

Australians at War Film Archive

Malcolm Webster (Mal) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 16th May 2003

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/143>

Tape 1

00:32 **We'd like to cover everything in great detail.**

Mmm.

But what we like to do at the very beginning of the tape is get a like a mini version of your life's history up until not long after the war, so a little potted history of where you were born and grew up and etcetera.

Alright then.

Yeah.

I've got some interesting stories about that too.

We'll have and the temptation is to...

Thanks to my mother.

The temptation is to go down memory [lane] for a long time but trust that I'll come back and ask you so much you'll be sick of talking about it at the end of it.

Alright then.

Yeah.

01:00 **So what's the Mal Webster story?**

Well, I was born in 1921 on the 25th of May, on Phillip Island of all places. And as a matter of fact I was so eager to come into the world that I believe I was born in a jinker [horse cart] on the way to the Cowes Hospital. So that's according to my mother and she said also "That I was a bit unique because she said I stood up at six months and walked at seven".

I bet she loved that.

Whether that's true or not, I don't know

01:30 but I keep bragging about that to my grandchildren and that. And then we came to Glen Waverley, which is this area. And in oh, I was about four to five, I'm not quite sure on that, and we father bought a small farm in Springvale Road, Glen Waverley. And he was in business in the city of Melbourne as a real estate hotel broker and

02:00 what but the business went down hill during the Depression in the late '20s. And then we he came and worked the farm and we grew vegetables, we had an orchard as well. And my mother ran a round in Oakleigh, she used to, we had a horse and cart and one horse and that named Nugget and occasionally we accompanied her on her doing her

02:30 fruit and vege [vegetable] round and that. And that's how we kept the wolf from the door from the days of the Depression and my father had to go and work on the roads and that till he finally got a job. Actually he was a lawyer, he was he had an LLB [Latin Legum Baccalaureus (Bachelor of Laws)] degree from the Hobart University and that but went and grew cherries in Canada of all places.

Oh Canada?

In Canada and that. And he, when World War II, ah World War I broke out, he joined the Canadian Navy and finished up a

03:00 skipper captain of a flotilla of mine sweepers. And so he had his war experience too and then came back here to Australia and that. And we had a family of five. I had three sisters and two and another brother and that. One of my sisters is now departed and sadly from cancer but other than that, that's more or

less the story of our origins and what have you but

03:30 we've been very strong on family. That's the main thing in our life. We've been close together. We never miss a birthday or things like that like and you know we tended and my mother was a great Christian and attended a church and what have you with my sisters but other than that I think that just about covers it.

Where, what school did you go to? High school?

Ah, went to the local school

And what...?

Glen Waverley and I left

04:00 school at thirteen because I had to because of the Depression and that but we did work hard as a, as youngsters. We used to go gathering mushrooms and that. And we used to put 'em in punnets and sell them on the Ferntree Gully Road in Glen Waverley. And also when the season was on we sold strawberries on the road as well and apples and things like that like to make our contribution. We used to go off before dawn and to get the mushrooms in the

04:30 paddocks two or three ks [kilometres] away and that.

Mmm.

But yeah but it was a good life but we all, we were very close together. There was no question about that.

And what did you go and do for a living after you left school?

I went and worked in an orchard at the age of thirteen and then at the age of fifteen as a matter of fact, talking about working in the orchard, I've worked all day Saturday afternoon for threepence or three pence in those days, which wasn't very much. But

05:00 I was prepared to do it but then I joined a company, my mother was a, the tea lady at or refreshments she provided at the Waverley Golf Club, hence in Waverley Road and that. That golf course is no longer there. It's a housing estate and we, she got me a job as office boy at the Talbot and Standard Motors in Elizabeth Street, 558 Elizabeth Street. And

05:30 of course it changed its name and eventually it became Standard Motor Products A Australian Motor Industries and eventually it was Toyota, Toyota Australia. But that's about it from office boy to well I don't know whether you want to know where I finished up, at the war of course.

How old were you when the war broke out?

The war, I was eighteen.

Right on the knocker [exactly] ?

Right on the, no just over eighteen but I remember quite vividly because it was a

06:00 Sunday night and I was doing the, putting sails on a little boat that I'd built and that. And I was putting the sails on this boat. In fact, I've got a photo of it over there and that but and mother came I heard Bob Menzies [Australian Prime Minister] announce it over the wireless. And then my mother came home and she was very worried and she looked terrible and she grabbed hold of me and...

Did she know straight away that you were...?

Oh yes, there was a, it was announced in the church.

But did she know straight away that you'd join up?

06:30 Oh, no, no, no. There was nothing but she thought, see I'm eighteen...

Mmm.

And however she was very disturbed because she'd lost her brother killed who'd been at Gallipoli and was killed in the 22nd Battalion in the First World War, Australian Battalion. And she had another brother who carried a bullet lodged beside his lung, who was with the Canadian forces.

And your father was involved?

And my father was involved and what have you

07:00 but my father, where was he at the time? Now wait on, this is 1939, oh he's already killed on the road. He was in an accident when he was riding down from the railway station at Glen Waverley. He was killed in Springvale Road but never mind, that's one of the things of life and I was not quite eighteen when he was killed but

07:30 they, mother was terribly upset and that. And we talked but soon as things settled down a bit I wanted

to be in it for some reason or other. I wanted to be in it because the family had always been in it so...

Were your mates sort of the same as you? They wanted to go?

Oh really, there was one fellow that I worked with who wanted to go and that. And he unfortunately was killed too,

08:00 in the desert in North Africa but he was in the 2/24th Infantry Battalion, so I joined up. My mother begged me not to go till I was nineteen. She said, "Wait till you turn nineteen," she said, "Then I'll sign the papers." Because to be a volunteer in the army in particular you had to be twenty years of age. Even then I cheated.

What did that...?

And pushed my age up one year but we, so Roy and I,

08:30 this Roy Watson, who I said was killed at North Africa, he and I joined up on the same day and we went in on June, the 6th in 1940. That's when we were inducted in but prior to that I tried to get in the air force. I wanted to go in the Empire [Air] Training Scheme as aircrew and that, liked the uniform I think and that.

Did you want to be a pilot?

Yeah, I was happy to be a - wanted to be a pilot but they wanted to send me back to school because my education hadn't been,

09:00 you know in those days you had to be almost a Rhodes scholar to get into the Royal Australian Air Force and the Canada scheme. And they said, "You've got to go back to school and do two maths subjects." And so the 6th Division prior to going away marched down through (UNCLEAR). And I said, "That's it. I'm gonna join the army." And so I joined the army, together with this Roy Watson, on the 6th of June in 1940

09:30 and I was in the 2/2nd Pioneers Infantry Battalion. And unfortunately they lost my pay book and that. And they accused me of having received the pay book and thrown it away and I said, "No, I never got my pay book."

This is before you left Australia?

No, this is when you first join up see and they give you a pay book, so you can draw pay or and that but I had to make an allotment to my mother, most of my pay went to my mother to help her

10:00 maintain. And I was some weeks without pay and in the meantime I got left out of the 2/2nd Pioneers, which was the greatest thing that could have happened to me. Because as we know they didn't have a very nice time because a lot of them got sunk in a ship by an American submarine on their way to Japan after being made prisoners of war and that. So my lucky charm was working even back then and

10:30 then they put me in the office at Caulfield, taught me how to fight with a bayonet and things like that. Not that there was much bayonet fighting during the war, but the next thing they were forming a new regiment and that. And they were very selective because I had the list and I was amazed at the stories. Unless you were a college kid, you didn't get into this regiment and sure enough they,

11:00 seeing that I was keeping the list. I apparently went on the list and was selected and so I ended up being in the 3rd Light Ack Ack [Anti Aircraft Artillery] Regiment in the 7th Battery B Troop. And after staying at Caulfield for awhile and marching in all the streets and out to the pub at Wheelers Hill and that, and long route marches, especially if we'd had leave, they sweated us almost to death to get all the

11:30 good living out of us. So that we were decent soldiers and then they moved us to Werribee, to the race course down at Werribee and we slept in the stands. And some of them slept in the stables or the horses and that. And you could never get rid of the smell but we were there for about three months. And then we marched through the city in November 1940. I have a photo there of that actual march and that

12:00 and a photo of three of us three of us who I became friends with, two other guys. Strangely enough one was named Woolcock and the other was named Wrigglesworth and I'm a Webster. And I think we just came together because we were at the end of the queue with the 'W's and that. And I had much pleasure in recently it was written up in the Melbourne Herald Sun that photos of the three of us still alive over sixty years later, which is incredible

12:30 and that. A chap named Neil Wilson from the Herald Sun wrote it up and that. So we're back at Werribee right and we did our training but only on Vickers machine guns because we had no Bofors [machine gun] guns and that. And I'd never seen a Bofors gun until we were in anger on Crete. But we trained around the hills of the You Yangs there, the hills back of Melbourne, which were pretty steep lugging along a great heavy part of a Vickers machine gun and that. And

13:00 we trained on that and we had shoots at the Williamstown rifle range with machine guns and that. And then we sailed away in December 1940 and went to the Middle East.

What ship were you on?

Ah, Mauritania.

Mmm.

I've got a picture of us playing cards there on the Mauritania, which the family somehow got the, this photo from out of the paper I guess. And sure

- 13:30 enough I'm in the group and it's astounding that my mother had all this stuff. And so we landed in the Middle East in early 1941 and then we stayed in Palestine. It was Palestine in those days, it's now Israel as we well know, and we did all our training, mostly route marches and that. We never had rifles or anything of that nature, no guns, and the sergeants were sent off
- 14:00 to be trained on the Bofors guns and that. And the first time I saw a Bofors gun was on the island of Crete. We were in, we moved out of North Africa, we'd been down in Egypt at a place called Amiriya and they moved us across, we were on our way to Greece with the 6th Division in what they call lustre force. And we were on a ship called the Ulster Prince and they were all jammed on top
- 14:30 of the deck and of course the war in Greece had been overrun by, the Germans had run, overrun our troops and what have you. The Greeks and the British or the allies and so they had to evacuate and we were side tracked onto Crete. And we arrived on the 24th of April in 1941 and then
- 15:00 that very next day the troops started pouring in that were being evacuated out of Greece. So that was interesting because they were a bit bedraggled I'm afraid and that. And though their spirits were good because you know we made tea for them and we hid in the olive groves as the Germans kept strafing us from the air and that. And it wasn't you know, it was a bit of an experience believe me and that but they landed all these troops. Some
- 15:30 they took straight back to Alex [Alexandria] and what have you so we were on Crete.

So we're now on Crete, did they, were you equipped with Bofors guns there?

Yeah, that's when we got our Bofors guns, yes.

'Cause a lot of chaps came back from Greece to Crete with nothing with no rifles.

Oh no, that's quite true because, as I said, they were unfortunate, a pretty sad army because they'd lost all their arms and things like that and they even had artillery units, Aussie artillery units which they turned into

- 16:00 infantry because they had no...no guns, so they became infantry and that. And I never ever got a rifle and that. And one of the bad things about the - and a gun crew I think there was about fourteen members to a gun crew and that. And a Bofors gun is quite exposed but it can only shoot at aircraft that are at, of at a height of no more than fifteen hundred metres, and that's not very high.

And so the Germans kind of outsmarted you

- 16:30 **in that respect?**

Oh yeah, because they, well they controlled the air. You know any planes we had, they either got 'em on the ground or shot 'em out of the air.

When all the paratroopers were coming down were the Bofors guns any good?

Oh yeah, well now that's a real good story and that.

How long were you on Crete?

Well, we arrived on the 24th of April in 1941

- 17:00 and we were evacuated on the 29th of May, so were there for some weeks. But in the meantime they were bombing and strafing us and what have you and we got an odd plane or two and that. And then on the day of the - we were at a place called Heraklion and that. We weren't at Maleme where the...

Is that where the airport is?

Yeah, but we were on the Heraklion Airport. We put, they put, the Bofors guns were around the perimeter and we were on

- 17:30 closest to the sea. And I think the first action I think we hit the leading plane and blew it to pieces before it hit the shore but however the, we were there and on the day of the actual paratroopers, which you no doubt know about but - and that it was a pretty tough day and strangely enough by coincidence I wasn't on the gun that day. They, I'd been detailed
- 18:00 off to control the signals from the control tower on the airport. It was only a small control tower and that. And the idea was that I put up one flag for an incoming thing. Answer the telephone and put up a flag. If it was to be extraordinary, I had to put up two flags and guess what, the place got blown to pieces and that. And fortunately I wasn't - as soon as the siren sounded

18:30 I went straight to a trench and it was a big trench nearby.

That was fortunate.

And I tell you what, I felt very much alone.

Why is that?

Because of, you know I needed human company and that you know. When you're on your own like that and you're getting bombed and strafed and that it, it's not a nice feeling but...

And no one else down there?

So, but I'd been detailed for to do that job, which I carried out and then I did a very sensible thing because were getting bombed and strafed and

19:00 what have you. Because it was the prelude to the dropping of the paratroopers and that. And I crawled across the ground, away from the thing because my headquarters had been eliminated. And I crawled across the ground and joined with the Black Watch Infantry Battalion and they put me in the, one of their slit trenches and that. And I was there and then the next thing

19:30 they said, the adjutants gave me a rifle and cartridges and what have you and next thing I'm looking up and the sky's full of magnificent sight of all these paratroopers coming down but oh gee did our guns make a mess of their planes. They were lumbering what they call Junker 52s and we shot sixteen of them out of the air as they're trying to come in and some of them - one plane crashed right beside us and that. And the fellas

20:00 were Germans were clawing their way out of the damn thing but it was just a massacre.

So...

Actually, it is claimed that we eliminated seventy per cent of them in the, out of about two thousand that were dropped in our area in Heraklion round the city and towards the airport, the airfield. They wanted the airfield because they, then they could bring their thing but they didn't have not like at Maleme where they had gliders as well being towed.

20:30 We were just the thing but it was a magnificent sight to see all these parachutes and different colours. Some of them, you know carrying supplies and what have you and in fact most of our people got rearmed by the German supplies that came in.

Was it true that the German officers came down in white parachutes and the others or well the senior ranking officers?

I would not know.

I'd heard that they gave themselves away a little bit by dressing differently as they...?

Oh but the story is that the Germans

21:00 were very annoyed. They felt that they should have been allowed to get down on the ground before we started opening fire but it was like, I think it was a duck shoot and it was awful, actually for them and actually one of the fellas that we had a prisoner was Max Schmeling, the world heavyweight boxing champion and that. And so we're there and we laid doggo [down in fox holes] from there on because they landed

21:30 more paratroopers. Every day they brought 'em in but they landed 'em well away from us, so they made the one bad mistake by dropping them into fixed positions and that. And do you know Hitler claimed that was their first reverse in their war effort, you know after coming through France and what have you and Belgium and all those places. He said that it was their first defeat and that because they lost they lost a lot of men and a lot of equipment and they

22:00 even tried to reinforce the area by sending boats over these caiques C-A-I-Q-U-E. You know a Greek boat like a trawler type of thing, fishing trawler and they, the British Navy got stuck into them and that and eliminated hundreds and hundreds of them and that and it was just you know slaughter.

They took it but they really, they took a beating themselves.

Oh yeah, they took a terrible beating and as I

22:30 said they claimed Hitler said it was their first defeat.

Well, how did you get evacuated from Crete?

Ah, now the hard part. This is how I became a prisoner of war. Not by design, just by the way things fell. They decided they, the logistics were too tough. They'd lost too many naval ships and that. And even though we were holding Heraklion and when we were told we were evacuating that night we were terrified.

23:00 We were upset. We really were upset because we hadn't lost ground and that. We had the, one of the Australian battalions there was the 2/4th Australian Battalion, which they acquitted themselves very

good, so we were told that "At midnight we had to evacuate". And we told the course and what have you and we went aboard a destroyer called the HMS

23:30 Hereward, that was a British destroyer, and that. And the destroyers were ferrying the troops out to the cruisers. There was two cruisers out there, one called the [HMS] Orion and the other one called [HMS] Dido and we were to go aboard those and that. And however what happened was that I was seven off when they cut 'em off and said, "No more." Even the ship's cat I believe,

24:00 and this is what the sailors tell me, whether it's true or not I don't know I didn't see it but the ship's cat left the Hereward and went across to one of the cruisers and that. Which is a, an astounding thing but if that's true well that's an indicator what life...

Do you think the cat knew?

Well the cat, I don't know but that's a, one of the incredible things. However, we were there. We were in the mess decks there

24:30 jammed in and that. And I suppose we had about four or five hundred on board or more, maybe more, and that. And all the ships, they pulled all the troops off and that. And we're heading back to Alex and we're thinking of a cold beer back in Alexandria in, north in Egypt. And at dawn next morning unfortunately we hadn't cleared the eastern end of the island in the Keso Straits. So we were attacked by Stukas [German fighter]

25:00 and the next thing I felt a terrible jolt and that. And we were all sound asleep. We were worn out. We were tired you know from the battle on Crete and they said, "That was a near miss." And even a near miss could spring the thing but just before that one of the ships in the convoy - we had the [HMS] Ajax was in the convoy, which you know from the River Plate battle and that. And it had to withdraw because it

25:30 got some damage to it, bomb damage. And then we had another ship there called the [HMS] Imperial and its steering was damaged from a near miss from a bomb and they evacuated, took all the troops off there, about three or four hundred off there. And put on these other ships and that in the convoy and that. And then they sunk the ship and they

26:00 sunk it with two blokes still aboard, you know that hadn't gone across. Apparently they, a couple of sailors and that. And the two of them, one of them survived actually and got back to the island of Crete on a carley float and that to become a prisoner of war of the Germans but anyway back to our experience. It's dawn and the Stukas are attacking us, the Dornier [German bomber] are attacking us and that. And the story is the, a bomb went down the funnel

26:30 into the engine room and blew the inside out of the ship and that. And we were immobilised in the water and then we were ordered up on deck and then we were ordered overboard and said, "Every man for himself."

Did you have anything like a life jacket of any description?

No, the only time they never issued with us - no, we soldiers anyway because I don't think they had time or maybe they didn't have sufficient of that material aboard. So

27:00 we were ordered overboard and the planes are flying round, they're strafing us and bullets are coming off, we could see the bullets coming off deck. We had one gun that was working I know it was a 4.5, I presume on the ship on the destroyer and it was still firing and that. But I know when it went off it really shook me and that. And I looked around at the aircraft

27:30 gunners and that. And they were sitting, all sitting at their posts, all dead. Anyway, we were ordered into the drink, so we were in the drink and there was no life boats because the life boats had been destroyed on with the bomb and that. And of course we had to abandon the ship because they were still bombing it and so there were a few carley floats. I

28:00 swam over to a carley float because being an arrogant Aussie I could see the land which was, they estimate it was forty kilometres away and I said, "Oh I can swim that." Because I'd done my mile down the Yarra when I was a kid and that, down stream of course, and so we struck out for the land, I joined some of them on the carley float but it was so thick with guys either hanging on or sitting on. And there was a fellow there in the water, who had no doubt from the engine room

28:30 had an awful wound on the side of his face and that. And I made him take my possi [position], take my spot and I said, "Look, I can swim to land." What, I was kidding myself. Anyway, I swam around for a long while and you could hear cries for help and that but it was every man for himself but they threw, jettisoned overboard every piece of timber, chairs, anything that would that could float and that. In fact, one of our fellows hung onto a dead sailor you

29:00 know, no doubt eternally grateful too and that but he hung onto a dead sailor and I came across two sailors, I could see them quite vividly even today and that. One had a very dark beard and brown eyes and that. And I said, "Do you mind if I join you?" I said, "I've had it. I'm worn out." But I'd been swimming for quite a long while and they said, "By all means." So I joined them and

- 29:30 the board I'd say would be about three metres long or thereabouts and you couldn't sit on it. You had to swim with it and that. And I kept getting, I moved in between the two of them and one of them just floated off and drowned - no doubt and that. He just disappeared and I don't remember him letting go. And we swam with this board and I got at least six attacks of cramp which numbed my body from the waist down
- 30:00 and that. And I said to this other sailor, I said, "Gee," I said, "I've got terrible cramp." He said, "You'll have to kick against it." And boy it was agony to force myself out of the cramp and that but I'd say I had five or six attacks of this cramp and the next thing over head. I looked up, oh just before that they machine gunned us in the water. And also they dropped a stick of bombs. Whether it was meant for the ship
- 30:30 but I tell you what, it hurt because I remember it was like electric shock and that the jar from these stick of bombs from Dornier. Anyway, they were machine gunning us but whether they were strafing us or not but war's not nice as we well know.

So any other ships in sight at all?

Well, the convoy is heading off. The convoy. See the Dido, another ship was, I think I've got the names of the ships there and

- 31:00 the Orion - they took a clobbering. They actually got direct hits from the Stukas and that but they sailed on and got back to Alex but the one bomb alone took out three hundred and twenty nine men, you know in one ship. So they buried them all at sea and that. And I've got the account of that. It's in my book I wrote up about and then the other ship, I think it copped a bomb and a hundred and something. Well,
- 31:30 the wash up of our side, here's this Red Cross plane overhead. I saw it quite plainly. I looked up and it was a Red Cross Italian sea plane and apparently the convoy had radioed for help. They'd said "There was a lot of men in the water" see and there's no doubt a few hundred of us in the water and the next thing they're sending motor torpedo boats or MAS [torpedo boat], M-A-S, Italian MAS out from the island
- 32:00 of Scarpanto in the Dodecanese group. So they're on the way but it was estimated it was about eighty kilometres away from where we were and so we were in the water and this Red Cross plane - as soon as the Red Cross plane appeared the other planes, the Germans planes went away. But I think they were too busy attacking, continuing attacking the convoy because Scarpanto, the island of Scarpanto,
- 32:30 and that's where they refuelled and rebombed and went off and dropped their stuff. But I estimated whether these figures are right or not, but at least a thousand lost their lives that morning.

It's too much in one hit, isn't it?

So I'm not making land believe it or not but what happened as an incredible thing happened and even to this day I can't remember being pulled out of the water because

- 33:00 what they did the motor torpedo boats arrived. And then an Italian destroyer and we'd been five hours in the water and they were pulling the people out of the water, the fellas. If they have a good look, if he was dead they threw him straight back see and my mates were telling me, they said, "We saw them haul you in and threw you on the deck. Never threw you back." And that, but I passed out right on the tick [point] of being saved
- 33:30 and that. And even now when I talk about it, I can see a cross. No doubt that was the cross tree on the motor torpedo boat. We're rescued and they threw us - they left me on the deck and I came to and we were coming
- 34:00 into the island of Scarpanto. I came too and looked around and there was one of my best mates in the, on this boat, this motor torpedo boat, Italian boat and I looked at the Italians. They were swarthy looking, you know dark because they'd you know sailors out at sea and I thought they were Greeks. Actually I thought. "Ooh my God, we're picked up with Greeks." I soon learnt that we were prisoners of war. So they landed us on the island of
- 34:30 Scarpanto and I was amazed at the people that were - dragged ourselves through and that. They looked very compassionate and they were Italians too.

Are they conscripts or were they...?

Oh no, they were the people that lived on the island in the Dodecanese group and they looked very sad. So they put us in a place with hay all over the floor. I know I got a terrible attack of the

- 35:00 diarrhoea and what have you and we had burning thirst. We could not get enough fresh water and that. And I know I walked over - we were right on the shore and I walked over and washed myself down because most of the - you see a lot of us were in the nude and that. I only had a singlet actually because strangely enough and shows you army training, I remember before I went overboard I stacked my uniform beautifully
- 35:30 on the deck with my tin hat on top of it. Just like we made our beds and our billets during the war.

Did you have your boots on when you went overboard but...?

No, I got rid of them too. I put them beside my gear and left it on the deck. Actually, just one little incident there. I saw a British officer shoot a man that was mangled and that, you know put him out of his misery.

On the island when you...?

No, on, on the

36:00 ship before I went overboard. I watched him and that. And but that was the way it was because the fella couldn't survive in that water. And so we were over on this island of Scarpanto and that. And with this damned thirst. And that night they moved us onto - British onto an Italian destroyer and I remember the sailors laughing because we in our bare feet

36:30 when we went across the hot plates, we all leapt in the air you know. And they jammed us into...

Still unclothed? Did they give you any clothing at this point?

Clothing no, except I had my singlet and that. And so they put us all on this destroyer to move us to the Rhodos Island that was the objective to move us to Rhodos Island, to barracks over there. And they jammed us in the hold and it was a terrible experience because it was hot and sweaty being the summer time and

37:00 you couldn't get up to pass water or anything of that nature, so it was a bit of a cess pond, believe me. So they moved us across to the, I've got the name of the ship too, it was something Crispi from memory but if you want the name of the ship I can give you the name of the ship. And we went, they took us to Rhodos Island. We arrived there in the early hours of morning and that. And then they marshalled us

37:30 ashore and put us into these barracks. There were concrete floors, we just lay down on concrete floors. You wouldn't believe it, even it was full of bugs and that. And the boys were complaining but we had no blankets, no nothing. And we were there for a day or two and they issued us with these boiler suits made out of flax, I think it was a type of flax. And of course the Italians were a bit smaller than us and every time you bent over the backside would split and things like that. And we

38:00 must have looked funny in these boiler suits, all we you know. So the wash up was that there were out of the ship of the five hundred or so that no doubt were on the ship, two hundred and forty three were saved. Two of them died in hospital before we left Rhodos Island, so they moved us out of these barracks to a camp on the island of Rhodos, very close to the Turkish border

38:30 it was and that. You could look across and see Turkey and that. And it was a pretty primitive camp but they fed us well and they even gave us genuine coffee, which was most unusual in those days. And the Italian officer who spoke perfect English, you know was very apologetic about things but they never gave us any toilet paper and a very amusing thing happened. There was a great big Moreton Bay fig tree in the thing and before we left after three weeks, there wasn't a leaf left on that

39:00 tree.

Tape 2

00:30 **Run through the actual kind of history of it?**

Yeah, but this is just something that - are we on air?

We are.

No, one thing in the, when I first joined up and that I mentioned about them losing my pay book and I couldn't go into the 2/2nd Pioneer Infantry Battalion. They gave me two - made me a corporal, an acting corporal, and that. And gave me two stripes and that. And

01:00 I'm walking around the place one day and this big Aussie digger grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me and almost lifted me off the ground and said, "They'll be giving them to the bloody boy scouts next." So that was just that, an aside that happened in those days.

Did that happen, sorry back in Australia or while you were in the camps?

Yeah, when I was at the war. The boys called me "Babe" actually because I was nineteen. I looked fifteen and that. And I got questioned a few times but,

01:30 as I said, I put my age up.

No, I'm sure there are a lot of privates that didn't appreciate being told what to do by chaps who looked a bit younger than them.

Yes. So they moved us, they were gonna move us from Rhodos Island in the Dodecanese across to Italy.

So they jammed us on the, on a small ship, a little tramp steamer type of thing and that. And took us to Limnos Island where we

02:00 we were jammed in the thing. We had two hundred apparently Greek prisoners of war with us and you'da thought we were at war with each other because oh God it was - I think it was a free for all and that. I don't know why because we were jammed and we didn't have enough breathing space.

Were you fighting over food or just room?

No, just room and being uncomfortable and probably dismayed with the way we had finished up.

02:30 however.

So you were in the Adriatic Sea?

Yes, we no, no the Aegean.

Aegean, sorry.

Yeah, we we're heading to, we moved off that tramp steamer onto a Italian liner that had been converted to a troop ship and it was called the Calina. And strangely enough we were put on the top deck, A deck and it was all bunks and things like that. And

03:00 I remember quite clearly that suddenly I woke up after being so tired on the trip on the tramp steamer, which was only overnight. They were playing the song Cathedral in the Pine and I woke up and said, "Oh, I'm home. I'm home," and that. I was far from home, so they moved us across to Greece

03:30 to - we called in at Port Piraeus near Athens, which was the port, and we saw all the German equipment there and submarines and things of that like. And then we sailed - they took us across the Corinth Canal during daylight, which was quite an experience and that. And we came out at a place called Patras. Strangely enough, they only moved at night because across open water.

04:00 Only moved at night because even though Mussolini claimed that it was Mare Nostrum, which means our sea, I think the British Navy controlled it however. So they moved us then across the Adriatic to and we landed at Bari. We landed at Bari the day that Russia entered the war with the, when Germany invaded Russia and that was the -

04:30 what was the name of the battle there? The...

Barbarossa?

Barbarossa. That's Red Beard Barbarossa and that was on the 22nd of June in 1941. So we land at Bari and unfortunately the night before and that, they the Italians were very disrespectful to the, us because they thought we were mercenaries you know. While the mere fact we'd volunteered and that. And we hadn't been conscripted put us in a different category

05:00 and that. And so we got a very bad reception there at Bari from the people and that. They threw stones and they abused us and what have you but fortunately the guards did a wonderful job, the Italian guards, and kept everybody at bay and we were put on a train and shipped out but the, whether it was the night before a lone Wellington bomber came across and dropped a couple of bombs on the port or

05:30 probably missed the target. I don't know but they weren't very happy about us. So they moved us across in carriages across to a place called Capua.

So, on train carriages?

Yeah, on train carriages. We were in carriages. Beautiful country, Italy and we moved across to a place called Capua, which is near Naples and it was a staging camp for all the ex-POWs [Prisoner of War] or the POWs coming

06:00 out of North Africa. So that was an Italian battleground and so instead of being sent to Germany they were sent to Italy because it was their area, even though the Germans were there grabbing all our prisoners of war - so grabbing the Australian prisoners of war. So we're there in Capua and we stayed there for about three weeks then they shipped us out of out of there and we're to go north but interesting you know.

06:30 Somebody had made a baseball bat out of thing. We were playing baseball and things like that. Made it out of a bit of wood and they took it off us because they said it was an offensive weapon and that but we pulled into Rome and you wouldn't credit, right next door to us was a troop train of Germans and that. And they were passing lollies [sweets] onto us and that. And they seemed so friendly you know. And it seemed awful that, you know that you're at war with these people

07:00 and that. And so we moved up and fortunately I drew a carriage because there was only one carriage in which they put the Italian officers and a few of the guards in and the rest of them were in cattle trucks you know. In vans that were relics of the First World War and that. And so they moved us up and we arrived at a place called Bolzano, which was right in the north and then we marched from Bolzano. It was a Sunday and it was beautiful

07:30 to see the people walking around in their Tyrolean outfits and that. And they moved us up to; we marched to a place called Prata Isarco.

It's strange. They've taken you all the way down and all the way up again?

Yes, they've taken us all the way up, no we only come across actually in the first place. So we went across to this Prata Isarco, which was on the Isarco River and there was a few kilometres' walk and that. And we felt that walk believe me.

