how the war in North Africa had been going?

Oh, yes, yes. The battalion I was going to join was part of the 16th grads, the 6th Division that had performed very well there. I was aware that I was going to that unit. And Greece.

Greece, you had heard …?

Oh, yes and we knew about Syria. In fact, before I left Australia, I'd seen a newsreel of the Syrian campaign.

37:30 **That began about June, July, was that right, in '41?**

Yeah, yes, I think so. Bardia was December and Greece and Crete, in think, were March. I would have been, yeah, about the middle of the year.

So you'd heard that the lads were doing well, you were going to a strong unit who'd been performing well?

Yeah, I don't know that

38:00 I knew the full story. What I do know was that when I came back to the 45th Battalion, I knew I was going as a reinforcement with the 2/3rd Battalion. There was a lieutenant there, a platoon commander, in the company I'd been with called Hutchison, Charlie Hutchison. And he said, "Oh, my brother's over there, he'll smarten you up." And I thought, "If anyone needs smartening up, it's you yourself, Charlie." He was a real rascal. And his

38:30 brother turned out to be my first company commander, and later commanded the battalion, that was Ian Hutchison. I explained to him, he was a paradox to me, and I make quite a lot of him in my book.

And was there a stop off on the way to Palestine?

Trincomalee . Oh my gosh, it was a lovely looking harbour. That really enthralled us when we sailed in there.

Did you have an opportunity to go ashore?

No,

39:00 No. Didn't get ashore. I went ashore with mumps in Tewfik and wound up in the 12th General Hospital. So I was a bit late joining the battalion, training battalion. A bit later than the rest of them.

So you left in September, when did the ship arrive in Palestine?

I think it was about three weeks later, roughly.

And you fell ill?

Yes, I had mumps and

39:30 I was taken off.

Tape 2

00:32 **Yeah, Griff, could you pick us up at having to go to hospital? Tell us about going to the 12th General?**

12th General. Well they just carted me off and put me in there. And the good part about that was that it got me used to starvation, it was terrible food. But it was a shade better than the Owen Stanleys, but only just marginally.

What was the quality of the equipment

01:00 **like at the hospital?**

Oh, I guess it was fairly primitive. I don't know really, we didn't need much, they were just worried that it would go to our testicles. So we, oh what happened to me though, I was delayed, my departure was delayed because I got cut short and used a bedpan and one of the orderlies spied and said, "Ah, you've got dysentery." I don't know whether I had or hadn't, but they made sure that I had

01:30 it because they started to dose me with castor oil. Oh God, that's a terrible treatment. We don't do things like that anymore, or Epsom Salts. But I was pretty, by the time they'd finished with me with three or four days of that, I was pretty well knocked out. The most interesting thing I found there was Italian prisoners of war who looked after us, three of them were attached to our ward.

Could you tell me more about that?

Yeah, we had a wonderful

02:00 relationship. There was a little guy, Salvatore, he was a sweet guy, he looked about fourteen, he was probably about eighteen. And he'd come in with a handsome little fellow, come in with a tray, and he'd sneak into the ward. He knew how we felt about this damn food. But we'd always give him a cheer. He thought it was something out of the box. And then there was Gino, he was a short man, very well built

02:30 with a face like George Sanders, the English film actor at the time. A very handsome, strong looking face. He was teaching me Italian. He used to come and perch on the bed and get out his pad and give me a lesson. He tapped me on the shoulder on one occasion and said, "Molto intelligencia." And I thought, "You're a good man, you can pick them." And then there was Pasquale, Pasquale, he was a fascist, and he was all for Hitler,

03:00 Mussolini, rather. And he'd give the fascist salute and then he'd say, "Mussolini." and he'd march like so, upright and draw straight out. And then he'd say, "Churchill." and pretend to be on a stick. But we liked him, he was good fun. But he disappeared on one occasion and I found him later on, when I was up and about, he was wandering around the … oh, yes, he had two buckets of slops in his hand,

03:30 he was slushing in the kitchen now, instead of an orderly in the ward. With his big purple patch on his backside that they all had to wear. And I said "Pasquale, what's happened?" So with a mixture of my Gino Italian and his broken English, he conveyed to me that he'd seen a medical officer and a sister, he'd peaked through a crack in the tend and seen them in a somewhat uncompromising position. And he later went to this sister and

04:00 assured her he could serve her a lot better, he was much better endowed. And of course, she wasn't going to have that, so the poor fellow wound up slushing.

What was the purple patch they had to wear on their ….?

That was to denote that they were prisoners of war.

Were you surprised to find that sort of situation, where POWs [Prisoners of War] were in a caring role for Australian soldiers?

Oh, they were delightful, the Italians,

04:30 there was no problem with them.

But did it surprise you when you got there and saw that they were doing things?

No, not really. What did surprise me was, eventually we got in the train to go back to the unit with all the hospital mob, and there was a dumb bugger there, and one of the things Gino taught us was acquafresca figa… figastretta.casadura acqua fresca minapuro [phonetic] which was rather rude.

05:00 Figastretta is a very tight womb entry, around the trousers rather, casadura is a hard and minapuro and acqua fresca of course you know And this idiot, I'd been trying to converse with a couple of ladies, who, when we got on the train, they were "Wogs." as we used to called them, squatting down with all their wares in the passageway, and these two women moved out of a

05:30 compartment and back into a seat. And I was sitting there talking, very pleasant ladies they were, and they didn't speak English but I had a smattering of French and they could speak French and we were conversing in that. But when this bugger started this thing in Italian, I could see their faces change suddenly. I said, "Italian?" "Si." And we'd been chiacking [teasing] all the way up as the train went through these POW camps,

06:00 and the prisoners there were fascist saluting, they were probably the fellows they couldn't trust. And that was a peculiar thing I thought, that felt very funny, being there with the enemy, being assisted.

How long did it take for your physical health to recover?

Oh, from the diarrhoea?

And the measles. Oh, sorry, the mumps.

Oh, no time at all. Only about a

06:30 week or two I suppose. By the time we got to the unit, I was not in the best of condition and I found the training a little bit hard until initially I got back into condition.

So where did you meet up with the unit?

In Nusarat, south of Gaza, not far from Khan Younis.

And they were preparing to go in and replace troops?

No, we were being trained there, it was a training battalion. And then when we

07:00 reached a level of satisfaction, they'd shy us up to the battalion. And I had trouble getting up to the battalion. In fact I'd been drafted in the orderly room at that stage. But I had to do a little subterfuge in the end, and put my name on the movement order. And was gone before the guy who was instructing, Ted Gibson, realised. I don't think he ever forgave me.

In hindsight, were you

07:30 **understrength, should you have waited longer?**

Was I understrength?

Yeah, should you have been held back longer?

Oh, no, no. He said I was held back because I was too valuable in the orderly room, that was his trouble. That was no good to me. I thought, "I'll have to drop the typewriter in the sand to get out of this." I used to do the morning parade, and the X list, they were the people from the battalion who had come down for various reasons and were waiting to go back, they were known as

08:00 the X list, they were the elite. So they were very hard to count up but I could get an accurate figure, then I had a correction factor, and that threw all the other figures out, you see, and Gibson looked at me, "What were you before the war, Spragg?" And I'd say, "Oh, I was in the bank, sir." He said, "Oh, you couldn't have been a very good clerk." I said, "No, that's why I left, that's why I went to war." He said, "Yes, I know you, I'm up to your little tricks." But later on, at one of the

08:30 funerals, old Ted was there, sitting pretty crippled on a stick, he had all the arthritis, looking very frail. Much as I'd like to have known him in the Middle East. And somebody said, and at this stage I was a doctor, said, "There's Spragg, do you remember him?" "Yes, I remember him." he said, "Bit of string for a belt." That's all he remembered about me. It was true too.

And this was

09:00 **in approximately December when you were … do you recall hearing of Japan entering the war?**

Oh, yeah. Yeah, we were in … where were we? We were in Ceylon then, I think. No, no.

December '42? Just before you went up to Syria it would have been?

Oh, this was in 1942. We were back from, hell …

The end of '41, December '41?

Oh, so it was, yeah, the end of

09:30 '41. Oh yes, it was before I joined the battalion. Isn't that funny, because somehow or other I thought I was with the unit when that news came through but I must have been at Nusarat. I may have been at the Eye School. I went to an Intelligence School, that was one way of getting up. Got my name on that, but that didn't help.

That was voluntary?

Oh, yeah.

What sorts of things were they teaching at the Intelligence School?

Map reading, field sketching and navigation were the

10:00 principal things, and then all about the enemy. Teaching how to evaluate documents. I still remember, little "g" was top secret in German. If you see that on a document you spear that straight up along the line. I wound up in the united section later, in the final campaign.

Did what you learned during that period influence the way you felt about the enemy?

Well,

10:30 I don't know really. I didn't have any great hatred for the Germans. In fact Rommel was somewhat revered in the unit. They were, unfairly, they were contemptuous to the Italians, which I thought was most unfair. Because they were not motivated, they didn't want to be in the war.

What was that contempt about? The lack of fight?

Yeah, yeah. Oh yes, they were big noting themselves,

11:00 I think. They were the originals of the unit that had cleaned them up in Bardia. It was a matter of pulling themselves up by pushing the others down.

And how did you feel about going in and potentially be fighting Italian forces after you'd seen their reluctance?

Oh well, I was never placed in that position. When I joined the battalion, I suppose the Germans were then … the siege of Tobruk had been on

11:30 and the outward garrison had been taken out and then Tobruk fell. And the Germans were rolling up to the Egyptian border. There was something there I meant to say. Oh, it will come to me later.

Were you confused by the politics of the Syrian situation, regarding the Vichy French?

No, the French were known as

12:00 the … what was it called? They fought under the double cross, the double cross of Lorraine and that was thought to be very significant. They couldn't trust the Free French. And, yeah, I don't think I was terribly happy about that, the politics of that.

Do you remember having … did you think you had a good grasp on the politics or was it confusing?

I never felt confused, although maybe I should have.

12:30 **But how would you reconcile going in to fight for the Free French for instance?**

I wasn't involved in any fighting of the Free French. I joined the battalion after the campaign, wisely, in Syria.

Did you feel that that area you were going to was safe or were you expecting that you may have to fight?

Oh, no. No, it was well and truly over. No, I thought, I think

13:00 looking back, if I had any thoughts at all, they would have been "It's tragic we have to do this but it had to be done." If we were fighting the Vichy French, I wasn't terribly happy about that, not terribly happy about the bloody Free French, either, the double crosses.

And just to go back, do you remember any more about hearing of Japan's entering the war?

Well, let me think. Gosh.

13:30 Well, I guess, well we expected to go home. We were a bit concerned, I guess, even at that stage about … we knew the 8th Div [Division] had fallen by February. That was the most devastating news we'd had, the fall of Singapore. That was on 19th February or thereabouts.

15th. Darwin was 19th

It must have been incredibly frustrating about the fall of Singapore, which was so symbolic? But the actual bombing of Darwin must have really shaken the lads up?

We didn't know about it.

Of course.

We knew more about the midget submarines and the shelling of Sydney.

So can you describe how the lads of the battalion were feeling about being stuck over here in the desert

when there's …?

We weren't stuck for very long. You see, things take time, we realise that, to get you going. We felt we should be going home, and we were eventually. We came down from Syria to Beersheba for a while.

Before we get to Ceylon, I better just quickly cover what your duties and what life was like in Syria during the time you were there.

Well, there'd been a blizzard

and the battalion had been snowed in. It had just lifted, but there was a lot of snow around at that stage, and we were occupied with training and mainly "stoning the road' as Hutch would say. "Don Company, carry on stoning the road." The bit of training, one thing I remember about the training was the wire cutters and double open barbed wire defences that a fellow called

Andreason, and myself, he was quite a bit bigger than I was, we had to snip these two strands and then throw ourselves on with our rifles. And that's okay if you handled it like electricity, you bash it down, you don't get hurt, but unfortunately he was quite a bit heavier than I was and I used to roll down a bit, the way my wife used to roll me in bed.

And so the work was nearly all training and a bit of things like reinforcing the road, was it?

Yes,

yes. There was … they demonstrated various things at times such as the sticky bomb. We had an old carrier that acted as a tank. I remember the thing didn't go off at one stage and they didn't know what to do about it for a while and then they got some marksmen standing well back and having a shot at this thing, about the thickness of your thumb. And eventually somebody managed to knock it off.

How well equipped for the snow were you?

Oh, we had to wear service dress uniforms and we had five blankets each and we used to share with a mate, get into bed. And some of the cunning troops had acquired even more. One of them had a great stack of blankets and round about the middle they had a civilian one, a lovely red looking thing, and that was their book mark,

they knew that's where to turn the things back. And the beer, we had to wait for it to thaw out. The heating of the stove, of the thing, was kerosene or coke I think, something in braziers. It would have been coke, I think. I have great trouble recalling some

of these minor details.

No worries, I'm going to keep pushing for them though. You never know when they'll pop up. Were you in tents or in buildings?

No, we were in huts, Nissen huts. Or a Nissen type of hut.

And when did news come through that you were going to return?

The day we started out, I suppose, almost. I don't

remember any trial moves there, in particular, I remember them in other camps. We probably had trial moves.

What - that March '42? Had you been there a couple of months?

Oh no, I hadn't been in Syria that long. I think it was February when we came down. We left in March to come home, been up in Ceylon.

So you actually came back to Palestine from Syria?

Yeah, to Beersheba, near Agar.

And how were you finding integration into the battalion, were you warmly welcomed?

Yeah, it was okay. It didn't take long to be absorbed. And there … I noticed that the people I enjoyed,

whose company I enjoyed and got to like the most, weren't the people that I related too early in the piece. One brute whom I'd known in the 45th Battalion, who claimed me and I was glad to see him there, but he lost his pay book in Greece,

19:00 and of course his pay book was the evidence that he'd forged an entry in Cairo and drawn some money. And he was fortunate to be whisked off to Greece before they caught up with him, and then he lost his pay book. So he was without pay for a long time and he was just sitting on his wits. And he knocked off five lira of mine, I'm sure.

How did you find being a leader,

19:30 **being a corporal, was it a smooth transition into the battalion?**

Oh, I lost my stripes, they were salt water stripes.

Sorry, what does that mean?

They're only for the trip over. When I got to the battalion, the training battalion in Nusarat they ripped those from me. My last job as a corporal was conducting the draft of us, recovered from

20:00 illness people.

Which included getting your name on ...?

Getting my name?

Was that where you tricked the man who was trying to ...?

Oh no, no, no. That was some weeks later, when I was in the orderly room.

Okay, so you're back down in Palestine and what did you do before heading off for Ceylon?

Well, we did a bit of training in Beersheba. The training was relatively light. We had shoots on

20:30 the range with the Bren and the rifles. We had much more intensive training with the training battalion, they really pumped it into us there, that was hard. But once you got to battalion you were treated with more respect. In fact the battalion had a lovely atmosphere, I always found.

And were you at all frustrated about not having fought yet?

Well, I would have liked to have been through the campaigns, yes.

21:00 To have come through them, I would have preferred. Not terribly keen to have gone into them. Yes, oh, yes, you were a bit raw behind the ears, "Wet behind the ears" is the expression.

Did you feel at that stage that you still have to prove yourself to the army?

Yeah, of course, for sure. And I suppose we should too, should have felt that way. In fact I used to ... one of the fellows got irritated

21:30 with me once. I kept asking, "What's it like in action?" "What do you keep asking that for?" "Oh, I don't know." It was the loudmouths, I'd like to hear that they were, and it was often the case too, they were not really quite crash hot. Some of them, they had spoken tales over things they'd never seen.

Was the unit aware, the lieutenant aware,

22:00 **that you were heading back to Australia, was that known?**

No. It was suspected. I recall, well I think we guessed. We didn't really know what our destination was, but we'd guessed.

You were certainly hoping I would imagine, that you were going back to Australia?

Oh, yes, yeah.

So when you were brought into Ceylon, were you told that you would be there for

22:30 **such a long time?**

I don't know. You know you said all these things, and you don't often query them.

Could you tell me about your arrival in Ceylon and your first impressions?

Oh, it was magical. The first thing I noticed was "Ceylon For Good Tea." a big neon sign or lights sign in the harbour. I thought it was rather quaint, advertising like that. But it was like the Middle East, like the Arab countries, they were so new and so different,

23:00 it was different again. It was a beautiful island, lovely fruit, birds, the whole works. We had a very good time there.

How were you received by the local population over there?

Very warmly welcomed. They were great. I got very fond of the Ceylonese, they were known themselves, they called themselves the gentlest race on earth. They certainly seemed that way. But I was trying to learn their language too. I still remember a little bit of it, and I was able to

23:30 converse to them and with the secretary of the last, the Macquarie Street rooms I worked in, she was Ceylonese.

What was important to you about learning the languages?

To converse with them. I suppose in a way, without thinking consciously thinking about it, suppose it was showing some respect for them, an interest. Because I was learning, getting all I could

24:00 about their culture, their winning procedures.

Was it just through talking to people?

Yes, yes. There were two guys in particular, there was one known as Paul, he was at Ratnapura, I think that's the name of the joint, we were up there doing an exercise and he was with the Colombo Commercial Company, we were camped in their grounds. And then there was another guy, David,

24:30 and he's got a name as long as your arm, he'd been a Buddhist and then he'd been educated in the Catholic school and he became a Catholic and then he reverted to Buddhism. But he was a very intelligent guy; I was very fond of David. But they were the two principal ones.

What do you recall of the mix of the traditional culture with the British culture?

Oh, the Brits were, they were very aloof. In the middle strata, but straight under

25:00 them were the Portuguese, who, the De Silvas and the Peraras, we were camped in one of their plantations. And then the next were the Burghers, they were of Dutch origin and they were our friends. Oh, yes, you asked did we have any idea we were going home? I remember Frank Shields, who was a lovely fellow, he was a magnificent guy. He was a lance corporal in our platoon. He led us

25:30 on nightly escapades, which we shouldn't have been doing of course. We'd go in a taxi into the theatre there, and at interval … oh, while the film was being screened, we'd sit in the bar and drink these Alsops and Barclays, English beer, and we did the right thing when the interval occurred, we'd get out and give the locals a fair go. But

26:00 we met these Burghers in there, and they were delightful fellows, they worked on the railway. And as we were going home, going to get on the ship in Colombo Harbour, they pulled up, there was a bit of a delay and it pulled up right opposite the signal station where these guys worked, and Frank stuck his head out and said "Hello" to them. "Oh, Frank." they said, "You going home Frank?" And Frank said "Well, we'd like to think so." I think we knew we were at that stage.

26:30 But always the diplomat, Frank.

And the nature of your duties was garrison work. Could you explain what that …?

Oh well, it meant that we stood too at dawn and dusk. And then they chopped that back to standing two, three times a week. It was a bit of a joke. We dug trenches. I remember our trench was used by a carrier to do an oil and grease change, and we were very angry about that. But

27:00 we went on fairly long route marches, and that was good and we got acclimatised to the tropics there, with these long route marches.

And there was a bit of jungle training, was there?

Yes, of sorts. We didn't really understand it until we got into the jungle and confronted the Japanese.

But overall would you describe some of these experiences as relatively unintensive, was it a good …?

27:30 Well no, the route marches were a bit tough and people did crack up. And I remember our CO [Commanding Officer] who was cruising around in a vehicle, standing at the side of the road and haranguing people. And he had this habit of abusing you for not … he was not liked. Mind you, when we got to the Owen Stanleys, he grabbed two of the boys who were carrying for the RAP [Regimental Aid Post],

28:00 to carry his gear. But he still had trouble making it, he was out of condition, and we were well conditioned at that stage. He didn't last so long, he got a scratch in the ear and had himself evacuated. And Hutchison, who was my company commander, took over the battalion then, and did a very good job. He was another funny fellow.

So in Ceylon, you were working hard and being conditioned, but you also had relief or opportunities to

28:30 **take your mind outside the rigors of army life?**

Oh, plenty of opportunities. Oh yes, plenty. Oh yes. When we got to Ratnapura, it was the same, we would train hard during the day but we got a fair bit of time off.

So there was three months that you spent in Ceylon?

Yes, it would have been about three months.

And then you returned to Fremantle, is that right?

Yes. That was about 29th July, I think, we docked at Fremantle.

29:00 **And could you take me from there? What you did during your time in Australia?**

We were there for two or three days and got leave daily there. And then to Melbourne, and we disembarked in Melbourne. We were on the Westernland an old German coal burner that had been given to the Dutch as reparations. And we went to Bangalore, just outside of Seymour.

29:30 And I was left on the rear guard there, being a … I'd only had about eleven months overseas, or less. So I was a sitter for the rear guard. And the result was, when I came to get my leave, I was recalled by telegram, and I only had half of it. And when I got back after the Owen Stanleys, I pretended that I'd lost the lot, then I told them how long it took to get to Barmedman, and I

30:00 got quite a decent leave.

Could you describe how the battalion felt when they realised they were back in Australia?

Oh, jubilant. Yes, it was great to be back. I remember Laurie Cheesman, our platoon sergeant saying that he'd had a baked potato that was in Fremantle. Oh, they fed us in Fremantle, they were great, wouldn't let us buy a drink, the goldminers, we fell in with them.

30:30 They spoiled us.

Were there any changes to the Australian community or Australian society that surprised you when you returned?

I don't know that surprise is altogether, but there was, yes the Americans had arrived. But there was a feeling of apprehension, that was very palatable, and with optimism, and a great welcome to us. At that stage, we were following

31:00 the Japanese advance over the Owen Stanleys. I remember seeing, I think it was about the time we embarked to go up there about mid September, and they'd got to Efogi and it wasn't long after that they arrived right down to Imita Ridge.

So, say they landed towards the end of the July at Buna and Gona. Was that news reported widely?

Oh yes, we knew everything that was going on.

