

Australians at War Film Archive

Harold Graham (Mike) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

- 00:53 **Mike, we might start the interview if we might by having you cover**
- 01:00 **briefly your life experiences and wartime experiences?**
- Well I was born in Ulmarra, which is about midway between Grafton and Maclean. It was in its heyday the main river port of Ulmarra and it took the coast of Stevens. They had quite a big reception
- 01:30 and loading and unloading area there. And I think... I was the 6th child of the family, 12 of us in the family, 9 boys and 3 girls. I was mid one and
- 02:00 I believe I was a very big baby, I was a 12 pounds baby and gave a lot of trouble, and have given a lot ever since probably too. But then I did my primary education at the Ulmarra Public School and at the end of that I won a bursary to the Grafton High School. So I did the next 5 years at the Grafton High School. There was no
- 02:30 reasonable road between Ulmarra and Grafton in those days so I had to go to Grafton on the river steamer every Sunday afternoon and come back on the following Friday afternoon and boarded with a family in Grafton. At the end of the high school Leaving Certificate I
- 03:00 got a job in a clerical position with what was then the Clarence River County Council. They were the electricity providers for the Clarence River with most of the supply coming from a hydroelectric station at Nymboida and then in 1936 I was transferred
- 03:30 to the Coffs Harbour Office. And the council at that stage was just starting to supply Coffs Harbour with electricity. I remember we took over from a private contractor who had a series of old machines out the back of his garage and Coffs Harbour had 600 consumers at that stage. Two separate towns, two completely separate towns, separate football
- 04:00 teams, separate surf clubs and separate ideologies. It was an understood thing that you got a fight or you saw a fight because the jetty mob would come up to dances in Coffs Harbour and there was always trouble. But however I was there until 1940 when I enlisted. Prior to that time
- 04:30 the Militia unit. 13th Militia Unit was formed in Coffs Harbour and I joined there and then joined the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] in - when was it? - March 1940 I think. Everybody seemed to be doing it at the time. And I went to
- 05:00 Ingleburn and joined the 2nd 13th Infantry Battalion there. And after basic training the camp was required for more intakes than they had the capacity for, so we were marched off to Bathurst and our battalion marched from Ingleburn up to Bathurst.
- 05:30 And we had to march because the Bathurst camp wasn't ready for us either, so when we got to Bathurst in the middle of winter it was a pretty cold bleak sort of a place. But we spent some time training there until September when we then trained back to Sydney and boarded the Queen Mary for the Middle East.
- 06:00 The Queen Mary and the Aquitania and the Mauritania comprised of convoy with of course associated warships. And from there we landed in Palestine, trained for another 3 or 4 months there before we went up the desert ourselves following on the heels of the 6th Division which had taken
- 06:30 Bardia and Tobruk in the meantime. So we went on through there up into Tripoli to a place called Beda Fomm, that's as far as we got. And in the meantime the 6th Division went to Greece and got belted there of course. And the Germans ripped it into us and we hastily found our way back to Tobruk where
- 07:00 we were able to hold them off. And we stayed there until the end of December of 1941 that would be yeah.

Mike if we can just pull you up there...you explained that you were there until December '41?

Hmm.

And could you pick up the story from there?