08:00 And we arrived and we said, "Where the hell are they gonna have barracks here?" And we came to an old disused brewery at this place called Prata Isarco and we were housed in there and in this brewery and that, and they were dusty buildings. They were all timber and that. And they musta been a fire hazard. They said "We weren't allowed to smoke" and that. 'Cause I never smoked. Never smoked in my whole in my life and

08:30 they said "We're not allowed to have cigarettes". So they only can smoke outside and things of that like but the boys - oh I don't know, the a bit foolishly but it was good. They fed us well. They, in fact we had that much food we were throwin' it away actually, burning it and that. And we were a novelty to - they selected see boys, a lot of the boys of the Hereward hadn't been saved. We had the British

09:00 sailors, they were segregated because we were colonials and we weren't supposed to intermix and they put a fence up between us and we weren't allowed to join with them. Although we used to talk through the wire and we were in these thing on this mountain side and we had a couple of nasty incidents and things of that like but there was, which I'll tell you about, but before that we had a

09:30 concert parties and things, like I used to take part in the concert. I even did a Swan Lake dance. They picked me and a little, the shortest bloke in the camp, to be my partner and we did the...

What part did you play in...?

Oh, I don't know. God knows, but I forget but I've actually got the poster there that they printed you know and it's a, it's worth looking at and that's the original poster that's come back. One of my friends brought it back from the war and that, and so we're there and we're being well fed and they used to take us for walks

10:00 and that through the Dolomites. It was magnificent area and that but we got into, got into a bit of hot water because on the way back we gotta come past the Italian command place. And of course the major who was the commandant naturally got the name Mad Major and that. And we wouldn't salute the flag. Oh gee, they took umbrage at that and possibly in a way I guess

10:30 they were right because after all, we were prisoners of war and we were out of the fight and that. And maybe we should have respected their flag by giving it an eyes right. We didn't, they wanted a salute, so they confined us to barracks and...

For how long?

In broad daylight, confined us to barracks. We're not allowed to go out on the compound or walk round the hillsides or anything of that nature.

For how long did they do that to you?

They did that for two or three days and it was considered a mutiny because

11:00 they had us on parade. They got us all on parade and that. And they had machine guns trained on us and that. And the Mad Major - I remember somebody giggled in the front row and he struck him with his revolver, pulled his revolver and struck him across the face and that. And this was just a very dicey incident. It was so upsetting that they even sent people up from the Vatican City to

11:30 placate us and talking of the Vatican City, the Vatican City did a wonderful job in getting the first communications away to our families and that, so they did an excellent job on that. So there's a good Catholic there for you.

They remained neutral did they not, Vatican City?

Oh well, Vatican City was neutral, a neutral thing and it was a central body for sending this sort of stuff off.

I think they were even hiding a lot of people.

And even the Sydney Apostolic

12:00 Church, it sent my reply off from - sent the reply back to me from my mother and that so the Vatican play, but with this incident they sent people up to try and placate us and that. And we started to say.... Then they sent a Italian general. I've never seen a general with so much salad [medals] on him. He'd outdo any American I thought with all these decorations

12:30 and ribbons all over his chest and that. And he was an old man and no doubt he'd been fighting in Libya and all those places and that.

Did you say salad?

Oh, we call it salad yes, and that so he came and you wouldn't believe what happened. The entrance to the place was through a wicket gate, you know with a steel, a big steel gate and it had a wicket door that you came through and wouldn't believe what happened. Well, they've got us all on parade, he

13:00 tripped and fell on his face. He fell on his face and we didn't know whether to laugh or clap and that because see when, see what upset them in the first place. When they said we were naughty boys and we were gonna be confined to barracks, we clapped and that. We were a bit arrogant I guess and that. And they had some of the boys - they were, took a lot of the boys out and photographed them and that. And especially if they had beards. I think they were, thought they were

13:30 Ned Kellys [Australian outlaw] or some something and they photographed them and whether they used them for propaganda purposes but we were considered mercenaries, as I said earlier.

How long were you in Prata Isarco for?

Ah...

Am I saying that right?

No, I'd say we were there about, I've got all the dates set down in my book and that.

'Cause I think you went to three camps, didn't you?

Yes, I'd say we were there about four months and then

14:00 we were but things settled down after that. For some reason the major came round and we started to put on concerts and he was invited. We invited the Italian officers and what have you and that. And they came to the concerts and they put on beer afterwards for us.

I expect they would have enjoyed it.

Yeah, they enjoyed it and we had a chap named Firelli, ah Firel was his name and they called him Firelli because he apparently, he'd sung at La Scala [opera house] during....

14:30 And sadly that fella died of cancer in Germany when he finished up as a POW but things improved. We got on very well with the command. You had to get on with the command - but then we had sports, inter competition sports. We were allowed to fraternise with the British again, the sailors. They were down the hill and we were on top of the hill and that. And they open up the gates

15:00 and we used to walk around like caged animals and that. And we'd gaze across because we were on the main railway line heading down south from the Brenner Pass. We were very close to the Brenner Pass and we used to wave to the German soldiers going past and say, "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry." They were heading down, no doubt to go down to Africa, to the desert and that. And so we got sports meetings and I used to be a

15:30 a runner, I was you know. Took part in a lot of sports and things like that and I was recovering from a damaged ligament in my foot and that. And suddenly it came good and we used to play - I lost my amateur status because we used to play for, compete for cigarettes and that because cigarettes became the means of, well the financial

16:00 means to buy other good goods and things like that.

So you...?

I never smoked. I never smoked. See the British, oh the Red Cross then was playing a big part because they were sending these food parcels and we were well off, you know with these food parcels of one a week and things like that. They got cigarettes, chocolate and they would be fulla niceties, you know from tinned meats and things

Was this...?

And bacon, all that stuff.

Was this British Red Cross dropping them or was it...?

No, it was international.

It was the International Red Cross?

The international - we got them,

16:30 I know we got Canadian parcels. We got them from the British but none from Australia strangely enough. We had them from Argentine and things like that, and as I said earlier, that I was a bit surprised to find that the Red Cross originated in northern Italy during the World War I and that. Which is very interesting because I was always associated only with Geneva, so that was a thing that I learned

17:00 and I've got a pamphlet to that in that regard there put out by the Red Cross. So we were having sports

and that was good and I think I won about five lots of cigarettes or something. And my mates were all backing me too because I was the, amongst the best runners in the place and the best jumper and that. And I was a skinny kid with, you know for some reason or other I was fleet of foot. Maybe running away from the enemy, who knows, so

17:30 they decided to shift us. Coming towards winter and they were going to autumn's along and the mountains beside us looked beautiful. They're covered with all these vineyards, you know terraced vineyards and all the leaves were different colours. It was a magnificent sight and finally they carted us away and we were going into a colonial camp. The British were to go down south down to a place called Sulmona down at the south of Italy

18:00 and that. And we were going to the Yugoslav border and that. And I said to myself and I wrote in my diary, "I wonder if one day I'll come back here." Never been back. So we went across by train and one little happy incident or funny incident that happened was that you know we had tea or something and we put the tea in the, our dixie [cooking pot] and said, "Would you get hot water from up the engine for us please to make our tea?"

18:30 And of course that was rather amusing because...

So who did you ask to do that?

Oh, the guards.

The guards?

And the guard looked at it and said, "Oh that's rubbish." So he threw it out - he came back with bloody water and that stuck in our memory. So we get to Udine, near the Yugoslav border, and we take the train from there, a side track down to a place called Cividale. And then we had to walk I'd say a few kilometres to camp. This camp number

19:00 57, which was on the plains where there was a big battle fought in World War I there and that. In fact some of the ruined churches are still there to this day with - they've been hit by artillery and things of that like. So we go into this camp and this was I was put in hut 18, which was nearest the command post. And this camp was properly administered by a

19:30 fascist colonel and he was a tough gentleman, believe me. His name was Calcaterra and that. And we used to call him 'The Pig' of course. And even if you were a darker complexion you were 'The Black Mamba' and everybody got nicknames, especially the enemy and that but he was such a fascist that - but he administered his camp and he had it really under control and he said, "Nobody's ever escaped while I've been in charge." and that. And on the walls of his office, in

20:00 Italian was a quotation from one of Mussolini's speeches which said, "All English are accursed but more accursed is an Italian who helps them," and these were his very words you know and that was his attitude. So we're there and decided that we should have our hair off 'cause we were fulla lice and it was probably a very sensible approach but being Australians we objected.

20:30 "We're not gonna have our hair off," and next thing we had the, what we called the incident which we call the hair raid. So they came and said, "You're going to have your hair off," and that. And he surveyed the scene, the colonel there, big portly looking bloke, and we said, "No, we're not gonna have our hair off." And it was the sensible thing to do in view of the lice and that we were suffering from and we

21:00 said, "It's too cold. It's coming up winter." So the next thing they come in with machine guns and with, armed with manacles, you know leg and arm irons and things like that and they - fortunately I was in the first group being hut 18 and that. And fortunately for me they ran out of the gear before they got to me, otherwise I would have finished up and been charged with mutiny. They took these fellas

21:30 away and put them in solitary confinement in a prison within a prison, which was the amusing thing, and that's a story in itself. But I won't get too deep into that but they were then forced out of our camp, put in another camp over near Genoa, a place called Chiavari and that. And they all finished up in Germany as POWs after awhile.

Did you...?

They had a

22:00 pretty tough time, I believe in the thing but we used to send, had to send food over to 'em and the, you know we'd have things with cigarettes hidden inside, they weren't allowed to have cigarettes.

Did you think...?

They weren't allowed to have Red Cross parcels or anything of that nature.

Did you have any idea at this stage that you were doing a little bit better than the German POWs? Did you know how badly they were off comparatively?

Oh I think, I don't think the Germans treated our boys too badly in my opinion because I was never there see. But

22:30 you know compared to the Japanese, my God we were in the Waldorf Astoria, I'd say compared to that. But things settled down for awhile and you know we ran sports, we ran quiz competitions, concerts and that. And I really hand out a lot of, you know kudos to the people that did this organising and it was well organised.

The Red Cross?

No, no, no, no, no.

Oh, the organisations within?

Within

23:00 the prison camp. See because the highest ranked man in our prison camp other than a padre or a medical officer was a warrant officer.

That's a fair way up the rung is it not?

Yes, and that's right but I was only a gunner, as you well know.

Were you still a corporal at this stage?

Oh. No, no, no. As soon as I went to the other regiment - I went to the 3rd Light Ack Ack - I lost me rank. Oh, I had

23:30 to but my war was short lived as you can imagine.

So how long were you in this camp for?

Well, there till April 1943, but along the track you know a tunnel was dug and so many men got out through much to the horror and thing. But they all got caught and brought back in and that's an interesting story in itself.

What, were they treated badly when they were brought back or just returned?

Oh, they got knocked

24:00 around a bit and that because that's their way of you know punishing you and that. And of course they were put into solitary confinement for a time but what happened was that, you know we played cricket, we played football, we played baseball and that. We made our balls out of string, you know out of the string off the Red Cross parcels and some of the

24:30 fellas were expert at making these balls to use and that. And I used to be in the baseball team, I was in the cricket team and that. And then we used to have bridge tournaments and things like that. In fact a mate and I, we won one of these bridge tournaments and that. There was about four thousand people in the camp because new people'd come in, you know from the desert that had been captured and that. And it was interesting too.

Always Australians?

Oh well, the Australians and New Zealanders

25:00 because we were a colonial camp. See we were different. We were colonials, and we were treated as colonials too so but a terrible, you know when on Red Cross parcel day, it was an interesting thing. It was like a market place. Fellas you know give and swap and things like that. We'd, you know swap cigarettes, I would swap cigarettes for chocolate and things like that or you didn't like this tin, a meat you'd swap it for a tin, a bacon or and things or and it was like a market place fellas. We'd all

25:30 gather round in one area and what have you. Then a bad thing, a terrible thing happened. The first winter was very cold; it was minus twenty three, which was pretty low for an Australian. There wasn't, we still hadn't got our gear then but it came later.

How were you dressed at this stage?

Oh, we were still in our boiler suits. This is the early part and that but then we got good stuff. They sent us stuff from out of Egypt, you know uniforms and things of that like but then

26:00 unfortunately they cut our rations by sixty per cent. And that is a hell of a cut and that. And we only used to get a piece of bread like a roll, which was two hundred grams or two fifty grams. It was only a little roll like that and they would think, and then we used to get two meals a day which was sloppy cabbage leaves and things of the like. And if we were lucky to get a piece of meat on a Thursday, it was about

26:30 half the size of your thumb. That was your piece of meat.

Why was...?

The Red Cross parcels cut out the same time. See there was some hold up for six weeks and next thing we got fellas down with beri beri. We lost a few through beri beri, which is the lack of vitamin B in the nervous system, and that. In fact, I finished up in hospital for ten weeks with beri beri and blood

poisoning from a problem with my foot and in fact...

Were you swollen up at this point?

Oh

27:00 yes, I had a great red streak going right up my leg into my groin and that. And my foot was like the size of a football and they had to - and my mates carried me to the infirmary and I had to be treated and operated on even - and I remember they said They couldn't believe that a man could have so much strength. They were holding me down and that." And just before I went out they said "I nearly threw a sergeant, an Italian sergeant and one of the other orderlies",

27:30 but I finished in ten weeks in a military hospital in Udine. Oh gee.

Separate to the camp, I take it?

Oh yes, oh yeah they took us; they didn't keep us in the camp so they sent us into this hospital and that, a military hospital, and gee they were lovely to us. The sisters were all nuns; you know nursing sisters and that. And used to come pat me on the head and call me bambino and said I was too young to be at the war because I was still only looked about sixteen and that. That's what they said and that. I said, "Oh no, I'm

28:00 over twenty, I'm twenty and that or twenty one."

Just before you go on...

So I spent ten weeks.

Why did they cut the rations?

I don't know. They said there was a lot of to do with oh, I think it was a general cut because of the war I guess and see don't forget this in 19...

It wasn't disciplinary?

No, I think this was in late 1942.

Yep.

They were coming up to the winter of '42 and oh gee we felt it because if you've been sitting in the sun, you stood up and you

28:30 blacked out and you'd fall over. We lost interest in sports, we lost interest in everything although I must admit -and this is a thing that's come to me in recent times - do you know that never once did it enter our mind that we'd lose the war. Never believed we'd lose the war. That's incredible. I just don't understand it because everything was against us as you well know, because we'd been driven out of France, we'd been driven out of right back to, into

29:00 Egypt by the German, Rommel's forces in the desert.

How do you account for the indefatigable spirit of the Australians?

I don't know whether it's indoctrination, I don't, maybe we felt superior and that. I should never have felt superior because after all I was a prisoner of war wasn't I?

It's interesting though. You're not the first person I've heard to say that.

No, it never entered our head and they did the nastiest thing. When they had a PA [Public Address] system in the camp right throughout the camp and when they

29:30 got Tobruk back, they were, they gloated about it. They told us and I tell you what, it upset a lot of the fellas because they'd, you know they'd fought hard to hold Tobruk.

Had a lot of them been there?

Oh yes, and a lot of the POWs came through from the thing when the Germans overrun the place in the early days and they the, it was the Tobruk Rats that did a

30:00 wonderful job. And it's only when they put, oh I won't mention the other country lot in there that, they lost the place.

Did any of them lose hope?

So we were, I'm in the hospital and I, my foot's been operated on and that but there was no you know quarantine or anything like. I had a fellow die just up two beds from me for tuberculosis and I had another fella right beside me, a New Zealander, that had meningitis and that. And I was

30:30 intrigued when they used to drag the fluid off his spine with this great lumbar punch. Rather sickening sight but he, actually he raved and raved and a priest used to come round, an Italian priest, and that. He spoke excellent English and that. And he said, "I'll give you something for your foot." And he had

made up a shoe for my foot because I hadn't been walking and that. And you know the, where they'd operated on as soon as it scabbed up. They'd

31:00 come along and pull the scab off with a pair of things and I'd say, "You rotten so and so's." I used a bit a bad language.

Were they doing that to make sure that it would drain?

Oh yeah, keep it draining all the time.

Yep.

And you know in those days we weren't as far advanced as we are on medical side today but we were there and I think I was in there for ten weeks. Suddenly, I went practically blind. I couldn't read any letters from home because

31:30 of the beri beri and I had numb parts in my body and that. And you could stick a pin in me and I wouldn't feel it you know. And I numb my hands, and as I said but finally they sent me back to the camp after ten weeks. The parcels had started again and it's April 1943 and they decided they're gonna send us out to work camps to work in the rice fields or the wheat fields over in the Lombardi plains. So we,

32:00 they called for volunteers. They got a lot - none, and they, then they said, "Oh well, if you're a farmer you gotta go."

So you woulda been right in line there?

Yeah, no not really because I'd been in the motor industry. I was although I'd been a member of a young farmers club when I was a kid at school.

They didn't know about your fruit picking skills?

Well I, oh no or anything of that like, so they decided in the end, they decided that they're gonna detail us off so they started detailing them off. Now, I

32:30 coulda got out easily by telling them how ill I was because I hadn't recovered and I had no strength or anything and in the end I said, "Don't say anything, don't say anything, I'm going, I'm going. I've gotta get out."

Just after you were ill, did you...?

Yes.

You had that sense that you couldn't stay there any more?

Mmm.

Were you worried that you would not make it if you stayed?

Well, you know I felt I had to get out.

Mmm.

33:00 **Was it to do with, okay?**

It's another one of those right decisions I made.

Yeah.

And in fact I couldn't carry my gear, the boys carried it, and we got on the train and we were shipped right across through northern Italy right across through Milan or Milano as we knew it, to a place called Vercelli, which is between Turin and Milan, near the Autostrada [highway system]

33:30 and that links up those roads. That was a magnificent road by the way and I'll be tellin' you more about that later. And so we were at Vercelli and we were being split into, there was a few hundred of us and we were being sent to various camps. And I've got the names of all the camps there but the main control was called camp, work camp 106, number 106, and we were shipped out to

34:00 this cicina [?] or it's a collective farm type of thing in the rice field. They're quite huge and I know the size of the areas and I need to look it up if you want it but the way out of the, it's a fourteen kilometre walk out there. But I hung onto the cart and that. And occasionally they'd put me on the cart, which was good.

It's a wonder you could walk at all.

Yeah, but they put us into this cicina, which

34:30 was called Cicina Oskiena [?]. Oskiena was the name of it and they put us in barracks, the fifty of us. We were broken up into groups of fifty and fifty here, fifty went there and so forth and the idea was that they'd then break us up into two groups a twenty-five to work in the rice fields and that. So twenty-five had to go off during the day and so on, but strangely enough and by coincidence the barracks that they

put us in,

35:00 we were pretty tight, you know fifty blokes jammed into - they had German prisoners of war there during World War I you know and that because the fella that ran the place, I think he had it on lease at the time was called Padrone. Il Padrone was the boss and La Pradona was his missus. She was a tough bird too.

Could you speak Italian by this stage?

No, I had an inkling. I was starting to pick it up and boy it was a few months later I really got into

35:30 it and picked it up in next to no time but we worked in the rice fields and that. The job was to prepare the paddy fields and that. And when they put water in them, we refused to go in and plant the rice but they used to bring the seasonal workers in from the cities and they came in from Milan. They were called mondini actually, and they were the seasonal workers and they would work in the rice planting the rice

36:00 and that. And we refused and they accepted it. I said, "We can't go in that water," and that. And whether we were pushing the Geneva Convention, I don't damn well know at the time.

And did you do that because you knew it would kill you eventually or did you do that because you thought the more resistance you could offer the better soldier you were being?

No, no, no, no, that never entered my head. No, but except that we worked, you know picking up manure and spreading manure and things like that and we worked

36:30 alongside women and that. And you know it was interesting because the women, which surprised us, if they wanted to, you know a natural incline for urination, they'd just sit, squatted down beside us and we learnt to do the same thing because there was no inhibitions and that. And we had one old man with us, the rest were women. One of them, who was the leader, and that they reckon we weren't good

37:00 workers and they and I'm sure they were right.

Well, you were a bit tired?

Yeah, that's right and of course you know with their hands blistered and things like that but after six weeks we were back where we belonged you know. We were diggers again [soldiers], you know ah very fit, very fit and that. What with the sun you know and that. And we were exposing our bodies and we were as tanned and things like that but we worked alongside these women and that.

37:30 And they had one, who was the forelady no doubt and she was, we used to call the Il Cavello, which was the horse, which meant the horse and that. Because she was the pace setter and that but this little old fella who was a socialist at heart wanted us to bomb, telling us we should bomb the Vatican, we should bomb Rome and all this type of thing and teaching us how to bludge. Not that we needed to be taught but he said you know, "You make a coupla motions with your spade," and

38:00 then he said, "Then occasionally you pick up a little bit and move it," and that. And it was rather amusing because he was a fiend but he became a great friend after awhile.

Were you patrolled very much at this point or...?

Oh, we had guards.

And they, did they come by and watch you work and make you work harder?

Oh no, we had guards with us. We were taken out under guard and what have you. One incident that happened there and it shows that we were, see it was obvious that the people were disenchanted and that suddenly the Allies are on top,

38:30 they're winning the war. We're coming into Sicily and things like that and they'd had, they could see that, you know that it could be the end of fascism, which they generally the, a lot of people hated it but then of course there was the thing. It was like the Liberal and Labor party and you know I guess they were split between the fascists and split with the anti-fascists and a lot of communists core that were, which was fairly dormant because it couldn't reveal it's head or hand because it would

39:00 be put away, you know incarcerated and that. But one incident that happened which sticks in my memory too, and it's in my diary, the one of the guards was a little Sicilian and he told me to, he said, "You've got to put your shirt on in front of the ladies." And we'd been walking round with shirts off and a pair of daggy old shorts and he said, "You've got...." thing and I ignored him and next thing he's got his rifle jammed in my stomach

39:30 and I thought, "Hello," and I looked him straight in the eye. And do you know he looked down and lowered the rifle. We were winning the war see and that, and I thought "My God, what a stupid thing to do."

Tape 3

00:31 **With the story, so you're in the fields?**

Oh what, with the shirt incident or...?

Yeah, well you just actually, 'cause I interrupted you. You'd just finished telling me about the guard who lowered his eyes and...

Yeah, after he had his rifle jammed in my stomach.

Yeah.

And that. And it's written - it's in my diaries and so he lowered the rifle and walked away and that. And but as soon as he walked away I put my shirt on. Because I thought well

01:00 we can't, you know the man can't lose face to that extent but we had a couple of interesting incidents and that. We had to go down and to the pump in the cicina [?] to get our - or the farm buildings to get our water because we didn't have water laid on and that. And we wanted them to load the water back to our barracks. We had to wash in the creek, and the creek or one of the canals. Tremendous

01:30 canal system throughout there. The Cavour Canal is one of the top engineering feats ever developed and that. And supplying the water to the rice fields and what have you through the Lombardi plains but we - our toilet was above the droppings went into the water and that. And then floated past it but one of our boys did a terrible thing. He's out there with the guards where we washed and that. And

02:00 he saluted the things going past. And oh gee whiz that really caused a - they beat him up you know and so we went in these barracks and we're jammed in them and they're hot and stifling and that. Fifty of us, you know three beds high and we went on strike. Believe it or not. The Italian word is 'sciopero'. We went on strike and that. In typical Aussie fashion

02:30 but gee just as well weren't, the Japanese weren't in charge of us or anything of that like, or the Germans for that matter.

Who did you approach when you went on strike?

We said, "We're not gonna work." We just said, "We're not working anymore." So they took our camp interpreter away and sent him off somewhere else and said "He wasn't controlling the situation". And we were singing songs and that. And annoying the guards and one thing we were singing, "Mussolini won the war,

03:00 pigs arse he did, pigs arse he did," and that. And the guards come flying in and I nearly copped a rifle butt through my head you know. I just got out of the way in time and this fella that had already been beaten up. They grabbed him again and took him out and beat him again and that but it settled down. We said you know, "We want the doors opened on the barracks. It's too stifling in here," and they made us take our boots off

03:30 every time. Our boots were kept outside and that. And we were confined to these barracks and they said, "Oh no, we've got to keep control of you," and what have you.

There's still only about fifty of you here?

No, there's only fifty of us.

Yep.

In this particular camp, so we got the strike on and I think it lasted about three days and in the end they settled it all down and that. Gave us our rations back, gave us

04:00 more rations.

So you got your negotiations going?

And they were being kind to us and that. And they opened the doors. They had the last laugh you know. The bloody mosquitoes, they ate us alive 'cause you know imagine all this water around in those rice fields and those canals and that. And those mosquitoes came in their droves. In a lot of camp work camps the boys used to burn cow dung and stuff like that to create a smoke

04:30 screen to keep them at bay, so we're back at work and we got on very well then.

Are you sick with malaria from the mosquitoes?

I never, no I never heard of any cases of malaria but another incident that happened too as I was about to tell you before we used to go down and get our water and carry our water back to the camp. They put the water on too after the strike and that. And I used to go down and get the water and a lot of little Italian kids running around

05:00 and I wanted to play ball with them and the next thing I got beat up by a big husky Italian soldier and

that. He kicked me and what have you and grabbed me by the throat and I thought he was gonna choke me, the rotten sod. But however - the women started screaming and the women, the farm women made him let me go you know. So after that there was a, you know nothing further on that. Right, now we're coming to the main part. We were in Italy. We

05:30 landed, we're taken Sicily. We've landed in Italy at Calvera and it's April the 8th in 1943. An armistice had been signed between the allies and Marshall Medolya [Badoglio], who'd taken over. Mussolini had been deposed and that.

Was he still alive at this point?

Oh yeah, ooh he's gonna play a big factor in what happens from now on and

06:00 I remember they come rushing up from the, we didn't have a radio or anything. They came rushing up from the cicina [?], from the farm buildings and they're yelling, "Laguera afinita, laguera afinita," which means, "The war's over," and that. And we couldn't believe it because I remember I was playing pontoon, so we were throwing the card, we threw the cards away and everybody was trying to be nice to us. The mondini who'd arrived to plant the rice used to

06:30 I don't know whether they were trying to get in and we were trying to get out but there was a thing till the guards drove them away. And said they weren't allowed but they used to come and sing to us and everything you know and oh so the war's over. So we thought. 'Course it was over alright but the Germans controlled the country. See they'd moved their troops in and they must have had a bit of an inkling in this and they rescued Mussolini as you well know. And then they formed the social

07:00 republic and that under Mussolini but what happened was see they'd been disenchanted for quite some time and they didn't like fascism because they were being big strikes in Turin and that. And the country was in turmoil but still the Germans were controlling it. So we're there and we're caught up in this and we thought, "Oh well," they said, "You'll be home for Christmas." What a load a rubbish. It had to be another two years before I got home and

07:30 they said, "You'll be home for Christmas," and that. And so all it done was split the country in two, the fascist and the anti-fascist and from there on it became a civil war in my opinion. And we were there and they were trying to keep us in and the Germans were occupied Vercelli, you know the city that was nearby and they'd grabbed all the fellas out of the, all the POWs, out of the big camps and shot 'em

08:00 off to Germany and that. And no doubt you'll pick that story up and we were, they were trying to to keep us under control and we said, "Oh, this is no good. We've got to get to Switzerland even if we've gotta be interned, we'll we'd better off to get to Switzerland while things are disrupted." And some of the boys, a couple of my mates, they went, walked all the way to the south. Went through the German lines. Disguised as peasants and that. And got back to the

08:30 lines but I've got all those stories there in print if you want them and then so we decided we'd, what we'd do we'd try for Switzerland ourselves. You know we hung around for awhile but we left the camp. We abandoned that camp. They tried to stop us but we said, "It's hopeless." So I believe as soon as we went they threw their arms away, the Italians because a lot of them, you know with the armistice had dropped their arms. You know the ones that were in Albania

09:00 and the ones that were in Yugoslavia and the like. So we're trying, we tried to get to Switzerland, the whole secret to get to Switzerland was to be able to get a guide to guide you through those tremendous mountains. You know they're over up to four thousand metres and they're big mountains in the Italian Alps and that. And unless you had a guide to take you through the thing - but the Germans were getting the main areas under control and the border, they closed the borders off

09:30 and that. But you had to go off and get through on or what they call the smugglers of the black market tracks and things of the like, which was pretty rife I believe. So we tried and we could not come up with a thing, so we were up in the north of Italy and we're cadging food and I'm learning Italian as fast as anything and we're cadging food. We'd always go the continini or the farm workers, they were the great help. You never went near a house that looked opulent

10:00 or anything of that nature. You always went to the farm, the farm workers and that, and they really, they were very sympathetic towards us because suddenly...They're on our side. They're anti-fascist so - but our trips to, we got right up in those Alps near the Swiss border but never made it so we decided well, we'll go south and that to Genoa.

What made it impossible to go further after you'd got all the way up?

Because we couldn't get a guide see unless we

10:30 got a guide and we were a little bit diffident about being interned in Switzerland, which was rather foolish actually as it turned.

So the closer you got the less likely you felt like...?

Oh well, we were prepared to go all the way if we'd had got a guide to go with but see unless you had a guide - because a lot of guys lost their lives you know. They died of altitude sickness, you know like that policeman that died the other day or yesterday. And so we decided we were gonna

11:00 party of four and we were joined by another man, so there was five of us. The fifth man broke away from us and unfortunately got executed later on and that. And I'll tell you all about that but however we're heading for Genoa. We walked across the River Po. Two hundred kilometres, we walked and that. And we got down near...

How long did that take you to walk two hundred kilometres in those conditions?

Oh you, it'd take a week or more and we

11:30 got down towards Genoa in the mountains of Monserrat south of the River Po and wherever you think we had to get off the roads. The Germans were everywhere, they were because they thought that the Allies were gonna land at Genoa and cut off the north and that. But it never happened as we well know and we got there and the people were terrified because we've got rewards on our heads. We were,

12:00 they started off fifteen hundred, which they pushed out to eighteen hundred lira and eighteen hundred lira in those days would be sixty pound sterling you know. Not as compared today where you've got to have about twelve hundred to get an Australian dollar, as we well know, but we're, we decided we can't, people said, "You've got to get out of the area." Because we were in civilian clothes and it's very dangerous and if you were in a sensitive area in civvies [civilian] clothes you could be shot on sight.

12:30 For being a spy or...?