And

31:30 **where did … the battalion went on leave from Melbourne, is that right?**

Yeah, from Bangalore. No they shot up to Holsworthy and were sent on leave from there. Then we eventually joined them, the rear guard with the equipment, the stores. I was a relief driver on a flat top that had the transport on, a relief driver for Slim Gear who was killed later, he was a lovely guy. The

32:00 extraordinary thing was, I didn't have a licence, I could drive a vehicle.

That's a pretty good relief position. So yeah, and you sailed from Brisbane, is that right?

Yes.

Do you recall the date?

It was sometime in September, might have been early September, I suppose. I'll look it up, if you'd

32:30 like it, I've got my records in there.

We'll check that later. But by the time you'd arrived, I think it was the 23rd, I think, of September, that [General] Blamey went to Papua and relieved Major General Rule, was that right? Do you recall hearing the news of that?

We didn't get that goings on, we weren't aware of that until much later, until we read it historically. I

33:00 can't remember when I first … I think it was after the war. Raymond Paul's book was, I think, was the first inkling I had of anything like that.

Okay, I thought that might have been a talking point. I think, from memory, it was the 26th that the Australians went on the front foot, 26th September and actually started readvancing back over, had that occurred when you arrived?

Oh, right, yeah, that'd be right. Yeah, we were at Donadabu. Look, oh, now that's interesting,

33:30 I wonder, we were hearing … I think he was still advancing when we got there, he certainly had air superiority, we were bombed. Yeah, oh yes, we'd hear stories of ambushes, they were all pretty negative and scary, actually. The Japanese seemed to be right on top.

Can you describe entering Port Moresby,

34:00 **what your first impressions were there?**

Luna Park, all lit up. Here we had been blacked out all the way up. We went up in the Paine Wingate a Liberty ship and the docks were all lit up.

Was it abuzz with energy at Port Moresby?

Oh, yes. They probably extinguished the lights when they heard the air raid arriving. We were on our way to

34:30 (UNCLEAR) by then.

Was it the first time you'd heard the air raid sirens?

No, oh, no. We got a bit of bombing up the canal, when I was in the hospital there.

Can you describe the apprehension that you or the lads might have felt, pulling into Moresby?

Yes, I suppose we were pretty apprehensive. We had a … yes, now you come to mention

35:00 it, it's coming back to me. We'd been following the Japanese advance, and they were still advancing, and we weren't sure that we were going to have to storm ashore. We were surprised with the lights etcetera that were there.

Once you disembarked, what …?

Got onto trucks, and were driven by Americans. And when this bombing started,

35:30 the driver just deserted and raced into the bush and left us sitting in the back of the truck. It was all over in no time, and nobody was hit, it was a bit terrifying.

Where were you taken in the trucks?

To Donadabu . It was near Koitaki, not far from Koitaki.

And what was at Donadabu?

Well, we made a camp there.

Nothing had been set up at that stage?

No.

36:00 No, I can't remember if there had been. See, we'd gone up in dribs and drabs, I think there were elements of the unit there already. And we just … the platoon commander, and I was his runner at that stage, and the platoon sergeant, his batman and I, shared an RD [Regimental Depot] tent. But the troops were in

36:30 their own two men shelters, they were improvised, with groundsheets. Those were the shelters that we had from then on.

Can you describe the weather at that point?

Used to rain pretty consistently in the afternoon and then it would dry off.

Was it hot?

Oh yes. Yes, it was quite hot. Although getting up into the hills, it wasn't quite as hot. In fact it could be quite cold at night.

At Donadabu, that first

37:00 **night, do you recall whether it was raining or how hot it was?**

Don't remember all that much rain at Donadabu oddly enough. No, I don't think we had all that much rain in the, down in the foothills. The rain we copped in the ranges itself, and there when it had stopped raining, it would still be dripping off the trees.

So you'd been relieved of your relief driving position and were now platoon runner, did you

37:30 **say?**

Yeah. Well, I'd been platoon runner all … in was in Ceylon, I think, or it could have been in Beersheba before we got back.

What were those main responsibilities in that position?

Oh, you just carry the messages from platoon commander to the sections or whatever, wherever he wants it.

And is that a job that's reliant on speed and fitness, or is the running …?

You're not, you … I was

38:00 no Stawell Gift [famous Australian foot race] runner. The running give you a false impression, I think.

And how long did you spend at Donadabu then?

I know we started off the 3rd October, I think that was the date, to go up to relieve the 33rd Battalion. We went up by truck and then we walked to Newton's Dump to Owers

38:30 Corner, there was a jeep trail there. That's where [General] MacArthur and Blamey and their jeep came through us.

What were the quality of the roads like?

Not good. There were inclined to bog, they weren't sealed, rough. Just boneshakers.

And was there close interaction with the Americans at this early stage?

Not until, not until the

39:00 Sanananda, we got to Sanananda, that area. And the 127 Regiment came in to relieve us.

So you just interacted with the drivers, very early, when you landed in Moresby, but from that point on you were on your own?

Yes, we were quite on our own. No Americans in sight. I don't know exactly where they were. They eventually came over.

39:30 I think some of them did a long trek and others probably flew into, what's the alternative airport there? There's Popendetta and … oh, I've forgotten the name of it, knew it like the back of my hand once. My memory is not good. Yes.

Tape 3

00:34 **Okay, Griff, can you tell us about (UNCLEAR) and replacing the 33rd Battalion?**

Yes, they were at Templeton's Crossing, the battle was going on when we arrived, a hell of a din. Making a hell of a lot of noise, it sounded like a team of angry dogs all bailed up in the corner, fighting to get out.

What were the predominant sounds?

Machine guns, I suppose, and then

01:00 when the mortar was lit, they used lobbing mortars in our area. And I still remember a guy coming back wounded, looking a bit ghastly and saying "He's mortars deadly." That cheered us up. This was my first sound of battle. We took over from the company that's the 2/33rd, the 2nd Battalion was with the 3rd Militia.

01:30 And the 25th, I think, were doing too, actual fighting there. Then they managed to get rid … put him on the run and we proceeded then to have occasional hold-ups as we went along as small groups of people, lots of the odd casualty. It was very dark at night. I remember

02:00 getting out of my equipments and realising that perhaps I'd better get back into it. Couldn't find it in the dark.

Were most of the engagements going on during the day or at night?

In the daytime. Oh, yes there was a little bit of harassing at night, we didn't do too much of that. There was a lot of firing. The rumour was that he used to bring out the carrier troops, the non

02:30 combatants, get them firing away at night to keep us awake. Yes, there was occasional … I suppose, there was, yes … when we got to Eora Creek, that's where our big stoush went on. We were there for the best part of a week, I suppose. Penetrating to try and define his perimeter. We were losing a lot of people there.

Did you have a definite sense of momentum though?

No, we didn't.

03:00 No, we had a definite sense of not knowing how we were going to do. But we just couldn't … we seemed to losing people and not doing anything or achieving anything. And it was about that time the CO, called Paul Hutchison up and said, "I want six Tommy gunners." And Hutch said, "I'm command now sir, I'll give you two Tommy gunners." And then he signed the casualty sheet that went out

03:30 and he didn't notice that the sergeant, Orderly Room sergeant, Johnny Carmen had said to the MO, [Medical Officer] "What are we evacuating the CO with sir?" "Oh, neurosis." Johnny wrote "Neurosis." and Hutch signed it. That's another story, there was hell to pay with that eventually. But Hutch took over and he was very positive and he pushed our company, which was his old company round up the top, we managed to get above him and behind him.

04:00 And this was 27th October, sister's birthday, that's how I remembered. But we were strong enough to attack at that stage, so he called it off and brought C Company in and their company commander took command of the two companies, and we hit him from our … C Company from up the ridge and us from behind and that's

04:30 when he departed in a hurry, screaming. MacArthur's headquarters released a different version of it. He said that "We were unable to move him and that the Japanese did a planned withdraw and left sixty nine dead." And we counted.

How were your nerves holding up to the battle?

All right I think, yeah.

Did you surprise yourself at how well you were coping?

05:00 I don't know that I gave it much thought. I was scared, but you were more scared of decompensating, I suppose, than that shooting through the enemy. I could never have led anything, but I could follow all right, I guess. Somebody else did the leading.

Can you compare the leadership styles that your company

05:30 **commander and your sergeant displayed and why the sergeant was a better leader?**

Oh, you've got that out of my previous notes, have you?

Just from what you said then.

I didn't know I'd got onto that. Yes, the platoon commander, who called himself "Willy" because the Japanese can't pronounce their L's, so I'll call him "Willy." He was a disaster. And the platoon

06:00 sergeant, Laurie Cheesman … I'm sure I hadn't told you this. Anyway.

You just said he was evacuated when he asked for the Tommy guns.

Oh, no, that was the CO.

The CO, sorry.

Oh, yeah, that was the commander of the whole battalion. Oh, mighty man. No, this was our platoon.

Oh sorry. Let's stick with the CO then.

Oh, he just went back.

06:30 **What was it about his leadership style that didn't work?**

Well, he just froze, more or less, he was hopeless. He didn't take control at all. He was just scared, concerned about his own safety. The Japanese were shelling the mountain gun and their mortar in the battalion headquarters area. We were pushed … every time you moved through that area, we'd cop it. We were pushed over to the right flank to try

07:00 and knock it out, couldn't find it. But he, out of one these here, he apparently got a little shrapnel wound in the ear, and after a while used that as an excuse, I think, to go out. Hence, the neurosis diagnosis. But it was the best thing he could have done.

Well, as a runner, were you in the frontline?

Yes, yes. You moved with the platoon headquarters.

07:30 **And could you describe how you were utilised?**

Well, the first thing I recall about that was being sent down to … he'd send 3 Section down to explore the left flank, Laurie Cheesman did, the sergeant.

Was this at Eora Creek?

Eora Creek, yeah. And he sent me down to get them because they hadn't turned up,

08:00 and they must have taken a different route back somehow, because I went and went and the next think I hear was voices in a language that didn't belong to me. I thought, "I'm a bit out of my depth here." So I quickly withdrew and came back by a different route myself, it seems, and came back the 17th Platoon's lines. And there were two fellows looking at me with ghastly expressions on their face. They confessed to me later, they thought I was the enemy,

08:30 and drawn a bead on me. When the attack goes in, you can be in the frontline or you can be just behind. Our position was really behind the two forward sections and in front of number three section, it was on this occasion, it was the rear section.

And you would oscillate between the various parts of this?

Yeah, yeah.

09:00 **There was also a wireless, was there? Or it wasn't used?**

Oh, there were UHF sets but they didn't function terribly well. It was the moisture I think, the humidity. Seemed to get into the batteries and do something. And there were land lines. But quite often we had no communication at all, except by a runner. The 2/1st Battalion found this when they … Basil Cattern's

09:30 company, or companies, I think he had two companies at that stage. Put up a very good fight in Sanananda. But there were up against a pretty tough … they were superior in numbers, and they were in trouble. And poor Paul Cullen their CO had difficulty contacting them, but he managed.

Over what sort of distances would the unit be spread, would

10:00 **you have to travel, at the most, with your messages?**

Oh, it depends, it depends. Not great distances at all, because in the jungle, it's pretty tight. You're not spread out very much.

What would be, approximately, the longest sort of distance you might have to run a message?

Oh I suppose if you went back to company headquarters,

10:30 no distance at all, worth speaking of.

A few hundred metres, or is even that too far?

Oh, that's a bit far, I think, yeah. Yeah, the company headquarters was pretty close to the platoon, the platoons.

Can you tell me about disorientation that may have occurred in the jungle?

Not finding your way?

Was there a sense of that? Was it difficult often to find your sense of direction?

11:00 Yeah, I suppose it was. I wasn't certain where I was going the time I went down to get 3 Section. But no, generally you seemed to know. Sometimes there were tracks. Yes. These things had never occurred to me so I don't suppose …I was only… A lot of the times, for instance,

11:30 when on the 27th October, I was with 16th Platoon and more or less link man between them and 17th, and I remember Bobby Lang, who was the sergeant in charge of 17th Platoon, their platoon commander was a bit of a washout too, but he was a swashbuckling bullshit artist, he progressed nevertheless, not like our poor little Willy,

12:00 who eventually had his commission cancelled. But I remember Bobby Lang saying, "Where's Willy?" - I almost gave this name away. And I looked back and there he is standing on some high ground, well back, about twenty yards away, making field signals. But oh, you found yourself pretty well, I suppose.

12:30 **Could we move along to the next major steps along the track?**

Well, after the Eora Creek affair, we went to Illola where they made a drop, an airdrop, which wasn't terribly successful. At this stage, we were running very light on rations. And we turned off, went through a village called Fila, which was short of Isurava, we didn't get to Isurava.

13:00 That's where the 39th and the 2/14th had made that magnificent stand and really held that mix up.But we woke up one morning and looked down over the Kokoda valley which had a fog in it, and it lifted and it was quite spectacular. But what we could see when the mist cleared away was a clearing which turned out to be Kumbara [?], and that made a good dropping ground. So we replenished there and

13:30 then onto Oivi. That was the next big stand the Japanese made, Oivi. And our role there, we were … now, when you speak of orientation, I'm not exactly sure where we were in relationship to the Japs, I think we were more or less frontal. And the 2/1st Battalion got around behind him. They did a very good

job there, thank God.

14:00 Because we were put in to attack over an area that had been, a lot of trees had been lopped down. And there was all this fallen timber, which is no real shelter, it's just an obstruction. And I recall, at that stage, Cheesman saying, "This is bloody murder, go back and tell him." "Him" being Willy. So I crawled back and when it was safe to stand up, I stood up and went back a bit further and found Willy where he

14:30 reckoned it was safe to stand up. And … is this important this? Okay, just pull me up if it's … And so he asked me "What the score was?" And I said, I told him. And you could see his Adam's apple going up and down. And it made me feel good. I thought, "Christ, he's more scared than I am." So I suggested we go

15:00 back and tell Walker, the company commander. He should have known that. So back we trotted, this time I trotted at his heels, because we were going away from the enemy. And when we got to Walker at company headquarters, he started to ask questions such as, "What sort of opposition is there Mr Barrett?" And Barrett turned to me, "Well, what sort of opposition is there Spraggy?" and I didn't know, so I made it up. "Oh, there's some light machine guns and GTR either end." it sounded good,

15:30 and they were using grenades. And he garbled something back to Walker along those lines, "And grenades." I still remember that. Then he asked him the next question and the next and the next and eventually he said, "Just how wide is this clearing Mr Willy?" And Willy looked at me and said, "How wide would you say the clearing is Spraggy?" I said, "Well sir, I'm not much of a judge at distance, I think you'd better come up and have a look for yourself." I'd had him. "Have you been up to see it, Mr Walker?"

16:00 Not … thank you. Anyway, they called … Walker realised we'd need artillery support if we had any, which we didn't, there was some mortars, before we had any chance there. And we were to go into attack the next day. I remember that night, feeling very miserable. We were hungry, it was wet and I was scared. And

16:30 during the night we heard mortars falling in this position and I thought, "That's reassuring." But they were his own mortars, he was pulling out. Got up in the morning and he'd gone, thank God. The 2/1st Battalion and the 3rd Militia had done a magnificent job, bringing up on his rear. But you were wondering about the length of trips. Yes, we had our platoon on one spur

17:00 on this ridge and 17th Platoon on the next spur, and then this company, platoon of A Company on the far spur. They were having me take messages across to those.

And in the chronology, where was your next encounter? Where was the next stop?

Oh, the next, well there was minor skirmishes that didn't really amount to much. Poor old Slim Gear, my driver, was killed in one of those. He was still wearing his

17:30 pistol. He was down the line a bit and he was picked off, obviously, as the officer. But they were just minor. And the next reasonable stand we made was at the Johnson takes off, that's Soputa that takes off to Gona. And there Willy performed again. We were put round to the left flank to attack and there was a great kunai patch ahead of us and we weren't very keen on that. And Willy wasn't at all

18:00 keen, at this stage he hadn't managed to sneak off anywhere. There was nowhere to hide, it seems. And so he found excuses for me to go back to Walker. There's sig [Signals] wire on the track, there's a track first, then there's sig wire on the track then there's a dead Australian there, then there's this … And every time I moved the Japs would open up. And 18th Platoon, whose area I was going through, cursed me and told me I was drawing the bloody

18:30 crows. Well, Christ, well I can't help it. I get back and see Walker, Walker said, "Yes, well tell Mr Barrett to attack. Sir." Back I went, "He says to attack." "Oh, go back and tell him there's a" …. And we managed to last until dark. The next morning we had to go in. They'd given us another platoon, thank God, from A Company, and we'd found that he'd gone, he'd departed.

19:00 **Can I ask you how your faith in leadership was affecting your morale if you were …?**

Yeah, we were not … I'd say our morale was not as good and many of the other platoons. I'd say we weren't functioning as well. Cheesman did his best. He's … but he had to pull out and be a platoon sergeant, the grace more

19:30 or less of the platoon. And then when the first shot was fired, there'd be nothing from Barrett, from Willy, and there'd be Cheesman through his voice.

How difficult is it to take and follow orders from people who don't have your confidence or trust?

Well, he didn't give many orders, fortunately. We just ignored him. I remember, after he crossed to Wairopi River, he's there with

20:00 his boots off and Cheesman's taken real command at this stage, he's allotting things to do. Barrett said, "What am I supposed to do?" And Cheesman looked around, grabbed some water bottles and said,

"Here, fill these." And he went away and filled them.

Your next stop?

Yes, that would have been Sanananda. We didn't get to the village, didn't get to the coast but it was in that area.

20:30 It was on the Cape Killerton track junction, we put up this stand. And that's where the 2/1st Battalion took a hell of a bashing. The company of Basil Catterns, did a very good job. And Paul Cullen was very energetic there, getting reinforcements and getting them out of it. The communication there was all by runner. He

21:00 had no, I don't know whether he didn't lay sig wire or whether … the Jap had a habit of cutting your wire.

And what was the state of the men at that stage in terms of their physical condition?

Pretty shot. It wasn't long after … you see the 127 Regiment, the Americans came in at that stage. Very brilliant more or less they were. They were going to play merry hell, poor buggers, got a

21:30 hell of a shock. They came right out again. And they used to retire and we'd never done anything like this. As soon as they'd had their little skirmish, or whatever, they'd retire way back for the night, and then come in again the next morning. Which was very strange tactics. But we wound up … some of our sergeants and officers were taking opposite platoons, patrols out,

22:00 with a mixture of Americans and Australians. And also they put us, put them in amongst us in the frontline, American, Australia, American, Australian. And they turned out to be quite nice fellows. I got very fond of them. Particularly, the guy on my left who unfortunately had a machine gun and didn't understand that you don't have a warm up session, you behave like gentlemen, you don't fire a burst of machine gun. The nearest I've ever been

22:30 wounded, was a bit of shrapnel that nearly went through my tin hat, and he got the message. From then on … I had a Tommy gun and I always had it on repetition.

So there was a good bond between the Australian and American troops?

Oh, yes, yes at a ground level.

And what were the major health concerns?

Malaria, dysentery, scrub typhus. Scrub typhus was the most lethal, but fortunately it was the more uncommon.

23:00 Malaria was and starvation. Malaria was pretty rife.

Were you suffering from it at that stage?

Oh, yes. In fact I've got a card in there, you can have a look at it later, it shows a temperature of one hundred and six. You were supposed to hit a hundred and three before you could be evacuated.

And did your evacuation come then?

Yeah. Yes, I went back to battalion headquarters. A guy who later became my tutor for a while in medicine, Alan McGuiness,

23:30 was the MO. And I could see he was quite alarmed, he sponged me himself, trying to bring it down. I didn't know what the score was then, I didn't know anything very much.

Was it a Field Ambulance Hospital, was it?

That was the RAP, 2nd Battalion's RAP. They were servicing our unit and their own at that stage. And from there I was evacuated to the MDS [Main Dressing Station] at Soputa, and from there onto Popendetta. But I wasn't strong enough to get on a plane.

24:00 There were a lot of healthy young men who, I think I suspect they were from the battalion who put an attack through our front and came out as quickly as they went in. And the load master would say, "The first, right oh, load the wounded first." They were obvious, and then the sick after that. Well being sick, you had to be bloody healthy to fight your way onto that plane. And he'd get his (UNCLEAR), "Right the first thirty men out to the wing," and out they'd go. Could get killed

24:30 in the rush again. So I gave up, my temperature had dropped to a hundred and three, so I qualified, so I walked back to the battalion. That's how I've still got the card. And we were relieved fairly soon after that.

The entire battalion was relieved?

Yeah, all fifty seven of us, out of six hundred odd.

And how were you transported back to Australia?

We flew back from Popendetta in a DC3 [Douglas]

25:00 and we were deposited in Donadabu again and then eventually, oh, Tom Blamey came and addressed us there, and thanked us for all that we had done. “I come to you with the thanks of a nation for what you have done.” And something about “Never since the First World War were troops called upon to do” … whatever. It was a load of crap, we knew. God, I’d much prefer to be in the Owen Stanleys than on the Somme.

25:30 Anyway, that was his feeling, that was very nice to hear. But then “Tubby” Allen was standing right beside him, he was the general who was relieved, regrettably. He was a great fellow. And on the way back on the trucks, he pulled them up and gave us a little talk and said, “Now you think you’re bloody heroes, you’ll get back to Melbourne, to Brisbane.” he said, “You’ll play up, you buggers, well you’d better not.” He gave us a bit of a

26:00 pep talk, he was a great fellow. And we got on the ship. They had a bet with a Win Kee who was a C Company man, fellow that had went over the draft with me, Chinese boy, and myself. Which of us would be thrown over the side first. I reckoned we were so poorly. And they had bets on us, they bet on anything. They were very serious about this they were. I was very,

26:30 I thought it was terribly insensitive, doing that. Of course, I had sixteen mouldy quid in my pocket, I backed Win Kee out. We both made it, as you see.

You arrive back in Brisbane, and did you still require hospitalisation?

Yes. I should have, but I managed to avoid the CO, he kept looking at me, he kept trying to catch up with me. I had beri beri and

27:00 edematous [swollen] ankles. I don’t think I was having a malaria attack at that time, no I couldn’t have been, but I was pretty weak.