Yes well

- 07:30 we were the only battalion which lasted right throughout the siege prior to December when it looked as though things were quietening down. The Australian units were being relieved by Polish and British forces and we were the last battalion to be evacuated, but we were down waiting by the harbourside in a sunken ship,
- 08:00 or a damaged ship, for the relief boat to take us out. But the German bombers got it first, so we had to go back into our positions in Tobruk and we stayed there. That was about September I think, and we stayed there until December when the British forces were pushing up from the Egyptian frontier for another dash at
- 08:30 Rommel's forces. Because there was information that Rommel was to attack Tobruk on a certain date. I just forget what the date was now, but sometimes in November it was. And the British forces pushed up as far as a place called Sidi Rezegh and they were stopped there. It was where the Germans had built a bypass road around Tobruk.
- 09:00 And they were running out of opposing forces then so they, the powers that be decided that the 2/13th Battalion had to go in. So
- 09:30 that's damn silly, isn't it? So anyhow we went out to this place called, have to try and vaguely pass it, Sidi Rezegh and we struck the Germans at a place called Edg, bloody silly...Edgina [?]. Actually
- 10:00 I can give you a resume there of our German battle. And after, or in the Edgina we lost a lot of men. As a matter of fact, when we went into attack the Germans one night there in the position they were holding, one of our own shells dropped on our leading platoon, killed, I think it was 17 of the platoon and
- 10:30 wounded the rest of the platoon and actually killed a bloke I was talking to at the time. Then anyhow we gathered the rest of them up and went in to attack on the Germans and we got, I think it was about 160 prisoners out of them and captured the position. And we nearly got Rommel that night because he had been operating there and he
- 11:00 got out just before we took over the place, might have changed the course of history a bit if we'd have got him. So then after things quietened down there we came back to Tobruk, it was about 10 miles out, if I remember rightly. And from there we
- 11:30 travelled back overland, back to Egypt and then up to Palestine. Trained again there and then we were located on the Syrian-Turkish border for some months because they were expecting parachute drops in the area from the Germans,
- 12:00 but they never eventuated. It looked then as though the German threat had virtually weakened and wasn't any great consequence any more. And the Japs had come into the war and our battalion, or the division was then to come home and do battle with the Japs. So because the training was a bit antiquated
- 12:30 in Australia they decided to send one officer and two NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] from each battalion, head to Australia to try and revitalise the training a bit and bring some modern ideas into it. I was selected from our battalion and two NCOs and we came back to Australia. But
- 13:00 the training card, it was suppose to be a composite force and stay as a composite force, but the powers that were entrenched in Australia decided, "Oh, this is too dangerous for them," so they split us up, sent us off to different camps and broke the actual wholeness of the unit. And
- 13:30 I was sent to Dubbo where I trained for, oh four or five months I suppose and then to Bathurst and Cowra and later to General Training Centre at Tenterfield. And from Tenterfield I rejoined the unit at Finschhafen in New Guinea. And after Finschhafen
- 14:00 campaign we came back to Ravenshoe in north Queensland and trained there for probably six months or something like that again and then went to do the Borneo landing. And we went to Morotai first there and trained with the American navy and then went on to
- 14:30 Borneo, landed at Labuan. And the Japs pulled out and we had practically no opposition there at all. So after that it was decided that we would then go onto a place called Murrimutoon [?], up the top of Borneo where the big Shell oil fields were. So the assault force was gathered
- 15:00 for that and we trained a bit around the coast there for that. Then we went up and did the landing at Miri, but the pounding was a bit too much for the Japs and they pulled out really as soon as the operation started. It was a massive sort of a thing on a small scale

- 15:30 if you get what I mean. We went up in American destroyers and went ashore in landing tanks and the cruisers and destroyers pounded the landing beach before we went in, really smashed it to pieces. Liberator bombers came over and they added it to it and our own
- 16:00 landing tanks. The Yanks that were driving the landing tanks, had a great time with 50 calibre guns firing every leaf off the trees. When we landed there, there was such a tangle of trees on the beaches that we couldn't get through with the tanks – we had to disembark and go on foot. However, the Japs saw the better side of it too and they pulled back quick smart and they stayed out on
- 16:30 the Ram Road, which left us the high ground covering the oil wells and so forth. But they did turn all the oil fields into one huge big bonfire before they got away. I think there was something like 19 wells were burning when we landed and the sky was that dark that we never saw the sun for weeks and weeks,
- 17:00 with just the smoke from these burning wells. And incidentally, they brought over from America some fire team that was suppose to perform miracles in putting out oil wells. They couldn't do anything with them at all. And eventually an Australian engineer did the job. They
- 17:30 rigged up aircraft engine on trucks with the propeller blowing the wind forward and when they got up near the seat of the fire they were able to get the fire away while they closed off taps and so forth. And eventually they got them all out but it was
- 18:00 a huge fire going. There was a stream running down the middle and it was just a stream of oil, must have been thousand and thousands of gallons of oil burnt. But, however, the Japs stayed fairly quiet. We did a lot of patrol work around the area to keep them out and that was the finish of the war for us. And by then the Japanese
- 18:30 force, or the Australian force against the Japanese, was being reconstituted and I was asked to go to Japan with them and I said, "No." I'd had enough by that stage and had five years' service in it so I decided I'd come home.
- 19:00 So I came home and rejoined the Northern Rivers County Council as it was then in the electricity department. And I worked here for some little while, I think it was about 12 months, then I was transferred to Lismore office, in charge of the Lismore office,
- 19:30 which covered the areas of Casino, Ballina, Mullumbimby, Kyogle and up as far as Tweed Heads where they'd extended electricity supply to in that time. And I was there until 1960 when computers first came into use
- 20:00 and it was decided to transfer all our billing system and so forth onto computers. But the idea was ahead of the computer knowledge and the computer capability. And we had one hell of a trouble trying to transfer all the records and consumer accounts and so forth to computers because the computers was a big thing then. They weren't little computers
- 20:30 like they are now – they were things that big. And we had 12 months of really great struggle until we got rid of those computers and got more up to date computer in, and from there on things went along fairly well. That went on until 1980 and I then retired.
- 21:00 No, yes I retired in 1980. We decided we'd live the life we wanted and we bought the house at Bedrock and we spent most of our life fishing and lounging around. It's been very good retirement for us, see our girls growing up and having
- 21:30 our their own families and that's about it.