Yeah, that's 'cause we had no weapons or anything and so we headed all the way back north. Went all the way back north into the mountains and that. And we roamed around. We actually made contact with the partisans [Italians against the occupation] but they couldn't give us any arms and we said, "We're not gonna belong to this thing to be shot outta hand without any means of defending ourself," and that. And actually we were in the group called

13:00 Moscatelli who was an avowed communist that had been rescued under an amnesty or something when Italy capitulated and that. And he was well known that and he had one of our Australians from, who was named Frank Jochamson, "Butch" Jochamson because he'd been a butcher by trade. And what he did over there, in fact he had a gold medal and

13:30 God knows what for his exploits and things like that. And he was with Moscatelli, as Moscatelli henchman and that. And actually Butch became a British liaison officer and been to Switzerland, all over the place and got parachuted back in and that but Butch - and they kept telling me, "We've got this fellow, he's the Australian champion boxer," and that. And

14:00 and I thought, "God." Course Butch did play rugby for Queensland; I met up with him after about three days in this damn camp, stuck in the mountains with, rather amusing how we got interrogated and that. We'd already broken up from the four. We'd broken up into pairs because we drew names. In fact, I suggested we draw names out of a hat for who goes with who and I went with the bloke I didn't want to go with, yet strangely enough we

14:30 survived.

Yes, and the other two?

Ah, they'd be, they two got recaptured very, one fellow who was chap named Burt Ridgeway from the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. He had no teeth and at the time and he was quite ill and so he handed himself back and that because we were asked to hand ourselves back. There was some you know in the early days. As long as you weren't with an underground movement and that. And everything and this Roger Wettinhal [?],

15:00 who was the other guy and that. He was walking along and the next thing he looked back and you, that's a fatal mistake you do when you're walking through enemy territory. Don't look back because if you look back you've got a guilty conscience thing or you're afraid of something, so they grabbed him and he finished up in Germany, so he's very lucky. They there were four of us, five of us. One was executed, two of us survived

15:30 the whole thing right through and the other two were recaptured and that. And that. So I've got this fella Bill Wrigglesworth with me and we were with these partisans and I said to when Jochamson turned up, I said, "Oh, Frank." He was in our Hut 18 at Gruppignano and I said, "Since when were you a champion Australian champion boxer?" "Oh," he said, "You can be the best athlete in the

16:00 world as far as I'm concerned." Because you know I was known for my, you know athleticism but we left them because they said, "We can't give you any arms." I know Jock or Butch as we knew him; he had a Thomson machine gun. Where he got it, I never found out.

That'd be a bit heavy to carry around, wouldn't it?

Oh, Thomson machine gun? No, that's not a, that's a submachine gun you know and that. And we, it was an English

16:30 weapon but where he got it from God knows. But anyhow, we left and we wandered the countryside you

know bludging our way till we came to a place called Medicina. And we were at the in the village getting a drink a water from the, you know the water fountain and that. And this young lad came along and he said, "Come and meet my father and my mother." And that started a great friendship which is still enduring today,

17:00 except the father and mother are dead but the boys are still - the two boys - and they took us into their hearts, into their house and everything and said, "We'll look after you." But there was a price on our heads and anybody get caught the reprisals were murderous because they'd either shoot you outta hand or deport you to Germany to work. Or burn your house down and things of that like and they were nasty, especially the black shirts, the fascist black shirts

17:30 and that who were occupying the area with, oh whatta they call them? Where you, not battalions where the, not barracks where they put them garrisons, they had these garrisons all strategically placed all over the place because that area where we were was well known for its textiles and that. Because the Italians loved to talk to me about the Australian wool and

18:00 the merino wool and how fine it was and how they used to buy it and things like that. And it turned out that all these textile mills everybody worked in the textile mills and they were making uniforms for the Germans and making uniform thing. Even in the end they were making uniforms for the partisans too, so they were going both sides but so we were with this family in Medicina and their name was Confienza. Confienza, Cielo and Mariatina. Mariatina was a little woman that was

18:30 scared of the dark but she was a gutsy, gutsy woman. So we were with them and you know we'd go and hide out during the day and so on but the...and then come back and sleep in their place at night and they said we were their extra two sons. They had two sons and said we were their sons and this is the way they treated us.

How long were you there with them for?

Well, we were there for a few little while, not a long time because we were getting too,

19:00 Wigglesworth and I were worried stiff because as I said the price was on our head and if we get, it's amazing what some people do for money. So we said, "We've got to get away from you," and just as well we did. We moved and we went into a maize field. We used to help the old ladies, you know gather their firewood and work in their little plots of ground on these steep stony

19:30 mountain sides or hillsides and that. And it was incredible how they gleaned a little bit of a crop here and a little bit of crop there. So we we're out in this maize field and we cut the maize and we built ourselves a humpy [shelter] out of maize not far from the village. I'd say about a kilometre and a half and the, it was beautiful too when the snow was on top of the little humpy, it was warm as toast. They gave us blankets and things like that. Gave us the food

20:00 and things like that through this Confienza family. Then one morning the whole village is surrounded by troops because they were after us. They knew we existed and that because there was...

And people would have talked along the way, wouldn't they?

Oh, there was a spy.

Yeah.

There was some spies in the village who were later eliminated by the partisans actually. They didn't die easy too, believe me,

No.

And the Mariatina was staggered. She said, "I've got to warn

20:30 them," because you know we'd be seen just after dawn. And she came out with her basket full of washing and that. And they used to walk down about four hundred metres to the creek at the bottom where they used to bash the clothing and wash their clothing on the rocks. And the guard said, "No, you can't go down there. You can't go down there," and she said, "Look, I've gotta do my washing. I've gotta do my..." This little woman that was frightened of the dark. They finally let her through and as soon as she got down, lower down she raced round the hill and warned us. We were still

21:00 sound asleep and that. And you know said, "Via via via," which means, "Get away, get away, there's Todesci." They always called them whether they were Italians black shirts or Germans they would everybody was Todesci, see. And so we shot out and waited till all was clear and then came back and the village and said, "That's enough. We're not going to put you people under duress any more. We're going to move." So we went

21:30 out into the hills and we lived in a cave for awhile. There was a great sloping rock and I used to look up at that rock and I said, "This bloody rock." I said, "If that moves." I don't know what the hell happened because it's probably been there for millions of years but it was a huge rock and we were there and by this time we were joined by two Englishmen. Oh no, we hadn't been joined by two Englishmen. We were in this cave and

22:00 a bloke came past along the creek with a shotgun and he's out ostensibly to shoot hares. A lot of hares in the area and he spoke to us and he said, "Do you want some food?" And things like that and when we reported back to the, to Confienzas, they said, "For God sake you've got to go. Move fast. Get going straight away."

They knew who he was?

Yeah, they knew him. See, he was the one that's spying for the

22:30 fascists, so we moved out and we built a beautiful A-framed place outta heath. Took us a few days and that. And we called it Australia House, this is just Wigglesworth and me, the two of us, and in amongst the damn little snakes that were there. What are those darn little vipers? Little vipers they were there runnin' around and that. And we'd kill anything that moved in those days. And we built this thing on this, what we thought was

23:00 private in the hills and that. And next thing it turned out the fella that owned it, owned that area even though it was in the bush, came out and begged us. He cried and he said, "Please go. They'll shoot me, they'll shoot me. They'll shoot me. Please go away. Go away. I want you to go away and pull it down." So we pulled it down and then we went and talked to Cielo and said, "Alright, we're going to get

23:30 away from the village. We're gonna move a long distance away."

Did you have a plan at that stage?

No, to survive that's all.

So you just thought you'd stay there for as long and things sorted themselves?

Yeah, see we thought the war'd be over in five minutes.

Right.

But like hell. It took nearly two years.

Yep.

And we said, he said, "Alright." He said, "We've got a plan too." He said "There were three Englishmen in the village next door up the road somewhere".

Being hidden?

He said "They've been chased out - just two of them escaped and one got shot and that

24:00 or got wounded and that". What happened to him and the people got carted away and what happened to them I never ever found out and neither did the two Englishmen. One was called Ernest Manners and he was a milkman in London. He used to pedal the milk round in a little trolley and that. And deliver milk and the other fella came from Southhampton way and that, and his name was Bert. So we, they said, "What we want to do, we've decided we're going

24:30 to [go] through central body," and that was through the Cielos, Cielo Confienzas. "We're going to supply the food and that. And you can come and collect once a week of a Sunday. You'll come and collect and we want the two Englishmen to be with you." So the four of us - so we went in and we hunted and hunted and we came into a ravine type part a country about eight kilometres away, oh eight to ten kilometres away and we dug in the side, we borrowed

25:00 some tools and we dug in and we went underground. We literally lived underground for a few months and that. And we built in the side of the thing and then we camouflaged it and from the top of the hill you couldn't see make it out you know. We'd camouflaged it that well but it got a bit dicey. There were patrols, German patrols, and then we saw fascist patrols and that but we always had an escape plan. We were clever and that. And we were like; you know we used to say I wrote in my diary.

25:30 I said, "Now I know how a fox felt," you know being chased by from pillar to post but we knew how to stay one step ahead and we definitely stayed one step ahead.

So you stayed indoors or underground most of the day?

Oh, no, no, no, no, not necessarily. If we saw a patrol, we withdrew down the ravine down, we had a lovely little creek there which we washed in and what have you and got our water. And then we'd climb into the country was covered in this heath, you know that high and you could crawl into that heath. And it's like

26:00 lookin' for a needle in a haystack see and that's thing and once we thought the coast was clear we'd go back but it got a bit dicey. They put a garrison very close to us, a German garrison mind you, and we saw one of them saw their patrols and that. But we used to do our cooking at night, so that we wouldn't betray any smoke and we kept guard from dawn till dark. From dawn till dark we kept

26:30 the, we'd climb up the hill and I've written a story there which the [Department of] Veterans' Affairs got and that. And we'd keep guard from dawn till dark. And then it's quite interesting reading because it

tells you all about that whole, then the next thing every Sunday night we went in. We took it in turns and going in pairs. It was a pretty dicey sort of a walk in these trails through these hills. What they call collina rossi, they were red hills, and that. And

27:00 we'd go in and get the food. They had the bag of food ready for us and a bit a wine and stuff like that. And we used to have a rendezvous and collect the stuff and that from Cielo's house but I'll never forget, one night we went in there and he didn't appear. He was to meet us outside the village this night and he didn't appear and apparently the fascists or the black shirts had a patrol in the village and in the end I went in my stockings, I used to take my boots off because your boots

27:30 make an awful noise on the cobblestones at in these villages and that. And I collected all the stuff while the fascists were in there and that. And carted it back to the boys. But oh gee, when it rained it was terrible because we couldn't keep the place dry because in April they've got a saying in Italy that, "In April it rains for thirty-one days." Do you get it?

Yeah.

Thirty-one days they say and that. And

28:00 so in April was a terribly wet month and that when we were out there. Now it comes to we...

So how...?

Nobody ever found that place by the way. Never found it. I went back after the war looking for it. Guess what? It's a lake now. They've made a water empowerment of it. Of the whole area where we were.

So just fill me in again? After you've left the work camp and the armistice has been called?

Mmm.

And you've set off on this journey.

28:30 Yeah.

How many months are we talking about that you're on the run? Or hiding out?

Oh, we were hiding out for from September to June 1944.

So a whole winter, you managed to do that?

Yeah, the whole winter we managed that there. We survived that winter and that to June 1944. Alright, the next thing for somehow or other Cielo appears. How he

29:00 found us God only knows. Cielo Confienza. He'd see D-Day. We'd landed in France and that. And he brought the papers out because by then I could read the papers and everything. And I used to translate for the other three guys and that. And so we're back in France. We're back on the continent again and we know that full story and that. And I said, "Oh well, if that's the case Cielo we

29:30 will join the partisans. We will now join them provided they can arm us." See, because we thought well they could arm us. So they gave us a farewell from the thing. Oh gee, the people you know they came on.

So for six months they knew you were there?

Only a small group.

Yeah.

And that because the spies had been carted away and eliminated by the partisans and that. And we didn't have a lot of regard for these partisans because we thought they were, you know paying off a lot of

30:00 old scores because it's just like of a different political persuasion that you would, you know eliminate your opposition and that. And that's what transpired in a lot of cases.

But I'm just wondering in the last ten minutes if you could take me from where, how you got out of Italy, joining the partisans, getting back to and basically getting back to Australia. I know that seems like cramming it but...

Alright, then.

I will come

30:30 **back and ask more questions about it.**

Alright then. Well, we joined the partisans and the HMS Hermes. We were in detachment of thirty-six. I was in the 12th Division. There was the underground force. Basically, the core...

So, did they have their own divisions?

Oh yeah we, oh we were a real army.

Yeah.

See we had battalions, brigades and what have you but see up to a division, you'd be lucky to make three thousand men, see because we had a detachment

31:00 which'd be equivalent to a company, which is two hundred Australian. In our infantry battalions it would be thirty-six men would be the maximum and then they're broken down into squads of twelve to fifteen guys, three squads, but the system was exactly the same as ours. Except that the numbers were a lot less and we'd, each detachment had its military commander and we had an eighteen year old boy that -

31:30 see they were all called up to be to be conscripted but a lot of them opted to become partisans and that. That was the thing but the hard core was definitely marxist. There's no question about it, although we had never democrats and we had the religious groups and you name it, you know justice and liberty and lots of, I think it was about six or seven different factions and that. But it was co-ordinated by some amazing feat of understanding and that because the enemy was common.

32:00 The enemy was the fascists or the Germans and that but we were in this detachment. There was thirty-six of us. We had one rifle, a shot gun and a knife between the thirty-six of us. That's all we had but then a great thing happened. The British parachuted in a mission, liaison mission, and that called Cherokee and that. And the next thing we with the help of radio and contacts

32:30 they had, we got arms and that. I finished up as a Bren gunner the last six months and that, so I had to lump that bloody great heavy thing around and that. And it weighed twenty-six pounds in the old scale. I don't know about what that it is in kilograms but...

Bloody heavy.

Yeah, bloody heavy but especially when you had to carry so many magazines of loaded with bullets and things of that like but we got Sten guns [machine guns], we got hand grenades, we remember how we got plenty of explosive

33:00 and things like that and we had mortars and that. And we became a bit of a nuisance and that. Not that we really did a lot but it, we were there, you know whilst we existed they kept sending troops in against us and we used to evade them and it was all hit and run. Actually, summing it up, it was nasty. It was ambushing and things of that like.

'Cause it would have had to have operated a bit differently to the way the other military forces were simply because...

Oh yeah, we couldn't fight a -

33:30 yeah we couldn't fight a pitched battle because we had no logistics.

No.

See and we were self-sufficient within our own group and that. And you know we cadged the food. I don't know whether they - oh they issued cheques or something no doubt, which were honoured after the war but and that. And we were self-sufficient but oh we had a lot of narrow escapes and things like that and you know we mounted ambushes, as I said, and pulled up railway lines, blew bridges thing and even that Autostrada. We used to send troops down there and so forth and

34:00 then the next thing the garrisons are packing in. They were pretty cruel some of those garrisons and that. And you know they used to fire their mortars indiscriminately around the countryside and that. But we controlled the countryside, they controlled the townships and things like that but they did some terrible things. The Germans in particular, it's horrendous what happened and we were on top the war. Clark, what's his name? General Clark,

34:30 says "Come on." He was leading the 5th American Army, he said, "Come on boys, get into it." And they crossed the River Po. We got stuck into it and next thing I said to Wigglesworth, I said, "For God sake, these bastards are gonna get us killed if we don't watch out," and that. And we occupied the city of Vercelli. The Germans had pulled back to the Cavour Canal and that. And the fascists all gone into civvy clothes. In fact I've even got the fascist, the fella that no doubt was the commandant; I've got his medal there.

35:00 I've got his fascist emblems and I've even got the flag. I think you saw the flag there. I've got his flag off his wall and that. And I occupied that. We were there when the 5th American Army came in a few days before. Just beforehand we made the first, we had a victory march on May Day. I sang Bandera Rosa with the best of them you know internationale because, you know when you're in Rome you do as the Romans do. And you know we sang The Red Flag and

35:30 things of that like but I'm far from, I'm a liberal man from way back. And so they got us there and then as I say the, a few troops came with reporters and I went out with them, showed them where to go to ask the Germans to surrender. So I was at the thing but I wasn't allowed, they needed colonels and things of that like.

Had you been missing all this time after you'd escaped from the camp?

Actually, I was missing for nearly,

36:00 well over two and a half years. My mother had nothing. Talking about my mother, the - do you want to go into that?

Well, we're gonna we're gonna run out of tape. I just want to get to the end of this

Yeah, well it's interesting the thing about my mother.

Oh, I've got so...

And it's just

I've got so many questions you've got no idea but just when the Yanks came in, did they come in tanks?

Yeah in tanks, yeah.

Yeah.

I met them and I was on guard actually because I controlled the guard because I caught them, the guards asleep. They were very foolish,

36:30 the Italians boys. Young kids you know.

So a whole messy situation there?

And I said that.

How did you get repatriated back to Australia?

I got flown to England.

Right.

Actually, I'm with the British mission in the end you know. I became, I got co-opted to them so I'm in the British Army and they shot me down too all the way. They got me down to Naples but it's a long story what happened and that. I got interrogated by the authorities there. Wanted to know where the hell, the war had been over since May and

37:00 what have you and that, and where have I been? It's June and what have I been doing for a few weeks? So I handed myself back to the authorities and was flown out to England, to the south of England.

Because even after armistice was declared there, it was very messy in Italy for a long time?

Oh God, yes.

With booby trapped bridges and...

Oh, it was pretty shocking and that. And even after

37:30 the war was ended and so on. I've got two very interesting excerpts from my diaries. One is the day war finished in Europe and the day I came home. They really, you should really put them in I think.

Well, just in the last few minutes of this tape tell me about getting, how did you get back from Britain to Australia then and what date was that?

We came home by ship and I arrived in Australia on the, left England, arrived the, we were in

38:00 Eastbourne and then we were shipped up to, trained up to Liverpool, through London to Liverpool. The boys did some nasty things. Stole all the damn Adams cakes that were on the railway station and oh God we got sick a cake by the time we got to Liverpool. And then we were shipped home, I came home on a New Zealand ship called the Rangitiki through the Panama Canal. So I went right round the world see. Through the Panama Canal to New Zealand. Of all places you wouldn't credit where we called,

38:30 Pitcairn Island, so we hove to there, but we couldn't go ashore because they, we were on the ship, the New Zealand ship called the Rangitiki, which was a troop ship. Stayed in New Zealand a day or two then back to Sydney and home on the 8th of September 1945. Nearly five years, I was away.

So just almost like a month after VJ Day [Victory over Japan] and it's all over and you're back

39:00 **and...**

Yeah.

And was your mother there to meet you? Did she know you were coming back?

Oh yes, the telegrams are all there.

Yeah.

They're all there. All the telegrams are there and strangely enough I wrote as soon as I contacted the 5th American Army on the British, I wrote letters to all my family. One to each of them. Do you know those letters didn't arrive till the news came through from Eastbourne in the south of England from the Red Cross to say I'd arrived in England?

Oh.

But there's a

39:30 story about my mother which is interesting.

Tape 4

00:31 **Now, I'd like to take the story back to Crete and arriving in Crete. You've been a soldier for a bit of time now, probably not a lot time?**

Mmm.

But you've probably hit your straps in terms of understanding how it all works?

Mmm.

How confident are you in terms of being in the ack ack regiment? Like pretty good

01:00 **with a gun by this stage, with a Bofors gun?**

Well, I'd say we lacked training. We were because as I said we didn't use the guns till we were in anger. That's when we used them. Until then we ordinary gunners had never fired a shot.

So was there a point when it all went from being a bit of a lark to suddenly very serious?

Oh yeah, because I remember that they told us we had to dig a

01:30 a trench, you know beside the gun emplacement. We had the Black Watch infantry beside us you know, a platoon of them and...

No, I don't actually know the Black Watch. Who are they?

Scottish.

Okay, sorry yep.

2nd Black Watch. Scottish regiment.

Yep.

And that. And they were there on Crete with us and each gun either had some of the 2/4th Infantry Battalion Australians beside them with a probably a platoon and we had a platoon of black watch with

02:00 us and nice guys. We got very friendly. They'd been in Eritrea and Sudan and that. And they were hard cases but they were, you know war hardened and what have you and we used to play cards with 'em and things like that. But we were told to dig a trench and the terrain on Crete is very rocky.

Yeah, I can imagine.

And that. And very hard and we poked around there for a few days and we couldn't get very deep but then

02:30 the next thing is they came and strafed us and by God we dug down next day. We went right down.

So how...?

And we had to have it thing. We covered it with steel and that. And covered it as well to camouflage it and what have you and do you know in all the casualties there, that in amongst our battery, our 7th Battery, the ones that were at Heraklion,

03:00 we never, I think we never had one fatality.

So...

But by the time we'd been sunk off Crete we lost, our battery had lost more men than any other unit on Crete. Did you know that? By one. I've got the figures that we got through the Defence Department. We know exactly how many were killed and

03:30 or were drowned. See, they were considered a casualty anyway.

So when you were sent over to Crete, had you been warned about what was going on in Greece? Did you know that you were there for a rear guard action?

No, I didn't really know what was going on in Greece. Did not know that we were pulling out?

Okay.

Or being chased out actually if you really analysed it.

So when you went to Crete did you think that you were on the advance? From North Africa? Did you think that you know that things were quite good for the Allies at this point to be sent

04:00 **over to that little island? It's a strange place to go.**

Oh, probably never entered our...see we were on our way to Greece as I said, in lustre force, and that. And we got side tracked.

Sure.

Onto Crete. And a lot of evacuees out of Greece were landed in Crete because the Germans were a bit keen for us. They wanted to control Crete because if we controlled it, they reckoned that we would hit their, the oil fields in Romania and those places. Very

04:30 strategic it was.

Yeah.

And that but to service it logistically with the British Navy was horrendous I believe but we lost so many ships. In fact I've got a list of them all there.

How many days were you on Crete before the Germans really started the heavy bombardment?

Oh, I'd say about ten days.

Okay. So you were there and you're set up and you sound a little bit more established than some of the other...

Oh yeah, I first saw my first German plane, was a Heinkel which flew low over us and they used to fly over

05:00 at night and things like that and put their lights on to try and entice us to fire at them, so they could pinpoint where the guns were and that. But most of the time we'd lie doggo and which served because see otherwise they would have never sent those great lumbering Junker 52 paratroop carriers.

Very clever.

And that's because we were told not to fire.

Is doggo letting sleeping dogs lie?

Yes, no well lying doggo just means that you're being a bit foxy. You're not

05:30 betraying your hand.

Yeah.

And that was the reason behind that but it worked beautifully because I think the figure was we got sixteen of those planes and some of them with their troops all aboard you know.

Were they...?

They reckon seventy per cent were casualties out of the two thousand they flew into us.

So you mentioned earlier that you did a bit of signalling during that particular raid but what was your main role within the anti-aircraft regiment there?

Oh, as I was a predictor number.

Predictor number?

Yes,

06:00 because they knew that I was making an allowance to my mother from my meagre pay. I think it was five and sixpence a day in those days that they made me a predictor number, which meant that I got another shilling.

Oh.

Or something like that

That's quite decent of them.

And of course we never used the predictors, otherwise you were gun layers, what they call gun layers, you know that move the barrel up and down like the traverse or you know vertical and things like.

06:30 But of course a Bofors gun fired a shell; a forty millimetre shell which you know was only about that big in, you'd have four like an armour piercing ordinary explosive, a tracer. And I forget, there were four categories and they were in blocks thing and fired very quickly and we were basically gun layers see, so that you know you traverse the guns

07:00 and what have you.

Can you just take me through what you would have to actually have to do in battle under heavy fire? What your actual role was to do, you know like the routine that you went through?

That day? On the day of the...

As a gun layer then?

Oh, as a gun layer, well.

Yeah.

You would fire at enemy aircraft, that's all.

Sure but...

They gotta be low. They can't be way up. Anything way up, you only wasted your thing. You couldn't get to them.

And did you personally have to incorporate, you know versions of mathematics to work out what you had to do at

07:30 **given points or...?**

Oh.

Was it not as scientific as that?

No, wasn't scientific as that. As a matter of fact they used what they call a hose pipe operation and that. You can with the help of the tracer; you can lay it across the plane see. That's how to; see that's why they call them gun layers.

Oh, right okay.

Yes.

So just take me through then with the planes coming over and the set up procedure and when you actually go into firing because if you've been laying doggo for...?

Oh, as soon as

08:00 we get the word we'd take stations as soon as we got the alert. The alerts came through with the flags on that control place see.

Okay, so someone else was up there doing the flags or...?

Oh well, no that's right and I copped it the day of the actual landing, which was a ruddy miracle. I tell you what, when I got back to the guns, that's one of the officers, a lieutenant, named John Mann, who was a Rhodes Scholar actually.

08:30 His father was a chief justice man in the Victorian judiciary and he came looking for me after dark, you know with the bullets going everywhere and what have you. And he came and it was a very dicey thing because see a lot of people'd be shooting at shadows when you get a bit nervous and that. And he came and found me after thing and carted me, got me back to the

09:00 the thing from the gun emplacement to where I was would be a good kilometre and he came and found me and but he, sadly he drowned off the Hereward but the boys back at the gun, they all embraced me because they, I was their babe.

Tell me a little bit about being up doing the signalling then? That must have been a fairly fearsome sight.

Yeah well as I told you, I really I wrote in my diaries

09:30 that I, you know I was, didn't feel too damn good you know.

How far up are you for a start? Like

Oh no, it's only a very small building, this one.

Okay, so it's not a tower.

It's only small. Oh no, it's not a tower. There's but it's the control centre

Right.

Actually and that. And as I said, it got blasted with it. In fact I think the Italians got it from high level bombing.

So they'd know what it was?

Oh yes, because that - well it just happens to be there I guess.

Yeah.

But fortunately I was in the trench, a covered trench with thing and I remember standing

10:00 in the trench and could stand upright in it with my mouth wide open because somebody said, "When you're being subjected to bombs, keep your mouth wide open."

Your teeth might rattle.

And that. And but oh gee I longed for my mates

So how...?

Being quite honest about that.

No, I understand.

It wasn't - it was a bit terrifying.

So it might have only been a number of hours but did it feel like an eternity down there?

Well, I was there from morning from dawn in the morning till dark except

10:30 I finished up as I said with the Black Watch infantry.

Okay, so it's like a, you know like a maybe one of the longest days of your life?

Oh yeah, I would consider it an experience but the whole thing was, this seems funny but the highlight was watching those paratroopers.

Yeah.

It was an incredible sight to see them with all the different colours and things of that nature and that. And seeing them coming down and getting it, oh never mind.

So after you've been doing the signalling and have you been watching planes getting shot

11:00 **out of the sky as you've been doing this?**

Oh we've got no planes. We never had a plane.

I'm sorry I thought you said that you shot...?

Oh no, oh you mean from the guns?

Yes.

Oh yes, I was seeing them gunned down, yes.

Yeah, so when, while you're signalling you're watching this happen?

Yeah, no I wasn't signalling because I was, the whole thing was out of commission.

Okay.

It had already been eliminated as a post and that but it's only when the paratroopers started to land that they got all their guns that had been lying doggo

11:30 all opened up on these lumbering great Junker 52s, which is a very slow plane you know. I think they carried about fourteen people on board them but they were hittin' them with their loads on and so forth and they came in from the sea. You could see them coming in a long line but after that, after they got the...annihilated by us they never landed anywhere near us. They went down the road down the coast a few kilometres away from us but no doubt they were building up their strength

12:00 ready to attack us and eliminate us.

So down in the trench on that one day that you were down there for over twelve hours, I imagine there's nothing to do down there except pray?

Mmm.

Is that what you were doing? You know praying that you'd get through it or praying that something wouldn't have got through or...?

I don't know whether I was praying. I must admit that I didn't feel too good. I was - you know I was a bit scared because as I said I really wanted human companionship.

Yeah.

Because when you're together it's a

12:30 different feeling but when you're one person alone you're isolated. That's why I went over to the black watch see and if I hadn'ta gone there because anything could have happened. If I tried to get over there while these paratroopers are landing, I could'a been shot as an enemy really rather than as a friendly.

Sure. So tell me a little bit about watching the paratroopers come down? You know all these little magnificent mushrooms.

Oh yeah, because they dropped them round the city, round in between us and the city because the aerodrome is a few kilometres

13:00 away from the city and that. And all round the aerodrome but oh they just cut 'em to pieces.

Your guys are busy shooting them out of the sky at...?

The planes we were shooting at.

Yeah, yeah.

We're not shooting at thing but at least I, well I guess I was firing them but you, well you're not talking about killing people because everybody's firing.

Oh yeah.

So you don't know who the hell's killing who.

And in that six weeks that you spent after the paratroopers have come down and you're in Crete, are you moved all over the island in rear guard actions or are you just...?

Oh no, no, no, no.

13:30 We just got evacuated and we hadn't lost any ground. We still had it all.

Okay.

So we went out, you know there was a lot of fighting in the city of Heraklion and that with the Greeks and the or the Cretans and the British and so but we just laid there and everything was quiet. We never hardly got attacked after that because they were no doubt were building up their forces ready to

14:00 come in and take us out but we were very disappointed when they said "We had to go".

Yeah?

To think.

Did you feel like you had it in you to take them on?

Well, I don't know. You're there and that's your job I guess but it was pretty quiet there for some days. See they landed on the 20th or the 21st, I'm not sure, of May and we left on the 29th. See I had my twentieth birthday on Crete.

14:30 **Yeah?**

Yes, and we left on the morning of the 29th. We moved out on the 28th in the dark and we had you know markers where to go. We were told where to go. Not that I was.

What were the markers? Who put them there and how did they operate?

Oh, I think they're markers like bits of cloth or something like that.

Just pointing the way which way to...?

Yeah, we had to follow that but the thing that really sticks in my memory and it never quite goes

15:00 away was the stench of the dead in the city of Heraklion. The smell was overpowering, pervading.

I guess there was no chance for any burials at that point.

Oh well, a lot of them were probably buried in the bloody buildings and things like that had been bombed and so on but that smell never goes away. I can still smell it.

Mmm.

Mmm. I don't know whether the other boys have told you that.

No, I'm just also thinking you had a birthday there and it was Anzac Day while you were there as well.

Well, that's right, yes.

I guess there was no time for celebration then though.

15:30 Oh my birthday? I don't remember. I can't remember. In fact I candidly, I think I had forgotten completely about it.

Yep.

There.

Now I want to talk a little bit about getting on board the boat that got you out of there.

Oh yes.

And you said you were...?

Onto the destroyer.

You were cut off seven short and...?

Oh yeah, because they were transferring using the destroyers because the cruisers couldn't come into the port.

Yep.