Were you then able to go on leave?

Yeah, I went on leave. Frightened hell out of my parents. Had a malaria attack on my twenty-first birthday. Oh, I’ve forgotten to mention what a wonderful welcome we got at Brisbane. Yeah, sailing up the harbour,

27:30 all the bunting. Those that didn’t have flags put out carpets, and it was quite emotional. And when we landed there some ladies organised … actually, they had real cutlery for us and a baked chicken meal.

And did you find that the public were relatively well informed about what you’d been through?

Oh, yeah, yeah. They seemed to know. One look at us, I suppose. Yeah, I’d lost about a third of my body

28:00 weight, I was then weighing six stone in my boots and fully clothed, or just under six stone actually. So, I’d lost roughly a third of my body weight.

And you were granted leave?

Yeah, oh yes, plenty of leave. I had my credit.

And you went home to visit your parents then?

Yes.

Did they, were they still in Maitland?

No, they were at Ardlethan at this stage. They went from Maitland to

28:30 Barmedman where the old boy was going broke. He was sold a pup there. And the chemist at Ardlethan conveniently dropped dead, and the locals there came over and helped my father take over, and he just walked into it. He got himself out of difficulties as a result of that.

How long did it take you to physically recover from …?

Oh, a good nine months, I say,

29:00 a good nine months.

And did you return to similar body weight and strength?

Oh, yes, yes. I got up to eleven stone, hospitalised. I was … used to go into 2/2nd or the 2/5th AGH [Australian General Hospital], alternating more or less.

And what about psychologically? Did you feel … did that period give you back your strength in terms of facing the enemy yet again?

Oh, yes, oh yes, yeah. After about nine months, we were ready to go again.

29:30 **And you went to the Atherton Tablelands, is that right?**

Yes. In fact, we were down to do our invasion training and they were going to send us in again. And our MO, Lyn Joseph, who's a GP [General Practitioner] out in Maroubra, incidentally. He had done a survey of the unit and he did his best to get us classed, B classed, as a unit. But his report was so strong, they

30:00 couldn't ignore it. And well, we weren't fit either. That delayed our, we had been reinforced but still the nucleus of the battalion was very unfit. But after about nine months of good living we were again right. And this seemed to have been implying that our nerves had settled down. Yeah, it's got a lot to do with physical condition I think,

30:30 the confidence.

So then, December '42 that you returned in the Owen Stanleys?

January, actually.

January, '43. And you had nine months of recuperation. So when did you rejoin the battalion?

Oh, no, I rejoined it as soon as I got back. I went straight to the battalion, at Ravenshoe they were then.

Was this after your leave?

Yes, after my leave, that's right. I went

31:00 on leave first and then came back.

For a period of a couple of months, is that right?

Oh no, not that long. No, I managed to drag it out for about three weeks. With pretending I hadn't got any leave before and telling them what a long journey it was. I think I got seven days' travelling time.

So when did you head to the Tablelands?

Yeah, that's right.

31:30 I'd taken the GDD, I went on leave, went to home, came back and went via GDD in Brisbane, where I had a malarial attack again. I was out with old friends of the family, the Bradnalls. And their son was in the bag in Singapore, in Burma, Thailand, rather. And there I am looking like a scarecrow

32:00 and having malaria. And poor old Gert put me in the bed, she was a very motherly soul. But I thought, I later reflected on that, "Gee that must have been trying for her." With the son over there, wondering what the hell his condition was. But I came back into the battalion, yeah I joined the battalion at Ravenshoe. I was feeling quite a bit better at that stage. And then I had another attack of malaria and went to 2/2nd AGH, and when I came back the battalion

32:30 had moved to Wandecla. And there we sat for about two months. It was there that Lyn Joseph did the survey. And also made the report that blocked our immediate use again. And we eventually did our invasion training. But that was two years before we went into action again in Aitape.

33:00 **What was the invasion training?**

Landing marches.

That was using American landing marches, was it?

Yes.

And can you give me more details about what you were required to learn?

Oh, we were just the pawns, I think. We were just loaded on and we had to storm off, the usual thing. Pretend, only this time we didn't go to ground, which we would have done in the real thing.

33:30 Got pinned down.

And how long did the training last for? Was it a regular thing throughout the …?

No, that was only one episode. It went on for a week or two I suppose. And then we did river crossing at another stage.

How were you kept interested? How did they keep you interested and active over such a long period …?

Well, apparently they didn't keep everyone interested, because some of the best soldiers in the unit

34:00 couldn't stand it, they kept blowing through. They went down to Sydney, found their way down and they got into bother back there and they were sent back for the CO to deal with, Hutchison. He used to rip up the charge sheets. He hated Provos [Provosts – Military Police].

So the men were deserting?

Oh

34:30 well, they class a desert if it's over three weeks, and a warrant is issued for their arrest. A court of enquiry is convened. They made me type these things out. I … what was I about to say? He failed to answer to his name at the morning parade, I instituted a thorough search of the lines. Really, what he'd done was given the guy twenty four hours notice, or twelve hours, before

35:00 he did anything about it to give him time to escape. But there was that feeling of camaraderie in the battalion. Those that did desert you wouldn't want anyway. And those that were just sitting on their back side and getting bored, well you could tolerate that I guess. There was one fellow, Bob Franklin, he was a lovely guy. A quite pleasant, laid-back sort of guy,

35:30 and he … oh, they got a bit of a wake up after awhile, and they wouldn't send them back to Hutch, they'd send them back straight to the detention. And then they'd be reposted to another unit. Poor old Franklin didn't want to be in another unit, he came over to us. And when we embarked for Aitape they sneaked him aboard and hid him down in the hold. And when we were safely out to sea, Hutch, our CO said, "You'd better bring

36:00 Franklin up, he'll suffocate down there." He knew he was there. But I think that's what contributed to the general morale of the unit. There was that feeling between all ranks.

Was that discretion in terms of going against certain orders and not others, that was an important part of the respect and …?

I suppose

36:30 it was. We didn't expect him to go to those extremes. But he did. He was a funny fellow. He was so childlike in other ways.

How much did those relationships between officers and troops change as a result of your time in the Owen Stanleys? Was there a different relationship after the experience?

Well, when I joined the battalion, it was already well established I would think.

37:00 I didn't sense it immediately because I was a bit on the outer, but not for long. In fact I didn't seem to mingle with the battalion all that long, when suddenly we were into action. After the campaign, I was no longer a rookie, no longer a reo, because there were other reos for me to look down on.

Did your brown fade on your patch?

No. As a matter of fact I manufactured one,

37:30 that looked much more like them.

I guess then from … oh you were there for all of '43 and into '44?

All of '44 too.

All of '44.

Yes, December '44 we embarked. And we moved up in January, late January '45 we moved up to take over from the 2/8th Battalion,

38:00 at Aitape, at yeah at Ackaball [?] on the Dumpu.

I'll just ask once more how you coped with the boredom of spending so long in the Atherton Tablelands.

Oh, well I transferred to the I [Intelligence] Section, but even before that I was in the orderly room, I took refuge in the orderly room, because of my physical unfitness. And I had plenty to do.

38:30 And we got a paper going, I used to run it. Oh, I had plenty of things to amuse myself with.

What was the paper called?

Oh hell. God, I've forgotten. But I know, I had a little sketch of Pop Morgan who was our RSM, he was a Military Medal winner. And he'd come in, and he'd call me "Louse." he'd belt, belt, "Good morning Louse."

39:00 That was his morning greeting. But you couldn't help but love him, old Pop. And I had this sketch of him … oh we called it The Menace, that's right. I think that's what we called [the] rag. Very childish, it was.

And was it basic news about the battalion, was it, and a bit of satire?

Yeah, the usual crap.

Things like that must have helped morale?

Oh it helped morale

39:30 I suppose. I thought “It was all right at the time.” I’d be horrified if I saw it now.

Tape 4

00:33 **I guess the next stage in your career was going to Aitape-Wewak. You arrived in January ’45, is that right, to replace the 19th Brigade?**

Yes. Oh, the 17th Brigade. No sorry, you’re quite right, the 19th Brigade, yes, 2/8th Battalion. Yes, we arrived at Aitape harbour and got down the scrambling net, which was a bit hairy. Taken on board

01:00 barges and we camped on the sea shore there, which was great. And then we moved up to the Danmap [River].

The conflict had been going on there, I think, since October, was that right, of ’44? There’d been a few months.

Yes, the Americans landed there, put on a landing. Yes that would have been the time, I think.

So Aitape was well controlled and established as an Allied base at that stage?

Yes, oh yes. It was safe. They’d had a big stoush not long before, when

01:30 something like seven hundred Japanese, I think, tried to attack. Can’t remember really, don’t quote me on that.

And what were your … what were you set to work on when you initially landed?

Oh, I was in the I Section. I was in the Battalion Headquarters I Section at that stage.

I Section is the intelligence?

Intelligence.

Had you done further training?

Oh,

02:00 well I’d done that in the Middle East. That’s what I was going to mention. That I’d said I went to this I School, this Intelligence School where I met the sergeant, with the sergeant instructor, who was really the bank man of the office, he was a washout. He was an old school chum, he was two or three years ahead of me at Maitland High, and we’ve been very firm friends ever since. But he was the I sergeant there, and that’s where I got my training,

02:30 and he was very good too, he was excellent. I turned out to be a crackerjack.

So once you’d arrived in Aitape, were you then permanently within company headquarters working on intelligence?

Battalion headquarters.

Battalion headquarters, sorry.

No. Actually working in intelligence sounds as though we were counter spies, almost, but there was really very little of that. May have done a bit of mapping. And I don’t know I did very much at all there. It wasn’t till I’d got out to the company. It was not long before

03:00 I was posted to C Company as the company I man. That was a much more vital and interesting position.

What does a company I man do?

Well he navigates patrols principally. He was responsible for the patrol getting to their target and getting back. And collects information or documents from the enemy, anything that may have been of importance to intelligence. And also you keep the troops informed. A lot of morale effect

03:30 there. You get the information and you disseminate it. That’s roughly it, but the main job is navigation. And I saved a lot of lives, Japanese and ours, by my navigating.

And what were the major challenges you faced there?

Navigating the jungle. I realised very quickly that you couldn’t rely on the way I’d been trained in the desert. Virtually around Khan Younis

04:00 and Gaza and Duidat … not Duidat, Nusarat That you can’t get up and reset on features, your compass is usually useless for that sort of thing, although it’s terribly important for direction. And all you can do is to try and estimate the distance and keep a compass bearing. And I used to move behind the forward scout and keep him on track, and that’s how we navigated.

So, yeah,

04:30 **you really couldn't be taking bearings off land features within the jungle?**

No, oh no. There was no … and the maps too, didn't have any great features on them, only contours.

So you were really trying to estimate distance by the number of steps you were taking?

Yeah, yes, yes. You'd count your steps if it was possible. If you're going across rough terrain, well it was bad luck, you had to do it by the contouring on the maps. And that could be difficult too. I remember

05:00 one patrol when we were sent out one way up a creek and then inland, and then we had to come down this, what looked like a beautiful broad spur that brought us right to company headquarters, but that spur was a bit of a myth. It was the aerial photograph from, with the maps were taken, takes the tree tops, and they're all grafted at about the same height, and so it obliterates

05:30 what the ground was really like underneath. And it's just a series of little ridges, and you're up and down, up and down. You've just got to get a compass bearing and go. And I remember on this occasion, coming down to the creek, or river it was, well really it was a chain of water holes, and not knowing which was to go, whether up or down.

06:00 And fortunately the sergeant in charge of the platoon, lovely fellow, Doug Adam, he pushed the platoon either side just for protection, etcetera. And the mob he put out to the left found the company we were looking for, thank God. So I got a lot of credit for that. But I had no idea really.

And what about the weather at that point. Was it raining?

Yes. You got used to that after

06:30 a while. It rained like hell every afternoon and then it would dry out. We had our groundsheets. Oh, at that stage, I think we had American two-man tent type things.

Was flooding a problem that you came across?

There was a bad flood at Tydackaball [?], where we relieved 2/8th. They'd had a … I'm not sure whether they had … or whether this was Hutch's idea, to put a machine

07:00 gun platoon on this island in the middle of the river. And there was a landslide further up and a great deluge of water came down and swept them all away. Seven of them lost their lives. The rest managed to struggle out. But that's the only serious flooding, I think, we encountered. I don't recall any other.

Were you particularly nervous about picking up malaria again or becoming … falling ill in

07:30 **the way you'd experienced the first time?**

No, you kind of accepted things, I think. We had Atebrin. Somehow or other, I had no fear that I was going to die of it, oddly enough. I always thought, "I'll shake it off, it'll be right."

Had there been any innovations in ways of treating or preventing …?

Oh yes. Well Atebrin and chloroquine and other things had been developed in the meantime.

They were anti-malarial

08:00 **tablets, were they?**

Yes. Tom Blamey was responsible for a lot of that.

Who was doing most of that research work? Who was developing …?

Oh look, I can't be sure, but I think there was quite a lot going on in Australia. I think you'd have to check with other people about that. I do know old Professor Ford, Ted Ford, who was our Professor at Public Health in Sydney University, was up there at the time. And he's a lovely fellow,

08:30 I'm sure he's a very sloppy soldier, I'm just imagining him. He'd have his socks rolled down around his ankles wearing shorts, etcetera. And he walked into Blamey's tent one day and pushed his papers aside and sat on the desk and said, "General Blamey, in about two months' time, you're not going to have an army." And Blamey said, "What, what, what?" And shuffled a few more papers and then Ted launched into his attack about the malaria. And Blamey sat up and listened.

09:00 But he thought a lot of Blamey.

How long did you remain then, in Aitape-Wewak conflict? Were you there until its completion?

I was there to the end, yeah. I did have one break in hospital with MT [malignant tertian] malaria. And while I was in there … yeah, I had an abscessed tooth that was

09:30 operated on and then I had a metal plumber space infection that had to be operated on. And when that was healing, I was discharged, I was walking back to the battalion and I encountered Darcy Lachlan,

who was our mortar sergeant and I said, “What are you up to?” And he said, “I’m in charge of the 16th Brigade Mortar Group, we’re going to bomb Nightingale Beach.” or Dove Bay or whatever it was,

10:00 “With the 2/6th Cav. [Cavalry] Commando Regiment, Cav. Regiment. The commandos are going in there to attack.” I said, “That sounds exciting, may I come?” He said, “Yes certainly.” And I said, “Where are you?” And he said, “About a mile along there.” And he pointed along this shore line. So I set off, I think, the next day and after a while I realised I didn’t know where the hell I was going. So there was this big hut with fronds,

10:30 palms roofing, etcetera, and the deal … with hard wood floor steps leading up to it. I thought, “This looks important, this will be an orderly room of Div. [Divisional] Headquarters. So I waltzed up these stairs and there’s an old guy sitting on an iron bedstead, pulling his shoes on and he’d got a singlet on and a pair of KD [Kitchen Duty] slacks. I thought, “God, they do it well here at this bloody Divisional Headquarters.” He looked up and said … and I said, “Where’s the

11:00 16th Brigade Mortar Group, mate?” And he said, “What, what, what?” I said, “The 16th Brigade Mortar Group.” He said, “I don’t know, try G.” So I marched through his tent and down the front, out the front side. And then I thought, “Oh, there’s a navel officer sitting out there with many, many rings on his sleeve.” I thought, “I wonder where I am.” And I looked around and it says GOC [General Officer Commanding]. It was “Ocker” Stevens. I ran for my life. And later on he was chairman of a company of

11:30 which I had shares and they were being threatened to be taken over by another company and he was looking for proxy votes. So I wrote to him and reminded him of this affair. I got a letter back from his secretary that said, “Unfortunately, Sir Jack has had a coronary occlusion and is unable to reply in person, but he remembers the episode and wishes you well.” But that’s just an aside.

12:00 **Do you recall hearing of the victory in Europe?**

Oh yes. Yes. In fact I …

Can you walk me through that?

Well, it was a great thing. Yeah, we thought it was great, shouldn’t be long now. That was the feeling. In fact I remember hearing … see I had to gather this information and pass it onto the troops. I remember hearing the attack on the, the Americans taking Iwo Jima , I had

12:30 trouble with the name of the place. That’s just one thing that sticks in my mind. I think because I couldn’t spell “Iwo Jima.”

And then when victory over Japan came, can you tell me about that day and the way that the battalion responded?

Oh, well it was tremendous relief. It was great. We just felt so over the moon, really. We knew that they were buggered but

13:00 it happened so suddenly. We heard first of all about the two bombs being dropped. So I suppose that moment had come as much as a surprise … I don’t know which would have buoyed us up more, I’m ashamed to say. Whether the bombs or the actual surrender.

Did you have any concept of the power of those bombs, of just what that meant when the news came through?

Well we thought they were pretty severe, yeah.

13:30 **And I guess dealing with mortars and snipers and stuff like that, and bombing raids, to imagine a couple of bombs that could end the war, it must have been …?**

Oh yes, God yes. Yeah, we were elated. We thought it was a good thing.

Everyone slept a bit better that night?

Slept a bit better? Yes. Oh well … oh, at that stage I’d

14:00 been drafted into the Q [Quartermaster] Store. I was at the RQ now. The IO [Intelligence Officer], Freddie Bell had gone over as Quartermaster. Things were pretty quite, we’d slowed down, we weren’t doing very much. And he dragged me over to the Q Store. It was just before the war ended. And there we were.

So how long did you have to remain in New Guinea before you …?

I was on the battalion

14:30 cadre, which was the stable element of which troops marched in and out all the time. Which was very good because the figures were so confusing, you could bump them up and … I tried to get Hutch to sign the … I went to him and I said, “I’m just about this, look sir, I’ve bumped their figures up by a hundred, that will give us another two hundred bottles of beer, we’ll divvy them up between your mess and ours, all you’ve got to do is sign this.” “Oh, I can’t do that.” he said, “I

15:00 might lose my rank and all my medals." I said, "Crikey, wouldn't want that to happen, no it's all right sir." Went away I signed it "Ian Hutchison." I had his signature off pat. And he got the lot.

How long was it before you were able to return to Australia?

We came back round about, I think we were on the water on New Year's Day, if I remember. Very early in January we got back.

15:30 **And what was the welcoming like on this return?**

Oh, very subdued. It was nothing very much. We didn't look for it and it didn't occur. What they had was busses, they bussed us out from the wharfs. In fact, I went out by jeep probably. But I remember seeing these busses with a notice on them " "Returning AIF

16:00 from the front." or something like that. But nobody was standing on the sides waving flags or cheering.

Was it Sydney that you landed in?

Yes. Did we go first to Brisbane? I can't remember now. Oh no, I know, we pulled into Townsville. I don't think we pulled into Brisbane at all on that occasion, we came straight to Sydney.

And what were your immediate plans? When you got off the boat

16:30 **what were you thinking your life held for you?**

Before I left the island, I'd written to the Summer Hays School, what was it? I've forgotten what it was called now. It was a coaching college. They used to coach in Banker's Institute, that was the thing to do if you wanted to get ahead in the bank. I was half way through the course when I went away to the war. So I went down, paid the rest of the thing off

17:00 and asked him to send the rest of the stuff up, so I could get on with it. And he didn't bother to do that. And then later on when I decided I was going to do medicine, I tried to get my money back. No, there was no way. However, when during one vacation I was working at the board of liquid fuel control, handing out petrol licenses and who should come in but the young Summer Hays "Oh." he said, "You're here, are you?" He knew what would happen.

17:30 No petrol. Revenge is sweet. There's another story, I'll tell you about too.

You went back to the bank for a short period?

Yes, about six months.

How did you find settling back into that routine after …?

Oh, well, they were very good. They were kind to us. I went to a school first. The first thing that happened was that I'd already

18:00 applied for a medical degree. I won't bore you with telling you how that came about, it was purely accident.

Through the Repatriation Scheme, was it? Was it an opportunity …?

Yes, when I was being discharged I met a sergeant whom I'd known and he pointed out I was underage, under twenty-one, and I was entitled to … And I said, "Oh don't worry about that, I just want to get on with it, get on with living." "Oh." he said, "Well, I'll put you down for something." He had this strange way of talking.

18:30 So he said, "What'll it be?" And I said, joking, I said, "Medicine." And that's how it came about. But yes, then I started to worry about it. I thought, "Oh God, the bank." When I left it was a different bank than what it is now. You had tenure and all that, you were safe in your job, but God you had to comply. And you couldn't be seen at a racetrack and all that sort of nonsense. I thought, "Oh God, the bank's going to roast me

19:00 for deserting them like this." And I went back to the school, they ran a school for us for a fortnight to usher us back into the banking life. And one Percy Rainsford was an instructor there and I told him, he was a nice guy, and I told him. He said, "Oh, my younger brother's doing that. Don't worry about it, the bank will give you twelve months off, leave without pay." And which they did. And I looked up Fred Rainsford, I was his best

19:30 man at his wedding, we became very firm friends.

So you then began your medical studies at Sydney University?

Yes, in '47. Oh after I got back from Aitape-Wewak, I was investigated for tropical diseases and found to have amoebic dysentery.

What does that mean?

It meant six months in Concord Hospital, which was good. I

20:00 was in with a lot of 8th Div. guys, ex-prisoners of war, they were lovely fellows.

Right, can you tell me some more about that experience? What it was like to meet those guys?

Oh, they were such tremendous guys. They were so thankful to be alive and they were enjoying life so much and they were making bloody sure everyone else around them did. They had a lovely sense of humour. A bit fatalistic. And the sister in charge of the ward, Singleton, was a magnificent ward,

20:30 and wonderful sense of humour. There was one occasion where Harry Berthold, was one of the PW [prisoners of war], and he was a real con man in a way, a lovely fellow Harry. And he wanted to [see the] Queen while he went off, AWL [Absent Without Leave], so he went down on one knee behind her, she was writing at her desk, he's behind her back. He said, "Oh, Gwendolyn, I can see it all now, a little house in the country, roses around the door,

21:00 just you and me, a little house in the country, roses around the door, babies on the floor." "Close the door and get out Berthold." was her reply. But that's the sort of relationship they had. "Close the bloody door and get out, Berthold."

And were those fellows open to discussing their experiences at all?

Yes. In quieter moments, they would tell you things that had happened, for sure. Of course, I've seen a lot of them

21:30 since, a hell of a lot. There's a group of … old Jim Greenwood was the ex-Deputy [Veterans' Affairs] Commissioner, and a couple of MOs, one of them ex-8th Div. another one, an old GP. They formed a panel to assist the PW with their pensions. Of course, you've got to assist them, they had no idea

22:00 about how to go about fleecing the government. You know, you've got to tell lies for them almost, because they're such magnificent guys. Anyhow, I was involved heavily with that because of my experience of them and the war in general. But once I became a psychiatrist, I got all the referrals from that group. So I've seen a hell of a lot of them. And when you've got them in one

22:30 situation, you really get their story. And although it was fairly repetitious, I was never bored. In fact there was one guy, Vic Duncan, who was in the navy, he was in the Battle of Matapan and then Greece and Crete, in the navy, in his ship, the [HMAS] Perth he was on, and he was sunk in the Sunda Straits, swum ashore and then in the bag

23:00 on the Burma-Thailand railway and then wound up in a factory in Japan. Now, how he came to me was, one of the boards would scrutinise all these things that went through and the recommending officer had decided he hadn't had a stressful war. And the board would just take it over and spear him my way. I remember Vic came in, he was so angry, so hostile. I said, "My God, you're hostile." He said, "Wouldn't you be hostile if you'd been

23:30 told you hadn't had a stressful war?" Anyway, he told me this story and I said, "Does your wife know about this?" He said, "No." "You've never told her?" "No." "Bring her in next time." Anyway, I got his permission and I taped it. And that's in the appendix of my book.

Your experience was obviously fairly mixed in terms of the way the government received and repatriated people. You were obviously, did quite well out of it and other people … in terms of your medical, getting to study your medicine. Other people we've spoken to

24:00 **really had a good catalyst to their future lives, but then others really struggled to get pensions and get the recognition they deserved.**

Oh, hmm, I wonder how much they deserved it. They're pretty easy, the Repatriation. Now, certainly there's a backlash. It's so easy in some respects, but there is a backlash. And this is what one had to protect the 8th Div. from. That was an example of it. I had others, one guy who was on the Krait [Special Forces operation]

24:30 on his first trip and missed out on the second one when they were beheaded, and he missed out because he had an appendectomy. And he came, he was full of guilt, but he was told his war wasn't stressful. That sort of thing. This is by stupid negative types. I remember this one guy, I'll give him a bit of a serve, Peter, who had a laborious voice, big, fat, overweight

25:00 fellow, that didn't bath very often, I don't think. I heard him plotting behind me, this is in Grace Building, Griffith, he said, not using my full title, that's … "Those were very intemperate remarks you made about that fellow that I said hadn't had a stressful war, who was in Tobruk garrison, wounded three times. Yes, it was full of crap." I said, "Oh?" He said, "I thought you might like to lift it off the file." I said, "No, give it to me, I'll make it stronger."

25:30 That's the sort of thing that you had to watch all the time. But many of those people who complained about it, may not have been deserving, so who knows.

You mentioned that it was a accident, somewhat of an accident, that led you down the path of medicine, but were you … once that path was in motion, were [you] inspired or did you feel

inspired by what you'd been through and your sicknesses that you'd suffered?

I did,

26:00 I had lot of time for the MOs, particularly the last one, Roy Park, and what they were able to achieve there. And modern … it seemed to me to be modern medicine taking off. Penicillin had come in, for a start and intravenous anaesthetic. I suppose, without thinking, I'd developed a bit of an interest. But what … my immediate reaction was, "Oh well, I'll go up to the university, if I can stay there

26:30 twelve months, it's okay." At least I've been to the uni [university], and then if I've got to come down, it doesn't matter. Well after about two months of it, wild bucking horses wouldn't have got me away. I really enjoyed it, it was great.

And at what point did you then decide to join the reserves again?

When we acquired a house. We moved out from Callan Park. This was after I'd got out of general practice, went out penniless,

27:00 more or less. And we had a house …

I'm just quickly trying to get a sense of the dates. You started in '47, studying your medicine?

Oh, yes. I graduated '52 was the last year, we graduated in '53.

And then began work as a GP?

No, I was two and a bit years in Royal South Sydney Hospital. I wound up Acting Medical Superintendent there. But I was carrying the

27:30 boss along, he was dying of cancer and they were trying to get rid of him, so that wouldn't have to pay him, I guess. Anyway, we used to cover him, bring him in and out. But when he died, I thought, "Well now I'll get my …" he was on fifteen hundred dollars, pounds, a week. I thought that was a fair salary for me. And no, they offered me about eleven hundred. So I told them where to stick it. And went into practice in Canowindra for eight years. So it was in 1963 I transferred to the Health Department

28:00 and worked for a year in Bloomfield Hospital in Orange, and then Callan Park, Broughton Hall, and eventually wound up as Deputy Superintendent, after I got my degree, psychiatric degree, Deputy Superintendent at Callan Park. And I fell out with one of the administrators above us, not the local one, he was a great fellow. And transferred to the Repatriation Department,

28:30 Veterans' Affairs. That was 1972.

'72. When did you join the reserves, the militia, and what inspired that?

Money, I needed the money. It was for Queen, County and money in that order reversed. It was, oh yeah, when I took out the mortgage on the house. We were living

29:00 in the grounds of Callan Park and my wife had been assaulted by a patient, my wife and two kids. And she was a bit anxious about it, she wanted to get out anyway and I thought it was about time we got independent. But I had no money. And I had to grab anything I could get. So I joined the army reserve. I was CMF [Citizens Military Forces] then.

How difficult

29:30 **was that decision?**

Oh, it was easy enough. The difficulty was getting into the damn thing. There was an idiot of a fellow on the cadre. I was 1st Field Ambulance at Chatswood where I enlisted. My medical was done by Don Childs who was superintendent at PA [Prince Alfred Hospital] for a long time, a lovely guy. And I was all set to go. And this guy just didn't shuffle the

30:00 papers, didn't move them, they sat there for eleven months. And I had to get my friend, Allan Murchison, who was major general in charge of 2 Div. And he put in a rocket and things moved very … But I'd say to this bugger, "What's happened to my thing?" "Oh, security, mate, security." I said, "I'm being checked out by security, but you know who my references are, Major General Murchison, Charles Cutler, the Deputy Premier and somebody else of equal importance."

30:30 And security was holding me up, he alleged.

What was your commitment then, to the CMF?

Parade once a week, a nightly parade. Weekend bivouac things and an annual camp. And then I'd do a course, but if you did a course, you got that as well. You got special leave off from the government department

31:00 to do that. So the course might be … being MO as I was to the 8th Terminal Group up in MacKay, doing their river crossings, etcetera.

Was there more specific army medical training that you required?

Oh, yes, yes. You had to pass. You go in as a temporary captain, and you have to confirm your rank by doing exams, and then to go to major, I had to do further exams.

31:30 **Did you enjoy being back in that life?**

Yes I quite enjoyed it, yes. It was quite good, I liked it. A lot of the time, particularly in 1st Field Ambulance there was nothing to do, that drove me mad. But once we got into camps or on bivouacs it was different, it was good. And at the 2/5th, the 5th Field Ambulance at Randwick, I was transferred to them eventually, after doing a stint with units as an MO. And that was

32:00 more active, much more active there, in training.

And can you explain how your apprehension or concern may have increased as the Vietnamese War approached? Do you recall how you felt?

Yeah, I felt very anxious about our troops going in there. For some reason or other I seemed to know there were going to be land mines or anti-personnel mines, I don't know how I knew that, there must have been some reason.

32:30 **Did you suspect that when war broke out that you would be called up, that there was a possibility that you'd be called up?**

Oh no, no. No there's no way I would have been called up, I was over age, etcetera. No, I volunteered.

You did volunteer?

Oh yeah. Oh Lord, yes. I was, what, forty-eight or something.

Tell me about that decision?

Well, it wasn't easy to make. Because my wife said to me, we were out dining one night and she said … she'd enjoyed the tussle I'd had

33:00 getting this higher degree and the stresses and the strains, and she said, "If you get a chance to go overseas, take it and I can always follow later when we've got a bit more money." I said, "Oh, I don't want to go without you." And then suddenly I thought … I said, "Oh, actually they've approached me to go to Vietnam." which they had. "Oh." she said. And she just accepted it. Off I went for four months.

When did

33:30 **you leave?**

January '70, 1970. Just after my father's death.

And what was your role over there?

Psychiatrist at ALSG the … and part time medical officer.

What's ALSG?

The Australian Logistic Support Group. That's the base group, they had a base at Long Tan. Our task force was the sharp end,

34:00 that's where the task force … where my friend Bill Weir was, the brigadier.

And what did your day to day duties involve?

Referrals of the young diggers [soldiers] and doing a stint in the RAP as an ordinary medical officer, or being on duty at night.

Sorry, what were the referrals, what do you mean? They were referred to you or you were referring them …?

They were referred to me for psychiatric opinion.

34:30 Mainly for disposal.

Whether people should be put back into the frontline or should be sent home?

Yeah.

And how did you find the responsibility of making such decisions?

Oh, it was easy enough, because I don't believe in sending neurotics back into battle. I argue with the Yanks about that.

Was there pressure from above, that you …?

No, they accepted anything I said, they were good.

35:00 But the Americans, I was always fighting them about this. That's a long story.

And so you were there for, in the end, three months, four months?

Yes, I was there until June ‘70, 1970.

And did you find that second trip to a war, or the second experience of a war

35:30 **contributed to a more philosophical approach or to really process for yourself what you’d been through in the first war?**

Oh yes, yes. Well I don’t know that I took it personally like that, but certainly I was more philosophical about many issues. Particularly the relationship of the army to its men - that had improved tremendously. In fact, well here’s

36:00 an example, on Thursdays we’d get lamb chops, at least some would. And the ORs [Other Ranks] dined first, and their mess is right beside the kitchen, so they’d get … they’d all eat lamb chops. The sergeants, about half of them get them, there’d be none for the officers. And they had their R and R [Rest and Relaxation] club, R and C [rest and recuperation] club in Vung Tau where it was strictly for the troops, no officers allowed in. I

36:30 did get in once because I went round with a caterer, who I was treating, he was having problems. And … what was I going to say then? Oh yes, at the officers’ club, which we shared with the Americans was the, I think it was a hotel, an old hotel converted to a club more or less, it was just a big barn of a joint. And if you had any of your private soldiers,

37:00 we all dressed in civilians, and they’d just come along with us. So they moved freely into our quarters but we were barred from theirs, which I thought was a good thing.

Just in the couple of minutes we’ve got left on the tape, after your return from Vietnam, is that when you became involved with the Vets, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs?

Yes, that’s right. I was still with the state before I …

State Health Department?

Yes.

37:30 But I had problems with one of the hierarchy, and departed.

And started working with … was it known as the Department of Veterans’ Affairs at that stage?

No, it was known as the Repatriation Department then, the name changed soon after. I was sent on a Veterans’ attachment in 1981. Oh, in about 1974, I think, yes, I became Senior Psychiatrist in charge at

38:00 the New South Wales branch and then after that, the following year, I became the consultant at the national level. So that involved quite a bit of travel within Australia and overseas, including a Veterans’ Attachment, which was usually six months, I took five on account of Christmas. And my wife came over too, we had to pay for her.

And did you remain

38:30 **in that position until retirement?**

Yes. In 1984, I retired.

And what have you enjoyed doing since? You said you’d written a book?

Oh yes. I started writing it after the Greek affair, no pardon me, that’s politically incorrect. The Social Security Conspiracy case in which I was heavily involved. I’ve got the true story of that.

39:00 And I started writing it then, but I didn’t get very far. It wasn’t until my wife died that I suddenly felt free again to say the things I wanted to say.

Tape 5

00:33 **Griff, I’d like to start by going back to before the war, and I’m just interested in your attitudes back then and what may have shaped them. Your beliefs were quite different from your father, at that stage?**

No, not really. I seemed to follow him. When he gave up the

01:00 right wing, liberal part, he was disillusioned with BSP Stevens and became enthralled with Stalin’s regime. He liked the idea of the peasants going to the opera and that sort of thing. It was all window dressing, of course, he couldn’t see that, the dear old boy. But I agreed with that, whatever he said was right by me. I got the idea that Chamberlain was being weak, from him.

01:30 It was formed, perhaps, before then. I didn't agree with the appeasement. I delivered an address on Empire Day in Maitland High School in my final year, fifth year, along those lines. It's written up in the centenary thing, I had no idea it made any impression, but they attributed a great precocity, great foresight to insight, which was my father's

02:00 of course.

What was your father's reaction to the outbreak of the Second World War?

Oh, I wasn't with him at the time. And I don't know. He didn't go to World War I, his elder brother did. I think he always felt a little conscious of that. He did on occasions excuse it by the fact that he had a wife and two children, so it did affect him I think. But

02:30 obviously he was in agreement with it because of his stand against Chamberlain.

Yeah, he was opposed to your enlistment?

Oh, they weren't keen on me going, no. They thought I was a bit young. But as soon as Stalin was invaded and they brought the age limit down to nineteen at the same time, he signed the papers. I'd also threatened to join the air force which was … joined at eighteen. That may have influenced a bit too, I think he was very unkeen about that.

03:00 **And why was that?**

Danger. He was wise there too, I think. They last place on earth I would have liked to have been was in Bomber Command.

Can you tell me a little bit more about Red Mick and the people at Brighton?

Oh, he was a dear old bloke, Red Mick, I used to play chess with him. He'd manufactured this chess set himself, carved it out of wood. His wife was English, she was a lovely person. In fact their daughter was married

03:30 to my first cousin, we were all good friends at that time. They're still living at Oakleigh. He didn't speak much of the war, but he certainly let us have a full blast when, both barrels, when we gave a great cheer at the announcement that Menzies made.

Did you have much contact with World War I veterans?

Yeah, I suppose I did in a way. I

04:00 wasn't terribly conscious of it. The teacher I had at Homerville Public School was ex-World War I fellow. We liked him in many ways. I realise, in retrospect, he was a bit of a sadist, he used to belt the ears off us. We feared him for the cane. There was another fellow who had the, his name was Blackman, and Turner had the class above that,

04:30 he was a withdrawn fellow. Just one look at him terrified you, but he was very … he loved to talk when you got to know him.

Did you, I'm just interested because you were in touch with quite a lot of people of left-wing persuasion…

No, not really, no. No, we didn't have any, I didn't have any real politics. Whatever my father said, that was it. He was the more wise.

05:00 **But Red Mick?**

Oh no, well Red Mick was … yes, I don't know when he started to have these things but that didn't worry us, just tolerated that.

And so could I just move into perhaps your early experiences in the army? Could you tell me,

05:30 **did you reach a point in your training where you regretted the decision?**

Never, no. I couldn't get back into the militia, back into the militia from cadet early enough, quickly enough. I wanted to feel like a real soldier, stupidly. And then I eventually got to battalion, I tried to avoid, at all costs, going to orderly rooms. I didn't feel you were a fighting soldier.

06:00 Mind you, it didn't stop me after the Owen Stanleys, taking refuge in the orderly room, because I was physically buggered.

But earlier on it was important to fight?

Yes, to be in the ranks. I got drafted into the orderly room in the militia battalion before I left. But as soon as I got into the AIF and got posted to our unit … oh, and the training battalion in Palestine,

06:30 I got pushed into the orderly room, but once I got to the unit, I managed to avoid it, until it suited me. But then I got out of it as soon as I could and into the I Section. That's the only way I could get out of it

then, they wouldn't let me go back to the ranks.

How does one avoid the orderly room?

Oh well, you can't almost. But you just don't let it be known if you can help it, that you were a clerk, although they soon know.

07:00 It wasn't difficult in the battalion.

So the war, your own experience was a hundred percent enjoyable at the beginning?

Oh, with the militia battalion? That disruptive element of the union concept, outlook, was a bit of a pain in the neck. And they organised the strike. I think I

07:30 mentioned last time. But apart from them. No, that settled down too and I got quite attached to the unit, but I wasn't sorry to leave it and go to the real army, as I saw it. And go overseas.

Were there any aspects of your early army experience that you didn't like, apart from not being able to fight?

The militia experience?

08:00 **The militia or your early experiences in the AIF?**

Well, the AIF I was quite happy all the way. Well, there were times, of course, when the training was a bit rough and you'd be in conflict, sometimes, with your superiors but that was a minimum. On the whole, I was pretty well received. I suppose being small and cheeky, I had no trouble settling in.

Can you tell me a bit about the

08:30 **bonding amongst the troops?**

Yeah, well I suppose we bonded. Don't know what else I can say.

What were some of the things you did to forge friendships?

Anyone who saves you or you had the good fortune to help out. But we all, I suppose, felt that way about each other.

09:00 You'd get very upset when you lost a comrade. I remember, after Oivi, I wondered over to 17th Platoon, I think, 17th or 18th. Jack Mackie visited, he's a lovely guy, Jack. And I was talking to him, we were talking about the fellows who had been killed. I said, "You know it's a strange thing, it's only the best of them that seem to be knocked off." And Jack agreed with me, yes.

09:30 Then I looked at him, and within a week he'd gone too. He was forward scout and got it. So, that's a feeling one had, I suppose. I was in a weird … I was very upset, I suppose, when Frank Shields died, although it didn't interfere with things at the time. It's been more since. He was no particular friend of mine, he was just a good friend of everyone's, just a nice,

10:00 sophisticated, amusing guy.

And under what circumstances was he killed?

At the … just before the battle at Eora Creek. He was our platoon, our illustrious platoon commander. Happened to be there at the time, he hadn't yet retired. And our platoon was given this area of responsibility, I suppose you'd call it now, which

10:30 was just on the downhill side, left hand side of the track. And a cord road over the track. And I don't know exactly what the orders were, they were just given to Barrett, and I didn't quite hear what he said to Shields, but I heard Shield's reply. "Oh yes." he said, "16th Platoon, forward platoon, No. 1 Section, forward section, Shields, forward scout, Mafi Shields, which means finish Shields." and that's exactly what happened.

11:00 This was really before the attack went in. So why he was pushed down there I still wonder about. I think he … the whole concept, I still wonder about that. I didn't wonder at the time, but it worries me now that I think about it, was writing about it. That that should never have happened, it should have all been in our positions ready to go, which is what did happen eventually.

11:30 And then at the word, get up and pour all the fire in the world, that keeps his head down, you've got a good chance then, if you overwhelm him, which is what happened.

And what were you doing on that day?

I was platoon runner with Laurie Cheesman. I was just behind the forward troops, and there was a section behind us, Johnny Duncan, who was hit, incidentally, in the mouth. He was leader of

12:00 3 Section. That's the section I'd been sent down on the left flank, to bring back. I think I mentioned that, I told you about that, didn't I?

Can I just get you to go through it again?

Well, we found the position the day before and we'd been pulled back that night. We came back into it and Laurie Cheesman, our platoon sergeant,

12:30 who'd more or less taken over at that stage because Barrett did seem, oh… Willy didn't seem to be around. And he sent No. 3 Section down to the left flank, for some reason or other, and they were a long time getting back. He sent me down to find them, and I went and went and didn't locate them. But what I heard were voices that weren't in our own language. So I decided I was a little bit out of my depth,

13:00 I came back in a hurry. And they must have come back by a different route. And when I came back, I walked in to 17th Platoon's area and two of the guys there, Murray Henshall and Les Murchison, they're looking as pale as a ghost. They 'fessed me some time later that they had a bead on me, they thought I was the wrong colour.But, yeah. What

13:30 was the question?

That's okay, you've answered the question. When you said you could hear the voices but not see them, tell me what you could see?

Couldn't see a thing. Couldn't see a thing. Once the firing started, the jungle seemed to open up, all the leaves shot off. Visibility became much better. But up to that point, you couldn't see him.

14:00 **So can you describe what it was like to be progressing through such dense forest where you can't see?**

Well it wasn't dense in the sense that you had to get your machete out and cut your way through. It was large trees, some vines, but there was a hell of a lot of foliage about. And he took advantage of it. It didn't

14:30 really impede, influence the attack all that much. Oh yeah, I've often thought about these things in the jungle sense. It's very hard to recall exactly what things were like.

Just interested in a general impression of jungle fighting? Is there much light coming into the jungle from … or is it blocked out?

No, in day time there's enough

15:00 light, you can see all right, well there's plenty of light really. I don't think I was ever troubled by lack of light, it's not glaring though. It's not that thick, which seems to be portrayed.

What sort of visibility have you got, how far ahead can you usually see?

Oh, not all that far, sometimes you'd probably be limited to about ten yards.

15:30 Yeah, that'd be about right. He could cut fire lanes and lie concealed at the end of them. And if you happened to get in one of those, the chances are you wouldn't see him but he'd see you. And that happened to poor old Ned Ogg, that first day, he got up … it started to rain again and he got up to put his ghost cape on, that's what he had for shelter. Turned his back on him and he got it all up and down the spine.

16:00 Died later that night, next morning.

And that was a constant risk?

The fire lanes? Oh yes. Generally, we were proceeding along the track and that was the … when you struck a fixed position. And it was a bit different in the hill as to down below where the kunai grass, I suppose was the greatest problem. I remember going, ploughing through one,

16:30 I don't know why I wasn't … what the hell I could have been thinking at the time, but we could hear Cheesman's voice, raucous voice, keeping us in line. There had been some sort of indication that he was on the other side of this patch and that would have been suicide if he'd been there, I think, he could hear us coming, there was no way he could avoid it.

How often would you see the enemy?