The cruisers were out and they were loading these destroyers. I think they had two or three destroyers

16:00 carting them out and putting them on. See, I think we were amongst the last to be taken off. We went off about three o'clock in the morning and they said "We were three hours late" and that's why we got clobbered next morning by the German Luftwaffe [German Air Force]. It was a marvellous shot to put a bomb down a ship's funnel, isn't it?

That was just lucky surely?

Oh well, they're attacking. You know Stukas - see we had Stukas attacking us all the time on Crete.

Yep.

And that. And they go into vertical dives, so they're about seventy degrees and that and

16:30 bit frightening.

Did you see a number of those heading in your general direction?

Oh, we saw them yeah. I've watched them and then they used to have high level bombing as well.

And was there time to take in like how extraordinary that looked as well as the fact that they were a deadly machine that were heading your way? I mean does the brain operate like that under those circumstances?

I think once you - it's like everything else. You know you might experience a bit of fear but once you move into action it's like with the partisans. I found the Italians,

17:00 if they were afraid they demonstrated it, whereas we were afraid we wouldn't demonstrate it see. We sort of you know overcome it and nursed it in our systems rather than they, whereas they're outgoing with their fears and their things and that of that nature, whereas I think as Australians, we were a bit different.

Mmm.

I think and of course once you move into you're active...

Mmm.

It all goes away.

So what's going on among the men as you're getting evacuated from Crete? What are you talking about?

Oh we're too

17:30 tired. We were tired.

You were shagged [exhausted].

We've had it because don't forget we've been under attack for a month and that. And it's tiring because there's probably nerve racking and so forth and I remember going down into this mess deck and putting my head down and the next thing I'm jolted awake by the near miss of the first bomb.

Okay, and that was at night? I've forgot.

No, it was in the morning.

It was in the morning.

It's in the morning, yes.

So can you take me through what that was like? The

18:00 **boat's being hit and you're all being told to go?**

Yeah, to abandon ship and each every man for himself. That was the...

And who's barking the orders? Is it the British?

Oh, I'd say the captain.

Yeah.

The ship's captain and that. And because we didn't see them after they were rescued because they'd go to an officers' camp and we were only the, you know the other ranks so we'd go to different camps. I think the fella that was on the board with me in the end, one sailor drifted away. I think he was an officer because he,

18:30 I never saw him again and that. And I would say that he was taken to a officers' camp.

Sure.

But that was incredible to think that I was still hanging onto that board and got pulled out of the drink unconscious. It's incredible.

It is incredible.

It's - that's my mother.

It's a wonder you survived. It's your mother, is it?

Mmm.

And what's she taught you?

I reckon, I reckoned because she knew there was, I was in trouble on the very day.

She was able to sort of send out...

She had that intuition. She knew it, but I never called for help,

19:00 not once. I was too busy trying to swim to the land.

So you think there was a sense that she'd sent you some sort of energy to keep you alive?

I don't know. It was her intuition. She talked to me in after years and she said that "She knew I was in trouble".

Oh.

She said, "You're in water. Water was everywhere." It's peculiar.

Did she have a sort of a sixth sense for most of her life like that or was it...?

Oh, she had wonderful faith and

19:30 confidence that I'd come back. But even when we, when I went away to the war you know and that. And I lived in Glen Waverley, had the farm here in Springvale Road, and walking up the station with the family all singing, "Onward Christian Soldiers marching as to war," and that. And they told me in after years that they did it all to keep my, you know the fact that I was going away and to make me go away happier and then they were all upset after I left. But I remember the, on

20:00 the station, Glen Waverley station it was, used to be one box train, just one carriage train on the station that and I remember leaning out of the thing and waving to them and I can still feel myself doing it, even today.

You said earlier that when you were given the order to abandon ship you had the presence of mind to fold up your uniform.

Yes, that's amazing, that's training. That is training I'd say because

20:30 see when we got out of our palliasses [straw filled hessian bags] we had to fold our palliasses up then put our gear on tin hats on, before we weren't wearing them and put them on top and I've put that took me uniform, folded it, laid it there, had time and then went down a rope into the drink.

So about how many men are on board?

About five hundred odd.

And are they all at this stage in their singlets?

Oh no. Some were nude. Some survived with their - it depend on what you got hold of. See some got hold of you know decent bits of wood.

21:00 **Sure.**

Which could support them.

And who's...?

And the carley floats. Don't forget there were some carley floats there.

Yep.

And they were absolutely fellas hanging onto carley floats.

Sure.

But a lot of them grew tired and just drifted away. They just drifted away. Let go. Then you got worn out.

Were the carley floats the barges that take you out to the boats?

No, no, no, no, no, no.

What are they?

Carley floats are sort of a rubber thing that they use in aircraft. You know those big round things that the, you know like a

21:30 zodiac type of thing, you know?

Okay alright, so how many would it be able to hold in normal circumstances?

Oh well, I'd say it'd take about ten and then you got all the ropes all the way round hanging on.

Right, it's...

It's a round thing and that.

Like a life buoy but a bit bigger.

An inflatable type of thing and then you'd hang on because I was sitting on it when this fella with this terrible wound came up and I definitely have said, "You get up here mate." I said, "I can swim to land."

22:00 Ha!

So you've got presence of mind to fold up your uniform? So you are you operating in a state of calmness at this point? Like you've been hit and you're not far from enemy territory.

Funny thing. I must admit never felt fear. Never once did I have any fear. It's an incredible thing, you know probably the comforting thought was that land that you could see in the distance. Even though they estimated it was forty kilometres away, I think that was the factor that. See because I

22:30 spoke to other people and they said "Ah that's how they felt but I was - you're busy". You're busy. You're trying to achieve something so therefore it's like you know starting action. Once your action starts the fear sort of goes out the door.

Can you recall the feel of the going into the water after climbing down the ropes?

Yes, I thought how bloody cold it was. No, I went down to the ropes and I watched the fellas dive off the deck and I thought, "Gee that's a terrible dive. I can't do that."

23:00 But quite a few some of them jumped, well one particular guy that was out of our unit he jumped overboard with a Bren gun, so he went straight down because he can't swim. A lot, they couldn't swim. Some stayed on the ship because she was - you know they put explosive in the ship so that she'd blow apart and sink because see it was immobilised. It wasn't sunk till later. It was sunk afterwards.

So it wasn't in danger of going down?

When I looked round, oh some time later I looked and the ship was gone. It had disappeared

23:30 over, gone down.

There was no fire on board or around the boat?

No. A lot of people got killed on board, you know with the bomb.

Right, so when it actually went down had the engine room and the explosion occurred?

Oh no, I'd say they put explosives in it to hasten its demise.

Sure.

Either that or opened it up. I don't know, I'm not privy to what went on there.

Before getting off the ship, did you see men dead around the around it or...?

Oh, I told you about the

24:00 guns.

The man that was shot?

Oh yeah, well yeah he was in a big one of those things they put the silly people in. What do you call them?

Straightjackets.

A straightjacket they had him in but he was mangled, he was mangled so but he did the right [thing] that was a merciful killing and the other thing was that...

Alright, I just want to get a little bit more clarification about what was going on board before you got off. You've got gunners trying to take shots at the...?

Oh yeah, they were

24:30 still firing. The one gun was operating. The rest of them out of commission and that. And they didn't seem to have any small arms fire to my knowledge but I noticed the Germans were flying round low round us, the ship and firing at the ship and I was watching the tracers. I could see the tracers going all round you know, all round us and that but mercifully I didn't get hit but those fellas on the guns, on the air guns who like the

25:00 what do they call them? Multiple anti-aircraft guns and that, they were dead. They were dead. Killed by the blast see.

I imagine that was fairly quick.

Yeah that's it. They go 'bang' and they're just there. You think, "Oh they're asleep."

Yeah.

But they were dead.

Yeah. The officer that had to shoot that poor man.

Mmm.

Was that sort of something that you saw just as you were getting off and it was just something out of the corner of your eye?

Oh ready, get to when we'd been ordered overboard and that's when I was folding my clothes.

Yep.

And they had him laid there

25:30 but he couldn't survive.

No.

He would have thing. It was merciful.

Yeah, I'm sure.

A merciful killing and that. And that's the way I looked at it anyway.

I can believe it.

Mmm.

In the water are there still things being thrown overboard for people to catch onto?

Oh yeah, anything wooden that could float was being tossed overboard.

And in the chaos of that was there a chance that, you know you could be hit if you were in the water too close to the boat? You had to actually get away from the boat as soon as you could?

Oh, you had to get away from the boat see.

Yep.

And that's the first thing we did was to get away from the boat because, as I said, they machine gunned thing.

26:00 Whether they were - it seemed to me I duck dived because the bullets were coming in the water and I could see them splashing, so I duck dived and went underwater, yeah.

I need you to explain to me a little bit about the tracers. If it was Stukas that were having a go at...?

Oh no, they were Dornier.

Yeah.

Stukas.

Stukas.

Stukas and oh yeah, mainly Dornier and Stukas. Stukas were the big bomb.

Yep.

You know for the vertical bombing.

Yeah.

And that. And the Dornier and ME 110s [Messerschmitt fighter plane] were there. There was three different types of

26:30 planes and that. Oh, I could see them buzzing around like bloody bees they were.

Was it an extreme amount of enemy fire on this one craft or?

No, all the convoy.

Okay, so and they're all steaming away?

Yeah, don't forget they hit as they're steaming away, they're copping it.

Yeah. Okay.

So therefore that probably dragged the planes away or but the Red Cross plane when it arrived, it for some reason or other the enemy dispersed, the planes but I think they were more or less concentrating on the main

27:00 convoy and that convoy took a clobbering, believe me.

So you're starting to swim? Is the carley float the first...?

That's the first thing I went to, yes.

And there's you know thirty, forty guys hanging, clinging off it. Is there any conversation happening or is that everyone in too...?

No, I think everybody was, we didn't seem to talk. I didn't talk. The only time I spoke was to the two sailors on the board when I asked, "May I join you?" Seems unbelievable that's what I said. "May I...

27:30 **It sounds very English.**

"Do you mind if I join you?" I said, "I'm stuffed." And I was too. I was tired. I'd been swimming for a long while.

Did you know what the coast was that you were aiming for? Did you have any idea what bit of land?

No, we were, as it turned out swimming the wrong way. We were swimming away from Crete. We were swimming to another island. So they told us afterwards. We learnt all that.

Yeah.

I've got a painting of the ship, you know that was done by one of the surviving sailors. I've actually got his watercolour there.

Okay.

Yeah.

I'll have a look at that a bit later on.

28:00 **After you get off the carley float and you're swimming and you're exhausted, you said before that one of the fellows that was clinging to that piece of board just floated away.**

He just floated away yes, because I turned round and he was gone.

I guess it's possible you know, you're so close to someone for so long and then you just...

Oh yeah, that's right and he just floated away because see your mind is preoccupied by trying to swim,

as I said, you couldn't support yourself on the board, you had to swim you know over the top of it see. Use it as

28:30 an added bit of buoyancy.

This might seem ridiculous but did you have to do it in synch so that you didn't all sort of sink on the piece of board? Like did you have to all swim together as a team?

Oh yeah, and kick our feet together, yes but I think in the end, I don't think we were doing anything. I think we just, you know just kicking our feet a bit sort'a you know paddling, that's all.

And...

But as I said that other fellow that

29:00 he was there and I remember him, last thing before I passed out. It's amazing that I should pass out at that critical moment when you know help was near.

Perhaps the brain just allows you to take a rest 'cause it knows it's gonna be okay?

Yeah, because I was - well it took me, I would say I reckon it took me three or four weeks to recover. I was that exhausted and I'd expended so much energy you know to survive. But

29:30 I never knew any fear. That's even to - I never felt any fear. I don't know why.

You said you were in the water for five hours. Did that just go like that?

Oh God yes, it seemed only a little short time. Some of them were even in longer, up to eight hours, which isn't a lot you know but if you're got a life jacket and it's not so bad but if you and that...

But you didn't have one?

But I had a piece of wood though.

Sure and could you start feeling sort of your internal organs starting to shut down? Was it cold enough to start affecting you like that?

Oh yeah, I

30:00 got these terrible attacks, a cramp which sent my legs numb.

Sure.

Once I forced them out, out of the cramp, straightened them, I went numb from the waist down.

Now, I've had little cramps.

And I have about at least five or six there.

Does it just stay cramped for a really long time in your body and you just can't move and you're shutting down?

Oh yes, it's very difficult but fortunately this English sailor who was next to me he said, "You've gotta kick. Force your legs to kick."

30:30 He said, "You must kick," and so I kicked and brought it out.

And...

And came out of it but kept coming back, recurring.

Can you remember hearing men calling out or crying or?

I heard, I could hear, "Help," in one situation. There was a young lad of about sixteen that shouldn'ta been there in the war, he was calling out for his mother.

When you were pulled

31:00 **into the boat, what's your first recollection after coming to?**

Ah I'm, "Ey, the Greeks a got me. The Greeks a rescued me," and there was my one of my best friends sittin' there. We became close friends afterwards.

Were you...?

Chap name McDonald, Bob McDonald.

Were you a bit sort of deluded and hysterical and you know...?

No, no, just had a absolute terrible thirst because see there's no doubt, see the water it was rough

31:30 and we were taking the salt water in. A lot of fellas were badly sunburnt.

Yeah, I bet they were.

They were starting to - they were badly sunburnt.

Blistered and...

Buttocks and all.

It's not at all comical what happened to you but I guess you can appreciate a bunch of drowned rats like yourselves on board an Italian...?

Yes.

Ship with your bare bums and...?

Oh no, that's right and bare feet and getting burnt on the damn hot engine plates above the engine.

32:00 **How ridiculous did that look to you at the time?**

At the time we said we weren't happy with them because they were laughing at us but they rescued us and I've never lost my feeling for Italians. They came and got us and I think the reason they came and got us was that remember we rescued a whole stack'a them, oh during the battle of Matapan? Has anybody told you about the battle of Matapan? You know the [HMAS] Sydney was involved in that and [HMAS] Stuart

32:30 and that.

And the sinking of the Bartolomeo Colleoni.

Yeah, that's the one yeah, you're right.

Yep, yeah.

You're spot on and they, I think because of that. Do you know what they did, which is surprising thing. This surprised me and I only found out through research, they repatriated the Australian sailors out of the prison camps in exchange for Italians. Did you know that happened?

Not specifically.

No, but that that's a true story and

33:00 that. I should'a been in the navy but they- no he actually did that and I think it's because of that feeling they had the navies, towards the navy. The other navy. The enemy navy.

You know how you said your mother had seen water and had you sent some telepathic message of some kind?

Yeah, but I never called out for her. I never even gave her a thought.

So, you didn't receive it at the other end as far as you were concerned?

Oh, no, no, no, no, no. She got it. She was...She said she was driving her car back here in Melbourne and then suddenly she

33:30 knew I was in the water. She said I was in trouble and it was quite plain, and she was spot on. The time was right.

It's possible.

And so these mental telepathy or some intuitive thing that you have no control over but.

Let's just call it a mother's love.

Yeah, but see everybody told after I'd been missing for about two years or two and a half years, they told her that, "He's gone for good. What are you worrying about?" In fact my sisters were quite proud that

34:00 they'd lost a brother in the war.

What do you mean they were proud?

Oh they thought, "Oh we've lost a brother in the war too," you know. They were keeping up with everybody else. That's what I tease her about anyway.

Can you recall that trip after you'd been hauled out of the water back to mainland? Can you recall what happened, what was talked about, what the Italian...?

No. I think we were all too tired and too ill to talk about anything. That's like - they gave us some food

34:30 and I remember couldn't eat it because our throats were absolutely seared with the salt.

Sure.

Yeah and that. And, as I said, I had a terrible attack of diarrhoea.

And why didn't they give you water? Did they not have any on board or was there just not enough?

Well, don't forget I'm unconscious till I got to the land.

Oh okay.

Coming into the jetty, I'm unconscious see and that. And I'm not aware of what transpired because I never even asked my mates.

35:00 **Alright, but you say you had like really bad diarrhoea or dysentery or versions of.**

Mmm.

Not on board the boat then, when you got back?

Yeah, see they marched us along the - I don't think we marched; they took us along the front of this township, this Scarpanto, and that. And as I said, it was lined with people and some of the fellas were in the nude and that. And the people looked so compassionate. They looked sorry for us. They really looked sorry and that stuck in my memory, you know.

How

35:30 **did you manage to...?**

They weren't clapping; you know the fact that their ship had been sunk or anything of that nature and that. And they'd killed half of us and things like that. See that ship going down cost three hundred-odd lives you know and most of them drowned no doubt. And quite a few got killed on board, particularly the navy.

How did you manage to walk? Like when did you come too on the boat then? I gather you

36:00 **kind of probably faded in and out.**

Yeah, as we were coming into a jetty. I looked up and there's a jetty straight ahead and that was on this island, that's where we, they disembarked us.

And was there a mate with you when you came too and said you know, "Get up Mal, we've gotta do something," or...?

Not from my gun emplacement, they were, most of them were drowned and that. We lost them all nearly but I just sat in amongst them and that. And

36:30 mixed up with my own thoughts I guess, and I don't remember talking to anybody and that. Except that I probably expressed the opinion that "We're not with the Greeks, we're with the Italians, so therefore we're prisoners of war". That's when it dawned on us.

But you said there was a mate on board that said you know...?

Oh yeah, Bob, we became great friends, close friends afterwards and that. And but he's gone unfortunately but and

37:00 his mother and my mother, see we were prisoners of war exchanged thing. You know my mother even went to a fortune tellers to find out how I was going. Where was I because you know I disappeared from May, end of May till some time in June. I think the telegram there is dated June, some time in June, and then of course I'm in the prison camp. And until the Vatican organised

37:30 communication until then there was nothing and then we went to - then of course when I went out of the prison, the work camp in September 1943, September 1943. From about four months before then they hadn't heard, so we had to go all the way through till September, not September, June/July 1945

38:00 before they heard any more, so that's two and a half years, isn't it?

So what did the fortune teller tell her?

"Oh he's alright. He's alright. Don't worry about him." They, you only go to a fortune teller to hear what you want to hear.

Pretty much and 'cause you said your mother was quite a good Christian woman, so I guess that was...?

Oh yeah, she was a good Christian woman but she was a bit desperate.

Yeah?

To find out but she had tremendous faith. Oh, her sisters had written to her and said, "Don't worry about him. He's gone. Don't worry he's gone. You've got to accept the fact," but she

38:30 said "She never gave up".

Well, it'll be interesting...

Yet, strangely enough when I waved from the train I felt sure I'd see her again. It's amazing.

I'm looking forward to hearing what that was like coming home again.

Oh yes.

Tape 5

00:31 **We'll, when we come back...**

Well actually, you wouldn't credit that the lady that took a book some years ago has given me back her copy. Gave it to me yesterday.

Why did she give it back?

Yes, because she's re-read it and re-read it and now doesn't want to read it anymore and thinks it might be more useful to me 'cause I get people chasing them and I can't supply them. I just farm out one copy that I leave from place to place but see the people that are interested

01:00 in you more than anything. It's not the general public, it's the people that know you.

Sure.

Yeah, because...

Sure. Well, it's a hell of a story and part of that story is arriving at Rhodes and they throw you into a concrete bunker?

Ah, no a concrete barracks.

Barracks.

It was cold as anything. I remember it was very cold and we just fell down on the concrete floor. We had a pretty nasty trip for from Scarpanto to Rhodes, jammed up in the forward.

Have I missed that? I've missed that

01:30 **then.**

Yeah, I told you that. Remember, we were jammed up in there, you know because we couldn't get to the toilets and things like that. We were all jammed up there together and each man fighting for his own space.

I just had this when you were talking before, just this image of you wandering around in your, only a singlet having a wash and just the sort of the loneliness and the humanity of that all mixed together and did you have a sense of, Good Lord, you know, how, what?

No, because I think you're mentally and bodily

02:00 spent. I think it's the... human effort yeah, no that doesn't even cross your mind because I didn't think it crossed my mind because, as I said, I never had any fear. That's what intrigues me even to this day and - but during the bombings and the things like that I knew what fear was and that, but not in this situation because it seems that I was a master of my own fate. Seriously. I really believed that.

So they

02:30 **finally give you these boiler...?**

Boiler suits. These canvas things. Oh God, they were terrible to wear.

So scratchy and uncomfortable and...?

Oh, scratchy and that. And I reckon they were made out of flax. I don't know.

Flax is what linen, really thick linen or...?

Linen.

Yeah.

Big thick linen but, as I said to you, I soon split mine because the thing - and that's all we had.

So you understand that there's some of it that's just so ridiculously comical?

It is funny.

Well, it's not but...

And especially the Moreton Bay fig tree, you know think about - that's incredible.

Well,

03:00 **that just springs to mind immediately, you know this thick - 'cause Moreton Bay figs are so lustrous and thick and full.**

Yeah, they're beautiful shiny leaf on them, big leaf.

Did guys actually climb up to the top to get more leaves and...?

Oh yeah, they kept on getting the leaves down, yes. Some were a lot fitter than me because I found even to walk up a little incline I found hard. I said it took me a few weeks to recover.

Sure, and you were pretty fit too.

Yeah, well until then I'd been pretty fit because I carried no excess weight. Not like today.

Oh, you're not doing too badly but how did some of the other chaps cope who weren't say as fit, you know

03:30 **did you see guys drop by the wayside at that point?**

Ah not really. I think you're sort of looking after yourself a little bit and we played cards. We made cards out of cigarette boxes.

Oh, I was gonna say how did you get..... did someone draw on the back of them?

Well, we made them, we made 'em up. We cut the cardboard boxes up; you know cigarette boxes and made cards. We played cards. I remember doing that and also

04:00 I tell you what. There was an experience. Now, this just comes to mind. While we were there they were bombing raids. The British were bombing, the RAF [Royal Air Force] were bombing raids and that. And the bombs were going off and I remember jumping up. I was in a lower bunk. Well, I just about put myself out. I banged my head underneath but I jumped up in nervousness or something just disturbed me and I went, "Ooh," like that

04:30 and I remember doing that. It just come back to me.

Now who is giving you anything? Cigarette supplies? Who, it wasn't the Red Cross at this point?

Oh, no, no, no. The Italians. Purely the Italians.

And did they give you things like pens to make these cards out of or did you come up with a...?

I don't know. Some boys no doubt got hold of pens. I don't know whether there was any bartering going on but I wasn't privy to any of that stuff. I don't know how it is but.

No, 'cause biros weren't really common.

Well, with a pencil. No, it wouldn't be biros.

No.

No, not in those days.

No such thing.

Probably,

05:00 probably pencils. And we definitely played cards. They were shocking cards. They wore out fairly quickly but we played, see that was, as I said, when we were in the main prison camp we, in Udine or Gruppignano we played bridge, we played solo whist, and 500 and that. And I still love cards today.

I do too.

I'm a solo whist man.

Whist I've never played. I'll have to ask you about that later on.

Mmm.

What and who are giving the instructions

05:30 **or the orders at this stage? Is it a junior ranking Italian officer or...?**

Oh, I think he was equivalent to a captain. It would be in my diary and I think he was a captain.

And he could speak English?

Oh, perfect, beautiful English. He spoke perfect English and that. And he was apologetic about the conditions that we were under and the food supply but we thought the food was - the food was alright and that. A bit different to our rations.

What were they giving you?

Oh, you know macaroni

06:00 was a staple diet and spaghetti. Well, we still eat 'em today, don't we? And they had real coffee. That was a thing that amazes me is back in Italy we had..... you know made from roasted wheat, you know and things of that like but this was real coffee. We don't know where he got it from but actually you know when we left. Now this comes back too. The day we left to go on this tramp steamer, this small ship to ship us and two hundred

06:30 Greeks across to Limnos islands there were two German pilots standing there and we were told that they were the ones that got our ship. They said they were the ones but I felt no animosity to 'em. War's war. I didn't feel, you know I've got no hate for anyone, even the Japanese I wouldn't hate.

It's all just a bit of a gamble really, isn't it?

Yes, that's right I think because the because after

07:00 all most of those young men that were in that war, they were forced to go to it. You know like the boys we sent to Vietnam, see. They're just forced. It's not because of their choosing.

Now in these barracks, first of all about how long were you there? Was it a couple of weeks before they move you or...?

Oh no, no, only just only a few days.

Oh, just a few days so there's no time or there's no sense of...?

No.

Discussing.

We were three weeks on Rhodos Island - I can if you want all the dates, I can...

No, I'm just kinda trying to get

07:30 **more of a general sort of picture of how it's happening because...**

Yeah, because the camp was - we went by trucks, they took us in trucks out to this camp and you know, it was surrounded by barb wire but nobody escaped. We were too tired.

Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask.

Yes.

Was that you, I guess you were just...?

See we got the sailors and the Australian soldiers. Oh, and don't forget there must have been a few British soldiers too amongst us that came off Crete.

08:00 **So it's a bit of schamozzle [mess] at this point. There's no sort of order or planning to it or at all.**

Oh no. No, no.

They probably didn't even know what to do with you themselves at the time?

Oh yes, because we were a novelty. We were definitely a novelty. As I said, in Bolzano when we were up there or Brenner Pass they grabbed the boys with the beards and took them and photographed them.

So you're the first Australian you think that they ever laid hands on?

Well, now would we be?

08:30 They came out of Africa and that. The Germans had a few of course coming out of Greece. They captured Greece. I don't, I think they probably - they used us, I've got a feeling they used us for propaganda purposes and that, because see they liked this word 'mercenary'. We were mercenary. We weren't conscripts. We were volunteers.

It's interesting, isn't it because you know...?

09:00 There's a big difference.

Well, it's a proud tradition in Australia to be a volunteer and of course you're going to be paid for doing for your efforts but in Italy there's a - I'm sure that people thought that the conscripts were a little bit cowardly for not volunteering.

Oh no, they want, they wanted the...

It's quite the opposite?

Yeah. They wanted them, the Italians generally and they had some good troops in you know the plumed feathers and that. And some of the black brigades and that. Bit of bastards I thought but the general conscript

09:30 in the Italian Army, he loved music, he loved making love and I think that's as far as it went. And he was there because he was forced to be there and they can have a different attitude, and as I said, that if they were afraid they showed it, whereas we didn't.

So they load you up onto the tramp ship. Not long after that. Is that right?

A ship to Limnos.

To Limnos?

Yeah, but there, from there on we were in a liner.

10:00 A peace time liner called the Calina.

Yes.

And that. And even though we were bunks but we were on 'A' deck, we were on top deck.

So there's some ironies at this stage?

Oh yeah, and that. And the way they treated us with food and what have you up in that this disused brewery up in northern Italy up near the Brenner Pass, it was incredible. We had to throw it away. Had to burn it. Could not take it in. What, especially with the Red Cross parcels coming in from, oh Canada sent a lot of parcels

10:30 too. Canada. Canada, Britain, England and ah Britain and Argentine. Don't think we got anything from, never saw a parcel to my knowledge from Australia although we did get clothing parcels and cigarette parcels and that from home.

So it's a long time until you get some proper clothing. I think you're in these boiler suits for...?

Oh yeah, we got our clothing came through from the navy, had organised it through

11:00 North Africa.

Sure. They Australian uniforms that they gave you?

No, British.

Right. Okay.

It was the Tommy [British Army uniform] you know, the short thing. In fact, and we got a greatcoat. I carried that greatcoat till I - now what happened to my greatcoat? I gave it away in the end.

You brought it all the way back?

Oh no, no, no, no. Oh gosh no.

No?

But you see, we didn't get Australian uniforms till we got to Naples.

Right.

Then they put us into a thing. Until then we were in Tommy uniform or

11:30 in the partisan uniforms, well it's a different uniform, the partisan. See I've got the epaulettes from the Alpini Alpine star.

And you also had clothing that you wore while you were in hiding for all that time too?

Oh yes, that was that I carried with me when I was on the thing because I had a pack on my back with some of my surplus clothing and we had a lot of clothing.

Who gave you those clothes?

Oh, the Italians. The supervisors.

Sure.

You know the supervisors the -

12:00 well we needed it because we could, you know walk up the road in those early days and the Germans

could drive past you and we didn't even give 'em the thumbs up.

Now, I'm just looking at my notes 'cause I wanna get the pronunciation right of the first camp that you said you went to and I'm just trying to remember.

Capua.

Capua.

C-A-P-U-A.

And that was the very first one and then there was also...?

That's a transit camp for the prisoners of war.

Pretanis.

Coming out of Africa.

And then the Pretonis Asako, is that how you say it?

Pardon?

Pretolis

12:30 **Arko? I can't pronounce it properly.**

Ah, Prato,

Prato.

Prato. P-R-A-T-O which means a field.

Yes.

Al, A-L means at Isarco is a creek.

Oh okay.

Which flows into the River Isarco. The River Isarco flows down through the Brenner, down through the Brenner Pass. Beautiful country. It is absolutely superb.

Well, what's it like, it is some of God's own country, Italy and what's it like being in a place like that

13:00 **but knowing that you're in this?**

Behind the barbed wire?

Confined circumstance where there's no future at that stage.

Well, see don't forget we had our concerts, we had our sporting activities. We played cricket, we played baseball and we did all these things. We had a fine group of guys that organised things and their names, some of their names are on that thing, the sporting. We had quizzes, you know thing

13:30 taught us to play bridge and things like that. There was always some something doing or we walked. We walked like caged animals. Admittedly and that. And as I say there was always something going past our thing, people fishing, fly fishing in the stream and the trains going past with the German troops and the tanks and things like that. It was a good spot to look out on because it was on the side of a mountain and that. And then in the valley, you see the mountains went like that and then the valley was the river.

14:00 The main railway line from Germany into south of Italy so we could see that, and as I said, we used to wave and say, "You'll be sorry." Oh no, we used to wave to the Germans.

Did they wave back?

Oh, they probably did. I told you about Rome with the lollies and things like that you know. I think they felt sorry for us but they...

Yes.

I guess they were on top of the world because they were killing - they were winning everywhere but...

So you're...?

Not up here.

No. No. So you're not

14:30 **scared and you're not hungry and you're not, and you're clothed by this stage and so you've got most of your sort of human needs?**

No, not at that camp. I didn't get clothed till I got out of that camp.

Better than a singlet though at least?

Because you, yeah see we were there, I'd say we were there from May/June/July/August. I think we moved out in about October I think, so we were there about four months. Four or five months.

And in

15:00 **that time did you...?**

But it was a dirty, dusty place if ever there was one but and it was a fire trap. It's still there.

In the brewery?

Old disused brewery you know it, and that.

And are the men working together within the camp or are people still trying to find themselves and find their, where they are in this place?

Oh, you know we talked together and things like mainly talked of home I think. I think that's what the main topic was and of course we,

15:30 as I said, we had lots of activities that kept us going.

Sure.

Especially concerts and that. And rehearsing and taking part.