17:00 Oh, not … well, once you got on top of him you would. You often saw each other at the same time and probably got a hell of a scare. I remember that happening at Sanananda, and this guy took off. And I'd decided to clean my own gun, at this stage, I had it in bits on a groundsheet. And he'd wondered around a bend where our forward position was, a couple of guys in a trench,

17:30 in the forward position. And this Nip walked … I was standing right beside him and I saw him and he saw me and fortunately he took off. He was obviously disoriented at that stage. Well, I don't know what he was but he had, I still remember, he had a stick and a dixie and a groundsheet thing on, with a slit on his shoulders. And he just went like that and he went. And my

18:00 two friends, I yelled out to them, I think they must have been asleep. They got up and fired at him but he escaped.

And did you find his position later?

No. Another section went out looking for it. Oh, but it didn't matter, we knew where the positions were at that stage. And we weren't doing much in the way of attacking them, they were pretty well spent. This was just after Basil Catterns, the 2/1st Battalion

18:30 had a pretty hectic assault on him. They achieved quite a bit, but couldn't get reinforced in time and they had to pull him out. With great difficulty I might add. But that's about the last assaultive effort we tried. We couldn't find him, mainly patrolling after that. Then when the Americans came in

19:00 we had combined patrols with the Yanks then and the Aussies.

How was that different working a combined patrol?

Oh, they were nice and enthusiastic guys but they were a bit clueless, but they soon learned.

What did they need to learn?

I suppose just ordinary procedures.

19:30 Creeping, being quiet and not exposing themselves unnecessarily.

Had they been trained, do you know?

No. I've read since … they were a pretty rotten force actually. Not the individuals that fought. I've read since that they were gathered together, there was a 127 Regiment that came from, I think it was Michigan, something like that, and they'd been on the move the whole time, there was no opportunity

20:00 for them to train. They were just moved out to, I think first, to Adelaide and then to Victoria and then up … so on and so forth. And they were on the go the whole time, on the move.

So how did the Australians, like in your platoon and others and you, react to combining with such poorly trained troops?

Well I don't think it worried us a lot. We were a bit disappointed that they didn't manage to relieve us.

20:30 They came in on 22nd November '42, we were hoping to be relieved at that stage. And they went in to make the assaults and they shot each other up as much as anyone. And they were pulled back at night, which was the incredible thing. We held the position. They'd go in in the morning and they'd put on their so called attack and then they'd come back through our lines

21:00 in the evening and they'd go back again the next morning. It was a kind of a day job for them.

How did they manage to hold their ground?

Well, we were holding it for them I suppose. And then the Japs weren't getting out unless they were stirred up. They were a pretty sick force at that stage. There were quite a lot of them and they were certainly resisting and you found if you just left them alone, they left you alone. We used to have the morning session, the warm up session, happy

21:30 an hour and we'd just blast away at each other. I don't know what the idea of that was. But there was this American … at that stage we were interstitialled with American Australian, American Australian, and this American beside me had an automatic weapon which he had on automatic, and he was giving bursts … I said , "Hey, hey cut that out." And the next moment all the shit in the world came over. And I got a little bit of shrapnel, T shaped, like

22:00 a 9th Div. colour patch, it was. It hit me in the tin hat and just penetrated and stopped at the rubber lining. But he learned then. I had an automatic sub machine gun but I always fired on repetition, most times.

Just a clarity, can you just explain to me what he did wrong?

Oh by having it on automatic and sending bursts over? That attracted

22:30 what little bit of artillery they had. They were keen to knock out any automatic weapons.

And so what should he have done?

Put it on repetition the way I did. He soon learned.

And what does repetition do?

Just single shots. Just like a rifle. It evens out the chances then.

And what weapon are we referring to?

His. I think they were called a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], it was a light machine gun, he

23:00 had. I had a Thompson sub-machine gun.

Tell me a bit about happy hour?

Oh, that's just what I said to you. Fire away for a little while and he'd fire back. Just to let you know he was still there and to let him know you were still there. And that was it. Then we stopped. Carry on again the next morning.

How long would that go on for?

Until we were relieved, virtually.

23:30 **And was it the same time every morning?**

Yes, roughly.

Okay, tell me about what happens from the moment you wake up in a situation like that?

You have anything you have to eat, you relieve yourself, shave if you can.

Where have you slept?

Well on the ground really. At Sanananda.

24:00 it was … you couldn't dig in too far, we had to build up a sand base because there was a water table just underneath. And there was an occasional earth tremor and it shook like hell, and that made the faeces flow out of the slit trench incidentally. So you just slept on the ground.

And what did you have? Did you have a groundsheet?

Yeah, we had groundsheets and ghost capes. And you could

24:30 rig up a two-man tent if you weren't in close contact. But if you were, well you couldn't, you just slept on your groundsheet and in your ghost cape.

How well did you sleep?

Oh, very well usually. You were buggered. I remember in the hills, Eora Creek, falling asleep with a … over a sloping piece of ground with a root in my back

25:00 in about half an inch of water, I had no trouble falling asleep.

Were there concerns of night attacks?

There was often a lot of firing. I believe the Japanese used to bring up their porters and they'd fire wildly in the night. But apart from that … he would attack at times, I don't recall ever being in an area where he attacked us.

25:30 I don't think, no, I don't recall any such episodes.

Okay. So tell me, so what time are you usually up?

Oh well at daybreak. You'd usually get up and stand too at dawn or just before dawn. What's happened, overnight you've had your period of sentry duty, it's usually one man per session does that. And comes the morning

26:00 the last fellow wakes everyone, the platoon sergeant or the platoon commander if he's worth his salt, and he just organises … well everyone knows what they've got to do, you just stand too until after dawn and then that's when you start your ordinary domestic chores.

And how long does that go on for?

Oh, as long as it takes to shave if you're going to. And …

26:30 well you can't cook if you're close to the line, you'd just eat your bully beef, whatever you happened to have. Or if you're lucky, K rations or C rations. And that's it, you just sit about.

What did the bully beef come in?

In tins. They'd be about half pound, I suppose. Have you seen spam? I think … in fact there are some that are exactly

27:00 like the bully beef now. It was called mutton really. That or Brockoffs or Arnott's biscuits, I preferred Brockoffs, they weren't quite as hard.

How well preserved was the bully beef?

Pretty well, provided it hadn't been damaged in the drop. If it had been damaged it had to be condemned. Once the thing had broken. Hermetically sealed, I guess.

27:30 But, oh, it kept indefinitely.

Was it a refreshing sleep you'd have or you'd wake up tired?

Oh usually, well it's like your ordinary schoolboy days, you often don't want to get up and occasionally you regretted being the one that falls asleep even on sentry duty. Then there's hell to pay. Say you wake up

28:00 somebody, and two or three people in between have not had their night disturbed. They never seemed grateful for some odd reason.

Did that ever happen to you?

Yeah, I've fallen asleep.

And what was the repercussions?

Oh, I got away with it. That's why I'm still here I suppose.

I mean disciplinary?

Well, you're more likely to be chastised verbally by your mates.

28:30 Or by the fellow responsible really.

Right. What happens after the … you've shaved, you've had breakfast?

It depends what the orders are, what's going on. You may be on a patrol or you may be on a stretcher party, depending on what sort of activity there is. You may be called … well by the time we got to Sanananda, as I said, we were a pretty spent force, so we didn't do any frontal attack.

29:00 **How did you receive the orders in the morning?**

Oh from whoever's in command, that would be Willy. Well when … somehow or other I seem to be concentrating on Sanananda. Because I'd joined … we were a composite company then and I was no longer a runner. There was no real running to do. And you'd get your

29:30 orders anyway from whoever happened to be in charge of your particular formation, your platoon, and he got his from the company commander.

Were you gathered in one spot to receive orders?

Well, they'd be passed on to the section leader, I should say, the corporal in charge of the section. There should be ten of you but they're more likely six or seven. And there was no trouble to pass it on there.

30:00 **Going back to Sanananda where you're going out to start happy hour, just tell me what you actually did, where did you move to?**

Oh, we didn't move, we were in our front … in our positions, which may have … if you're on a bit of higher ground, as we were when we ground right round to the left flank, you could dig in. But when we were nearer the track, we had to use sand bags, and you'd

30:30 be in your weapon pits or behind your sand bags, we just manned those. You went to sleep just behind them, and when it was your turn to do the sentry duty, sit in your thing, line it and just keep your eyes peeled. But we felt fairly confident he wasn't going to do anything. We were all racked with malaria etcetera, at that stage, that's why I think you're inclined to fall asleep. We had temperatures … you had to have a temperature in excess of a hundred and three,

31:00 that was the rumour. I've never actually seen it written but it seemed to be the case. I got up to a hundred and six before they evacuated me. I've got the field card in there, because I didn't use it eventually, didn't have the strength to get on the aircraft that was evacuating us. Had to fight your way on, you see. Too many healthy men. Very urgent they get on before somebody woke up they weren't sick.

31:30 So I thought the safest place was back with the battalionand I went back and rejoined them. My temperature was down to a hundred and three then, so I qualified. And I was with them then for the remaining few days, about a week or so, we were all pulled out then. Fifty seven of us out of six hundred odd.

How was the troops' attitude towards malaria, the risk of disease?

32:00 Oh well, we just expected to get it. We all knew we had it, I suppose. We were a bit scared of scrub typhus. Somehow or other, I don't think we looked on it as fatal, but it really was. Scrub typhus was a bit terrifying, nobody wanted that.

Tell me what that was like?

Oh, the only fellow I actually saw with it, Tommy Dowd from Gooloogong,

32:30 I saw his name later when I was up in practice in Canowindra. It must have been when I was down myself in the 104 CCS [Casualty Clearing Station], yeah, it was our last campaign. And he was sitting

out there just having diaphragmatic reactions, just hiccupping. It was fever and a rash and just general malaise. They're bloody crook

33:00 and then they die. Never have had to treat one since, I'm not terribly familiar with the symptoms. I believe this was the only fellow in our company that I know had it. I think he was in company headquarters. Yeah. That wasn't common, fortunately. I think the total deaths in the

33:30 battalion from scrub typhus was about seven.

What were the most common ailments?

Malaria and dysentery. And then malnutrition and beri beri.

And were supplies often short?

Oh a lot of the time, yes. They couldn't keep it up to us. Kept the ammunition up. When you got to a dropping ground, got the opportunity to really cash up with them,

34:00 threw away your ammunition, make way. He knew that would be kept up to you.

So tell me how you coped with the lack of supplies, food?

You just whinged I suppose, and you dreamt. Lie on your back and have a conversation, such as, lovely roast dinner and a beautiful roast

34:30 potato. And then somebody else would come up with, "What about some fresh bread, butter, blackberry jam and cream?" Oh yeah, great. That sort of thing. But whenever you got the opportunity, you'd grab whatever you could. At Wairopi for instance, I came across some seven pound tins of corned beef, real corned beef, not the corned mutton we were getting. And I took one or two of those

35:00 and distributed it amongst the troops. Another occasion, at a dropping ground, I acquired a bag of sugar, and I knew the Provos were stopping us from such practices, so I took a detour through this swamp. And of course, I had to come out on the track, and that's where the bastard was, and he said, "What have you got there son?" I said, "Only a bit of sugar." "Only a bit." he said, "You know that's as scarce as gold up there." down here or something. I said, "It's scarcer than gold, mate." He said, "What

35:30 are you going to do with it?" And I told him, so he let me go, thank God. Not that he could have done anything, but he could have confiscated the sugar.

Where was the sugar intended for?

Just for distribution amongst the troops. Usually found its way into the Provos ASC [Army Service Corps], I suppose.

Was that behaviour of that provo unusual?

Well, I don't know. Ask

36:00 most of the troops, they'd say most unusual. But I think they were pretty human. We all hated them, a nice healthy hate. Somebody to get angry with. I had quite a different attitude in Vietnam to them. I think they did a magnificent job there. They did seem a different group, a different corps somehow or other.

I'd definitely like to ask about the provos in Vietnam further on. But for now I'd like to

36:30 **ask about the other … were there other resentments that the troops had about your getting enough bullets but not enough food?**

Oh, no, you accepted it. You just realised that things were difficult and you just put up with it. You knew you could do nothing about it. But when the opportunity arose and you could souvenir a bit, that's what you did.

37:00 You had to keep yourself, your strength going for the sake of the nation.

Tell me about the motivations to keep morale up? What did you fall back on?

Well, I don't know really. You'd grasp any piece of news that may, indicated that you were about to be relieved, or another formation coming down on your flank, or there was good news from abroad or we'd good air

37:30 superiority, or anything like that. You grasped onto that. And you felt pretty miserable when you got the reverse type of news. Some people were rather gifted at that. My section leader, he was my first section leader when I joined the unit … at this stage I'd been transferred to platoon headquarters as a runner, and I was in contact with him quite a bit, Jimmy Hammond, delightful

38:00 fellow. And we were feeling pretty miserable and it was wet as hell, this was at Eora Creek and the Japs had the upper hand, they were sniping and cutting people up, cutting people off and people were disappearing. And Jimmy came around and I remember he was spruced up as though he was about to

meet his girlfriend's parents and he had his slicker on, his groundsheet

38:30 and his underpants and boots. And he started to tell us about Greece and the pleasant times they were having there and how they … their platoon commander, Speed Gordon, whom I revered, was mayor of the town at one stage. And they'd see this … they'd be up in the upper story of this two-storey house and a policeman would go by below, and they'd call out, cheerfully waving at him, "Mug copper." And he'd go, "Oh yes." They'd insult him like hell with smiles on their faces.

39:00 And somehow or other, that amused us. But Jim had that habit. He's a very quiet guy but a very pleasant fellow.

Tape 6

00:37 **Since it came up, let's start off with feelings about home, when you were up on Kokoda. Were there times when you felt home sick? Tell me about it?**

Oh yes, there were times that there was nothing I was prepared to do other than go home and

01:00 get a big hug from mother. Yeah, certainly felt that way. Felt I could almost … crawling back into the womb I suppose you'd say. And another case where I was damned hungry and I'd sacrificed a meal of lamb chops, I was on leave, after the Middle East this was. And I'd foregone this to take a girlfriend out and I suddenly … poor girl, I

01:30 started to resent her over that, because I was so damned hungry.

Is this in Sydney?

Oh no, it happened in the … it was in Sydney, yeah. Again, it was on the Eora Creek area that this feeling came over me. My mother would … occasionally you'd get a bit of mail and my mother would warn me, because I had a weak chest, to keep my feet dry.

02:00 And I was amused by this when you consider what was happening. I brought it up later as a joke and she said, "Yes, well I was very worried about you at the time and I was frightened, but I wasn't going to let you know that." That's why she said that, it's all she could do. Which was very typical of her in a way and it was also typical to be a little bit non compos.

02:30 **So did you often get … how often was the mail?**

Oh pretty rare until we got down to Sanananda. They had to rely on porters, etcetera to get in. Once you got aircraft backing us up it was better. You started to get things like The Bulletin then. I remember reading the back page of The Bulletin, that pink part, where the account they gave was

03:00 just a mock up or almost a repeat of our Rev. Sit., Revised Situation, of a week before. I thought, "Oh God, anyone reading this is going to find it as dull as hell." but it was deadly accurate. I was very impressed by The Bulletin over that, they weren't sensationalising it.

And what sort of … were there censorship restrictions in what you could write home?

03:30 Oh yes, they would have been censored somewhere along the line. But we didn't get much of an opportunity, in fact, I had to manufacture an envelope myself, on one occasion. You had very little in the way of writing material, it would get. So it was difficult until we got down again, on the flat.

What sort of things would you write about?

Just to reassure them that you were pretty well. I

04:00 probably only wrote two or three of these letters and they were about a page. And you didn't mention anything that was happening to you.

And how were the letters brought up and down the track?

They came to the platoon sergeant who distributed them, that's as much as we knew. They would have come by native porter, I suppose.

Can you tell me a little about the

04:30 **relations between your platoon and the native New Guineans?**

Well, we got to appreciate them very much because they were very skilful. You've just got to see them handling a stretcher around those slippery narrow tracks to realise how good they were. And they were gentle. They were lovely people. But good and all as they were the ones that I really

05:00 admired were at our final campaign where we had them as scouts. And dear, they were tremendous there. I was in the I Section at that stage and worked with them. And really got to appreciate them. They were great people, great, innocent lovely people.

Were there any individuals that you could tell me about?

Yeah. Again this was our second campaign, there was Otis

05:30 who was a cheeky boy. He wasn't one of mine but he was very enthusiastic and he used to race ahead to sniff out the Japs and come back. And you'd see him up the track pointing, waving beckoning . The guy I had the most to do with was Magra Heckless[?], he was a Wandecla mission boy and he was broad shouldered, eighteen years old with a lovely set of teeth. Just a

06:00 handsome lovely guy. And he didn't speak much English, we conversed mainly in … I didn't speak much pidgin either, but we managed to understand each other and we formed quite a bond. And then there was an occasion when there were two of there, he was the second native scout, and then I followed, navigating the patrol. It was the whole company, actually.

06:30 And he crossed a creek and I followed, and when I got to the other side, it was only ankle deep, the water, and there was a pit pit island in the middle, that's a cane type thing. I was fired on, I just had the sensation of the shot going across my chest, almost located. So I hit the ground and they're yelling for me,

07:00 "Can you see him Silas?" - they used to use my middle name, bugger them - and I said, "No." And then suddenly I spotted him and I went to bring up my rifle and there was a bough of pit pit between foresight and rear sight and I fired blindly. And saw him stagger, and they said, "Did you get him?" And I said, "I think I might have. Or he could have put his foot in a pot hole." Later on we picked up a blood trail, so I think I had got him. But Magra was so upset over that, that he hadn't sniffed

07:30 him out. I tried to reassure him, that everything was all right. And later on when we'd moved further up, I came upon him, at this stage we had other scouts, and he's carting kai in the boong line, as we called it. Carting the rations. I said, "Magra, what on earth's happened?" "Not my bush." he said. This was not his

08:00 bush, therefore he was no good to them. They can only operate in their own bush which they knew like the back of their hand. But I was so upset to see him fall to a position of an ordinary porter.

Tell me about "Not my bush." tell me what that means?

Yes. This isn't my area of operation, normally. To put it in precise military terms, I suppose.

You're saying it was another tribal

08:30 **area?**

Yeah. And when you moved on you took … we had an ANGAU [Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit], Warrant Officer John Godwin, who's well known in Canberra and in the army generally, a lovely guy John, a magnificent fellow. He later became, he became a major eventually. He was with the Occupation Forces and then in Korea after our campaign. And he used to allocate the native scouts

09:00 to us as well as patrolling with them on his own. They accounted for quite a lot of Japanese. We measured success in killing the poor buggers. There was another very intelligent guy, Marlos, island boy, who was known as Marlos, and he took a keen interest. We were never quite sure about Marlos, he seemed to be a little bit of a con man. I remember coming in from patrol, on one occasion,

09:30 and he asked me where I'd been. He spoke much better English. And I said, "Do you understand a map?" "Oh map, grande ." he said. So I laid the map out and showed him, "Oh, you killed three Japanese." I said, "Yes, news travels fast, doesn't it?" And then I thought, "My God, I don't know whether this is a breach of security giving him this information." but it wasn't really. But they were fascinating people.

Was there any fear

10:00 **that the natives may also be working for the Japanese?**

Yes, they did at times. But your own natives seemed to be able to identify that. But they couldn't betray, I suppose they'd give them a hard time if they ever caught up with them.

And were tribal conflicts still going on?

They weren't evident. I think they were too occupied, as we were, with the Japanese.

10:30 Didn't ever see any tribal conflict. Even the Sepik River boys, the head hunters, they were fine looking fellows.

But when Magra knew not to go into someone else's bush …

Oh no, he didn't understand the bush, he was no good as a guide. Oh no, he was living in that part of the area now, working as a porter. But his days of being scout were over because we'd moved out of his area, which he knew. He didn't know this area

11:00 and therefore he couldn't be helping us.

And so as intelligence officer?

I was an intelligence private

Oh, sorry, an intelligence private, involved in navigation, was your relationship with the native guides …?

11:30 A close one. Yes, I was responsible for interpreting and leading them astray. I had to go out with every patrol that they were on. Sometimes they were short patrols in the section and other times, platoon.

How heavily dependent were you on the native guides?

Well, we could have done without them, but we

12:00 wouldn't have done as well. They sniffed them out and led us to the enemy.

Was there ever any … how willing were they to help?

Oh, very willing, very willing, they were great.

Tell me a bit about their attitude to the Japanese?

Hated them. Yes, no doubt in my mind about that. Their feelings were very strong.

Did the

12:30 **natives ever attack the Japanese by themselves?**

I don't know. They certainly did enter … John Godwin, for instance, the late John. Something occurred to me then. Dear, what was it? See the trouble is that as soon as it's gone, my short term memory's had it. Oh yes, the natives,

13:00 did they ever attack? No, no, I've lost it, sorry.

That's okay. Did you have to learn pidgin?

Yeah, I was suppose to. I don't know how I managed to pick it up. You sort of picked it up somehow, but I didn't do any formal course in it.

Could you tell me what sort of phrases you would use to talk to one of the natives?

13:30 I can't remember much now, but, "Now look him here, you fellow boy, you go along that side of the mountain, you no do so and so, or you no stop." Or on one occasion, George Priest, he was also in the I Section, said to this boy, "Now you go along takem this fellow bag, you takem along etcetera, etcetera,

14:00 and then when you come you no leave him there, you bring him back." and so on and so forth. And the guide said, "Oh, you want the bags back." I don't know why they bothered to teach any of us pidgin. And I've forgotten just about all I knew. I can recite the Lord's Prayer . "God bless em this."kai kai you give bilong me.."Oh no. That's Grace.

\n[Verse follows]\n "Bilong Name, Bilong Father, Bilong Ghost Bilong Holy Spirit\n

14:30 Father bilong mipela\n

He stap long heaven\n All em saint he name bilong him\n Kingdom bilong yu i kam\n [UNCLEAR] him tok bilong him, bilong land and bilong heven\n Tude givim kai kai bilong day.\n

Take away something… that would bilong mipela."\n

Oh, I've forgotten it.