Well, let's talk about the concerts then. Who was the bright spark that actually managed to get everybody together?

Oh, I'd have to get his name off - he was a South African actually, another colonial, a South African. I think his name might be on there, John.

In, oh the...

Oh, that's

16:00 over there.

Are you talking specifically about the Swan Lake concert or are you talking about...?

Oh no, Swan Lake was only a thing. We put on plays and things like that and we had a fellas that - I told we had a top tenor, we had people who could play the piano. It's amazing when you're away in the army, the surprising, what fellas can do.

So you had a piano there?

Oh yeah, we got a thing and we got equipment from, the Italians gave us equipment.

Well, what did

16:30 **they give you?**

Oh, I think we had piano and you know different instruments and things like that and when we were naughty they took it away, see as punishment and that.

What's an example of being naughty to lose some of the privileges?

Oh being rude, not saluting their command post. Things like that and being caught smoking in their,

17:00 you know areas where you shouldn't be smoking, and they were dead right, they should never have been the guys, should never have been smoking there but I never smoked.

Right.

So, I never knew what the feeling was and that.

In a situation like that, and you know these guys shouldn't be smoking, not because the Italians have told you not to but because it's just bloody dangerous.

Yes.

You know did - is it okay to say to them, "Look, just don't do that fellas," or what, is it not okay to mention that?

I wouldn't dare, I didn't dare do that.

Was anyone ever sort of the

17:30 **individual that...?**

No. I don't know. That I do not know.

Right.

But...

Because that's not really co-operating, is it?

See the fellas that I slept with, I don't think they smoked just quietly. So we did well with cigarettes for chocolates. We bartered them for chocolate. Yeah, I'm sorry about the name of that.

No, no, it's okay it's...

It's there; it's there in my diary.

No, I just like to know how, I've got a bit of an idea of how you go about putting on a show like that, especially when you've got a captive audience to...

Oh yeah, that's right

To,

18:00 **literally.**

They turn up in their thing but these quizzes and these tournaments, the card tournaments, there was always some activity that was going on. And we walked and we walked and walked round that place. We had, true thing, and we'd go round and round and round and round. See, because that's the only way you could keep your fitness going and that. And then when they opened up the English, those Pommie [Englishmen] gentlemen down below, the sailors,

18:30 you know we intermixed with them. And they took us on in a sporting competition and we thrashed the tail off them but you know in a sporting competitions, you know running, jumping, anything you name it. And we even had a marathon round the tops of the, round the hills up on the mountainside running around. Caber tossing [throwing poles], we used to have.

How did you have a marathon and still be guarded? What, how do they guard you while you were doing that?

Oh, we were inside the

19:00 pen, inside the fence.

Oh okay. So it was just big enough to...?

Yeah, see it's a fence but the fence was way up on the thing and...

So...

'Cause it'd only be a few kilometres around that track but boy it was tough getting up a slope like that to start with. And then run along beside the fence and that. And then down again and through the camps and...

And did all of this amuse the Italian guards?

They thought we were mad. I think they thought we were crazy.

Did they communicate?

There was, actually we had one attempted escape from there, or two guys,

19:30 and they got caught very smartly.

Before they got out?

Yeah, they caught 'em, you know on the roof, getting across the roof. Actually, if a man could have really escaped from there if you thought about it, but I never thought of escaping. It never entered my head to escape.

Why is that do you think?

I don't know. I think they say it's a man's duty to escape but I don't know whether it really is.

When did they actually give you instructions about what to do if you were a POW?

Never got any

20:00 instructions.

'Cause I've heard this a lot that it was duty to escape but I can't figure out who actually said that at any given stage. Like, was there an army handbook that said, "By the way if you get captured...?"

No, I never saw it but it's been stated and yet fellas escaped like, you know like those airmen and the damn Germans shot them.

Yes.

So...

That's right and it all went horribly pear shaped but...

Yeah.

So no one ever said to you, "If you get...?"

But yeah, but I wanted to get away from that work camp before the Germans got me.

Sure.

Yeah, that was

20:30 escape in itself. They called us escapees and evasive from the concentration camps and there's even a directive there from the Italians to hand ourselves back, so that we can be well treated again and what have you.

Did the guards communicate with you very much at that camp?

Oh no, not a lot, not a lot, no.

Because when you say that...?

No, because they were - they're a you know,

21:00 they're doing their own thing and we accepted them as part of the existence.

Sure.

We had to accept them as a part.

But you say that they thought you were all mad for doing all the crazy things that you did?

Oh yeah that's right. They thought we were crazy.

But how was that communicated to you? Did they yell out and just say, "Australia," you know? So they, did let you know what they thought?

Oh yeah, they'd laugh at us and that. And because - they of course held the upper hand, didn't they?

Well, yeah.

And that, but as I say, they accompanied us out of the thing and then

21:30 in the end we'd hold their rifles and God knows what you know. They didn't give a damn because they knew the war was over, they were losing it and the workers knew it was all over and they were looking forward to the final decision to have the Armistice. But it was a farcical thing because all it did was split the country in half and allowed some of us to get away.

Well, tell me about that escape attempt by those chaps who got caught on the roof? Do you know if they were taken in

22:00 **and ill treated afterwards for their attempt?**

Yes, they would take a beating. That seemed to be the Italian way you know.

So...

To give you a beating.

And would it be a beating to - just be a strong reminder of who...?

Yeah.

Was in charge? It wasn't like...

Yeah, that's it.

Near fatal beating?

Yeah, not fatal beating, God no. Not Japanese or things like that. I don't know what they did, SS [Security Squad] were terrible. The German SS and that but there's a lot I can tell you about the partisans.

22:30 **Yes, and I don't...**

And the things, how punishment was handed out. In the kangaroo [illegal] courts.

There's a lot to talk about the partisans. I'm gonna have to leave that for John [interviewer] to

sort of get that into some sort of chronological shape but...

Mmm.

In this particular camp where you are, this is before they've moved you into camp number one and I'm sorry, I'm struggling to remember the name of the first camp that you were in there but...

Capua.

Capua, thank you. Ah, is

23:00 **the bedding and the conditions, are they more than humane at this stage?**

Oh, we had palliasses.

Yeah.

Yeah, we had and that. And we slept on little wooden structures and things like that. You get inured to all this type of stuff. In the army it doesn't matter.

No.

Because you can throw yourself down on concrete and sleep if you're tired. And we always tried to grab a nap whenever we could

23:30 and that. So you know the conditions as far as sleeping was concerned, they never worried me.

And were there any chaps that you knew of in there who, unlike yourself, were you know dead certain to escape from there? Like were there anyone with that sort of one-eyed mission that you were aware of? That didn't want to stay in a POW camp anywhere despite?

Oh, some of them threw themselves at the wire and were you know eliminated, odd ones, but they, I think that in Gruppignano the one

24:00 near the Yugoslav border, they thought they could get into Yugoslavia pretty smartly if they escaped and they joined the, Tito's partisans but they didn't get there. And but I think it was just a test of you know, "Well, you said we'd never get out of the place," and sure enough they escaped. I think it was about nineteen of them went out.

In Gruppignano?

In Gruppignano. They dug tunnels by and went right

24:30 underneath and hid all the dirt under the barracks and that. But they didn't last long and that. I can recall another fellow and he was Cypriot actually, another colonial, and he tried to walk out with a bunch of workers in the camp. They had workers, you know putting up new barracks and things like that and but they picked him up. He got to the gate,

25:00 you know through the gate before they picked him up. You know there were some cool kids out there. They were.

Now in Gruppignano if you had, did you catch wind of any of these escape attempts or did you hear about them afterwards?

I only heard about them afterwards.

'Cause I imagine if you were planning something you'd tell no one for...?

Oh gosh, yeah no because you'd be a secret society.

Yeah.

And you have to be. You've got to maintain because unfortunately the human frailty is to chat, isn't it? And this is one of the big weaknesses with the Italians.

25:30 No seriously, it was, you know they said, "Oh be careful of," you know they'd demonstrate, you know big mouths, blabbermouths and things like that. "Be careful who you talk to," but I got, my lady friend got interrogated by the Germans and the fascists and that. And those Germans knew my name and that is an incredible thing

26:00 because I only went under a battle name. See we all had them. I was "Sydney" and my mate was "Melbourne" and what we had these non de plume because the idea was that no Italian who had beaten the, walked away from his call up and if in the partisans, would never give his name. He would be called the "Bear the Rifle" or some silly name like "Fagili" or "Orsa being Bear".

But

26:30 **they knew your name was Malcolm?**

The Germans did. I don't know to this day what happened. How it came about. Whether I'd been drinking too much red wine in some place and dropped it where it was picked up and so on. She was lucky, if it had been three months earlier she'da been shot. She was lucky the - anyway I've got her story there too.

Sure, okay.

Yeah, it's an interesting story what she said and that. And but

27:00 there's some of the good things that came out of the, and as I said, even though she had to be subject to that, and she was with the partisans too as a courier, nobody got hurt through me or through Wrigglesworth, so we were very charmed all the way through. Charmed life. So we were lucky for people and they were lucky to have them because you couldn't exist without them. So just as well the country was split

27:30 between the two factions or major factions of anti-fascist and fascist.

After Gruppignano, how did they send you, they sent you further west again, didn't they?

Pardon?

After Gruppignano, they sent you to the camp where you were...?

Oh yeah, we went over near the French border. Over to this place called Vercelli.

Vercelli.

That's the rice fields. That's where we went, yes.

Yep, and you elected to, I'm sorry, I've got to remember you elected to go there or they sent you there first and you got sick and then decided to go out on

28:00 **the work parties?**

I didn't volunteer.

Right.

Nobody volunteered. We were detailed.

Sure.

Definitely detailed but I wanted to go and strangely enough it was Anzac Day we left and as we were going through the gate to say goodbye they were playing The Last Post at the Anzac Day service in the prison camp. And I wondered, I said, "God," in fact I wrote it in my diary, I said, "Is that an omen?" The Last Post. Which is a very disturbing number you know.

I'm

28:30 **always interested to hear how the Diggers celebrated Anzac Day during the war, so you would have had...?**

Oh yeah, we had our services and we were allowed to hold them because after all the Italians were on our side in World War I.

Yep.

And that. And we - you know we fought alongside them.

Did you ever have a conversation with one of the Italians about that fact?

No, not really. No.

Not even with the partisans, any of the partisans?

No. No. Nothing I don't think because

29:00 I'm dealing with only young kids that, of course I'm only a young too. Strangely enough, but no I don't recall that I had many a political discussion with them because see the communist side, you know they're very materialistic. You've got to actually have something that you can physically see rather than something like on the opposite side, which is spiritual and things. They had some wonderful conversations with Italians because each

29:30 detachment had not only its military commander, had its political commissar and his job was to indoctrinate the people, the members of the squad or in the detachment to the ways of either communism or a different way of life after we get rid of the fascist. Gee, we had some wonderful talks. Yeah, too true but I love this materialism thing. You gotta physically see it before you can believe in it. Not something spiritual

30:00 that you can drag out of the air. Interesting and that but I was definitely no communist.

Now Gruppignano, did you ever meet any chaps there who unlike yourself just couldn't cope with it anymore?

Well, some of them threw themselves at the wire and that. And tried to crawl through the wire and things like but it was apron upon apron of barb wire and there's machine guns

30:30 mounted up on sentry boxes all the way around. It was a well administered camp, that Calcaterra, the story was that he turned the whole camp over to the Germans, you know. And they reckon that he was eliminated by the partisans for doing that very thing but then I've got another story that's come through and now I don't know where I am, that he died a natural death years later, so you don't know.

31:00 They reckon he's - they've got his death certificate, so whether it happened or not but the story was that otherwise he would have been tried as a war criminal. They reckon because of you know certain shootings and certain things that went on in that Gruppignano camp after I left mind you.

So not before you left?

And I got nothing against them. I don't think, look he's got a whole bunch of wild Australians and

31:30 colonials as we call them and that. And to control and we're not easy to control because we were a bit individualistic I think.

So did, I mean did you see him on a daily basis? Calcaterra?

Oh, well his office was there right in the corner like just outside the barb wire. The main administration post was there. And our hut was right beside it you know and that. He could probably look in and see us walkin' our cage.

And was there any organisation

32:00 **within Gruppignano that told you that as a soldier you had certain duties to fulfil quite apart from, you know, you said you had loads of activities which kept your morale up but....?**

No, we had to parade every morning and you know and be counted off.

And who instructed you to do that though?

Oh we had to. That was it, the sergeant major or whoever was the senior man in the camp. We had to

32:30 do it every day and that. And then sometimes they'd whack it on in the middle of the night There was a lot of little pin pricking things like. They had guards walking around the camp at night tramping through our barracks so 'bang bang bang' without any care for us and that. And then every now and then they would come and kick us out of our places with all our bedding and stuff and all our goods outside

33:00 to be inspected and what have you. And then they'd go through and pull up the boards to make sure there's no tunnels underneath and look up in the ceilings and things like that. Actually, we had, this is amusing, we had these heaters, you know wood fired heaters in the thing and some of those ceilings, I don't know how they never fell down because they were pulling the wood off, out of there to feed into the heaters to keep it going.

So they weren't really giving you

33:30 **enough fire wood to stay [warm]?**

Oh no, we didn't have enough. We had some but...and then of course we had these little blowers that they built, you know out of tins and things like that so air thing, you keep thing and pumping the air through it and with a little bit of kindling in it. You could boil your water and make a little stew and stuff like that but that's only made thanks to the Red Cross. It wasn't anything of their food because their food, when they cut those rations sixty per cent that hurt, that really hurt us.

But what would

34:00 **happen to soldiers who just didn't want to go on parade?**

Oh, you'd finish in the boob [solitary confinement], within the boob. See they'd cut you off and if you, that's mutiny under their law.

Under the Italian law or under the Allied law that...?

Oh, no, no, no, but I think under the laws of the Geneva Convention as applies to prisoners of war. We had to toe the line on that.

But I'm curious about that though. I mean who's gonna...?

I think we'd have to do as

34:30 they, as we were told.

But what are they gonna do if you, I mean okay you get thrown into the prison?

Yeah, but you could be put on, you know half rations. You could lose your benefits of cigarettes. You could lose your benefit of Red Cross parcels.

So would the sergeant major instruct that that man who is disobeying orders be taken and put away into solitary confinement for either in the boob or similar?

Oh no, the Italians because they'd pick it up on the roll call. So, "Where is this man?" So he could be ill.

35:00 He could be ill and too sick to do a thing, so they would go and investigate. And if he was ill, fair enough, but if he wasn't and he did it out of sheer cussedness he'd be in serious trouble. Because they would move, you know a lot of fellas got slapped into booby within the prison camp.

Yes. Did you ever?

No way. I was, I've never gotten into trouble. I'm not the type because I accept it was

35:30 a fact of life.

And did you...?

That I was there and I'm their guest. I don't know whether I was their guest but I was there, not by choosing it, just happened that way.

And what provisions were there for medical assistance within...?

Oh yes, we had medical officers and we had religious people too. Padres and that. In fact we built the - after I left there they built a beautiful

36:00 church which stands today for the Catholic people, they built a lovely church out of stone you know.

So, I'm curious to know how?

It's still there, that stone. In fact I can probably come up with a photo of that too.

Right. It just made me wonder about the staunch Catholics, the Italians?

But the RAP, or the regimental aid post, was very good and they looked after us.

Right, and just one last question before we finish up this tape.

36:30 **Was Gruppignano where you first received Red Cross parcels and mail or had you received that earlier?**

Oh, no no. The first letters came into Prata Isarco.

Prata Isarco, okay.

And then the Brenner Pass until then. That's where we got our first parcels. I couldn't believe it.

No, I bet and your first mail from your mother?

The first correspondence I made was through the Vatican City. And her reply is there. The actual original. I found all this stuff in my mother's gear when she died

37:00 you know. The telegrams, the whole lot. She was a hoarder.

Well, on that note.

That gave me the basis for a book.

Tape 6

00:34 **Alright, Mal let's start off by talking about the Confienza family a little bit.**

Oh yes, yes.

In terms of, you said even at the time you felt that these people were doing something way above and beyond the call of duty.

Oh yeah, because it was tremendously courageous for the simple reason that if they were caught out they would be certainly executed and what have you. Especially aiding and helping

01:00 ex-prisoners of war who were evasive from the concentration camp as they said it, but there was many a notice in the local press to that effect that, you know anybody caught and of course there were manifestos put out. They were on walls everywhere that anybody caught helping would certainly be severely dealt with and in some instances they would, they caught them out, they would burn their

houses

01:30 down and that. I've seen villages on fire and things like that and the people either killed summarily executed or sent to Germany to work in factories. But there was mainly Italians against Italians in the area where we were. The Germans only came in to bolster up when things got a bit tough.

Well tell us, the village they lived in, roughly how many people would have lived there and how small or how big was it?

Oh the village, in fact I have photos of it over there but

02:00 there'd only be a few hundred in the village. They were like on hillsides, steep hillsides and the streets were cobblestoned and what have you and just a few hundred. That's all that'd be there and the people would work in the fields or work in the factories. As I said, that was the Berlize [?] zone where I we operated - was a textile area and were full of woollen mills and they're still there today because that's what it's renowned, for that industry and that. So they

02:30 either worked there or they worked their little plots on the sides of hills and things like that where they grew maize and stuff like that. And foodstuffs for the household to augment the very poor rationing that was available in those days. I think the staple diet was either rice or macaroni, spaghetti.

So, you're staying in at the start though you're staying in the Confienzas' house?

Yeah, I stayed, I looked up, I checked it out and

03:00 and that. And we only stayed a very short time because we were, Wigglesworth, just the two of us, we were terrified that something would happen to them and there were supposed to be people that could not be trusted in the area. And which they referred to as 'le spiare' meaning a spy who would sell their souls for the sake of a bit of money or the fact that they had a different political persuasion because the country was sort of divided with the demise of Mussolini. Originally,

03:30 it divided the country into two and we had the anti-fascist and the fascist regime but however we'd spend the nights, we slept actually for over a week inside their house. They put us up inside their house with their two young sons but during the day we would go and hide off in the hills and wander round the hills and we used to help the elderly ladies because they used to carry these great things on their back. I don't

04:00 know how they could - they used to glean the fodder from any grass that was growing and they'd bring that in and put it in their hay lofts, you know for winter storage.

That's a question I wanted to ask you because excuse me, if it's a small village with a couple of hundred people say, few hundred people...?

Yes.

And you're out helping the old ladies in the fields then surely everybody in the village would have known you were there?

That I do not know but we tried to be careful because we'd go away right on the crack of dawn you know

04:30 but they were pretty friendly, all the villagers that were in the know and that. But see, we sort of disappeared off the scene when I told you that we went out in the hills and finally found ourselves a dugout where we literally went underground. But they probably thought that we'd moved on or gone to Switzerland as most of the boys were trying to do at the time but they took an awful risk, and that as I said, the manifestos were up on the walls and that, posters

05:00 for spelling out the dire consequences that would be dealt out. Anybody found aiding an ex-POW or was evasive from the call ups. Don't forget they're calling up all the youth. Mussolini's new socialist regime was definitely calling up the youth and of course that's how the partisans got built because they opted to either hide out or to become a partisan. That's how the forces built up

05:30 from the original solid communist core that was the mainstay of the thing in the early days.

When you were in the Confienza's house at night then, was there a real visible air of tension? Was everybody worried that someone might knock on the door?

No, this is, don't forget this is early days. This is, you know before the big garrisons came round and were put strategically around the area and that to maintain law

06:00 and order and to maintain the workers in the textile factories that I think we felt a little bit free. Cause there was only two of us and the fact that we disappeared during the day. Whether everybody was in the know, I don't know.

There must have been a lot of prisoner of wars on the loose though?

Oh there was, there was hundreds of them and a lot of them made it to Switzerland straight off. They did the right thing. They went straight to Switzerland before

- 06:30 the Germans controlled the border entries and that. But when we attempted to go, unless you had a guide to take you off the beaten track, you couldn't make it and those mountains were as we well know in northern Italy and on the border. They're up over four thousand metres and they're big mountains, compared to our Kosciusko, which as you know is a very small mountain compared, but no we just left it too late.
- 07:00 But we did try, as I said earlier, we did try and that because that was the aim, was to get to Switzerland but we turned round and went the other way. We went way down south. Some of the boys did go south and finally made it through the lines. They sorta holed themselves up behind the German lines and then the war went over the top a them and therefore they got themselves back but two of my mates that were in the same work camp as me, we were playing pontoon the day that all the
- 07:30 Italians came up excitedly and said, "Le guera finito." They actually walked all the way and it's a story in itself that. They walked through the thing disguised as peasants with a whole bunch of Italian farmers that had been pushed back by the tides of war and they joined this group under much apprehension and a lot of talking to
- 08:00 try and get the Italians to agree that they join them because these two fellas, they were bearded and scraggy and in civilian clothes. And they had the very tense moment when they walked into a company of German soldiers and that. And the officer went along the line and looked at all their gear and what have you, looked at them closely and then he said he'd let them through and eventually actually showed them where to travel. How to get back through to their farms, which were south
- 08:30 of the lines where the other side of where the Allies were and pointed out where the mines and said, "Don't deviate from this creek. Don't move on the banks or anything like that, just go down through this creek." And as a matter of fact I wrote it up in the book, he said "The feeling of euphoria when finally they were through the lines". So that was an incredible thing and those Italians took an awful risk
- 09:00 because if they'd have detected there was a couple of Australian, you know dressed in civilian clothes there, they would have executed the lot but maybe the German was just one, this German officer was just one of these guys that was decent, you know that probably hated the war but was there because he was forced to be there. So back to Confienzas.

Yeah.

They took an awful risk.

- 09:30 They took a terrible risk, but as I said earlier, they organised the food and all that sort of stuff for us, which we collect every Sunday night at midnight. On the stroke of midnight we would arrive and that. And we were met by Cielo. Cielo Confienza eventually became a partisan himself. He joined the partisans and survived and finally he went out to Peru and that

- 10:00 to join his, some relation out there and died of a broken heart according to his son.

Why did he break up with his wife or did she die...?

Oh no, she lived a bit, she lived on and I used to correspond with her for quite awhile for a few years then suddenly she passed on. There is one son, the youngest son, Tiziano he's called, he's still living out of Peru but the other boy, James or Janus as they called it, is living in Chicago. I've been to see him in Chicago

- 10:30 and oh they were wonderful to me.

I'll bet they were.

Yeah, and that but we correspond every now and then we send each other cards at Christmas time and birthday times and things of that like.

Now, when you would pick up the food on at midnight on Sunday, was it a curfew in existence at the time?

Oh yeah. My gosh, yeah there'd always be a curfew.

How would you meet Cielo and how would you make sure that...?

Oh Cielo, would meet us outside the village as a rule. He would always meet us outside the village. We had a rendezvous and that. And

- 11:00 sometimes we didn't even have to go into the village because he brought the food out to the rendezvous or other times he would lead us in there. As I said earlier, that I went in there one night in stockinged feet because with my boots off and when there was a patrol in the actual village itself. But the village was definitely under surveillance because somehow or other they knew of us, the republican or the black brigades knew
- 11:30 fascists, knew about us and they were trying to catch us but we fortunately were one step ahead. We were shrewd.

What food would they give you? In that package on a Sunday night, what would it be?

Oh, there'd be no meat. It'd be, there'd be mostly pasta, stuff of that like. Bread and things like and always the newspapers. They gave us the newspapers and we were able to keep abreast of the war even if it was from the Italian side and that. And I used to translate

12:00 it for the three because don't forget we'd been joined by two Englishmen at that stage and the food, there were bits of everything, salami. We'd get a bit of salami and stuff like that but in the main it was pasta and things like that. The only meat we ever got is unfortunately, I found an owl's nest and next thing then we were eating owl.

How was owl?

Owl?

Like chicken?

Chicken yeah, that's right and anyhow like that but we had,

12:30 we didn't have any meat. Just a little bit of salami and things of that like but we learnt to think because I know when we got to England after all the small meals and what have you, I tell you what, I couldn't take it.

I bet you couldn't.

I was very uncomfortable.

Now, this is when you were staying, you were in the vagabond's nest?

Yeah, vagabond's nest, yeah.

Could you do what they call a word picture for us? Imagine you've just turned up there in the middle of the day. I don't know

13:00 **whether you've had a door or a...**

We had a pop hole.

Tell us, describe for us...?

Well...

From the pop hole in the back.

Well there was, it was a sloping hill, a very steep hill that it was more like a ravine like that with a creek in the bottom because this is where we selected. So we dug straight into the side of the hill and then where you went in was only about oh so about that high - the pop hole and then it followed up the slope of the hill and that.

Is this a narrow...?

But you could never - it was,

13:30 no it was enough to sleep four of us because we put, we cut heath and we put that down as bedding and that. And then put our blankets over the top because don't forget these people like Compienzas, they supplied us and got that, these goods for us. They gave us the tools that we dug it and that. As I said before, we were never detected there but we piled earth on it and sods of you know and made it look like the terrain. Then when we used to do

14:00 the dawn till dark sentry duty up on top of the hill watching out for the enemy, you could look down to where it is and you couldn't make it out, we'd done such a perfect job of camouflage.

And inside it's - how big in dimensions would it be?

Oh, it was I'd say it'd be over three metres. It'd be over three metres wide and at the highest point it'd be about twelve hundred

14:30 thing and coming back to about six hundred millimetres.

So really quite small.

Oh, it's quite small and that. And there was only room for - we had field mice in there and in fact I wrote quite a story about the field mice in my diary because they used to - polenta, we had plenty of polenta flour and that. And we used to make the polenta up ourselves and that but we'd hang the stuff up in the ceiling there to try and stop the darn

15:00 field mice from eating it. And they used to get along the thing and crawl down our string or wire whatever we had and we'd feel the stuff from the polenta dropping out of the bag onto our faces as they gnawed into it and that.

So once you're in there, is it pitch black or do you have a candle in there?

We had no light. We definitely had no light.

So you'd just enough room for four men to crawl in and lie down?

Yeah, four in the thing it was comfortable as far as that was concerned, except when it really rained for day on day after day and finally the water would soak in and

15:30 we'd have to get all the stuff outside and dry it. Our blankets and things like that.

Were there any cave ins?

No, never. No cave ins. We did after the first when the water did enter the first time we pulled it to pieces and rebuilt it and strengthened it and that. And thought we made it watertight. No, we didn't make it watertight because...

So it wasn't actually...?

It rained in April where one of the worst months, it rains nearly every day in April in Italy, in northern

16:00 Italy with thunderstorms winding around the mountains and that going on for hour after hour.

I was thinking it was a tunnel into the hill but was it a construction built?

No, we followed the contour of the hill basically and that either because we built it, you know on a slope like that so with twelve hundred at the highest point with back to six hundred at the lowest point.

And did you have a frame that you built it on?

Ah no, we supported, we cut timber,

16:30 we cut trees, and we made a frame. We definitely made a frame to support it and that by cutting down saplings. That's how we did that.

Alright, I understand that 'cause I thought you'd dug a tunnel into the hill but you had...?

It was a constructed thing. We'd sort of escalated like a side cut into the side of a hill then used timber and that 'cause we had to use timber for the struts, not for struts for uprights and things like that. And I

17:00 think we, if I remember we lashed them together then when we got the thing. Then we started building over the top with earth and that.

That's incredible. Do you ever think...?

Yeah, I went back to find it you know and that. And found it was a lake. They'd turned it into a water storage actually but we were never detected there. It's incredible.

Did you ever have patrols come very close?

Oh yes, we saw them.

Tell us about that?

Well, at one

17:30 stage there we had a garrison moved in fairly close in one of the villages close by and that. And they were Germans actually, and we'd see them patrolling out of the hills, the hills we called (UNCLEAR) Rosi, the Red Hills. And once we saw them and they were poking about but they'd be about a kilometre or so away. They weren't that close. We would withdraw down the valley and then we'd crawl back into

18:00 amongst the heath. The heath was very thick on those hills and you could hide in there and they'd be flat out finding you, 'cause we had no arms or anything like that, not that we intended to put up any resistance.

Was there ever a time when you were lying in there, the four of you at night you're thinking "Oh, I'm sick of this, I'm just over it," you know or were you always managing to keep your morale up pretty much?

Oh, we did a lot of things. We used to have quiz contests, bet between ourselves.

18:30 We talked of cricket because the Poms, they were two English guys and they were keen on their cricket and of course we Aussies are born and bred to cricket as we well know and we discussed cricket and we discussed things. One of the lads came from London and he was a milkman there. He spoke about the Blitz and all that type of thing and delivering milk during the Blitz and what have you. But 'course he was sent out to Algeria he and this other fellow, Alberto, as we called him, and they got picked up

19:00 when they were overrun by a Panzer Division, a German Division, that's how they became prisoners of war.

Were you able at all to send mother, ah mother, to send word to your mother or anyone in your family that you were there?

No way. No way. It was not possible and that, so that's why we disappeared for about two and a half to three years, I think it was.

You must have thought...?

Without communication because then, oh I used to think a lot of the family. I wrote one day when I was no doubt

19:30 a bit nostalgic. I wrote an article in the diary, quite a few pages of it, and it dealt with home and the trout fishing and all those things that I loved and that I wrote up because I just, you know it felt, I longed for it and that. And when the terrible war would finish.

Was thinking of home a source of strength in terms of, "I must survive to get back to that"?

Oh.

Or did it make you feel so sad that it was debilitating?

No,

20:00 I don't think that, I never lost my morale, ever. No way and that. And you know and I would think of family and things but unfortunately I lost all my gear on the, when the ship went down. I had no photos, nothing. Lost my wallet, the whole works, and then when the Hereward was sunk but I'd think about 'em a lot and you know I felt for them. And I wrote in my diary and said, "Well,

20:30 I wonder what they're thinking, wonder what they're thinking about me? Wondering where I am." But see even the prison camp I used to think of them, but I'll tell you about my mother a little later, alright?

Well, let's talk then about when you decided to join the partisans.

Oh yes.

That process.