How was the natives' skill in English?

Some of them were

15:00 quite good, others not. That's still going on up there, I notice. They still use pidgin, and they write it in English now, the pidgin. Now supposem, supposem you smoke and then they'd tell you (UNCLEAR).

15:30 **Were any of the Australian troops intolerant of the natives?**

Well, no I don't think … this may sound wrong, but I think that those who had the dealings with them … I know John Godwin was very … respected them highly. But I vaguely

16:00 remember some guy … oh, "The natives were restless." this was in our last campaign. He used to give them the thumb a bit. Actually, I don't think our history of our treatment of them was very pretty really. I don't know if you've read … there's a book I've got behind me here, Tag along Master, that reveals the attitude. They were certainly looked down

16:30 on, and I don't think they were treated all that well. As in Ceylon where we fraternised with the natives, they'd get very anxious, it's supposed to be a security risk. I think the risk was, that we became so friendly that they would not like they're caste conscious, nice English masters, when the end came, and seek some freedom. This is

17:00 what really worried people. And I suppose that applied, also, to New Guinea. Again, I think we rushed through the independence too quickly. She's a bit of a mess at the moment, as we well know.

So you're saying that the authorities had a vested interest in not having you get too close to the locals?

I suspect that strongly, yes.

Can you just tell me what you think their reasons

17:30 **for that are?**

Well so that they … in case they became uncontrollable, I suppose. They may say "Well, I'm as good as you are, can't push us around anymore and pay us ten bob a month.

I think the interesting thing is, we've heard a lot about the bonds between, you know, the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, and the bonds what existed, obviously they did. But I was just wondering if there

18:00 **were also tensions?**

Oh, not at our level. No. No, we relied on them. Oh no, there's no doubt in my mind about that. We didn't see all that much of them because they came as far as the RAP, to pick people up. Picked up the wounded and took them back. Or sometimes, maybe they didn't even come that far. No, I don't think they even got as far as the RAP. They tended not to let them get in, right in to the frontline.

18:30 So they probably didn't even get beyond the MDS. So we had no … very little contact. On one occasion, I'd got dysentery, I didn't know what was wrong with me, I just felt sick and was feverish and I was straggling, I was left behind more or less to make my own way. And along the track came old Doc Vernon, who was legendary,

19:00 he was expatriate, a medico who looked after the natives, and he had two of them with him. And he saw my plight and got them to carry my gear. They each took a load, and they were so cheerful about it. But that's the only real contact I had with them, or that was the most real contact I had with them, apart from seeing them occasionally on the track. This is mainly when

19:30 we were in reserve. They came through out lines. See, our transport platoon acted as stretcher-bearers and as distributors of the food. They'd met up from the battalion area. So we didn't come, all that much, in contact with them. But what we saw of them, we liked.

And tell me, what sort of mood were they in?

Mood?

Yep.

Oh

20:00 they were pretty quiet or they could be enthusiastic and cheerful. I didn't ever strike … except for this time in the camp there, it was apparently getting a bit restless, and this guy, he may have been with ANGAU, I don't know, but he was contented to go and thump on them.

20:30 So, you do get a bit of that. These are just fragmentary impressions, I don't want to give you the wrong view either way. Paint it as all pure white or all pure black. They, as I say, they are just fragmentary impressions. I wasn't close enough or long enough, probably, to get a reliable

21:00 picture.

That's fine. I asked you about, perhaps something more direct in your experience, and it was just how you coped with the terrain. Was it a physical challenge?

Oh yeah. Oh well, you just had to go but it was very tough, very, very, tough. And you had a load … I mean, I had seventy five pounds on my back, at one stage,

21:30 in the early stages. And never less than about sixty. And it was really hard. I recall at Eora Creek … oh, once you made contact, you shed most of your load. You got down to … see, we didn't take packs over, we took haversacks. And we shed those whenever we entered a battle area. And you just had ghost cape and your basic pouches

22:00 with your ammunition and your food, in that order of priority, until you first became hungry and then you reversed the order. And where was I?

You were talking about shedding the load when you went into a battle area.

Oh yes. Oh, I know. At Eora Creek he had a mountain gun and a mortar. And we … I think our three

22:30 inch mortars, well a least one of them, I think, had blown up. We didn't seem to have much in the way of artillery. And he was pounding hell out of our battalion headquarters and we were pushed over on the right flank to try and find this mortar and do it over. We didn't succeed, but I remember it was almost perpendicular, this ridge we had to climb. And

23:00 one Donald the Duck, Donald Yeo, lovely guy, killed later tragically. It's all tragic, I suppose. He slipped and came down on me and I just managed to hang on to the root of a tree, and hold the pair of us there until he gathered his feet. He lost his water bottle, that's what he was after. But that's the sort of terrain it was. Very hard to get a grip on.

23:30 That wasn't all that common. That's about the worse I had struck, in that particular area. You wouldn't have attacked over it, I wouldn't think.

And what was the effect of the accumulation of days, of going through this terrain?

It was amazing what the human body can put up with, that always impressed me. Just what you took, what you had to stand.

24:00 Yeah.

Did it get easier?

Oh, it got easier down on the flat. Except that after Wairopi, they were … instead of having enormous ridges, they were small ones. It was undulating, up and down. And that was a bit damn tedious too. But at one stage there, I felt really exhausted, I thought "I can't go any further." I just lay at the side of the track and I thought "If a Nip comes in now, I'll just open my shirt and say,

24:30 fair in the heart mate, that'll do." That's how I felt. And suddenly there are shots ahead. We were a full platoon at that stage, and a great surge of adrenaline. I was up and on my way again. It's an amazing thing. Just that little bit of respite, I suppose, is all I needed.

Was there always a surge of adrenaline under fire?

That's the only time I was conscious of it. But I …

25:00 when you're not expecting it. Well I suppose you're always going to be expecting it. But at the first contact, when the first shots are fired, certainly, I think you get a surge of … a bit of anxiety at least. How can you know what's happened? And I was knocked up, nowhere near the forward scout when I heard this, on this particular occasion.

25:30 **Did you at any stage, did you ever feel a sort of the sympathy for the enemy who were also fighting this terrain?**

It's funny you should ask that. I mean, in retrospect, yes. No, we hated his guts. "It was too good for him." I thought. "Too bad for us, but too good for him." That was never expressed as such, but when I

26:00 look back, that was our attitude. And we just hated him. Feared him and hated him. But since then, oddly enough, I've had that feeling. And in fact, when I went back to battalion from the hospital, when I couldn't get on the plane, I think then I may have had the beginnings of that feeling. The poor buggers in there. And we shared the morning warm-up session. I was getting to that, I

26:30 don't know if that's a retrospective impression I've put upon myself. Or whether I did actually feel that at the time. Still don't know unconsciously or pretty consciously.

I was just wondering, can you tell me about … did your platoon ever take Japanese prisoners?

Oh let me think.

27:00 No, I don't know now … but we never actually sent one back, no. I don't recall ever, in either campaign.

So did they ever surrender?

Well, they'd be wounded and there were occasions when you were out in the hills, and this happened in both campaigns, I suppose,

27:30 and it was going to be a struggle to get them back, you had to probably stretcher them. So we engaged in a little euthanasia. Which I haven't felt very happy about since. But at the time, it didn't worry me in the least. The first time I ever saw it happen was in … just before we got to Eora Creek, coming up from between Templeton's Crossing and Eora, there was

28:00 this Jap lying on the road. He was fully dressed in what looked like a KD uniform and his helmet. And he was like a skeleton, he was just breathing, lying there completely exhausted. And we just passed him and then later on I heard that a sergeant from A Company, who was following us, had bayoneted him in the throat. Which probably wasn't very pretty.

28:30 And then … oh yeah, there was a company commander. When we passed this fellow who could have been a (UNCLEAR) but he was pretty weak, sitting at the side of the road scooping out water out of a dirty puddle. And when the company headquarters came upon

29:00 him, the company commander told someone to dispose of him. And nobody seemed to be inclined to and he pulled out his pistol and fired a couple of shots. And missed the first two tries and then he got him. We heard the shot, but that's as much as we knew, I didn't actually witness that. Then in our last campaign, there were a couple of occasions under the same circumstances where it was going to be

29:30 a bit of a drag on us. We were out on a three-day patrol, it was going to take us the best part of a day to get back, and carrying a wounded was not good. And so I'd say all told there were about four and at the most five, I may have forgotten one, episodes that I remember.

What were the Japanese like when you captured them, were they defiant?

30:00 Yeah, mostly they were. Oh yes, I remember one guy that, Billy Carmichael our CQMS [Company Quartermaster-Sergeant], you could hear him yelling, "Get up, get up." And this chap was being very stubborn, wouldn't get up. But others were very docile. You never knew whether they were Japanese, Korean or from Asia. There was one being led round

30:30 by a … and I was doing freemasonry on the end of a cable tow, he had this rope around his neck. They were just towing him around. Not tugging him but he was just following docilely. So it depended on the guy.

And when a Japanese was captured, how was the Australians' attitude towards them?

Oh, didn't like them.

Was it an angry

31:00 **sort of ..?**

Yeah. Yes, it was really. So, it wasn't very difficult to dispose of them. We just had a set idea about them.

Was that a predetermined …?

It wasn't policy. They were only concerned behind, at getting prisoners to interrogate. So it was certainly not our policy, but it was a matter of expediency if you were in the front. You had the dealings with them.

And

31:30 **afterwards, what sort of things would be reported?**

Oh, you just killed a Japanese, that's all. I had the reporting to do in many cases, of course. Or on the odd occasion.

So what would you write on the report?

Oh tell them how many we killed and how many got out. Just what the casualties were. It was never questioned, they had no reason to. They may know a week later what happened but nobody ever interrogated us.

32:00 **Tell me, you said that later, years later, that you did sort of manage to feel … can you tell me how that process developed?**

Well I suppose it started round about mid sixties, when the RSL [Returned and Services League] Federal President was beating the drum. He was a World War I guy

32:30 and like so many of those RSL fellows, he liked … he was a bit chauvinistic, and he was bellowing about the Japanese coming out here to trade with. This was when they were starting to establish trade relationships with the Japanese. And I was pretty disgusted with that. I started to think then, I think, about … well for a start, these guys were not necessarily in the frontline, or in the army.

33:00 And they didn't commit atrocities. And then I read a Time Life account of the conventional bombing of Tokyo, Yokohama, etcetera, and that was pretty horrendous. And there was a description of a little girl who was about seven or eight, whose father had been killed in the South West Pacific area, and now her mother was killed by a bomb.

33:30 When I read that, I wondered, you know, it would be a remarkable thing if I killed that young fellow's and girl's family. I wouldn't know anyway. But who else have I offed, that's the thing. So even though you do it legitimately, it starts to catch up with you after a while.

34:00 I read then, The Pacific War, I think it's called, it's up there in the shelves. It's written by a professor of sociology, something like that, Japanese. And he speaks about how conditions were at home and how severe it was for the civilian population. He doesn't condone the Bushido cult at all, but he gives a good account.

34:30 And I was starting to feel a bit funny after that. Then we went to Japan for a trip in 1978, after a conference in Singapore. And our guide there was a tremendous fellow, most delightful guy. And the people were so lovely. And bit by bit it started to catch up with me, and there were things that I don't like to think about now.

Did it ever fall to you to have to

35:00 **shoot a Japanese captive?**

Japanese Captain?

Captive?

Captive. Well suppose you could say that the … I only ever did it once, I think, might be twice. These were wounded, you couldn't burden yourself with them. But they were pretty sick anyway. I don't know whether they were badly wounded or whatever. So it wasn't all that cold-blooded.

35:30 At the same time, I had no great qualms about it. I do now.

What was it … fighting in the jungle, what were the things that you feared most?

Being shot up. Having to face fire that's coming at you. I think that's the thing I feared

36:00 most.

Tell me, how did the anticipation of it, was that worse than it actually is?

Yeah, I think it was. I think it was, yes. Trying to sleep the night before, etcetera. Yeah, once it starts, of course, it's different. Yes, but certainly the anticipation's worse. It was different sets of circumstances. Sometimes when you're

36:30 pinned down, you know if you move you're going to be hit. You're in this continual state of anxiety. But on the whole, yeah, once you're committed and you've got good blokes around you, you're already committed, I suppose.

And how did you cope with the … was the possibility of your own mortality, death, was that on your mind?

Yeah.

37:00 Oh yes. God yes. Like poor Frank Shields, who more or less wrote his own ticket. And that was … and that shouldn't have happened, I don't think. I was never placed in quite that situation. But yeah, when you're asked to attack it's … you've got to think about that and hope.

Some

37:30 **veterans we've spoken to have said that they felt … after they'd had a few lucky breaks and they began to feel indestructible. Did you …?**

Well, I suppose there was a bit of that in it, yeah. Yes, I know I had two or three very narrow shaves. And after that … oh, they took away my rifle and gave me an

38:00 Owen gun then. Thought "I was getting into too much trouble." And I did feel a bit of that there. This was in our second campaign and the attitude was so different there. We were well fed, well organised and it wasn't as nearly as heavy, and the terrain was easier. So that it wasn't … just the same background. But yeah, yes, I don't know that I ever felt invincible, I was still

38:30 apprehensive. I certainly didn't feel the fear that I'd felt before. I felt, certainly, more in control.

But was there any soldiers that sort of gave up, thought they were …?

Oh yes. There were fellows that pissed off.

Were they ones that were convinced that they were going to die?

I don't know what their thoughts were, really. But we saw them as pretty weak links.

39:00 Their nerves cracked. This brings up another issue, that I believe they should be cut out of the frontline, those fellows, you don't need them, they're a menace. And the army, the American Army, feels that's the wrong thing to do. "They'll get a chronic neurosis if you don't send them back to battle. That's the way to cure it, send them back." And they've even … they've

39:30 got some way of proving this is so. That they've sent people back and they do well, etcetera. It's a load of crap of course. But that gets other people quite enthusiastic. They call it the Immediacy Proximity Expectancy, IPE. Then it became the Proximity Immediacy Expectancy Simplicity - PIES.

And just quickly

40:00 **because we're nearly at the end of this tape. From your personal experience, could you …**

what's your impression of that?

I think it's a load of crap. I think it's dangerous. And I've written about this and I've had occasion, with the Americans. I think their attitude has changed a little. But if you look at the comparison of the two troops on the ground, two types of army, it was our policy, but it was rarely followed by local commanders.

40:30 And when it did, it could be disastrous. So no, I didn't agree with it at all.

Tape 7

00:46 **Okay Griff, just going on from the topic we were approaching. Yesterday, you mentioned that the commanding officer that was evacuated with neurosis. Can you**

01:00 **tell me that story?**

Well, I don't know where to start. He was a most unpopular man to many of the troops. He was arrogant. Anyway, one thing he did when we got to Ceylon, we were all pretty out of condition after quite a few days on the boat, and we were put on a route march in the tropics, we'd been in Syria in the snow, previously, and very little time in Palestine

01:30 on the way through. And of course, troops were dropping out and he arrived in a car and harangued us. But we managed to get fit. When it came to walking over the hills, he was cracked up. But they managed to get him there with the aid of two natives that really belonged at the RAP, carrying his gear. And that area, I was telling, where they were shelling with a mountain gun and mortaring, a four-inch mortar, and we were sent round to knock out.

02:00 Oh, every time we'd pass through battalion headquarters he seemed to stir up the Nip, he'd lob a few more over and see this guy, this commander, a colonel, you could see the whites of his eyes, permanently it seemed. He was really not in possession. He was not commanding. And eventually

02:30 it was alleged a piece of shrapnel hit him, I suppose it did, in the ear, put a scratch in it. And I remember he had a, what looked like a Friars Balsam dressing on it. And when things became too hot it became too painful for him and he had to be evacuated. So he called Hutchison, our company commander up, and handed over command to him. And he's demanded six, this is the story, he demanded six Tommy gunners to escort him back.

03:00 And of course, that would have been depriving the troops of … well, it's obvious, isn't it? And Hutch said, "No sir, I'm in command now, I'll give you two Tommy gunners." That was the first issue. And then when Captain O'Connelly, the MO of the … our MO had been hit and evacuated by one of these shells, or

03:30 the products of it. And the MO who was evacuating this colonel fellow, with his septic gun shot wounds, as he claimed. The Orderly Room sergeant, Johnny Carmen said, "What are you evacuating the CO with sir?" And he said, "Oh, neurosis." So Carmen dutifully wrote down "Neurosis." And Hutch, then the CO, he signed it without looking

04:00 and back it went. Well, when it hit the back area, that's when the pineapple hit the fan. And when Stevo, when things got quiet, Stevo eventually came up, right towards the end, flew up and took command of the battalion. And he gave Hutch the rounds of the kitchen about this neurosis business. And he said, "Well sir, I'm afraid I signed it without looking at it, but if I'd known what I was signing, I

04:30 would have done it all the same." said Hutch. So he was banished, way around on the left flank. Thank God I wasn't in his company at that time. We only had two companies. I'd been cannibalised into Lenny Herwick, who was a lovely guy, his company. And Hutch was stuck around in the most dangerous position on the front. But he weathered it all right.

As a runner you would have had more to do with officers than …?

Oh,

05:00 not really, I was only platoon, platoon back to captain, oh, back to company. Company runner took over then. And as soon as we started to break up and be reformed, because the numbers depleted, I was no longer a runner. There was no really, hardly any call for runners from then on, not a specific one.

Why was that?

Well, we just … it was a static position. And anyone could take a message back if it was necessary.

05:30 Also the land line was working.

Could you tell me about some of the problems that a runner faced?

I suppose getting the message wrong.

Were the messages ever confusing, the way …?

Not really, not really.

What sort of messages would you relay?

Oh, well, you'd be telling them "What was going on." If you went back to company headquarters, as on

06:00 one occasion I described, yesterday I think, Friday. When, this is at the junction of Soputa Track and the Sanananda Track, rather the Kokoda Track and the Sanananda Track, when there was this determined Japanese position. And our platoon was pushed around on the left flank to attack through a kunai patch. And we had to put in the attack, and 18th Platoon, I think, was

06:30 pinned down in front, 17 I suppose, in reserve. But, I think we were the only ones that were going to attack on that occasion. Anyhow, our platoon commander, Willy, that was his nick name because Japs can't pronounce their L's. I don't know why he bothered, because he was never near enough to worry him. And he would send me back with a message

07:00 like, "There's some sig. wire." we'd found a track. And I'd go back, and as I went back the Nips had opened up near the 18th Platoon fellows, and they give me a blast for drawing the Japs. So I'd get back to Walker and I'd tell him, "There's a track there, sir." "Yes, yes, well tell Mr Walker to attack, sir." I'd come back, "He says to attack." "Tell him there's some sig. wire on the track." So I'd go back and tell him, "There's some sig. wire on the track." "Yes, tell him to attack." "Yes sir." "Go back. There's a dead Australian on the track." That's

07:30 something I'd like to talk about in a minute too. "And there's a dead Australian on the track." "Yes, well tell him to attack." And so it went on. That sort of thing. And eventually night fell, thank God. So it really was going to be a bit of suicide for us to attack across that thing anyway. Although we haven't held this platoon commander in the highest regard,

08:00 I think he did save a few of us with that delaying tactic. They gave us a platoon the next morning, we sullied through and found he'd gone, thank God. So we lived to die another day, and the Japs lived to kill a few more of our troops. So he got out of it, but you hadn't done your job. But that Australian. Yes, more recently I've started to think about that.

08:30 I don't know where he came from, whether it was a commando unit or one of the 25th Brigade or who. Because we were the forward platoon on the Sanananda track and how he came to be there, I still don't know, and how he came to be left there. And I don't know what happened to him after that after we went through. Somebody from behind would have taken his dead man … his identity discs and sent one back and buried

09:00 him. But that's rather, there are a few of these mysteries that I took at the time as nothing, now I begin to wonder.

Did you see him?

Oh yes.

What happened to him?

He'd been shot, I don't know where, but he'd obviously been shot and was lying on his back, stretched out. He was quite a big guy, a big handsome fellow. It was when I was having a sneak look at him that I got another one across his bows, and

09:30 they yelled out to me, "Silas, are you firing?" I said, "No, some bastard's firing at me." And they seemed to think that was funny, the platoon. I didn't think it was at all funny.

Was that one of your lucky escapes?

Yeah, that was one of them.

Can you tell me about another one?

Oh, the one at Magra Heckless and there was a time, this was when I was "I" man, and we were in a creek bed, there was a creek junction.

10:00 I was just checking to make sure … I had my rifle over my shoulder … checking to make sure where we were and somehow or other I was out in front, we didn't have any native scouts at that stage, either. And somebody said, "Look out soldier." And I look over there and there was this Nip. He was leaning against the tree as casually as you like with his rifle. And as soon as I saw him, he must have been watching me, it was almost broad daylight,

10:30 how I hadn't seen him earlier, I damned if I know. But he came charging down and I just hit the deck and got my rifle up and we fired a few shots at each other and missed in our heat. And a Bren gunner came around the corner and he looked at him and said, "Wooo." and took off. And he got away. Good luck to him, I think now. I was a bit disappointed at the time.

11:00 **Now, I wanted to ask you about … it's gone out of my head.**

I have that trouble.

You have that trouble too, yes. What was I going to say? You said when you arrived in New Guinea for the first time, you were bombed?

Oh yes. When we got to … we got on these trucks driven by the Yanks and got out near the aerodrome,

11:30 and there was a barracks there. I suppose it's Murray barracks. And there was a … the Japanese used to raid at night there frequently. And they'd dropped their eggs, and we were sitting up in the truck innocently. And the driver had "Taken a powder." as the Americans say. Take a powder and gone into the bush. When it was all over he came back and drove on.

And

12:00 **that was your first time that you had come under fire in New Guinea?**

Yeah, I suppose it was really, yes. Oh, I'd been in an English Hospital on the canal at Cheerford and that was occasionally raided. Down the canal, not the hospital but the canal itself. And we had to get into slit trenches there.

Do you remember the effect of being first under fire, had on you?

12:30 I suppose I was brought into it a little gradually, in that we were behind the 2/2nd Battalion and the 3rd Militia, they were part of 25th Brigade at Templeton's Crossing, and there was a hell of a din. And one of the wounded came back through our lines, he looked ghastly. He had this great field

13:00 dressing on his chest and all he could say was, "Their mortar is deadly." Which was very reassuring because they were lobbing into most of us at this stage. And I suppose that was the … although we weren't right in contact, we were certainly close enough to hear the din. And after that, we took the lead … no A Company took the lead first, that's where Garney …

13:30 Lance …no Dave Forlance was killed. Somebody was wounded, Pross Pritzler (UNCLEAR) and then we took the lead after that. And I was, at that stage, beginning to accept the fact, I guess. You get fired on by a small parties, and usually they seemed to miss, thank God. I don't know whether they were firing prematurely. They didn't always miss, unfortunately.

14:00 And then we got to Eora Creek. It's hard to remember what I felt, except I know I felt bloody scared. Yes, it's hard to recall one's reactions, easy to make them up, except you know you're bloody well scared when you're scared. You try to hide it.

Was hiding it important?

Oh yeah. I thought so. Wanted to get a name for being

14:30 calm, cool, really cool.

How important was it, that reputation, amongst the platoon?

Well it's your own feelings. Some fellows didn't seem to think much one way or the other. I think Frank Shields was that way. He was pretty frank, he was a bloody good soldier. But I guess, I've always been small, weedy, so it was important for

15:00 me to be a bit macho. Not so much macho but at least cool.

Were there some soldiers whose reputations were poor?

Oh yeah, yes. There's some that you, that still managed to stay there. Well, I wouldn't say their reputations are poor, but you realise. There was one little guy, Charlie Turtin he was a delightful

15:30 fellow. But he was so morbid about everything . Oh God. If you wanted cheering up, you wouldn't go to Charlie. But he was so lovely if you went and talked to somebody after him, I suppose, the contrast would be so great. But I can still remember him at Eora Creek, this little guy had been through the lot, through Bardia, Greece and Syria. And I can still see him in the attack there. He was about … well even smaller than I was, shorter than I was. He's got his rifle and he's going in. I

16:00 don't know whether he fired it or not. But he was there, he was doing it. I knew what his feelings were. I thought, you know, "You've got a ton of guts showing Charlie, really."

Were there any soldiers that were sort of sneered at or picked on by the other soldiers?

Not really, no. They usually managed to disappear one way or another, if they were not suited,

16:30 they weren't measuring up.

How well … if somebody wasn't measuring up, were they tolerant, or were they …?

Yeah, they tended to tolerate them unless they shot their mouth off. And some of them did. Like Pissol,

he was known as. And he … I first met him in Palestine when he was sergeant of the guard, and I was trying to get me four hours sleep in, two hours on four off,

17:00 and this voice was droning on telling everyone that was prepared to listen how it was in the western desert. It turns out, he managed to escape every bloody campaign that was going. He used to, he was a pathology technician. “But it was Colonel England and I, and so and so and I, and of course I’m just … etcetera, etcetera.” He was a sergeant at that stage, too I might had. But when the Owen Stanleys were on, he came down to see us off on the train at Central Station.

17:30 It was amazing “Oh, I’d love to be with you boys, but the old knee’s gone again.” I caught up with him much later, when they came in for assessment. And I said, “Mr Anderson, did you have a nickname in the platoon?” And he looked at me and he says, “Yes.”

This section of transcript is embargoed until 1 January 2034.

18:02 **Tell me about the relationship between the militia and the AIF?**

Well, when I was in the militia, the AIF looked down on us, when I was in the AIF, we looked down on the militia. And in fact, in Campbelltown, there’d be fights between … the militia … the AIF would pick on the militia. And I don’t know who started the fight on this occasion, I wasn’t there, but I had to accompany … don’t know why they needed an escort,

18:30 I had to accompany one of the victims. And he was from our company, and also aboard was a fellow who was going over to the 2/1st Ack-Ack Regiment. I think they were being formed then, this was 1940, it would have been, yeah. And he said, “Oh, my wife’s going to get a laugh when I tell her that I’ve had a couple of chocos [chocolate soldiers]

19:00 escorting me here.” He’d done his ankle or something. Escorting him to the thing. But I would have like to have caught up with him later, because the 2/1st Ack Ack really didn’t see anything worth speaking of.

What did you think of the AIF when you were in the militia?

Oh, I just wanted to get into it.

But was that a common feeling?

Yeah. Well, yes. Well those who wanted to get into it, got into it.

But what I don’t

19:30 **understand is, if so many militia men wanted to be in the AIF, yet they were simultaneously deriding it.**

Oh no, no. I think they probably didn’t want to be in it, once you were deriding it. I certainly wasn’t deriding it.

What was behind their sentiment?

What, for deriding the AIF? Oh, I suppose they were excusing themselves, giving an explanation why they wouldn’t join, or something, I don’t know.

20:00 **Tell me about when you did join the AIF, did you … what sentiments towards the militia did you encounter then?**

Well, no choccos. And, let me think

What’s the implications of being called a chocco?

Oh, that you’re gutless. Chocolate soldier. And this is the feeling now. The

20:30 39th Battalion and the 3rd Militia Battalion did a lot to expel that notion. And they were highly respected. And after the Owen Stanleys up in the Tablelands, there were a lot of amalgamations. We amalgamated with the 3rd Militia Battalion. And others, other units were broken up. Some of the militia battalions were maintained, their identity. But again, it was

21:00 probably a pretty unreasonable attitude, except that in 1995, we went back to the Aitape-Wewak area, or the Wewak area rather. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the thing. And there was a group from a

militia battalion who had got Dick Smith to sponsor them, pay the way. There was one terrible loudmouth amongst them, who claimed that we was like a Smith's Weekly

21:30 soldier, playing the old digger, criticising everything. It turns out that he left Madang, that's as far as he got. And they hadn't seen any Japanese at that stage anyway, and in fact all they saw was a group that we left behind at Brandy plantation. I doubt if they suffered much in the way of casualties. But there they were, trying to establish themselves, I think.

22:00 And they were very annoying, we didn't like them at all.

Was there … did the militia really have to prove themselves in New Guinea?

Well, they did.

Yeah, they did, but was there …?

What was the feeling amongst them?

Yeah, I'm just wondering what the AIF were thinking of … were they contemptuous of the militia in New Guinea, up to a point?

I would think not, because the militia, the 39th Battalion

22:30 was the first to greet the Japanese. And they greeted him at Kokoda and pulled back to Isurava. And that's a beautiful place to hold a position. It's high features on either side, and this little neck of thing and then a gorge down below. And it would have been very difficult for the Japs. But they came in large numbers, and the 39th and the 2/14th Battalion, AIF, together, held him up.

23:00 Although they were gradually outnumbered. Managed to hold him up for long enough, I think, to … well I think they really are the ones that saved Port Moresby. Because he got very close and those two or three days he was held up there, I think, made all the difference. So at that stage, we knew about the 3rd Battalion and the 39th, we also knew about the 55th, 53rd, who were not held in

23:30 great esteem, as you're probably aware. In fact, they were given the job back in the wharves, to keep them out of trouble. And then they came into our front and put up a pretty miserable show putting in an attack through our line. And I think they were probably the strong fit young men who managed to get all the seats on the plane at Popendetta. So it was mixed. You identified who was good and who wasn't, I think,

24:00 that's what it amounted to. And again, it comes back to training and leadership. And Ralph Honer commanded the 39th and he was an ex-AIF man. As were many of their officers.

Do you feel you were trained adequately for New Guinea?

Oh, yeah. Well, you couldn't be trained perfectly because you could only get that in the area itself. But we were trained as well as we possibly could.

24:30 Yeah. See, there isn't a great deal you can learn. The thing you got to be able to use is your weapon. Have to be able to understand it and use it, as though it was second nature. And with the rifle, for instance, I remember, many years later in Canowindra. I went out to one of the properties there and this guy at a .303 and I just picked it up and worked the bolt action, did everything with my eyes shut, more or less.

25:00 It never left me. And that's how you were trained. So that particular weapon you really got to know.

Do you remember your feelings about the militia, at the time? You gave me a general picture, I was just interested in your personal feelings.

Well, I don't think I thought too much … I wasn't terribly keen on some of the people in the 45th Battalion that I had left. Others were good mates, liked them a lot.

Did you ever think of them

25:30 **as choccos?**

Not really, no. I'd been a chocco myself. Or did I? Maybe I did, I don't know. Maybe that was the thing to do, just call them "Choccos." or "Chocco bastards."

Was there an element of humour in it?

Oh yeah. A bit of rivalry.

Another, actually, another impression that I wanted to ask you about was the Vichy French. You mentioned …

Well, I didn't confront them, but those who did

26:00 wouldn't trust them. Oh, the Vichy?

Yeah.

Oh no, no, they were non persona gratis. No, it was the Free French they didn't trust.

Oh I'm sorry. Tell me about that?

That's all right. Well they operated under the Double Cross of Lorraine, significantly. But no, they felt they couldn't be trusted, the troops.

Why's that?

I don't know. I don't know exactly what happened. Somehow or other, they were very sensitive about the

26:30 troops you could rely on. That's why we didn't like the Americans at some stages, but when they got amongst us, were split up and got amongst us, we got quite fond of them.

Tell me, did you have much to do with the Free French?

No. I missed the camp … I'd joined after the campaign was over, wisely. So I only knew what the fellows said about them. When I got there the campaign was well over. It had been over six months or more.

27:00 **Okay, now after you were pulled out of New Guinea, and you went back to Australia for quite some time.**

Yeah, two years.

Can you tell be about what they felt like? To be back for that length of time?

Well, the first thing, we were pretty sick when we got back. And

27:30 we knew we had to do our evasion training, we were going to be used again. And our MO, Lyn Joseph, who's still in general practice out at Maroubra incidentally. He did a survey of the battalion and put in a report that made it impossible for them to ignore. And I don't know whether he actually got the battalion classed B, but he certainly said "We weren't fit enough." Although we had been reinforced. We weren't up to full strength either. And so nine months

28:00 went by and then the opportunity went by as well, apparently. I think they used 9th Division. They did Finschafen in Lae. And we were then sitting on our backsides for what amounted to be a full two years.

What did you want to be doing?

Oh, sitting on my backside for two years. No, I suppose we were a

28:30 bit keen, in the end, to get into New Guinea. When it came we were quite happy to go off again. We were pretty well fed and fit, fit as Mallee bulls. A lot of the troops, the boredom got to them and they'd shoot through. Go down to Sydney. They were some of our best soldiers. And they'd come back or be picked up and brought back and punished sometimes.

In hindsight, what do you think of that wait, was it wise

29:00 **to hold you back for two years?**

Well it depended on the tactical or the strategic situation, whether they had use for us. In fact, the feeling is, that it was just to appease us, appease the government, that we did the last campaign. The feeling was that it was unnecessary. I don't agree with that really. I think we had to get rid of those Japs that were there. They still had a lot of fight in them. And the Americans were moving on, you couldn't leave

29:30 a vacuum. That would have played merry hell with the natives as they were coming down. I mean, they're so fanatical. So it had to be done. Where was it? What did I start out to answer?

Well, we were talking about you being kept back in Australia. And you moved on to talk about the final campaigns in the Pacific after that. And that's quite an interesting point, because

30:00 **there is that perspective by historians of "The unnecessary war." And I'd be interested in what you think about that.**

Yeah, well, it was certainly more necessary than Vietnam. I felt it was necessary, I didn't think we were wasting time. I felt the way they conducted it was a bit stupid, initially. We had barriers beyond which we would not go, we weren't allowed to go, initially. And you could, you might have to cross that barrier

30:30 and you'd take a position, then you had to pull back and give it back to him. It was crazy. But then there was great objection to that, and I think Doctor Stevens, our general, was very vocal about that. So they lifted the ban and gave us free reign we could do what we liked. That's why I'm interested in Shedden, see just what was behind all that. He was Secretary of Defence, I've just started his biography.

Right, well look,

31:00 **just asking you from the perspective of when you were in the war, what were … did the**

Australian troops, what were their opinions of MacArthur?

Oh, he stank, couldn't stand the bastard. Have you read … and what we felt about him was justified. He doctored the information. He described our attack at Eora Creek, where we killed sixty nine Japanese that we know of,

31:30 accounted, wounded many more. Two companies did that, two depleted companies. And he just said that "The Australians were unable to …" I forget how he put it. "We'd been unable to take the position and then the Japanese did a planned withdraw." It was crap. And that's the sort of thing. He didn't like to give us any credit at all.

Was that known at the time?

That

32:00 these communications were coming out of his headquarters? No, we didn't know.

So on what did the Australian troops base their dislike of MacArthur during the war?

Well one thing he did, he came up through our lines to Owers Corner and made the pronouncement that he hoped we wouldn't … I can't remember what his exact words were … "We wouldn't shoot through or we wouldn't desert the way

32:30 some of our comrades had." And one of our A Company guys said, "You keep your bastard out of the way and we might have a chance." But he was seen as arrogant. I think we picked him, all right.

And how about Blamey?

Yeah, mixed feelings about Blamey. A lot of the troops, and I'm one of them, had a lot of respect for Blamey. He was a very good general. And he really had the troops' feelings at heart. I think Norman Carlyle, who was a civilian,

33:00 he relied on a lot for advice. I think he made him an honorary captain or something. He's written Blamey Warts and All, I don't know if you've read that biography. I think he gives a fair picture. Old Tom was very much against the Greek … the Australians going into Greece. He knew what was going to happened. But we had to go, they had to go.

You encountered Blamey at one point, didn't you, personally?

Yeah, well not … I was

33:30 about from me to Simon [interviewer] away from him. When he addressed us after the Owen Stanleys, and said, "I come to you with the thanks of a nation for what you have done during the First World War and" … or something like that, some crap like that. It was nice crap. "I bring to you the thanks of a nation" … that really gets you, gets you fair in the guts, those words. "I bring to you the thanks of a nation." When you think "Your nation's thanked you." you think "You're pretty good."

34:00 **And do you feel that the nation has thanked you?**

Oh yeah, God yes. More than enough. And we've exploited it up to the hilt. God yes. We're having a problem at the moment. Got a few of those jingoistic people here. And they're insisting on reciting the ode at every damn tin pot dinner we have. And I think it's … they're wanting to be heroes still. I don't think any of them saw an angry hour, either.

34:30 **Well, what do you think a hero is?**

A fellow who's dead scared who stays in nevertheless. And is prepared to … well I think we're all placed in a certain situation, we have to do our job and that's it. Anyone can be doing it. It's about time, after all these many years, that we're integrated back into society. This elite business,

35:00 standing out, is absurd.

What elite are you talking about?

Oh, well I can't knock the Anzac Day march, I suppose, that's quite a spectacle. But just reciting the ode for a start. The dead, I'm sure, Frank Shields I'm sure would say "It's a bloody romance." I would too, wouldn't want it. But it's the … it's being perpetuated by the troops who

35:30 don't want … what they don't want you to forget is we were being heroes. We are an elite group.

Could I just back track a bit? When you went into New Guinea, that was after Milne Bay or around the same time?

Well, yeah. It was about the same time when we landed there. Oh, Milne Bay was the first reversal. I'm not sure that Guadalcanal didn't really

36:00 have that honour, but never mind. It's given the honour of being the first reversal, the first time he'd been …

I just wondered if the Milne Bay victory had an impact on you because it happened so near to your arrival?

Yes, yes. We were very happy that it happened. That did … that was a bit of a morale booster. We knew that he'd been belted. Any success we heard of was great.

Was it a surprise?

36:30 No, I don't know. Well, I don't know really, can't remember. I think we thought "We should have it." At that stage, he must have been pretty close to within our reach. It wasn't long after that he was held up by the 25th Brigade. And then pulled back of his own accord.

Was there a point that it was generally

37:00 **felt by the troops, by your fellows, that they Japanese were on the run or facing defeat?**

Oh, well, yeah. But that was … oh I suppose that was towards the end of our campaign that we thought "That might be the case." But we realised there was still a hell of a lot of hard fighting to be done. Yes, certainly we felt … once

37:30 after Eora Creek, I think, we had that feeling.

And what was the fighting like at the beginning as compared to the end, near the end? Did you notice the Japanese will change?

No, they still seemed to shoot at us. We were a bit different, perhaps. We were pretty knocked out physically and sick. So was he. I suppose both sides were inclined to

38:00 slow down.

When you encountered Japanese of those few occasions, were you ever … was there a physical conditioning banner …?

Oh yeah.

Tell me about what they were like, what kind of shape they were in?

Well, they just looked poor, malnourished, they had swollen ankles, a lot of them. They just looked crook,

38:30 exhausted, weak. That was the ones that were usually stragglers and left behind. Others, like the guy that came upon me by surprise, he looked fit enough. He looked thin. Some of them looked all right.

Rumours that some of the Japanese were reduced to cannibalism, did you encounter any evidence of that?

39:00 Yes. I didn't personally see it, but I believe it happened all right, in the Owen Stanleys, I think that's true. And certainly, although I didn't actually with my own eyes see this either, I know of people, troops, two of our fellows out of a 16th Platoon whom they carved great hunks off the buttocks. That was reported officially. They were starving.

39:30 Oh yeah, it happened all right.

Were they ones that had killed or been captured?

Oh yes, they were two of our killed. They also, I understand, and I think this came out of the War Crimes trials that were conducted up in Wewak after the war, they were in that area. But they had killed Indians deliberately.

40:00 In fact, we had one Lieutenant Gin Sing, lovely guy, who was a … he had a Viceroy Commission, and he was the witness of one of these atrocities. And he was asked, he'd picked up some of our language. One Brucey Ring, the Brigade Warrant officer, Ordnance,

40:30 who was with our brigade, he'd say, "When you going to today Bruce?" "Oh I'm going down to the frog and toad [rhyming slang: road] for a piffle and pork [rhyming slang: gawk]. The toad, the pork, you are hungry?" And so on. And when he got into the witness box, the defence said, "Did you actually know this Indian that was eaten?" "Oh yes." he said, "he was one of my Chinas [plates - mates]."

Tape 8

00:37 **Griffin, I like to move on now to Vietnam if I can? And I'm very interested in your impressions of … they both involved a lot of jungle fighting. I'd be very interested in your impressions of the similarities and differences?**

I only ever penetrated the jungle there once. Flew

01:00 on a resupply mission. And there was supposed to be somebody in there that needed attention, it turned out to be not so. And it looked to me to be quite a bit thicker than the jungle that I'd been used to. It was more tropical anyway. It was down … it was flat, nearer sea level. What was it you asked me again?

Just what the differences were there in jungle fighting …?

Oh,

01:30 I think they just refined what we'd … passing on, what we'd learned. I was .. I had nothing to do with the infantry after World War II, so I don't really know.

I guess I'm thinking more along the lines of the reaction of the troops to that style of fighting?

They took to it quite well, from what I could gather.

02:00 In fact they became … I think they were much more professional than we were. I think, one thing I noticed, now this maybe an impression only, but the feeling I got was that when we were stuck in an ambush, we were inclined to get pinned down, go to ground. They'd been taught, and I think they probably carried it out, that they hit back immediately. And that, in the long run, is probably the wisest thing to do.

What do you mean by

02:30 **"Hit back immediately"?**

As soon as they … the … they opened their automatics and just blasted away at the enemy.

You mean you stand, you don't hit the ground?

Oh, that's right, yeah. There was a film made of this, it was a phoney thing of course, it was a training film. But that's what it was demonstrated. And it looked highly professional, and I have a feeling that maybe, I don't know really, that's the trouble, I don't

03:00 know, but it's just an impression I get. Incidentally, I didn't mention the ambush where my life was actually saved by Bill Weir, the lieutenant.

Yes, I wanted to ask you about Bill Weir, so perhaps tell me that story now? Was that at Wewak?

Yeah, it was in that campaign. It was in the hills behind, where was it? Oh, it doesn't matter anyway. Yes, beyond Dagua.

03:30 And the first four of us were cut off by this mob that were above us on this bit of a hill. There was a cliff, like so, it would have been about ten or fifteen feet high, I suppose. And opposite was this bit of sand and a bit of water in between. Anyway, we were just sitting there, we couldn't move, either way we would have copped it.

04:00 And the company commander pushed one company up to try and get above him. They didn't seem to manage. And another company was put around the other flank, they didn't seem to manage. I was getting quite anxious at this stage. And then he said to Weir, "Take him across from there Bill." So Bill was the first to cross with his platoon following. Red Gun was the next to cross. And I could see him, I'm sitting with my back up against this war waiting for the grenades

04:30 to descend on us. I was looking at Bill and I could see his black eyes flashing. He was pumping them up, he had a rifle, and he's pumping shot after shot and blazing away and yelling out that he's not … well at the Japs, just yelling. These men then came up and put in a burst and they got rid of them. And that was … there's no doubt in my mind … well, if we'd stayed there till nightfall maybe it wouldn't have been necessary, I don't know. But I

05:00 give him credit for me being here. There was probably a fifty fifty chance I may have got off. So I get up to Vietnam and I'm the only major, a psychiatrist, and he's the task force commander, I was looking very much forward to seeing him. But he gave me the cold shoulder, I couldn't work it out. To cut a long story short. He thought I'd been sent up there to spy on him. Well in a way he was

05:30 paranoid, because when I got over there, the CO of our battalion, a man called "Cowboy Bill" in Saigon, came to me and he said, "We want you to go up to Task Force Headquarters for a fortnight as a medical officer and observe the brigadier and make a report on him. We're worried about him, we think he should be home in Australia." I said, "Well, gentlemen, I hear what you say, but you realise our association goes back a long way and he is my commander and yours."