We, Cielo, when D-Day came and the boys were back in France and Cielo, he said "It took him two hours to find

21:00 us" because we gave him, he was the only one who had an indication where we were. In fact, I think he was with, when we decided on the site because I think somebody had to know and we took Cielo with us and that. And we told him exactly what we were going to do and where we were going to do it and that but he said "It took him either an hour and a half or two hours to find it" and that. And he came and told us that "They'd landed in France" and brought the papers which were full of, you know thousands of

21:30 planes. The dummy paratroopers that were being dumped in and things like that when they went in to Normandy but as soon as he told us that we said, "Right, well now that's happened, we're going to remove any danger from the people, we're going to join the partisans provided they can give us arms." So in June 1943 we, no June 1944, that's right 1944, we joined the partisans

22:00 and I'll never forget we were inducted in and given an identity card and I've still got my identity card and Wigglesworth adopted the name "Melbourne" and I adopted the name "Sydney" as battle names. And one Englishman came from London, so he was "Londre", "El London" and I think the other fella we called "Alberto", I don't think he wanted a battle name but noma de battalia or nom de plume, as you well know and so we joined the

22:30 partisans. And we were in there and I thought, "My God, what a raggedy taggledy lot they were." Most of them were in civvi clothes and that. And they didn't have any arms and they looked a real motley crew but I thought, "My God, how do we look?" I'd say we were worse. I remember I had the backside out of my pants and things like that and our boots had had it but however, we joined them and the first job they gave us, and it was good fun actually We were

23:00 sent down the road about two kilometres down to where the main road and we put up a road block and we had one rifle between about four of us. And the girls had come up and it was great fun asking the girls for their identity cards and what have you and we loved that and that because I think we longed for a little bit of comfort from the opposite sex. Then the enemy came up and boy did we skedaddle and that because we had no weapons to fight them.

Germans or other Italians?

They, no

23:30 fascists, the republican army they came up with the black shirts or Brigade Nere, Brigade Nere, and they came up and we had to take off because we couldn't fight a pitched battle. We had nothing, so we left our billets and went into the high mountains. The nearest mountain there is twenty-two hundred metres high. It's called Monte Brione, and God it was cold up there at night, but they chased us

24:00 into those mountains and that. And we wandered around and then in the end, you know we couldn't get food so we had to come out and that. And we came into a wood right across where they had their garrison. We could look on the edge of this wood onto this garrison and see their, they had about two hundred troops there, fully armed and what have you. We had nothing and we hid there for about a

week to ten days right under their noses and we used to watch their patrols go off into the - watch them have them their parades, watch their patrols go off into

24:30 the mountains you know, and you could hear shots being fired. Whether they were firing at shadows, I don't know but we survived and then suddenly after that everything calmed down and all we did was we mounted patrols you know and I usually led these patrols and that. And in the end I had seven Australians in my group because they made me a military commander of one of the squads and that. And we just patrolled and very rarely we

25:00 ever saw the enemy because it got that way, wouldn't go into where they were and they wouldn't come out to where we were see except the Germans. When the Germans took charge then it was a different kettle of fish. They'd have what they called 'restrela mento' which means a complete raking of areas. They'd come in like that and they'd thing but we were a bit foxy for them too but they did get a few.

So many, I've got so many questions in my mind from what we've said so far. I've just got to roll back a bit.

Yes.

Get myself in order.

25:30 **Joining the partisans, it's not like going to the local drill hall and signing up?**

Oh no.

How does it actually work? I'm sure they're suspicious of you as well, are they?

Oh.

How does it work?

We were highly recommended - no doubt and that. Although when we first contacted the partisans it was like a film it was so intriguing.

Tell me...?

And that. And this is when we met up with Moscatelli, he was in a different area and we were heading towards Domodossola

26:00 near Lake Maggiore at the time. And woman said, "You should join the partisans," you know and we were speaking quite good Italian then and said, "You should join the partisans." And I said, "Well, how do we get to these partisans?" And they said, "Big Franco's there," and I didn't know this is Frank Jochamson as I explained earlier and they took us into - we were led into a thing and I tell you what, if we'd

26:30 have said the wrong thing we would have been shot because they had their hands in their pockets with their pistols and that. And they were watching us.

So how did you, how did you approach them? What were the first words exchanged and...?

They wanted to know who we were. We said, "We're Australiani Australiani."

Was this in a tavern or in someone's house or...?

Oh no, in some in some private house I presume at the time and then they said, "Alright," they accepted that we were genuine enough and they kept asking us "Did I know big Frank?",

27:00 you know, who which was this Butch Jochamson. And I said, "Oh, I don't know." I couldn't place him as big Frank as they called him. The "Big Australian" they called him because he was very set thick set and he played rugby for Queensland in the past. And so then they said, "Right, we'll take you out to where the partisans had a cell way back in the hills in the mountains and that." And it was the hairiest motorbike ride I've ever had in my damn life and that. And we went out there

27:30 and we stayed a few days and then met up with Jochamson and met up with - I actually met up with Moscatelli, who became one of the most famous partisans of all.

What was he like as a fella?

Well, he didn't talk much to us. We just talked to Jock, what's a name Frank Jochamson. We just talked to him and that. And Moscatelli didn't say much to us and they, we said you know, "Have you got any arms for us?" They said, "No, nothing."

28:00 We didn't have rifle or anything of that nature and see so Wigglesworth said to me, "We gotta get out of this." He said, "We can't stay here with this, it's too dangerous for us," and that. But they gave us all a new pair of boots each and that. And we're going through this place called Borgosesia on our way heading south again towards Medicina where we were to meet up with the Compinzas for the first time. And the next thing a car came past

28:30 and a bloke was, he turned his head sharp and he was looking and I said, "Oh gee, Wriggle I don't like the look of," we'd just walked past some Germans and that in the streets. And we were carrying these

boots in the these bags on our backs you know, we didn't have rucksacks, we just had a bag.

Tell us about the...?

Right now, we...

The induction process.

I've told you about when we met up with the first group and the leader was named "Topolino", that was his battle name,

29:00 and in other words Topolino means "mouse" as we well know. And it consisted of a detachment of thirty-six called Delatetsa [?], named after a martyr that had already been killed - a partisan. They seemed to adopt those names more than anything, and we were in the 12th Division in the Berlize[?] zone but all we did, we signed, we signed, definitely signed up and

29:30 that. And we were issued with a identity card which was bordered by red, white and green you know.

Did you have to swear an oath?

No, didn't swear anything and that. And next thing we're partisans but we were in civvy clothes, we didn't have any uniform or anything of that like. So we were in civilian clothes but in those early days we were a - you know as I said between thirty-six men we only had

30:00 one shotgun, one rifle and I think somebody had a revolver from memory and that. And it wasn't until the British got parachuted in that we really got ourselves armed. But up till then they were attacking where possible police posts to get arms and things like that. But otherwise, they had to glean the stuff from the enemy or from these police stations but...

So...

But we were just - we were just a rabble. There was no question about it in

30:30 those early days.

Well, in those early days then what actions could you undertake as a force?

As a force we'd set up, we really didn't do much except we patrolled and for some reason or other we didn't seem to be making contact with the enemy and that, which was a good thing. But we'd, you know we'd pull up the railway lines and we'd - because they had to service their garrisons and the garrisons were strategically placed round the area

31:00 and that. And they'd have a few hundred troops in there and they'd come up with their troops and we'd open, the partisans'd open fire on them and that, or throw hand grenades or things into their trucks and that but they got a bit foxy after that. They thought, that's ah, that's too deadly, so they used to come up in line and bring armoured cars with them and things like that and we didn't have any gear to fight against armoured cars. And then they used to send their wing patrols out into the bush on each

31:30 side of it of the road. They were coming up but we still ambushed them and that but it was hit and run. It was...

Guerrilla warfare?

It was guerrilla warfare. It was too. See fortunately for us the fellas that we had in charge of us, the this Topolino, who was an eighteen year old boy that had refused to go into the call up, and Chedamere [?] who was the political commissar, who was more right wing than left wing actually. He'd served in Albania and served

32:00 in Yugoslavia and that but we just did what they told us to do and that. And they'd say, they always sent me out on patrol. In fact, I led most of the patrols even when we were, you know roaming round the countryside, they always put we Aussies out in front for some reason or other. I thought it was good being there but contacting the enemy wasn't easy sort of thing because they'd come up at night most of the -

32:30 see when and we didn't know their movements all the time unless somebody could telephone it through and that. But the partisans still got into them and you know they knocked 'em around a fair bit and so much so that they had to maintain the garrisons.

In those early days was it a disciplined force, the partisans? Was it...?

Well, see fortunately, as I said, with this guerrilla warfare that these two fellas that were in charge of us they were born and bred

33:00 to the area and that was a tremendous advantage. In guerrilla warfare if you know the terrain and that. And we got to know the terrain ourselves from our experience of wandering around and avoiding the enemy and things of that like because we couldn't put up a fight. That that helped us a hell of a lot but until the British parachuted in and sent in these arms drops, we were probably fairly innocuous. I'd

33:30 say that we couldn't do up - they called us resistance but we just didn't have the logistics to fight.

What did the British drop in? How did that happen?

Oh, they came [with] things and I've been at these drops. In fact one night we got sixteen plane loads of Flying Fortresses [B-17 Bomber] and Liberators. We'd light a - we'd pick some high ground - we'd light a box of four fires, you know one here, one there, one there and the planes'd come in and they'd drop their stuff down

34:00 in the box and that. And then we'd disperse it very quickly and that. One of the biggest loads we got I think was twenty-four planes and that. I organised the civilian population that were sympathisers towards us to help us disperse the stuff because we had to hide it.

Well, what would you get...?

Very quickly.

In twenty-four airplanes, that's a lot of stuff. What would it be?

That's a lot of stuff.

All weapons?

All weapons. Yeah, we had mortars, Bren guns. I finished up, as I told you earlier, I finished up a Bren gunner in the rest of the war and

34:30 we had loads of Sten guns, which was a submachine gun. A very dangerous weapon too. If you dropped it, it'd still go off with the safety thing on but a few of them knocked themselves off unfortunately through lack of experience with these guns but all the machine gun things, some heavy machine guns and that but mostly Brens and that which was a fantastic gun.

So you became a pretty well armed force?

Oh yeah, and we had plenty of

35:00 explosives dropped and stuff. We hid them in cemeteries you know. We hid this stuff in cemeteries until somebody betrayed us.

In graves?

In crypts see you know. I don't know, you know the system of the graves there. You have a tomb arrangement and they put them in boxes, you know and they slot them in and there'd be quite a big area. In fact I've hidden in there from the Germans.

Tell us about that instance, hiding in the crypt?

Oh well, we

35:30 hid in there for a couple of days in a cemetery. For some reason or other it seemed a place that was inviolate. I don't think the too sacred. They didn't seem to want to come in there and that. And we hid in there and that. And then when the coast was clear we'd come out but that's where we kept all our, a lot of our explosives and our caches of weapons see.

Would it be stored in people's houses as well at all?

Oh yes, definitely. Definitely was stored in houses but even some of

36:00 that was betrayed you know by the sympathisers towards the fascist regime and that. And we had a few instances of that but as the war got further along the track and the British and the Americans were pushing up, that's the 8th British Army and the 5th American Army were pushing up to the - it'd been a long haul and very slow, especially up through Monte Cassino and all that areas, which you well know, and

36:30 we came with, they got up to Florence near the River Po. And then Mark Clark, who seemed to be the senior general, said to the partisans, you know told us to lay doggo. Not to sacrifice ourselves and that until he gave the all clear and then he told us to get in it because they were compressing the Germans back into the north western corner of northern Italy and that. And it got

37:00 a bit tight for us too because you know we've had 'em all around us and they crossed the River Po and the next thing the war is just about they're in Berlin, I think or just about in Berlin and that. We had all the news and we attacked them at any drop of a hat we'd attack them and their - darned the fellas in the garrisons started surrendering to

37:30 us. They used to come over, bring their weapons with them and come over to us because don't forget they were conscripted a lot of those. They were the boys that answered the call when they were called up, you know under the class of whatever the year was or that. And they were called up and they were forced into this republic against their own wishes and that. And they came across to us. They brought their weapon. As a matter of fact they were defecting that greatly that the officers used to take their boots off them. And

- 38:00 put them in their own quarters and that but then we were told to, you know to stir the nest up and we stirred it up. As a matter of fact I said to Wigglesworth, "These bastards are gonna get us killed if we don't watch out," and that. And we came down out of the mountains where we'd been holed up for years, although we had survived a very nasty - I didn't tell you about this but what we called the restrelamento when the Germans came up, I think they -
- 38:30 it was estimated they sent up about eight thousand troops against some, the whole of our division added up would not number more than eight hundred. Although, in the end everybody was jumping on the bandwagon, you know when they could see that we were on top and that. But the Germans came up like that, we went round and round behind them and see. But we - yeah they got a few of us and we lived on the plains down there in the, in Italy's coldest winter
- 39:00 in history. It had been the coldest winter and thank God for fogs because that enabled us to get away from thing. We couldn't fight a battle because it was just a few of us and each, we went away. I think we pulled out of two hundred and eighty guys and we led, Wigglesworth and I led the patrol out in the front and that. And we were down round the Vercelli area and then we broke up into small sections. We'd crawl into farms at night.
- 39:30 We slept in hay lofts and things like that but the farmers were terrified.
- I'll bet they were.**
- And then we - oh, terrified because they were the meat in the sandwich, believe me, and we would move out and we hid in ice covered and snow. We laid in snow, in irrigation ditches and that. We climbed up, at one stage there we pulled off and they thought they had us. We crawled up to right under the noses of the Todt organisation,
- 40:00 which was the engineering organisation which were repairing a bridge over the Sesia River near Vercelli and that. And we crawled right up there and I could see them, we watched them and we watched them from the ditches and then we'd disappear and at night and we'd move to another farm. And so we kept on the move and kept on and we survived. We survived, it's incredible. We came back into the mountains and that. And we got trapped in a valley and that.

Tape 7

- 00:41 Yes, well it wasn't easy. I'll tell you why. Their strategy was that if they were going to move in and check out a particular township or a village the first thing is to grab as many people as they could and line them up in the town square as hostages and that. And that hamstrung us
- 01:00 because we couldn't - if we attacked them, they would for some reason or other whether there was bush telegraph or what but the word would come round that they've got so many hostages lined up and that. And they would shoot the hostages if we opened fire on them. So that was a bit of a restriction. You had to get them on open ground and that. And with the type of a terrain if they sent out their patrols and they usually sent out, you know it might be a hundred strong or two hundred men and that. And they'd have to wind up through
- 01:30 these mountain roads and things like that. And what we'd do, the partisans, one lot'd hit 'em there and another lot'd hit them there and so forth and see I'd open up with a Bren gun and that. And then the whole mob would join in. See our detachment, but we did it in detachments see.
- So are you like under cover of trees or something?**
- Oh trees, oh yeah we were cunning because we were very foxy. Matter of fact, I don't know who it was but
- 02:00 this Italian had me pinned down, Wigglesworth and I, we were behind in a little village and that. And we were firing down on them and the next thing they'd got the range on us and we were pinned down. And we were behind a little low privet hedge and the bullets were going through the privet hedge. And it was showering privet pieces on top of us and I said to Wigglesworth, I said, "That's bloody good shooting, isn't it mate?" And that - oh no I didn't, it wasn't Wigglesworth
- 02:30 with me, it was another fella, a chap from the 2/24th Battalion that was a prisoner of war. A chap named Wally, Wally McGregor. He's since died unfortunately but that was the type of thing the partisans set up. Now they did in the other area on the other side there in an area north of Borgosesia. They actually set up their own stronghold and tried to set
- 03:00 up an interim government but the Germans came up and eliminated that very smartly so, but if you could get somebody to talk about that, who survived that it would be good. The ideal guy's in England, a chap named Peck who got a DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal] but and there's Jochamson who unfortunately is dead, but he was there but they were protracted battles. That was a protracted battle but ours is always hit and withdraw.

So you'd have to...?

Matter of fact, I was gonna tell you that the Italians,

03:30 Topolino always discussed the withdrawal. We'd decide on an ambush and oh nine times out of ten you wouldn't even contact the enemy because you'd set it up and that. And he and I discussed how we'd withdraw thing. See, you couldn't fight because of logistics, you couldn't stand a protracted battle, so we would pull back see and then. And we used to plan the escape route see and then we'd pull back into the hills away from that particular spot and

04:00 oh we, you know we had a lot of narrow escapes and that.

Tell us about some of those narrow escapes?

Narrow escapes because we were, we set up a road block to engage a crowd that was coming up to relieve a garrison that we had under siege. The partisans, you know it was a big group, see don't forget that we're talking of, you know eight hundred thousand men and that. And it was to be combined effort and one of our jobs with

04:30 another detachment was to try and stop the enemy coming up and I remember London, or Londre, as he took over the first shift and while some of us slept and he had my Bren gun. And he set it up in a spot there and had it in a quite a good spot I thought. But when they come for some intuitive reason

05:00 I shifted it. I shifted it about two metres and just as well because when the enemy opened up on us, absolutely cut that place to pieces with a heavy machine gun, you know but for some reason or other I moved it and so didn't get hit. Well, we had a bad day that day because they chased us and that. They came after and they had hundreds of troops and you know they had armoured cars and stuff like that and we couldn't really combat those.

How did you escape?

Well, we pulled back, you know went

05:30 into the hills and as a matter of fact I could tell you a little story now, which I call the saga of Paddy the Irishman and this is combined with this. This actually happened on this very day. Paddy, he was holed up in there, an escaped prisoner of war, and he was holed up in a cosy little nest with a young lady named Pearl, I remember, and we got word that Paddy was there in this village and I went in

06:00 and caught up with Paddy and I said, "Listen Paddy, it's not fair on the people." I said, "Sooner or later you're gonna get caught and what's gonna happen to Pearl and the people who have been helping you?" I said, "It's too dangerous," and the people were out to help us. They were, you know because the country had been split and they were, you know sympathisers and that. And he came and joined the partisans. I thought Paddy was a little bit of a pacifist. I think he came from the north of Ireland that. And no doubt had been conscripted from Ulster I guess

06:30 and we were going in and I'm going to take a patrol in with some other fellas from another detachment and that. And Paddy said, "Do you mind?" he said, "I believe they're going in to such and such a village." And I forget the name of it. He said, "Do you mind if I take your place?" So somebody gave him a rifle. I didn't give him my Bren gun. They got lumbered, they got ambushed. Two were killed; two lovely guys and that had been,

07:00 you know I knew very well and that. And one of them was the fiancé of a girl that was one of our couriers. So they got Paddy, got a bullet through the thigh and that. And 'cause he's down, they take him down to Vercelli and put him in the hospital, repair him first and then he's waiting to be condemned under a tribunal. See the Germans at that stage were going

07:30 through all the motions of doing the right thing to, Paddy is up for tribunal and that. And a military tribunal and been told quite clearly that he would be condemned to death for taking up arms as a partisan behind the enemy lines. And you wouldn't believe what happened, we went in and took the city of Vercelli and in the big thing there was Paddy got released. We saved Paddy and that.

08:00 And I met up with them and he'd got so thin. He told me that they'd cart him out and put him up against the wall morning after morning and that. And nothing would happen and that. And he died a thousand deaths. He cried actually and that. And he said, "All I want to do now, I want to go home." And we shook hands and that's the last I ever saw of Paddy but what an incredible bit a luck and that. And what incredible luck that I wasn't in the patrol, see because I was

08:30 in that patrol.

So much of war is luck, isn't it?

Yeah, luck it's charmed.

Chance.

It's charmed life and that's why I'm sitting here today I guess.

And thankfully you are.

Mmm.

Tell us about this (UNCLEAR)?

The objective was to chase the partisans, engage them, but the partisans were like will o' the wisps you know. They knew the terrain because they'd been in this guerrilla warfare and they moved as the enemy'd come

- 09:00 there. They'd move to the side or, as I said, we went way right down below but a lot of people, the villagers got burnt, houses got burnt and a lot of people got deported and things like that for some reason or other had been helping the enemy. In fact my lady friend, which we'll talk about later, she got interrogated too and she survived strangely enough at that time but then they'd do a zone like that,
- 09:30 then the Germans'd come down and do the next zone. They were doing because don't forget there was partisans all over the countryside. In fact the figures quoted, I don't know whether they're true or not, but they reckon that the partisans all up lost two hundred and fifty thousand men or people. Two hundred and fifty thousand. That's just as many as the 5th and 5th and 8th Armies lost in the battle throughout Italy because I guess there was a lot of civilians in that that got, you know eliminated along the way for aiding and abetting
- 10:00 I guess and that. But we seemed to be one step ahead but we came back too soon and most of the Germans and what have you had pulled back and gone into another area. And we thought it was time to come back and we got back into this valley and we're trapped in this damn valley with the enemy all round us and that. And I know I laid in behind my machine gun
- 10:30 in the snow and my body, they had to lift me up. I could not get up because I'd frozen behind in the snow, laying in snow. It's alright, it feels warm enough but oh boy once you get cold, you're cold, but we decided we had to get outta this and we decided we'd get out at night and strangely enough, and you wouldn't believe it, that we led them out. Wigglesworth and I led them out. We had two - oh be well over two hundred men and we led them out
- 11:00 because we...

How'd you do that?

Because we knew the terrain where we'd been hiding out in and we knew it backwards.

How do you sneak out two hundred men though? That's incredible.

Yeah, it's move at night, see because they don't, most of them at night are billeted up, aren't they? They're not gonna be out in the damn cold hunting you and we found - I told them about a track and Topolino and I and Wigglesworth, we were out in the front and that. And

- 11:30 they - I think we came on a patrol. We came, we saw the enemy, and it was moonlight actually and I remember we crept there and I said, "Gee, see there's some guys there." We could see them in the moonlight and that. And we withdrew back and Topolino put me up on the top of the hill with the machine gun and that to make sure that he said, "We'll have to withdraw." And in the end I said, "Well, I know a track," and Wigglesworth and I
- 12:00 led them out on this little known track and that. And took 'em out and we went back on the plains again out of the danger area but they had us trapped in there you know. But they didn't come out and fight at night see, so we were very lucky.

Very lucky.

But you know, but during the day they're, you know they'd be firing heavy machine guns and you'd hear the bullets whistling all over the place, but then for some reason or other they were Italians against Italians and

- 12:30 I think the whole thing had changed that suddenly they're on the losing side and they knew it. I'm sure they knew it and that. And they didn't seem to want to engage us, even when you know we went down and took the city of Vercelli. The Germans pulled out, they pulled back, we went in and took over the - our first job was to control the railway. They thought the Germans might come back
- 13:00 along the railway line and we were set up in position on the railway line. Then they said, "We gotta move in," and our job was to take over the fascist headquarters in Vercelli before the 5th American Army was due in a few days time. And I'll never forget marching through the city in a big patrol with women racing over kissing us and throwing us flowers and that. And waving flags, you know Italian flags, no Aussie flags, and things like that. They seemed to be intrigued when they were told
- 13:30 that we were referred to not as Australians but as English, English, see rather than Australians because people thought that when you said you were an Australian, you came from Austria and that. So we'd take in, we took over the fascist headquarters. The only people, everybody had cleared off and gone into civilian clothes but there was a little bit of fighting from roof rooftops and I led patrols up into those rooftop. Bit hairy and that.

So rooftops over the

14:00 **city you're walking...**

In the city, yes.

Describe one of those rooftop patrols for us then?

Well, the idea was that they say, "Right, well there's some enemy up in the thing," and so on but as soon as we approached them they seemed to disappear and that. I know they fired a few shots and I remember a woman leaning out of a window seeing what was going on and the next thing, great big red mark and a - where a bullet had taken her in the chest and that, but she survived actually and that. And it shows you don't want to be a stickybeak when bullets are flying

14:30 around. You should keep your head down but after two or three days it all cleaned up. Then loads of enemy prisoners of war came in and this is where I think I should tell you about brother against brother. In our unit detachment we had this chap and his brother was on the other side, he was in the, this Valley Mossa, which was a garrison force that was very evil actually and it was

15:00 very sad and I can still see his face when they brought his brother in as a prisoner and that. And they were taking him off to be shot and that, you know to face the firing squad. Then they had the officer that was in charge of the thing and one bloke, he went absolutely berserk with his rifle and that. And he's screaming at, "You raped my sister, you raped my sister, you bastard," and they clobbered him with the rifle. Opened up the whole side of his face and the bloke's

15:30 manacled and that. And I remember him, you know he knocked him to the ground and he got up and he wiped the blood off his face like that and stood up. I said, "You're a mad..."

Do you want to take a little break?

Course they shot him. They shot him of course, and there was a lot of scores paid off. Whether they were genuine, I don't know. They'd hold kangaroo courts and I'd call them kangaroo courts. I used to say to Wrigglesworth, I said,

16:00 "We don't want to get involved." I said, "We don't." We told them that we didn't want to be in firing squads or anything like that and we didn't want to be in the, you know the bashing up of prisoners. I said, "That's not our way."

Was it...?

But they you know, and they recognised that and they said because they could have you know said, "Well, it's your duty," but no, they accepted the fact, they said, "It's not our way. We don't want to - we don't understand why you're doing it," and so forth. But a lot of people - they just were killin' each other off

16:30 because of political persuasion you know.

Was there no forgiveness? Was it a time of revenge and cut and dried, so even if you were my brother you're gonna die?

You're gonna die. No, there was no forgiveness and in the early days of the partisans, if a partisan was caught he was executed and likewise. If we caught one of the republicans, even though he'd been a conscript

17:00 or something he would be executed. And I remember the story, not that I saw this actual thing happen, but they said that we shot a German officer and that. The partisans killed a German officer and they come up the village where it happened and they took the first twenty people and hung 'em on butcher's hooks. Whether that - I didn't thing, but this was the story, whether that was true or not, but you see the

17:30 atrocities were terrible on both sides. It was eye for an eye.

On that that note, I know it's bloodthirsty and gory but for the record, can you give us some more examples of what might have gone on?

Well, the partisans used to be - quite a few of them, you know get caught out. They got drugged or something by somebody that was betraying them and so forth and I remember there in a couple of incidents they got twenty or so at one time. And what they did to those,

18:00 the mutilation of the bodies was something frightful.

Before or after death?

Well, in the proceed you know disembowelling and you know and cutting your names in them. And as a matter of fact one nasty little thing because the people got the bodies back and interned them afterwards and that because [they were] all local people. Once particular instance there they cut the man's stomach open, cut his penis off and stuck it inside his stomach. That was the type, now they were Germans that were doing that.

18:30 There was a notorious doctor in the city of Bielsko who was supposed to be, you know he was just an animal and that. But for some reason or other I reckon man against man, he's a terrible animal and that you know given the upper hand, the thing - nobody died an easy death. If you were caught the thing is

you not only took a bashing but at the same time you had to dig

19:00 your own grave too.

So, they didn't take prisoners as such?

They dug their own grave.

Yeah.

No, in the early days they never took any prisoners but as things changed the whole scene changed and then we used to swap prisoners and I went to one of these prisoner swapping and that. And organised by the church, Catholic Church, and that with priests and that. They've got so many of our boys and we've got so many of their boys and we would swap them but the rate in the early -

19:30 to get twenty, if you had a German officer you could just about write your ticket. You could get twenty partisans back, you know and all of these kids, they didn't know how to put up a fight and they weren't even trained and that. And but the whole thing changed, the whole scene changed. As we're getting towards the end of the war, it's got down to one for one and so forth and in the end,

20:00 they'd have to get twenty to get one of theirs back and so on but we had prisoner exchange. We would exchange prisoners and that.

Tell us how the church would organise that and where...?

Well, I don't know because I wasn't privy to the actual workings but they'd organise a spot and say on such and such a day we would go in there with white flags and that. And the enemy'd come in with his group'a guys and we would just change 'em over.

And you'd both walk away?

Walk away.

Once they were exchanged.

Yeah, and

20:30 no shots were - or nothing, the thing, we just walked away but the priests'd be there in attendance.

Now with these...?

The church really, you know even though the communists hated the church as we well know but the church was a factor in the whole thing. I did a terrible thing and I even think of it to this day and I wrote it up in my diary and I'm a bit ashamed of it. We, it was

21:00 Christmas Eve and they have a, what a major mass, which no doubt you know about, and I was invited by my lady friend to come. She said, "Please come to the church with me." Things were fairly quiet then and I went to the church and much to my horror I found the men were in one side of the church and the women were in the other and I wasn't sitting with her but this is where I made my greatest faux pas. They pass around at midnight

21:30 an effigy of the baby Jesus and that. And they're passing it round and everybody's kissing it and when it got to me and I said, "I'm not kissing this bloody piece of wood," and that. And passed it over to the next guy. That was a bad thing because I should never'a done that and I'm ashamed of it.

I'm sure...

Mmm.

That you know no one would be holding any grudges about...

Yeah, but it's the only time.

It's understandable.

But, the only time I ever went

22:00 to church in Italy. First and last time. I coulda got married you know.

Well,

I contemplated that.

We're gonna get onto that.

Oh yeah, that's right.

The young lady story. Two questions about what we discussed in the last few minutes. Firstly, the first question is; do you think people used this time to settle old scores with each other?

Ah, I always had that question. Wigglesworth and I, we often talked about it and I said, "I think there's some old scores being settled here,"

- 22:30 and that. And that's why we refused to be a party, asked them would they please, it wasn't our way? They were the - it was tough
- 23:00 And that. And I told them that "If ever I catch anybody asleep I would have them", I promised them they would be shot you know for disobeying the order and that. And I never had any trouble, but they put me in charge. No, because we were only a small group you know. We were only thirty-six and we're self-sufficient.
- Now, in amongst all this horror and bloodshed and nastiness, there must have been lighter moments?**
- Oh gosh yeah, lots a lighter moments.
- Well, let's have a talk about some of them.**
- When you know,
- 23:30 when things were quiet because we had a lot of quiet periods. As I said, you know you'd go along for a few weeks and there's no contact with the enemy. They never came near us and things like that and we sorta ruled the roost. The people would come out and we'd have picnics and they - I remember Mariatina Compienza coming out and bringing me a cake, you know and things of that like. It was just similar to visitation and...
- 24:00 **Did you find yourself becoming more and more Italian?**
- Oh yes, very much so. You know when I came home my family said I had the most atrocious accent. My brother, who was Nigel, I called him "Nidgel" and Nidgel is the way you'd pronounce it the way it's written and that. And I said, "How's Nidgel?" For my brother but they - I used to think in Italian and I found it a lot easier to but today it's
- 24:30 bloody hopeless.
- How did you feel the experience of being so deeply immersed in a foreign culture?**
- Mmm.
- Helped you as a man?**
- Oh, I'd say it, I grew up. I must have.
- You'd have to be...**
- I'd say you know that probably the worst thing about the war was that we lost our youth.
- 25:00 **Do you need to take...?**
- But I guess I grew up.
- Let's talk about some of the fun times again then. Tell us about, you know you must have had some wild times, some fun times.**
- Oh God yes, and we wrote ourselves off a few times.
- Tell us about that.**
- No nothing, but see when we came out of the partisans, everybody wanted to entertain us because we were unique, we were Australians and we never wanted for anything. We didn't have to buy anything
- 25:30 because they just regaled us because I think we were good for their morale that we were there and that. I don't think they felt so much alone although they very much leaned towards Russia because of the wonderful victories that Russia had against the Germans. And let's not lose sight of the fact that's what turned the war but the - oh no we used to get entertained and we went to many a party and things like
- 26:00 that. And they'd had plenty of rabbit and stuff like that. You know they used to have their hutches of rabbits that they bred and ate and they'd kill the odd WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK too and things of that nature.
- What was your favourite food in Italy? What was the...?**
- Oh, I'd say that I reckon my favourite food, and I still like it today, pasta ciutta. What they call a dry pasta you know with a sauce and plenty of cheese and things like that. Oh, that's something
- 26:30 we always got, cheese. They always - when we used to pick up the stuff we always got a lot of cheese, formaggio.
- Cheese.**
- But we went all those years all that time and never rode in a vehicle you know. That twenty months that

I was outside the prison camp or the work camp, never rode in a vehicle.