06:00 But they sent me nevertheless. So I got up there, and instead of going up in the morning on a Monday and coming back in the afternoon, I appeared for breakfast on Tuesday morning. At this stage, I already knew there was tension between us, something was wrong. And he looked over and he said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "Well sir, for better or for worse, I'm your medical officer for the next fortnight." And he said, "You're not a medical officer, you're a fucking psychiatrist." It was just part of the ongoing thing. I was there for four

06:30 months and throughout the whole four months he didn't twig. I tried to tell him who I was, what our association had been. I didn't actually bring up the ambush.

Did he remember you?

No, no, he didn't. But later on I was down at Duntroon relieving the MO there, and John Godwin, the ANGAU officer, who was now a major, I think he was a QM [Quartermaster], no he wasn't a QM, he was something there.

07:00 And when he heard I was coming, he gave me a call and said … arranged to have dinner. He came to me on that night in the mess, a few grogs, we were going to have dinner the next night, I think it was. And he mentioned Bill Weir. And I said, "Oh gee, I'd like to see Bill again." "Oh." he said, "Well I'll invite him." And then he invited him. Bill said, "Not Corporal Spragg, yeah I'd love to see him." So he came in and expected to see Corporal Spragg, and all he can see is a fucking psychiatrist. As soon as he crossed the threshold he looked …

07:30 "God, what's he doing here?" And he didn't say anything at the time, but he went out to the kitchen with John, and John told me later. He said, "What's that bastard doing here, he tried to skin me from Vietnam?" And John tried to put him wise. But it wasn't until after the evening had progressed and I took the bull by the horns and told him about this ambush. We'd mentioned fellow's names like Shadlow, who was killed and the circumstances

08:00 of it, and things that he should have twigged, I knew too much about. So when I told him about this, and left … no doubt in anyone's mind, "I owed my life to him" I thought. He said, "Oh, you're him, oh. Oh God."

What aspects of his behaviour were they concerned about?

He was very irascible. He'd blast off.

08:30 Some of them could handle him very well. One couldn't deny that. He was an angry man underneath it all, and that was good for us, when he was … it was good for me on one occasion at least. But I liked him in the last campaign. He used to walk along and talk. He was a very fair dinkum guy. Anyway, what was … oh his behaviour yeah. God, what was I about to tell you there?

09:00 Yes, it's escaped me.

His … surely his being an angry man wouldn't be sufficient to …?

Oh, I know what I was going to tell you. His artillery officer, he was a lovely guy, calm as they come. He'd had a falling out with him and he abused him like hell. "Go on get out, get out." The artillery officer was retired as ordered. And as soon as he got outside he realised he couldn't let it go, he had

09:30 to have a decision from the brig. [Brigadier]. So he'd go back and knock on the door, the brig would open it, "Excuse me sir, can I see you sir? Oh yeah, come on in." It'd be all over. They'd be right again, if you knew how to handle him.

What about, was he responsible for making tactical decisions …?

Oh yes, yes. He was under a lot of pressure there. He was responsible for the lives of people, that's what worried him, I think.

Or were they worried that he was costing lives?

10:00 No, he certainly wasn't costing lives. No, I think it was pretty unfair, that's my personal opinion. But I didn't respect the guy from Saigon particularly. And I believe … I heard later that he upset Colin Girder, the Major General and the director of the thing, and that's maybe where it all stemmed, I don't know really. I believe he was concerned about him, which was fair enough, I guess.

10:30 **So what was your … what was the outcome of your stay with Weir?**

What, that night at dinner?

Well, you said you were up there for four months to watch him.

Oh yes, well I … he did sort of simmer down but he never really felt comfortable with me, which I thought was a shame. I just couldn't get to him. I remember one night, I went into the Grand Hotel, we were all in civilians at that stage,

11:00 and it was as dark as the inside of a cow, and I kicked a table and upset a pint of beer over this hairy-chested gentleman, and this voice said, "What the bloody hell are you doing? You - oh God." he said. It was Bill. So he went away and changed his shirt it seems, while we went up to, apparently it was the French restaurant. And he came in there after us and I said to him "Walk in." all affable, talking to the proprietress who he knew quite well there.

11:30 Then he spotted me, and just said nothing. Wheeled on his heels and went down to Chuck Clayton's. He was an American who held open a house for Australians on Saturday evening. Whether he got stuff from the VC [Viet Cong] on Sunday was not known. Anyway, I caught up with him there and had a long talk to

him, and we compared notes. I still don't understand, he was so blinded by this idea, I think, that I'd set up there, he just couldn't

12:00 get it out of his mind. "What the hell was this psychiatrist who?" … See, when I first made contact with him, was in the mess at Nui Dat, and the SMO, Senior Medical Officer, at Task Force Headquarters, Robin Harvey, said, "There's your mate in there, go and see him." I said, "Oh, do you think it's appropriate?" He said, "Yes, he'll never forgive you if you don't." So I thought, "I can't have that." So I walked in and said, "Sir, Spragg sir, ex 2/3rd Battalion."

12:30 "Oh, yes, all right, this is Colonel Outridge and this is Colonel Falkland, my 2IC [Second in Command]. Yes hmmm." And he might as well have said, "You can stuff off." That's the impression I got. I stuffed off anyway. But then I heard later that he'd said, "This psychiatrist fellow came up, said he was MO of the 2/3rd Battalion, he was never the MO of the 2/3rd Battalion." And the guy who told me, this was a local war correspondent, he tried

13:00 to put the record straight, "I know the gentleman he was talking about, I don't think he would have claimed to be that." "Oh, no." said Bill. And I would have contacts with him at say, at 6th Battalion's barbeque, pin him down again and try to get through to him. But I think the more I pursued him, to pin him down, the more suspicious he became, that I was trying to get the goods on him. That's the only explanation I can give.

You were there to assess whether he was too neurotic though?

Oh, that's what they wanted me to do, but there was no way

13:30 I was going to do that.

So what did you do?

I had to work like hell. Because they needed an MO there. The SMO [Senior Medical Officer], Dick Green, lovely guy Dick, and me.

Tell me a bit about what you actually did, you duties?

Oh, just taking care of the sick. The wounded usually flew over, straight back to ASLG back to the field hospital. But back there I had a part time medical

14:00 officer role. That was to be on call at night, in turn. And doing the RAP and ordinary general medical duties. But the other part was psychiatry and I had to, I had referrals of troops that were having various psychiatric

14:30 complaints, including those who decompensated in battle, whom I refused to return to the frontline. And that was accepted.

Did you see … did the troops that were coming in ever remind you of your troops that you served with in the Second [World] War?

Yeah. They were, on the whole, a bit more intelligent, I think. I'm sure they were. They were very professional. National servicemen. Well,

15:00 we had recruited, at least the Yanks recruited the types that we rejected. I think that sums it up. The types that went into our army managed to get themselves out of the draft, on the whole, the American, I think, that's the feeling I get. I was engaged in doing recruit physicals and the induction, and …

15:30 oh God, this is terrible … and I'd knock back about four and a half out of every six. We did six a night, be four one night, five the next. So very few got through. And I knocked them back largely on motivation, these were people who didn't want to go. I always found that they were too fat for their height. There was a scale for doing that. Or they had flat feet or back, or any old thing.

16:00 But if they showed much of an inclination and I thought they weren't going to be much goodthat's what I did. So I'm afraid we sent the cream, and the national servicemen, which may seem a bit unfair. But then what would they themselves think about this, how would they react, would they want somebody who's not motivated. They weren't … they were guys that accepted their man like, they didn't

16:30 particularly agree with going but their number had come out, so they accepted. And they were about the best army that had ever fielded up to that date, highly professional. The Australian Army, itself, had become very professional, and it's been proved, if anything, since then, I think. They way they conducted themselves in East Timor, I think, was admirable. And of course, you're seeing it again now. Yeah. They

17:00 really are something to be proud of.

What about the psychological, you were assessing the psychological effect of their exposure in a war zone, essentially. Was those psychological effects … or different to what you had encountered in the Second World War?

Oh, no, I wouldn't say so. It's

too loose a concept, I think, to comment on really. I'd have to … even then, I'd don't think if I did a careful study, I don't think I could come to any great conclusion on that.

Tell me what the sort of effects, psychological effects, you were seeing?

Well, it depended a lot, whether they were the task force frontline troops or whether they were at the base. There was quite a lot of homesickness from the base

troops, presented in various ways. There were battle wounds, one thing. A lot of them were referred to me because they thought they ought to be. Graham Edwards, who was a member of Parliament in Western Australia (UNCLEAR) of course, he lost both legs. He was referred to me just because they thought he should beand he was really good, he did me the world of good.

He was a great fellow to interview. Very healthy, well adjusted guy. But those two were very anxious . There was one fellow, I think he was a stretcher-bearer, and he'd been … he had both eardrums ruptured in an explosion, well he was quite shaken up. And he was quite

deaf and he didn't want to go back. And he was one I did send back, because I'd heard that they were contemplating recommending him for a medal, and stupidly, I thought, "Well, I know they won't do it if he doesn't go back." So I don't know whether he knew he was to be recommended, but I persuaded him to give it a try. When he got back there, and Dick Green was his MO at that time, later became SMO, was the MO of his battalion. And

I next encountered the lad down at the post office collecting the unit mail, he had been given a safe spot by Dick, he recognised it. And that's another way of handling it. But as he said to me later, "I don't have too many of these slots that I can put them into." In other words, "Don't do it too often."

And so on what basis would you send somebody back?

If I didn't think they were going to make it.

I mean send them back to the frontline?

Oh,

I did send one guy back. And he fired upon his sergeant, so I didn't try that again. I don't know why I sent him back. But mostly, by the time they get to the psychiatrist, they've been through all the necessary hoops, and they're really not fit. And you make them S3. But generally homers, they've

got to go home.

In the Second World War, was this in place, psychiatrists?

Yeah, apparently … oh I don't know whether we had much in the way of psychiatrists. But yeah, there was Alex Sinclair in the Western Desert, of course. I can't recall … and Ernie Marsden who entered the bag in the Singapore. I can't remember any others

who were practicing psychiatrists. But there wasn't when this system was in vogue, I think. Well, yeah it was, although it was looked at rather sceptically by our mob. But our RSM, I saw him with two guys on one occasion. One of them was a lance corporal who was a bit of a loudmouth. And I said what … these were going to the guard battalion, known as the "Old and Bold"

or the "Ruthless and Toothless." and that was a safe job, you see. And I said, "What are you sending X over there for?" And he said, "Oh, it's no good George, no good." So what happened, he said "He'd seen him at the end of the Owen Stanleys campaign where he was all shot to pieces with his nerves." and then he'd come back to the Tablelands, and he was a big noter, a macho type, and he managed to talk himself into one stripe. And at an exercise,

"Bagging Bill" was the RSM I was talking about, kept his eye on this guy. And they'd deliberately set off explosives around him and that sort of thing, to get a realistic view. He said, "I watched him and he went to pieces again." And I said, "No, he's no good." But they sent him nevertheless, Bagging didn't seem to have the power to get rid of him. And he went up and he ended up shooting one of the fellows, one of his own, in an area where there were no Japs, we were well behind at that stage.

And the mistake the boy had made, he was roused to relieve this guy on night duty, patrol, a guard. He approached from the wrong side of the tree and our friend hit him with one shot. So that's the outcome, I think. I think that's one of the reasons the Americans flagged, not only officers,

they flagged, by privates as a matter of security. You know, the fragmentation, great thing. And that, I think, accounts for the fact that they were not able to hold ground.

When did you first become aware of the concept of post traumatic stress disorder?

I was in the States at the time, and the term had just been invented. We used to call it

"Transitional Situational Disturbance." or something classed as that. It was the same old thing. But now they've made an industry of it. They've got all sorts of funny things, like the eye movement business

that's actually curing it. It's a load of crap. It's a good industry.

I'd be interested in your insights as a psychiatrist on development on … I mean the focus of it has increased dramatically.

Oh yeah, that's right. Oh well,

24:00 it's the thing, the bandwagon to get on at the moment. It started … the Americans … I think it's the outcome of this immediacy proximity thing. Sending the troops … you get them … when they decompensate in battle, you keep them as near the frontline as you can, you sedate them heavily, and then you shoot them back, preferably before they've woken up properly. And that's their system.

24:30 And I think … out of that they claim they have this marvellous success and the casualties, the psychiatric casualties, from Vietnam were, as a result of this, were nil. Well, that's a load of nonsense. They had to admit that eventually, that they, the aftermath of Vietnam played merry hell with the troops. They had a lot of psycho-pathology. A lot of it due to the fact that they weren't all that red hot when they went in anyway.

25:00 But to overcome that, they said, "Oh, there's been a delay in the onset of this stress." that's why it wasn't picked first. That's why we falsified the figures, in other words. So they invented Delayed Stress Reaction, and out of that, that was about '79, '78 or '79. I was over in America in '81 and PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] had just recently been invented then. That was obviously

25:30 a goer.

Obviously being in a war does have an affect on many.

Oh yeah, I'm not denying that for a second. But a lot of these people, they didn't see very much of the war. It puts me in mind of the young MOs that the Repatriation Department decided they'd have to get them sensitive to what the troops had been through.

26:00 So they used to make it compulsory to watch these war films. And they weren't very happy about that. They objected, they thought "It was a load of nonsense." They said, "No, no, no, it's important, you've got to look at those war films because that's where most of these guys got their experience of the war, at the cinema." That's so, I think.

Do you think there's a lot of delusion involved or …?

Oh, a lot of fabrication.

Fabrication.

26:30 **You, yourself experienced debilities in adjusting to post war, with nerves?**

Oh yeah. After the Owen Stanleys, once we'd got … I was pretty shaken there, but I had malaria at the same time, and I'd lost about a third of my body weight. Had peripheral oedema, beri beri. And once I'd … took me no time to recover physically.

27:00 And I had the occasional nightmare, but nothing very much. Flashbacks, I didn't experience at that stage.

What form would the nightmares take?

I remember one in particular. I was suddenly amongst … oh, this was after our last, this was after the end of the war. I can't remember the others. They were just generally anxious and certainly had a startle reaction after the Owen Stanleys. I was handling it a lot better after our

27:30 second show. But one or two I remember in particular, one I'd strayed into, it was round about Shiburangu, which was an area which we occupied. And I strayed in amongst these Nips, and I didn't have a weapon, and they're all sitting around looking at me. They were mainly officer class with their pistols, etcetera. And then I woke up, I thought "That was the safest way out of that." I'd trained myself to wake up, so I wouldn't wet

28:00 the bed, as a child, and I can still do it, when things got impossible. And another one, there was this Japanese fellow who was unarmed and coming at me. I put one in the breech and fired it and it misfired, so I quickly jetted and put another one up in the breech, it misfired too. I thought, "This is no good, this big bastard's getting closer and closer to me." so I said, "I think the best thing I can do is take you prisoner."

28:30 I was very amused by that, really, I woke up at that stage. With the temerity of one.

Tell me what you think of the value of counselling people that have nervous problems after the war?

It depends on whether you know what you're doing. And it's like bereavement counselling. When my wife died, we had an expert in,

29:00 who I managed to get rid of very quickly. Some people are good, some are naturals. But others read the

textbook and they decide that you're angry, you're this or that the other. I think there's only one way to treat a person and that's in a psychodynamic way. In other words, you listen to what they're saying, you look for a latent meaning of it, and you respond to that. You don't tell them what's wrong with them, you try and find

29:30 out. And you make interpretations, in other words, of what you feel is troubling them, what they're thinking at the time and you phrase it as close to their own words as possible. And if you're spot on, they'll accept it. And the first thing they do, is to realise that you understand them. And that's the most important step you can make. The most therapeutic thing is for the person who is now relying on you, realises that you understand them.

30:00 **What do you think was the effect of a generation of returned World War II servicemen, not really get much in the way of counselling early on?**

It was probably just as well, knowing some of the counselling that goes on.

Do you think it's on the whole unnecessary?

Oh no, no, I wouldn't say that, but it's a very hit and miss business. I think if you know what you're doing, it's all right,

30:30 it's good, it should be. But, see they don't understand what's happening at the time and they have this set system. They have the theory and they impose the theory upon the person and quite often they looked quite nonplussed, wondering what the hell it's all about. I'll give you an example, in Topeka I was at a

31:00 group therapy in the veterans hospital there. And Joel Brangy was the leader of this group and they were relating quite well to him. There was a couple of schizophrenic lads there and they were very anxious guys. And then there was another guy, an Hispanic looking fellow who has quite a bit of notoriety, he was one of these

31:30 heroes from Vietnam who knew all about the deal. He was exploiting the situation, he took over then and started to talk about fragging. We fragged them, we gave him a warning, these officers that came over for three months, and a lot of what he said was right, we'd frag them. He was talking about fellows

32:00 who didn't know what they were doing shouldn't have been handling it. Now we've got a set up there where this guy feels he knows all. What do you think he's talking about? Or who do you think he was talking about? It's a thing we call the transference and he's transferred these feelings onto the therapist who happened to dodge the Vietnam draft. At the end of it they said, the wanted to know what the Australian thought about it, what the visitor though about it. I said, "I found it very interesting

32:30 but I just wonder whether you'll be able to educate Doctor Brangy or whether you'll have to frag him." And that sort of hit the spot.

What affect does being in a war have on somebody mentally?

Oh, it depends on the person.

What affects can happen? How did it affect you?

Oh I don't think it affected me a great deal,

33:00 it matured me a bit. It probably made me defensive in places I wouldn't normally have been. Probably a drop in confidence. I don't know, it's very hard to answer that. See if you look at the 8th Div guys, they seemed to, superficially they seemed a very healthy bunch, the ex-prisoner of war of the Japs, and you've got to prise out of them those symptoms, you find that they accept a lot of them as being normal. But quite a lot of them are sexually inhibited

33:30 and they have their nightmares but they take them as normal. But they've got to be forced along to even claim benefits to which they are so richly entitled. So it depends a lot on the personality type themselves I think, how they stand up to it or how they don't. It's a bit of a complex question that.

34:00 **What about the effects of being called on to kill?**

Well, it eventually has an effect on you I think, that's why I wonder about the guys here who claim they hate Asians. Eventually they are going to probably have the same developmental reactions that I did.

What was that?

Well, I hated the Japanese, I don't like to have that feeling, only add guilt,

34:30 mainly guilt about things that happened I suppose.

What were some of the things in particular?

Oh, just having to bump off the guy.

What circumstances was that under?

Oh he was wounded, it's the guy I spoke of earlier, we were on a three day patrol, we were best over a part of day away from our base,

35:00 where we had to get him back. He might not have made it anyway, I don't know. But you can imagine carrying him back all that way. And we still felt we couldn't trust him completely and we were passing through enemy positions, so, what do you do?

Tell me your perspective

35:30 **on Hiroshima, I'd be interested to know.**

I thought it was a great relief at the time, I thought it was wonderful, not anymore.

What do you think now?

Well, actually, the conventional bombing was just as bad, I don't know, it's hard to say how many lives it saved as well as how many it knocked off. And have we the right to sacrifice some to save others, it's too vexed a problem really. If we'd have had to storm the

36:00 Japanese homeland and I can't see any reason to believe otherwise because they wouldn't surrender after the first bomb and it took them a day or two to do it after the second. Well if we'd been advised to storm the homeland there would've been very heavy casualties all round so, it's a matter for public hearing who plays the part.

36:30 **Your opinion on the, there is a theory or a body of opinion amongst some historians that the Japanese invasion of Australia was never seriously contemplated, do you hold to that?**

Well it seems that they have documentary evidence for that, which I accept. We certainly thought though that it was on at the time. I've just got to believe what

37:00 I can (unclear) apparently. I wondered why they bothered bombing Darwin and Broome and other areas well down, why they'd done all the reconnaissance of our coast line and the even bombed down our east coast, if they, maybe they just wanted to quam us, I don't know. I don't see it as an absolutely established fact that they had no intention.

37:30 But apparently on balance that is so. A more pertinent question is probably the thing that upset my father so much and that is Churchill, who it seems was prepared to let us go and (unclear) was most unhappy about that and I can see his point. If there'd been an occupation, provided there are no atrocities, when we eventually won the war it would be

38:00 alright, if we didn't win the war well we've lost anyway. So I don't know really. I though a lot of old Churchill really, I thought he was quite a fellow. My father hated him for that, because he had a son over there I suppose.

Your father admired Stalin at the time?

Yes.

Did his opinion of Stalin ever change?

Oh eventually he did, yes he eventually caught up with the truth.

38:30 He was heavily into politics, in theory anyway, he never actually stood.

Can I ask, do you have moments of pride when you look back on the war and if so what they are?

Oh yeah, more of the other feeling.

What's the other one?

39:00 Shame

Tell me about that.

Oh, the things I've been saying. Oh I felt very proud initially, oh geez, I was six feet high, hell. But gradually over the period one matures somewhat I think and you begin to realise that perhaps you weren't so good after all.

39:30 **But what could you have done?**

I don't know. Oh, probably nothing.

I mean at the time the Japanese threat was very real.

Oh yes, yes, oh no that part's okay.

So what is the part that isn't okay?

The actual disposing of the guys, and I got a certain amount of satisfaction out of it I feel, at the time, I

mean I did it rather callously, without any great feeling.

40:00 It was learning since, what they were putting up with.

Did you find similar emotions amongst Vietnam veterans that you were…

I suspect this will come, I know a fellow I'd known in Bomber Command for instance, there was one fellow, he was shot down and parachuted to safety and was

40:30 taken by the Germans. and after he was liberated the American pilot very kindly gave him a flight, a tour over the Dresden and the rest, Hamburg, and he was really rocked at the damage they had done. So I think a lot of the Bomber Command fellows whether they had visited or not are feeling pretty sorry for that.

41:00 **We've got about a minute left on the tapes is there anything you'd like to say?**

There's a hell of a lot but I can't pack it in, if you'd told me we had a half an hour I might have been able to.

I wish we did, but I think we'll turn that tape off now.

INTERVIEW ENDS