I wanted to ask you on that point too. When you weren't on patrol, were you...?

We were

27:00 in billets.

Billets.

In the village. I've got a photo of some of the thing, the haylofts that we slept, mainly in haylofts you know as a group and that. I don't know whether I snored in that day. I don't think anybody'll sleep with me today but they, no we slept in haylofts and things like that but we mounted guards. We had guards all the way round but there were a lot of periods where things were relatively quiet you know. Nothing sorta happened.

Where did you get your uniforms?

Nothing really happened until we

27:30 really got armed you know and that was thanks to the British mission called Cherokee when it was parachuted in.

When did you get your uniforms, 'cause they're pretty snappy looking uniforms?

Oh yeah, they were in, the partisan uniform was made by the textile factories round about. Same time they made us a nice suit of civilian clothes too. So that if we went out on leave, I used to go on leave, the same as I did here even though I was in enemy territory behind the German.

It must have seemed quite strange?

Lines. It seemed strange but we had city clothes and things like that although I still

28:00 had my - I always borrowed a Sten gun. I always had a Sten gun with me because, you know you never knew what was along those tracks and we'd - I had this lady friend and I used to walk up to about eight or nine kilometres just to see her but you couldn't travel in the bush. You had to travel on the roads and they didn't seem to want to go out at night for some reason, as I said earlier. They see, I never struck an enemy patrol at night,

28:30 come to think of it, never struck one.

We're talking about the Italian black...?

Yeah, black shirts.

Shirts.

And where the Germans too but we see all those garrisons were mainly the black brigades, you know that perhaps the Germans didn't think they were good enough for front line troops and that. And they, I think they used them for garrison work.

Did you...?

But the Germans came up and aided and then when the Germans with the SS and that. They were - what a pack'a

29:00 bastards they were and that. And they, you know they didn't ask any questions. They just eliminated people right, left and centre. Even sent Stukas in, Stukas against little villages you know. Pretty little villages you know, Stukas just bombing them and that. And killing people and thing. I know one sad, I've been back there and read the grandmother's playing in the street with three little grandchildren -

29:30 'bang' just from a Stuka and that. But I think you know for a while there I think the Germans lost their head because they believed in the old iron fist of you know, scare the people so much so. See, I've lead patrols and the next thing the people are skedaddling up into the hills. They're leaving the village just to taking off because I was tall and fair fairly blond looking. And you know they

30:00 thought I was a German and that. And they would, they would shoot through. They weren't - if they hung round and got caught the next thing they could be deported to work in Germany and what have you.

Did you ever give the...first of all, another two questions, did the British offer to take you guys out once...?

Yes, they did. Now that's a good point because I wrote that up. They said "We'd been", they took our names and said,

30:30 "Would you please contact our people at home to tell them that we're still okay?", and that. But it never got through the system. It did not get through the system.

Did they offer to fly you out back to Britain or anything?

No, they couldn't fly us out because they wanted us to go into Switzerland. So they said, they got us all together and we made a group of thirteen. I've got the numbers there. There's a New Zealander, there was a Frenchman and who was later

31:00 executed, seven, nine Aussies I think, a couple of English and New Zealander. I think it added up to thirteen. I thought, "My God, this is an unlikely number'a people." And they said, "You've got, you've been here long enough and you've done enough." They said, "You've got to go out," and they told us that they had the guide and everything and we started off and I was a bit worried actually.

31:30 This was the last winter of the war and so much so that I decided to put it all down on paper. I wrote a very long letter to my mother and left it with a family and asked them to, you know send it on if anything happened to me, if they learnt that I was gone. I'd been killed twice by the way because they had me killed a couple of times.

Did they tell your mother that?

No, no, no. The letter

32:00 stayed there but I collected the letter and brought the letter home and sadly I've lost the - that letter's disappeared in the family. I cannot find that letter but my mother read it, she cried but I told her all about it and how I was going to marry this Italian girl and all this type of thing. And I don't know whether my sisters were jealous but however it didn't happen as we well know.

Did you ever give any thought to...?

Oh, I was going to tell you about getting into the Switzerland.

32:30 **Oh yeah, go on.**

We started off and next thing, we got beaten by the snow. We could not get through the ice and snow because they are, that's a formidable barrier unless you know you can handle that country. Because a lot of our boys died from sickness, you know altitude sickness in the thing and some of them got, you know pulled away by groups, got killed by avalanches and things of that like in there. So,

33:00 I was quite relieved and she was relieved too when I came back.

I'm sure she was.

And I said, "Wriggle, we're gonna see this out," and we saw it out.

Did you ever give, did you ever make any, in with the partisans, did you make any really strong friendships with men of a similar age to yourself?

Oh yes, yes. My word, and I got on very well with them because see we were - whether it was by design

33:30 or it just happened that way, as I said earlier, the hard core of the partisans were these marxists. Most of them had been in prison and they got out when during the armistice of 1943 and amnesty, they got away and that. And they formed the hard core of the partisans but there were democrats, there was justice and liberty. There was several action groups, church groups and things like that but we seemed to for some - whether they deliberately did it

34:00 or not, we seemed to be in the group that was more right wing than left wing. The political commissar, he wrote to me and I said, "How'd you feel about it?" "Oh," he said, "I never knew a damn thing about politics," he said, "But they made me a political commissar." And he said, "And I studied it all up and that," but he was more right wing than left wing you know or socialistic in his attitude. And I think I told you the other day that we

34:30 used to have many a conversation on spiritualism or religion and materialism because the died hard communists, they believed unless you could see it in your hand it was nothing. It was nothing. You can't work on or live by something that's, you know just a pipe dream or something of that nature but we were and the villagers you know. We stayed in villages and the people love - I've been

35:00 back to the villages and they still think the world of us you know and they still call me "Sydney" and that. And you know I've gone into, "Oh Sydney, Sydney," you know and they get all excited. Then you've gotta meet so and so and meet this one and that one, and they dine and fete you. But when I went back the first time in 1989 I went back after I wrote the book. I was invited to a party and it was the communist party had their annual get together

35:30 and the winds'a change were definitely blowing in Europe then because they said to me, "You know we used to have forty-eight per cent membership and today we're down to twenty-four." They said the winds'a change were -and it turned out, remember Russia changed in 1988?

Yeah, well that was '88, wasn't it?

And all that, and that was that period.

Yeah.

I was over there and that, so not that I cared because even though I'd sung "The Red Flag" and you know we had these, every now and then we'd have a march and they'd definitely played "Bandera Rosa",

36:00 you know, the red flag and things of that like.

Did you...?

But now do you wanna know about some funny things that happened?

Oh, on this tape we've got about five minutes to go.

Alright then, okay.

So, we'll have a quick chat.

Yes.

I just have a couple more questions and the next tape we'll pick up funny things.

Yes.

And we'll pick up romance. I just wanted to ask you a couple of quick questions before this tape runs out.

Now, you worry me.

No, it will be a - we're all amongst friends here.

We're done with atrocities, oh these executions out at Piancone [?], I think that that should...Should be recorded.

36:30 **We've got five minutes on the tape for that.**

Yeah, what happened in May of 1944 there was some of our boys out there living and being looked after by local people back in the mountains at a place called Piancone [?]. And there were five Australians and one Englishman there together, not even in the partisans. Up came the black shirts, captured them, see they were unarmed they've got nothing and that. And summarily

37:00 executed them after making them dig their graves.

And were these Aussie boys?

The five Aussies and the one Englishman and that. And I went back there to that spot and where they've got a remembrance tree, you know like a rosemary and also I've got a picture of the cenotaph that's there with the names. Anyway, one of the fellas was with me when I was on the loose to start with. Remember, I said he broke up away from us and was finally executed but the

37:30 church back out of the hills every year holds a mass on that site. Now, they were buried there at this site and that but before we came home we had the graves exhumed and put them into an Italian cemetery and eventually they were moved over to the war cemetery in Milan. But the thing that I liked about thing was the beautiful words the Italians had. In Italian it said, "They'll live

38:00 forever more with us," but gee I was upset. Oh.

I bet you were.

Well, when I went back, you know when I went back there I couldn't stop myself. I broke down.

That's understandable.

Tape 8

00:31 **Now, you wanted to talk about the republican who sang...?**

Ah yeah, we were towards the end and that, we were taking a few prisoners and that. And they were coming across to us and so on but we did capture one republican and that who'd been a tenor and had sung in La Scala in Milan and that. And rather than eliminate him they -

01:00 somebody knew of him and the next thing we got him singing and he had a magnificent voice. The women used to come up from the villages to our billets and listen to this fellow sing. So it actually saved his life and we found in the end that we didn't give him a weapon or anything like that. We made him a cook and I don't think he was a very good cook but he was there but that definitely saved his life.

01:30 But even when the war actually ended in there, there was still some scores being paid off. A lotta terrible things happened, particularly the Germans who were trying to work their way back to Germany and that. If they got caught up with, they got very severely dealt with a lot of them and I put those

things down as murders anyway. And a lot of them had - alright we'll that's enough on that.

You just said you didn't give him a weapon but was he a fellow that wanted to come over

02:00 **to the other side or you said...?**

No, we captured him and that you know. He gave up but in fairness he was a fella that had been you know conscripted. And sadly they're forced to do things that they don't want to do. Italians generally, I don't think want to be soldiers. They'd just sooner, they love music and they love.

They're lovers, not fighters.

They're fighters

02:30 and that except, as I said earlier, the other day but they were top troops in the desert and that. The ones with the black plumes outta the side of their helmet and that. But do you want some of these funny things that happened?

Well, I wanted to, on that note of the Italians being lovers and amore in general, I wanted to talk about this, I know that you were probably a clean living and possibly virginal lad before you left home, but I'm

03:00 **wondering...**

Oh, geez oh...

Well, a lot of men...

How did you read the signs? Oh, that intrigues me.

I'm taking a leap in faith here. Were you a virgin when you left home?

Yeah definitely. Most certainly.

And a lot of your mates would have been too.

Because, in the thing we respected women and you know we treated them, we were, they were, we wouldn't touch them but...

Comes a time though.

There came a time, and in Italy

03:30 and that. We were all, most of us had friends and that. And I certainly had a lady friend who at one stage if it had been easy I would have married her but it didn't work that way because I was a Protestant, she was a Catholic and the church thing. Although, a British Officer did talk to me and that had been parachuted in, this Captain Farren. He was a lieutenant but he became a captain in the field and he said, "Whatever you do Malcolm, please go home."

04:00 He said, "Please go home first," and he was right.

Before marrying her or...?

Yes.

Before calling?

Yes, and that but she married one of the partisans, who hated my guts too by the way. I didn't realise till after years that that he must'a been pretty friendly towards her and even though I'd come on the scene. And I think she liked me because I looked clean and I looked blonde. And you know fair skinned and what have you.

04:30 And she was from the northern part of Italy and so on but oh no, we, she was great because the family took me in and you know, if I went on leave, I'd go and stay with 'em. We actually went on leave, you know even though we were behind the German lines and that. We went on leave and they would look after me and that. And they really thought the world of me I think because that and...

Well, can I just back track here a second. First of all, what was her name?

Amelia.

Amelia.

05:00 Amelia Zampesi.

Amelia Zampesi.

Zampesi and she's been out to Australia a couple of times and...

And where was she, where was her home village?

Ah, it was called Solda. Solda near Trentino in north western...

North west.

Yeah, in the Berlize [?] zone it was.

Okay.

Close to Biela. Not far from Biela.

Now, how did you come to meet her?

Well, strangely enough we were marching to new

05:30 billets. We were shifting, we shifted camp, and the detachment was marching to new billets and I happened to go past a house and I've got a photo of her house. It still stands today in exactly the same, and strangely enough this girl looked out and I looked out and our eyes locked. And you wouldn't believe it and she sent word up to the camp and said, "I'd like to meet the Australian."

So she knew...?

The tall Australian.

She knew. You were walking?

I don't know. She'd no, but somebody said, "He's Australian,"

06:00 and that. And...

Somebody's been a little bit talkative?

Yeah, and well amongst the partisans no doubt and she said "She wanted to meet the tall Australian" and that. And I came down and we became fast friends from there on. But I never went, I only went to church with her once when they put us in the separate parts of the church.

Well, it's a difficult relationship for anyone whether there's a war or not being Protestant and Catholic, that's you know, that's a hard task.

Yes.

But...

In those days because the old what's her name was banned in those days, but today it doesn't matter now.

What's the, what's

06:30 **her name?**

The, no I mean the religion thing because I think even in my own family when I was a youngster, you know we sort of looked askance at somebody of a different religion. And in Italy they were very strong Catholics and that. And as a matter of fact her sister, her sister was killed in a love suicide with a married man and the church refused to bury her

07:00 in the church grounds.

How traumatic.

Had to be put outside the walls. That's how strong they were.

After the war?

No, this is before the war.

Good Lord.

Yeah, but there was a bit a tragedy there but not 'cause I never met the sister because it happened before I came on the scene. But we were great friends and even when I was wherever I was she became, she worked with the partisans. Matter of fact she was telling me

07:30 she rode up, used to ride round on a pushbike and she'd come and see me and we'd spend hours together and that.

So when you received a note, was it or did it, word of mouth that she wanted to meet you?

Oh, word of mouth. They said that the, "She wants to meet the tall Australian."

And tell me what that was like being told this?

Well, I was flattered. I guess I was flattered.

Had any of them...?

I don't know but until then I'd you know. I'd been friendly with young women

08:00 but nothing in particular and that. Anyway, I came down and thing and we'd be fast friends but she worked with the partisans.

Can I just interrupt though. Like, is this basically the first woman you've had any contact with since you've left home, or you said there was another friend of yours earlier on?

Oh, purely platonic they were.

Yes.

But nothing at all really.

But even in the most platonic of circumstances that must be incredibly

08:30 **meaningful to have some contact with a woman?**

Oh yes, somebody that started to care for you and I cared for her too. If anything had happened to her God knows what I'd done.

Well, can I also ask then, under those circumstances you must have built up a - and I'm assuming here -but you must have built up a kind of a reserve of strength and you know an intestinal fortitude. Does having a woman come into your life, even as a friend...?

Oh, yes.

Does that start to soften you up a little or deplete

09:00 **your reserves?**

No, I think it strengthened me and if anything had happened to her through me, I don't think I would have ever forgiven myself but she did some fairly courageous things. She put bombs under a bridge for us and things like that and I said, "Why did you do that? Carrying bombs in you know in explosive in your bicycle rack," and

09:30 that and she said, "Oh, I wanted to blow up the bridge. I wanted to impede the Germans. I'm trying to help you." Kept saying to help me but she used to go - somehow she always found out where I was and would come and see me. She'd ride her bike, even fifty/sixty kilometres just to see me and that. And spend a few hours and go back but...

Now, you say you're friends but you, that sounds like love to me to ride fifty or sixty kilometres?

Oh, yes I would say so.

Mmm.

I would say so but...

10:00 **And did you find yourself you know that thing about falling in love where you lose perspective and you feel sick and you can't eat?**

Well, I wanted to be with her all the time.

So, did you think about leaving?

You know I'd ride, I'd walk if I got get leave, I had to get leave and I used to have leave passes there. There's copies of them there and I would...

Did you have to give a reason?

Walk all the way back. I'd walk eight or nine kilometres to spend a few hours with her and that.

Did you have to give a reason when you're asking for leave?

Oh yeah, well I said well

10:30 compassionate leave if you like.

Mmm and they would understand, wouldn't they? Especially if...

Oh yeah, they knew, they all knew because they got big mouths Italians and that.

Oh really.

But...

And big hands.

But she was very lucky. What happened, they came up one day and the Germans, there was a German officer and a fascist officer and they interrogated her. They got her and a couple of other girls, carted 'em off and that. And they put flamethrowers in front of her house,

- 11:00 guard on the house, flamethrowers. And they interrogated her and they, actually the Germans knew my name and as Malcolm Webster, and I don't know to this day how that came about. I cannot believe - whether somewhere along the track I'd disclosed my name to somebody because they knew me as "Sydney". I was known only as "Sydney".
- And what did she call you?**
- She called me Malcolm, no Sydney. She called me Sydney in those days. She calls me Malcolm today
- 11:30 but she called me Sydney and that. They wanted to know about me. The German wanted to know about things and what sort of thing and she said that he hated the war. He said that it doesn't matter whether it's the German side or on the Allied side, there's always somebody fretting for somebody in some other place you know. Somewhere out throughout the world and it was just as hard on the German people as it is on our people and she...
- So tell me about,**
- 12:00 **I'd like to know a bit about your first actual meeting with her and what that must be like under the circumstances you were in?**
- I gave her a cuddle. I was a bit, for a bit I don't know whether she took any leading on or something but it was spontaneous. Let's say it was spontaneous and that.
- Well, you said your eyes had locked?**
- It was a good friendship but nothing happened of any note. That all happened later.
- What**
- 12:30 **do you mean by that sorry? No, I've...**
- No, see I met her during '44. Musta been about nine 'bout September I'd say, September/Oct, it'd be in my diary anyway, exactly when I met her.
- So, by this stage you've got a pretty good idea that the Germans are on the back foot even though you're...?**
- Oh yes, except it was pretty tight for us because...We were being forced into a shrinking area, as you can imagine.
- And so did you**
- 13:00 **get time to get together to you know, as lovers do that time that you need together, quietly by yourselves just to (UNCLEAR) and talk and...?**
- Oh yes, we used to go for walks together and wander around the bush. I used to sleep up in the top floor. I didn't sleep with her or anything of that like you know. She might come up and give me a cuddle but it was a three storey house and that. And it was right up against a back hill, so that it had a - even a little bridge
- 13:30 out to the thing so you could, if the enemy came along and that. And I could just skedaddle down the thing but I always slept with a pistol and under my pillow and that. And with a Sten gun. I always took a Sten gun when I went on leave.
- And when you got time together, did the war disappear for that bit of time while you were walking and talking and just trying to be in love?**
- Oh yes, yeah it was bound to. It was bound to because I think that in a way
- 14:00 I was lonely and I needed the company. I definitely needed the company. She fell in love. I don't really and honestly think I was really in love and that but I just needed the company and that. And maybe it was selfish, I...
- Well, it's easy to imagine that you want to stay alive and you know she's in her home country, so things must be a bit different to her?**
- Oh yes, that's right.
- Did you make plans together after the war? Like fantasy plans?**
- Yeah, I said that we'd, you know I told her
- 14:30 that I needed to go home first and I would sort myself out but in the meantime she married this other fella and that who really hated my guts I believe. He wanted to - he told his cousins out here in Lismore in New South Wales that he shoulda shot me and that but I wasn't aware of that. And yet that same guy when I went back and he met me and he was married to Amelia. He
- 15:00 cried when I left. He actually cried and that you know. I don't know why, whether it was a guilt complex or what but she and I, we're still good friends and that. She summed it up. She said, "We were

adolescents." She really summed it up. She said, "Maybe, we were just adolescents in those days," but if it's puppy love, give me that any day.

Mmm, well extreme circumstances though.

Oh yes, and but when she came out we, no we dined

15:30 and feted her out here. She met all the family and...

And when you met her, did it change the way you felt about your mother? Is that a weird question? Your mother's probably the main woman in...?

No, she never crossed my mind. Never crossed my mind. Mother was mother anyway and so forth and but it was the sympathy that they poured on me, you know. The feeling that seemed to be uttermost in their mind.

You said it made you stronger to have her in your life.

Oh yeah, that's right but I'll tell you what

16:00 I wrote in my diary that if anything had happened, God I don't know what I woulda done.

I'm sure you would have declared yourself (UNCLEAR), perhaps because it would have made you vulnerable?

Oh yeah, it mighta made me worse, made me you know, I coulda been really, coulda gone berserk you know but...

And what about her parents? Did you know them?

Oh yes, oh her father and mother, they thought the world of me and that.

Did they think of you as their son?

Well, I think they were a bit keen to see us

16:30 get together even despite their religious thing.

And what did they think that an Australian ex-POW part of the partisan, was going to be able to offer their daughter?

Oh, they had a lot of relations out here in Australia you know. They came out. They cut sugar cane in Queensland, became fruiterers and concreters, and they had so many thing and to them this was the Mecca, I reckon, and so forth because they'd

17:00 had a tough life, especially under fascism and that. And you, they were poor and that but they worked in factories, in those woollen mills and they gleaned.

Well, you must have cut a very romantic figure in their lives though? You know a tall foreigner?

Oh yeah, because yeah and then I - you know I, they used to call me whether the fastest thing on two legs, they reckon. "Gambe lunghe," they used to call me. "Long Legs," and that but they, oh no they really,

17:30 oh they treated me beautifully. They really took me in as a member of their family.

Well, tell me a bit more?

You know I was terribly sad when I left. I can still, the cry, I can still hear the cry of anguish from Amelia. I can still hear it and that. But I never went back.

That musta been tough.

But she got married in the meantime, so I don't know whether she

18:00 fell out of love. I don't know, I don't know but we're still good friends and as I said earlier that she said "We were the victims of adolescence".

And war, don't forget that.

And war. War pulls down a lot of barriers you know.

Speeds things up, doesn't it?

Yeah, well it speeds things up as far as the, you know you suddenly, you become uninhibited and what have you and...but I enjoyed her company.

I know she's a young Catholic girl and all that

18:30 **goes with that but I've just - it's hard to imagine that under the circumstances that you were in that that you didn't, you know for example, you didn't make love because you would have**

thought that you could be dead in a week or...?

Mmm oh no, that didn't, no.

It's amazing.

I just needed the comfort. I really needed the companionship. I seriously, because you know you, alright you got your mates with you in a detachment and there were seven Australians who were with me, six others with me as I said, a bunch of seven of us and

19:00 that but we just needed the company. Every one of them. Every one of those guys had a girlfriend. Oh, lady friend, let's say a lady friend. And some slept with them but I didn't sleep with Amelia.

And did any of them become - did any of them get exposed as a consequence of having a girlfriend? Like did any of them do what you thought that you might have to do if their girlfriends...?

Well, I know one fella left a girl pregnant and I was a bit disappointed to hear that.

19:30 **Did you have words with him about that or did...?**

Oh, he seemed proud that he had a son in Italy. He told me after we came out. Actually, it was London, Londre you know the English guy, and he told me about it and he said "He's got a son in Italy".

Well, they've got a reputation for being bounders haven't they, the English?

Yes, oh that's right, but pleasantly I and pleasingly, I left nothing behind.

When she was captured by

20:00 **the Germans or...?**

When interrogated.

Or arrested and interrogated?

Yeah, they put these flamethrowers right in front of the house you know. Said they were gonna burn the place down and so forth and they interrogated her. But in the end whatever she said, which I've written in my diaries because I got her to send the story of what actually happened and they let her off. Let her off. They took the flamethrowers away and everything.

Can you just for the record, can you sort of take me through what happened or what your

20:30 **version of events were or what she told you afterwards? Like was she just at home not expecting this or...?**

No, she came down.

Was she caught doing something?

She came looking for me to tell me that she'd survived an interrogation but...

So what did that...?

But earlier, I think possibly looking back on it and considering it, I would say that she was lucky because we're getting towards the end of the war. See, it was early in 1945 it happened, and don't forget the war was over by May the 8th in Europe. And I'd

21:00 say that was a controlling factor in the fact they let her go. I firmly believe that and either that or she, for the first time she struck a decent German or a decent fascist.

So, they came into her house, they took her and her family outside, they...?

No, they kept the family inside the house. And carted her into another place to...

With flamethrowers?

With two other girls. With two other girls.

And do you know what they knew? Like, did she tell you what they knew apart from

21:30 **they knew your name?**

Yeah, well that's a mystery. That's still mystifies me even today but they seemed to want to know more about us. They kept asking questions about what was I like and so forth and she said that "He's just like any soldier. That he's got loved ones in, whether they're the same applied to the Germans as applied to us, that we had people that cared for us in some other part of the world."

22:00 **It's strange. I mean they knew.**

It's strange, it was strange.

They knew who you were. They knew where you were or did they not know where you were at this stage?

Well no, because they'd been chasing me for - they'd been chasing us for, ever since we escaped from the prison camps. Maybe they got the name from, I don't know where they got the name from.

So, I imagine if they caught any partisan they would have you know?

Oh, I would have been executed for sure because I'd gone beyond the point of the amnesty that,

22:30 see they said we hand ourselves back and I think I mentioned the other day that we had price on our head, which was about eighteen hundred lire which was equivalent to about sixty pounds sterling and that, which is quite an encouragement to divulge where people were but...

Did anyone ever come close?

Fortunately, we worked with the right place.

Well so did, nobody tried to give you up? In all that time? Nobody tried to get the money?

I think we had a few narrow escapes when

23:00 we were on the loose before we even joined the partisans and that. I know the Germans came into a village where we'd been there for a few weeks and that. And we'd already gone and they wanted to know, "Where are the English? Where are the English? Where are the English?" And somebody said, "What do you want the English for? They're not here. They're not here." He said, "This," and he drew a cross on his hand. They wanted to put us underground. They wanted us out of the way because they considered us a

23:30 a little bit formidable, which was a bit of an over exaggeration I reckon on their part. Because we just became like the rest of them.

So how long did you and Amelia get to spend together?

Oh, I'd say on and off we - when I got leave sometimes I went and stayed with 'em for some days, two or three days, like you'd get leave.

Was it months?

I had to get leave to do it and that but usually it was just a fleeting thing that

24:00 when I was in the barracks up on top of the hill just above where she lived...We were will o' the wisps.

Now, sorry I meant not sort of in hours, but like were you and Amelia friends for a period weeks or months or....?

Oh yeah, we were friends, oh bloody hell. Yeah, we spent as much time as we could together. As I said, she came and visited me.

But in Italy, it was like a couple of months that you were together?

Oh, we met in September and until I departed

24:30 in June, I was on and off with her all the time. That's a period of about eight months, seven or eight months.

It must have been heartbreaking?

That friendship had built up, yes.

Just heartbreaking for her when...

But it was heart rendering when we left when I left. Oh God. We took food back to 'em and clothes and things like that.

Well tell me about how you broke the news to her that you were leaving Italy?

Ah, I can.

And I know that it's a bit upsetting but I...

No, it's not upsetting because, as I said, this British officer

25:00 that had been parachuted in he said, "Whatever you do Malcolm," he said, "I've had the same experience," because he was an escaped prisoner of war too that got back to the lines. And then was parachuted back as a, what they call a British liaison officer, BLO, and he said, "Malcolm, go home whatever you do. Please go home." He said, "And see how you feel about it then," and I think it - probably distance and time made a hell of a difference but I told her,

25:30 I said, oh she was terribly upset. I couldn't, you know she broke down. She definitely broke down.

Was she angry at you?

And I went swimming. I just jumped in the river and went swimming and that so maybe I was a cold heartless beast. I don't know but I went swimming because I couldn't face a woman in tears. I still to this day can't stand it but we, she accepted it and I said, "Look, I'll come, I'm gonna come and see ya anyway." And I went back and we had a wonderful time together. We went over

26:00 to a place on Lake Maggiore and we had a holiday over there and we did all those nice things and that was - I got ten thousand lira from my discharge from the partisans, so I bought her a gold watch. I spent the whole money, all the money that they gave me as my allowance.

Did you, were you given that before you left or afterwards?

No, after I'd the day, I was discharged from the partisans, before I went across.

26:30 **They handed you the cash?**

Yeah cash, they gave me ten thousand lira, a chip for ten thousand lira which I went and splurged nearly all of it on a gold watch for her. And whether she's got the gold watch today, it's never been mentioned.

Now, you said you weren't in love but that sounds to me like the actions of like either a man in love or a man in regret?

There was never any rings or anything of that nature but.

Would you have bought her a ring if you could?

Ah, never thought of it to be truthful. I never thought of it. There was

27:00 tremendous feeling between us. There had to be, there had to be because you know she's risking her life and I'm risking my life for them too but she...She was a wonderful companion, lovely companion and we did a lot of things together, you know many a long walk and when she - when I was with the British mission down in Vercelli, when we had control of the city I used to go out to the Sesia river and

27:30 swim in the river and that. And she used to sit, she wouldn't swim but I used to swim and things like that and we were good friends. Good friends. We had beautiful moments.

Under German occupation, what does a young woman like that do to look after herself?

Well, she worked in the woollen mills. Textile mills.

I sorta mean from the Germans really. How did she protect herself from them? I imagine they had free rein in places.

Well, don't forget it was Italy that was at war to start with

28:00 against the Allies.

Well, would...?

And therefore she's dealing with her brother's in the army, he got called up and that. I still correspond with him. He's still alive. He's in his eighties. And no, I think they used to have dances and things like that. I used to love their dances because they, you seemed to dance you know jig around, and you didn't sort of hold your partner and things of that like. I thought, "This is amusing," my sisters reckoned I was the world's worst dancer just quietly.

28:30 **But despite the fact that the Italians and the Germans were allies they weren't really very friendly with each other?**

Well, they hated each other. Hated the - I think the Germans looked down upon the Italians, as a matter of fact when they capitulated Hitler made some derogatory remarks believe me on the radio about the Italians. "Everybody knows about their fighting troops. They've lost all their armies in North Africa.

29:00 As for their navy well words fail me," he said that, "As for as the Italians, they can stew in their own juices," he said. They were Hitler's words. No, because they looked down on them but the German, he was such a superior animal. He was a superior animal.

Which is kind of why I'm asking the question, because I would assume that they could do what they like in Italy, including the women, and do you know of tales of that? Of whether the Germans did?

That, I

29:30 never come across it. Never.

Does that mean you never had to take special care to stay away from them?

Oh yes, the only time that she really got caught up with them was when they grabbed her and

interrogated her over, and because of me.

But if they're roaming the streets and they've got garrisons everywhere, are you know a woman going to walk home again?

The garrisons were mainly fascists. The black shirts, they were nasty bits of works believe me but the Germans, they would come up when they wanted to hold

30:00 these (UNCLEAR). When they wanted to try and clear the area. That's the way the Germans were. Good troops, good soldiers.

If women partisans were caught or if women doing anything were caught did they have special punishments, didn't they?

Oh yes, that's right. You know what happened? Cut their hair off. That thing was the greatest dignity and that. The partisans used to do it to the- then the enemy used to do it to the girls

30:30 too. Take their hair off and that. That was the way to thing. I'm glad you brought that up because I picked it up in my diaries.

Did you see any women with their hair cut off?

Ah, no I never struck any but some of them were Italian women, they betrayed the partisans. They definitely betrayed the partisans and if they got onto them they executed 'em.

And you weren't privy to any of that activity?

No, I refused. I might have helped dig

31:00 a grave or two but, which I hate like hell to think about, but they yes. I've had some lovely conversations with prisoners.

Did you have to bury any women?

Only one. Only one.

Did you know her?

But I didn't shoot her. I didn't shoot her. I didn't actually get her but they usually walk them along and that. And say, "Oh, we're taking you another place," and the next thing they'd shoot 'em behind the ear

31:30 see. They wouldn't see but there were cases where you know, where fascist women did some terrible things to prisoners you know and that. Dancing in the nude in front of them with the blokes tied to stakes and things of that like but I didn't actually see this. It's been told and when you get sort of a civil war type of situation some of the acts are pretty diabolical in my book.

Well, it's been interesting

32:00 **listening to you talk about it because a lot of chaps have said, you know they didn't like the Japanese but we were at war. They didn't like the Germans but we were at war.**

War, yeah.

Listening to your stories, you know this is very particular. This is, as you said brother on brother and...?

Oh yeah, it happened. Physically saw it happen, right before my eyes.

So for example the grave that you had to dig for this woman, did you know this woman in the street before she was killed?

Oh, we sat and talked for hours beforehand.

With the woman that was executed?

Oh yeah, because she was a prisoner,

32:30 she was a prisoner and that but...

God, that must have been difficult?

No, it was difficult. It's very difficult and as I said, we didn't want to be in executions because it wasn't our way. It's not our way, it never was. I've seen...

I'm interested in the partisans get you away with those sorts of things, that they didn't...?

Yeah, it's amazing because they said "They respected us 'cause we said we can't because we don't understand what it's all about and because people'a got different

33:00 political persuasion". It's like the Labor party and the Liberals, you know tearing each other to pieces.

Did you ever have arguments about that? I, you know you said...

Oh yeah, I said no because I think I mentioned to John [interviewer] that we had talks on especially with communist, people with communist attitudes to and their belief in materialism and they used to demonstrate and he'd put a thing in his hand like that. He said, "Now,

33:30 I'll close it." He said, "Now what's in my hand?" And I said, "Oh, well's that an (UNCLEAR)." He said, "Now, that's what we believe in." He said, "Unless you can physically see and visualise it, it's not", against on the other hand you've got, you close that hand. And you know spiritualism and religion and all those type of things they said "That they were things that they wouldn't accept in their life. It has to be something hard and fast."

So sorry to get back to this woman again that you talked

34:00 **to before she went.**

Yeah.

I know it's upsetting but did she know she was going to die?

No way, no. No, It was the thing that horrified.

So you can remember what you were talking about?

Me, was that she left two children too. It was very sad, but a lot of that went on but it just crossed my path see and I used to talk to her for hours and that. I thought she was a lovely woman.

Do you recall what you talked about?

Oh, I never had any feeling towards her and that because what she was supposed to have done, I can't quite recall but it wasn't

34:30 very good. Betraying. See they really took it out on people that betrayed, other thing because it was the German way. It was the, it was the partisan way.

Yeah.

In those early days.

What about women couriers for the partisans?

Pardon?

What about women couriers for the partisans?

Oh, marvellous. Stefita [?] they call them.

Stefita.

Stefita.

Stefita.

Yeah, and we had two girls. Actually, one of them was Topolino's sister and that. And she was a lovely girl and they did some...Stefita, they were wonderful because that's how we got information. Those girls used to ride round on bikes. They'd go up and tell us where, they'd find out where the road blocks were and so forth. Even go up and hob nob with the Germans

35:30 and they'd get cadge cigarettes off them and they'd bring 'em back to the boys. But they were marvellous, those girls.

I know men can be sort of a bit blinded when a pretty girl's talking to them but how - surely the Germans musta been able to figure out what was going on or was it so confusing that they didn't know who was who and what was what and what was going on in terms of...?

Oh.

Who was fascist, who was partisan?

Bit confusing. I'd say it's confusing and that but you know if we wanted to move along a certain road, well those girls more or less

36:00 cleared the track for us and tell us who was who and where they were and so on.

Did they get any recognition for that work?

Oh, they certainly got their certificates at the end, like I even got a certificate. Not only did I get discharged from the partisans, but I've got my certificate from the British military mission to northern Italy, Cherokee. They gave me a certificate to thank me for my work but no those girls were wonderful and that. But

36:30 we just had the two and that. But they were liaison workers not only for our detachment but for other

detachments. That's why we knew exactly where everybody else was along the track you know.

Such a lot of trust involved, I guess there were...?

Oh gosh, yeah they were...

People working on both sides?

They, oh I admired those girls and tremendous respect for them and those two, the two that I'm talking about, and I've got their photos here, they're still alive today. I think one,

37:00 I believe she's in a mental asylum but she had a terrible car smash and that, but when I went back the first time, they were marvellous to me. Matter of fact my wife, late wife said, "They still love you, there's no question about it," but I got on well with them.

Sounds like you broke a few hearts over there?

No, I didn't break those hearts.

What about front line women?

Well, we did. We did have partisans, women with the partisans and just an odd one,

37:30 but gee they were tough. I remember one there, I'd hate to attack me with a knife. She was tough and that. And they reckon that she'd carve you up and that. And 'cause they take prisoners and they'd hand 'em over to these types'a girls and they would thing, but they would fight with the men alongside the men.

They'd take prisoners and hand them over to the women?

Sometimes, yeah.

So the women would do the interrogating?

Oh yeah, and I was never really in the situation of being at an

38:00 interrogation see because after all, I'm only just an ordinary ranker and that type of interrogation was carried on by the, you know the hierarchy. They'd do all that and that's why I say whether they were kangaroo courts or not but a lot of it, one particular spot I know they were bragging that they had two hundred, at least two hundred graves of political enemies that they'd eliminated. Two hundred

38:30 in this area. I couldn't believe it.

So, could the women be high up the ranks of the...?

No. Definitely not, no. Never saw any woman of high rank. They were just, you know just...Just a partisan.

Did you witness any women actually firing weapons?

No, I didn't no, because we didn't have them with us and our women.

Oh, I thought you said there was just one that you...?

No, I come across, I met up with her and that. And they said, "Don't let, don't get loose with her."

Was she...?

39:00 She had a - she was notorious.

A femme fatale to say the least?

A femme fatale. I don't know, I think a scorpion'd be better in your bed.

I think that's where the stiletto, that was an Italian knife, wasn't it?

Yeah stiletto, yeah.

So, I'm sure they were around?

But they, but...

Could you tell, you know when, if you met these women could you tell that they were capable of what they were doing or were they able to mask that in themselves?

Oh,

39:30 I think the women, these types of women would be tougher than men. I think the men although there was a lot of terrible things went on both sides, it was eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth but I would say this type of woman, they reckon that she'd carve you up with a knife see. And you know you'd been living through it but they'd carve you up with a knife and that. I don't think that's a very nice reputation and she

40:00 wasn't very attractive anyway. That's the only one struck in the partisans and that. And that's in that area where they had these, you know all these graves.

Tape 9

00:31 **Do you wanna talk about...?**

Yeah, I was gonna tell you.

I'd like to talk about your last weeks or months...

Alright, this is it. A thing we discovered, the Allies asked the partisans to hand back their weapons but the partisans, the hard core partisans were caching them away you know and that. In fact...

They weren't stupid.

Yeah, because they thought, you know they can live another day, to force home

01:00 their desire for communism in Italy. And I got told about where one of these caches were and I passed, the girls told me. The women up in thing, they were very upset.

The front liners or the couriers?

No. No, these were ordinary women that worked in the factories and said, "They're putting their weapons aside and not handing them back."

How do you get in contact with women like this? How do you...?

Oh, because of Amelia and meeting up with them and

01:30 that you know, and talking together and that because...See, I've got the language pretty fluent and I had the dialect conquered as well and they were telling me - I passed the information on and the British went in and seized these weapons and so forth and...That's why, when I went back there I thought, "My God, I'd better sleep with a pistol under my pillow."

Well yeah, would the partisans have taken you apart for telling the British where they'd hidden...?

Oh, it's was to - I was with the - they would have

02:00 but don't forget that they were disbanded too.

Right.

They were disbanded and most of them had gone back to their homes.

So, did you...?

Except the countryside is rife with people wandering everywhere, people trying to to get back to Germany, the German soldiers and things, gettin' eliminated and that. And it was a dirty business those few weeks after the war ended in Europe and that.

Well, someone told in places like New Guinea and Borneo and so on after VE Day [Victory in Europe], it would be unlikely that an Australian would shoot a Jap after

02:30 **victory had been declared but in Italy after VE, I said VE Day before but it was VJ Day [Victory over Japan]...**

Yeah, some of this stuff went on. It definitely went on. There was...

So, the war wasn't really over?

It's, no it was wasn't really over. It was, suddenly it become a political war I would say and but it cooled down. It took awhile but it definitely cooled down. Some of the things that happened afterwards and I was told about them you know. And people being indiscriminately murdered, it's suddenly not war it's

03:00 murder and that. And they were definitely eliminating, paying off old scores as you said earlier and there's a lot of truth in that and the poor Germans trying to to get back to Germany because they'd locked up in that north west corner of thing - they couldn't go into France but so, on with the British mission, I had a real holiday.

Well, can you take me through just the, where, when were you contacted again by the British and told, "It's time

03:30 **to go home?"**

I got into trouble actually. What happened, I got discharged from the partisans and I went across to the

British mission.

Can you just sort of tell me what month in, is this '45?

It's there, can you see my discharge from the thing? Oh, it's in May, it's in May.

Okay, so it's after VE Day.

Yeah, after we'd had the march through the city which

04:00 I spoke about.

I wanted to ask about that too, the march through the city discovering that Normandy's occurred and hearing about all of this you know. Did it have a huge impact on you?

Oh yeah, it certainly - we never lacked morale I don't think. I think we always had strong morale, we Aussies, so whether it's just our companionship together and doing things together but I was co-opted by the British mission that had been Cherokee, the one that had been parachuted

04:30 in and I worked with them and I drove, I drove around in a Volkswagen, German scout car. We had that and...

You didn't care that you were driving a German machine?

Oh, no, no, no, but see don't forget the war's over.

Yeah.

And we had holidays. I went up and stayed with my friends in the (UNCLEAR). I went back to them, carted them the loads of food we did, and also with Amelia. I took Amelia for a holiday over to

05:00 Lake Maggiore and that. And we had a lovely time and then...

How strange was that to go from war to not war?

Oh, I don't, probably it was relief I think because don't forget that I'd been hooked up in it for a long time.

Yeah, I think I read in your diary on that day that you said that "You didn't feel like celebrating, you'd had enough".

No, I'd had enough yeah, well then but then it was party time, wasn't it? So, I became very friendly with this John Farren,

05:30 who was a lieutenant but became a captain and I became - I drove round with him and that. I used to go and pick up his girlfriend who was in Florence and we were down at Sienna, a place called, and I used to...

Bella Sienna.

Yeah, and I used to, and we went touring. We went right across to Ancona, you know on the other on the east coast and that. And I did the driving most of the time because we had a Matford we'd taken off the Germans. It was a French Ford.

06:00 **So was it a bit of a free for all in those...?**

Oh yes, and I remember we ran parties for university students and things like that. John used to say, "Come on, let's keep the band going," and I'd dig in and we'd, we he had plenty of money you know lira. And we'd pay the band to play on for another hour and we'd...

How do you get...?

Dance with the students.

I've got so many questions. How do you get your hands on money at that point? Like, what system is operating?

Oh, I never had any money.

He did though?

No, he had money. I didn't have anything.

He must have had it

06:30 **hidden away somewhere.**

I don't know. Even hid the - actually before we left we had a jeep and also this Matford thing. He hid that Matford in a village over near Ancona, over there somewhere. Whether it's still there today, I don't damn well know.

You were saying earlier though that just because it was VE Day didn't make it particularly safe

in Italy. There's still a, you know there's the remnants of a civil war going on.

I think we were safe.

Simply because you were non-Italian?

Yeah, I'd say

07:00 we were pretty safe. Except that I was worried the divulging this information about them caching their weapons.

Yeah, I'll bet.

That was a worry because...

How did that not get traced back to you?

It never got traced back to me because the information came through these girls from the factory girls and that, they passed it on. They were horrified.

Now, looking at the photographs of you, you say you were tall and blond and the definite, the photographs are black and white, so it's hard to tell, but you kinda looked Italian

07:30 **in those photographs or you did to me, or you certainly looked European enough.**

Yes, oh yes.

So you never got confused as an Italian though?

No, I posed as an Italian, you know with Amelia. I've put it across to, taken over as her brother and that but...But I was very fair. I was fair.

A lot of northerners are too though?

Oh, that's right. There's some beautiful girls up there. Not that I ever eyed them off.

So if you passed yourself off as

08:00 **Italian and were very successful obviously 'cause you hid from the Germans for so long.**

Mmm.

After the war, after VE Day, how did you get by presenting as an Australian again or was it - did you change your uniform or...?

Oh yeah, I went back into British uniform.

Right.

I was issued with a British uniform and then I travelled right - I worked my way on the 20 - worked my way down to Naples and that. As a matter of fact, John Farren

08:30 took me or organised it he said, "You'd better go home," and that. And authorities, I got interrogated and do you know I've tried hard to find those interrogations. They cannot find 'em.

Where and when were you interrogated?

In Naples. We were interrogated in Naples.

By the British?

By the British and they wanted to know where the hell I'd been. The war had been over since...May the 8th, and it was well into June, so they interrogated us and took down all the details. We just - we it was

09:00 a fairly short interrogation. And then they let us loose.

Take me back to - you chose to go to Naples?

We did under our own steam. We worked our own...

And did they pull you over and say, "We've been looking for you," and all that kind of stuff?

Oh no. We handed, we said, "No, we want to," we were told where to go. So we went to the authorities and they...took us over and put us in a camp and we stayed there a week. It was beautiful there, swimming in the harbour and that. And the Isle of Capri and Sorrento and all those places you know. It was lovely but Naples

09:30 is a dirty city though.

Naples is Capri. It's amazing. Were you considered AWL [Absent Without Leave] at that point?

Not really. No, because it was...

Was it a bit grey, the lines?

I was happy because when I met up with the 5th American Army I'd written all my letters home and to tell 'em that "I'm alive and well". And I wrote a letter to each member of the family and

10:00 so in Naples they kept us there till they had a plane and they flew us to England.

But so you didn't get reprimanded for not showing up?

No way. No, because after all the - I guess I'd been a law unto myself. I'd said that "I was working with the British military mission", so I had a good reason and I was working with them.

And was there any suspicion cast on the fact that you'd stayed working for the Della Tesa [?] all that time?

Oh no. It was with

10:30 Jochamson because he was a close associate and avowed communist in Moscatelli, and he was definitely interviewed very strongly, both in Italy and back in England.

And so did the Brits give you a hard time when they were interrogating you? Like, did they sort of...?

No, no, no.

So, they were very polite and...?

Oh, very polite because the war's over...

Yeah.

They wanted to know where the hell I'd been. I was able to fill them in just broadly

11:00 that I'd been with the Italian underground after escaping from a work camp. Do you know even today my casualty form as issued by the Defence Department just says, 'Prisoner of war recovered.' That's all it says. It's got nothing. As a matter of fact, I'm gonna put that right. I'm gonna go and see if I can put that right.

When did you get the chance to go back and dig up all your diaries?

I collected

11:30 them when I went back into the hills, I collected them. I knew exactly where they were.

So after VE Day and before you went back to Naples?

Oh yes. That's right, yes.

'Cause you have got nearly eighteen of them I think it is and...

Yeah, that's right. Yes.

They were buried in how many different spots?

Oh, in half a dozen different areas in tree stumps and things like I knew where they were.

Had you kept a, like a map of where they were or did you just keep it in your head?

No, it was in here and that because see you didn't want to be get caught with those diaries, although I was very meticulous, especially when I was in the partisans. I didn't mention people's names and I didn't mention

12:00 places. I just - the places were up here but no, it took me forty-five years later that I read those damn things and the day, and you saw the last entry, the day I came home. What a day.

Well, we're nearly, we're nearly there.

Mmm.

I just, you've gone to Naples, been interrogated by the British, you've got your diaries, you've got your uniform, you're on the way home and have you told Amelia yet that you're

12:30 **leaving?**

Oh, yes.

So she...

I wrote her letters from there, well I wrote while I was on the move because I'd already left her in May.

So, you'd already told her?

We had a birthday party mind you. They put on a beautiful birthday party

For her or for you?

For me yes, because I was twenty-four.

Twenty-fifth?

Twenty-four, it was my twenty fourth birthday on the 25th of May and they made me a magnificent cake. The cake, Mariatina made the cake, beautiful cake and Wigglesworth was there with his

13:00 girlfriend and Amelia came down and we had a ripping party and that.

What about Wigglesworth? Did he talk to you about saying goodbye to his girl or did he...?

Oh, he parted with her and that but...

Was she okay about that?

But he had a fiancée back here in Australia. See I didn't.

Did you have words about that? Like, did you think it was okay that he had a girl in Italy and a girl back home?

Well, I wouldn't talk about her, no.

13:30 I wouldn't mention it to anybody, oh I've just mentioned it, blow it. Never mind. That's, it's not important because he's gone and I went to the wedding and it broke up anyway a few months later but his widow, his second wife, we're great friends.

So, just before we leave Italy and you head back to England briefly, I just would like to know what state things were in? Germans are trying to escape. Are the fascists and the communists still

14:00 **fighting and taking each other out while this is going on?**

Oh no, it went on for awhile, it was...

Did the British go in and try and peace keep?

Oh yes, because they set up a military government, governors all over the place.

Yeah, and Mussolini's been dead for some time now?

Oh yes. I was there close by when that happened you know.

Now, he was strung up by his ankles?

Oh, that was disgusting and that...Musso to my way of thinking, I don't think Mussolini should have been treated like that. Okay, the fascists

14:30 ruled with an iron fist but I don't think he went out of his way to murder people like they did with the Jews in Germany with the...

I think they sent a lot of them up to the Jewish camps though.

Yes.

A lot of Italians.

And that, but they tried hard not to but they, he, Musso was that tough, he had his son-in-law, Luciano, the Count, he had him. He was married to his daughter, they had him eliminated for you know as a

15:00 traitor and that. But they captured him, the partisans captured him, shot him outta hand then they brought 'em into Milan and hung 'em up in the square upside down and that. And Petacci was the, if I recall was the name of his paramour, and her, the dress was hanging down and that. And somebody had gone up and pinned the, safety pinned the skirt in between her legs

15:30 and that. They had all these photos. They were trying to to sell them. I would not buy one of those photos. I would not.

When you say nearby, how far like in the next town?

Oh yes, it happened next door to us in the next zone. See, we were in this zone and they're in that zone.

How big's a zone? A coupla streets?

No, zone, oh a zone could be quite a few square kilometres.

Oh right.

A big area, big area. See we're Belize [?] and then they were in what they call the Novara zone see.

And you didn't go down there to have a look?

Oh no, I didn't, did not want to see

16:00 it because in a way I felt that they did the wrong thing. And okay, admittedly he was playing around with his mistress and that. And he treated his own wife. I think one of his daughters is still alive, isn't she? She's a politician.

Don't know.

But at least he got the trains to run on time. Mussolini is reputed to - he did a lot of - I think he did a lot of good except that the old iron fist you know and that. And it's,

16:30 you know it's too autocratic I think to - we need democracy where you at least you can tell your neighbour he's a rotten sod.

So how did they get you back to England?

Oh, in the bomb bay, in the bomb bay of a Liberator.

Was that the first plane flight you'd had?

Yeah, no they flew us out there and I'll never forget I sat up in the pilot, next to the co-pilot in the co-pilot's seat,

17:00 and that. I got pictures of the plane and us waiting to leave and they flew us to a place called Lewes in south of England, near Brighton. And then and we were put in the staging camp at Eastbourne and we were kept there until such time as they had a ship home. And then they came home on the...

The Rangitiki.

Rangitiki. Good memory.

That plane flight must have looked incredible? That

17:30 **flight from Italy to England. It's just...**

Oh yeah, we flew over Paris and...

Over some of the most beautiful places in the world?

Saw the Eiffel Tower, the white cliffs of Dover and that.

I would have been bawling my eyes out, and you know coming back to England.

Yes.

I know it's not your home but it's as next to as good as?

Yeah, well as it turned out we flew out on the 22nd of June in 1945 and I landed in Bari, Italy in June the 26th in 1941, so exactly four years I had in Italy.

18:00 **And a lifetime in that time?**

Yeah, that's right and...

So did you...?

I reckon I was more Italian than Australian in the end.

So did you feel like you were leaving your home when you left?

I felt sad about Amelia, I really and honestly did feel sad and that. And I hated like hell leaving her but I still, I had stronger ties to come home too and of course my mother always believed that I'd come home.

At this stage, by this stage, by the end of the war, like had you been able to contact

18:30 **her? I know that you'd been listed as missing and she thought you were alive but everyone else thought you were dead.**

Thought dead yeah, my sisters in particular and her sisters and but...

So, have you got contact with her at this stage?

The first contact was a - despite all the letters I wrote the first contact - was a cable from the Red Cross to say that "I was landed in England, was at Eastbourne camp". And that's the first news.

So you knew that, she knew you were alive by that stage?

Oh yes, then because...

19:00 Then the Red Cross did the job.

Right.

But they...

Now, on board the Rangitiki, and you said you hove at Pitcairn Island?

Oh yes, that's right yeah, and I bought a few curios from the offsprings of the mutiny on the Bounty, you know Young and Christian and all those type of things. In fact, I've still got some of the things here now and they...

And how long...?

I've got stamps and that.

How long was the trip back from England to Australia?

Well, we came through the Panama Canal. We

19:30 were naughty boys. They let us off at Panama Canal because apparently, you know you could get a glass of bourbon for equivalent to about a shilling or some damn thing like that a glass. And I think most of the blokes wrote themselves off. I think I wrote myself off because I remember being dragged back to the ship and dumped on board and getting drenched in the pouring rain but they reckon that we disrupted the city. We stopped the trams, we stopped everything, and there was only a few hundred of us and that. And

20:00 in fact one bloke dived off the bridge. Thought he was a Spitfire and killed himself onto the thing.

What a disaster.

We were nuts, we were mad. We were mad Australians and New Zealanders we thing. We stopped in New Zealand, oh they treated us well and drove us round their island and that. And they were lovely but what about mother?

Yes, let's talk about arriving home.

Arriving home.

Now, when you...?

You read the last entry in my diary and that, but Mum, you know she had

20:30 tremendous...

Did you come into the port?

No, I landed in Sydney and came down by train and... I met her at Royal Park.

That's right. You did mention that.

In the city. That was GDD [General Details Depot]. That was where they dispensed with the troops and put the - but I was gonna tell you a strange things about the, what used to happen and quite often I had this dream of that the whole scene would change and I'd be sitting in our living room at home

21:00 around a big table and every Sunday night we used to have scones and cream and strawberries and things like, which we grew ourselves by the way, and we had a cow and that. And I used to - the scene, and I'd sit round, sit there around the table and that. And then the scene'd change. I'm back and I've got barb wire in front of me. That dream happened several times, so it showed there was something going on between the two of and a very funny thing happened. We were,

21:30 I told you I was being taught bayonet fighting in the thing and I was demonstrating to the family with a broomstick in the lounge. And I put the blasted broomstick through the wall, a plaster wall, and that. And you know my mother said, "That hole will stay there till he comes home," and she said, "It will not be repaired till he comes home." And I repaired it you know and that stood there for nearly five years but some of the funny things that happened.

22:00 **Well, tell me about getting back and...?**

I didn't tell you about dying.

About you dying?

Yeah, how I thought I was dying.

No, I don't...

No, I had influenza badly and that. And had the...

When you got back?

No, over there.

Right.

But I was gonna tell you about an action we were in and this is rather amusing. I was with a New Zealander who had a piat, which is a bomb type of thing you fire from a

22:30 thing, it's like a projectile and you fire it and it blows everything in front of it aside. And I was up, we crawled up to within seventy-five metres of this place and his job was to blow this thing and my job was to pour the Bren gun fire into this thing where these fascist officers were. And how we were there and there's bullets going everywhere. I don't know whether the enemy were firing at us or our blokes firing at our thing. We've got a young kid of sixteen years of age and a partisan with a

23:00 mortar, these little Canadian mortars which are fifty millimetres and that but nobody really knew how to use these damn things even though they'd been dropped to us by parachute.

Sorry, is this another story of your mother knowing what was going on for you?

No. This is just, I was just gonna tell you some of the funny things.

Oh, it's 'cause we've only got a few minutes left on this tape and I just would, I just need to know...

Oh right.

What it was like coming back and seeing your mum again after all that?

I was terribly restless. I could not shake the alertness out of my system, even though I was back in the trout

23:00 streams and things like that. And they said that "I used to wander round of a night and sit down and talk to them and that". And I couldn't settle down, you know and I couldn't shake the feeling of every tree carried the enemy behind it.

Sure.

You know I could not, and it took months before that went out of my system. It's gone now.

And can you recall the first night you got back?

Oh, it'd be party time. No, I...

Did they have a party ready for you?

Yeah. The cruel part was to tell me my dog had died the week before.

Oh.

Yeah.

24:00 He got killed on the road the day, a week before I got home but nevermind. No, it was party time and we...

And could you take part in the party or did you just go into your room and shut the door?

No, no but the - you know the only person that was missing was my brother, who was in the navy and he was up in the islands somewhere but.

And what did your mother say to you when she clapped eyes on you after all those years?

I can't remember because we, you know we just hold onto each other and that. And the tears were flowing and things like that but she was

24:30 very excited and so was my sisters and that. My three sisters were there and...

Were you a bit dark on them for thinking you were dead all those years?

No, I thought it was a joke.

Because you said yes, you said on Friday that...?

Yeah, I said to my sisters...

That they thought it was pretty cool having a dead brother, which I didn't understand.

Yeah, well they'd lost a brother in the war and they had somebody they can talk about because you'd don't forget that's a long time, two and a half years or whatever it was. It was a long time without any word and I'd just - but talking about mum's intuition,

25:00 she saw a fellow walking along a beach, a soldier and she went up to him and asked about me and that. And I don't know what attracted her to but he was the fella I was playing pontoon with on the night war was finished in Europe in Italy.

He was part of the partisans?

No, he wasn't a partisan. He got back this fella, walked through the lines. Remember, I said a fellow

walked through the German lines? He is, you know she said, "For some reason I was

25:30 attracted to him," and he said, "Oh he'll be right. He'll be alright. Don't worry about him. He's up there somewhere," and that. But why did she go to him?

I don't know but you seem to - she seems to have remarkable connection with...

Oh yes.

With, either with you or with...

Oh yes.

The energies that prevail or whatever it is.

Mmm. That's right. It's incredible.

And do you think you had something keeping you alive all that time?

Oh, even when I left, as I said, I waved from the train. I felt certain that I was gonna

26:00 see till the end but I will tell you - can I tell you one funny story of when I died and we - I was talking about - I started to tell you about...?

Sure, you've fired this mortar and...

Yeah and that. And I've got the machine gun and I'm pouring the fire into the thing and the stuff, the main crowd billeted in the school house that was in the this township and there's stuff flying everywhere. And I had the Bren gun and

26:30 it sits up on a tripod you know and that. And I thought, oh, it's getting a bit exposed, and I'm in a bit of a hollow, so I took the legs down and I was firing from there. Then suddenly I stopped and this New Zealander, he said, "You alright Sydney?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "I've got terrible burning sensation in my chest," and I reckon my blasted heart stopped and it's like a terrible burning sensation in my chest and that because I definitely stopped firing

27:00 and I put my hand in there. Guess what? It was the ejected shells from the Bren gun jumping inside my open shirt and that, but it definitely stopped my heart, you know because I've never been hit. I don't know what it is to be hit.

Good lord.

Yeah.

In the last minute or so I just want to ask you your thoughts on coming home and your feelings about having fought that war.

Oh, I guess the more I think about it the more I dislike the thought of a war. I definitely dislike

27:30 the thought of a war but that comes with age I think. But I was...

But did you regret when you got back and you looked around and you're back in your bedroom and your family's there and you're safe and everything?

No, I was glad to get back to my job and everything like that, except to shake this restless feeling out of my system, which went in time. Once I got back in my beloved trout stream, I was my old self again but I...

And did you find that the people in your life had any understanding of what you'd been through or did you just have to bite your lip and not talk about it?

Oh, I never talked about it. Very rarely.

28:00 It's only in recent years it's all come out.

So what's it like talking about it now then?

I'd say that tomorrow I'll be emotionally spent. Because even when the Italian Historical Society got onto me and this what's her name? Margaret Giddes and that, I felt absolutely washed up and I'm gonna be washed up because it's flooded back so easily, it's unbelievable. You've got no idea to

28:30 pull that stuff back all those years and that. And it's come out so easily but fortunately I've given these talks, you know in recent years and that although nobody's - except for one recently at the Waverley Historical Society and that, they wanted me to give them memories of war rather than dealing with the partisans and that but no, I'm glad I went. Glad I went.

Did you think you made a difference?

Oh,

- 29:00 I think as far as, oh I had a pretty short career you know, what with Crete and what have you. And it's over in five minutes for me but I think we were good for the morale in Italy. I like to think that our very existence was good for them and that. And they respected us and I respected them, and as I said towards the latter part I was a bit staggered how brave they were and they took some stopping.
- 29:30 They were just as good. They were on top, so maybe they had some bullying instincts, I don't know but no, I'm happy to have gone and that. And the government, as far as the Veterans' Affairs and that. And they've looked after us very well. Done well because we got our jobs back and we were never out of unemployment, we never had unemployment or anything of that like. And I stayed with the same company from the age of fifteen till I retired at
- 30:00 sixty-three. From office boy to CEO [Chief Executive Officer] and that, so you know. I know I was away for nearly six of it but it still counted as service and I put in nearly forty-eight years. With the one company. So somewhere along the track I must have got it right.

Okay.

Thank you.