That's really well rounded and covered, very nicely covered. I'd like to go back now to start at the beginning and work our way through slowly. Could you start by describing the town of Ulmarra for me in a little more detail?

Yes now, wait a minute –

- 22:00 can I get up?

Probably not, no.

I've got a book that was there which was given to me just recently, River Boats of the Clarence, and that gives a very, very good description of all the boats that were operating in the Clarence in those days, particularly Ulmarra. But the Ulmarra area was a very big agricultural area in

- 22:30 those days particularly in cattle, pigs, poultry and other agricultural products like potatoes and so forth. And the coastal steamers, the one I remember particularly was the Polgenbar. He used to come up, I think it was twice a week there was a service there, Tuesday and Thursday between Sydney and Ulmarra.
- 23:00 Polgenbar, and I just can't remember the name of the other ship, but they loaded from the wharf at Ulmarra, pigs and cattle and all sorts of things. There were quite big chutes and slipway things there for holding the stock. And that was the main way of getting stock to Sydney at that time. And

- 23:30 the passengers going to Sydney, that's before the train times, they went by the coastal steamer. I think it took about a day to go down to Sydney, day and night. I don't know, I remember it was a great source of interest to us when we were kids to
- 24:00 go and watch the pigs and cattle being loaded and so forth. I can remember them trying to load an old bull there one day and they had trouble loading it and they put a big rope around his horns and went to lift him up with a winch and drop him in. They got him just over the hold and the horns came in together and he dropped, boom, down on the deck - we thought that was great fun.
- 24:30 But things were pretty crude at the time of course. The river boats carried all the passengers up and down the river, they were virtually no decent roads and no decent transport. Cream which came to the butter factory, which incidentally was the biggest one in Australia, it came from around the river and tributaries of
- 25:00 the river, the Coldstream Narara [?] and so forth. And that was picked up each day by these little river boats from the jetties and wharves that each farm had down near the waterside. And that was one of the kids' past-times in those days. We'd get up early, I think it was about 3 o'clock the cream boat left,
- 25:30 and we'd spend the day on the cream boat, Saturday or Sunday something, going up and down the various waterways shooting ducks and red bills, anything that was on the water. They were tough days in a way but we had a lot of fun with them too. But my father had a general store in Ulmarra and it was a very, very busy town
- 26:00 in those days. The main street would almost be choked some days with carts and very, very few cars. As a matter of fact my father's delivery truck I think was one of the first to come to the Clarence, or to Ulmarra. It was a T-model Ford truck and I remember it was unloaded from one of these coastal boats onto the wharf and
- 26:30 a chap called Phil Amos who was employed by my father decided he could drive it up the hill. It was a fairly steep hill going up from the wharf. He got halfway up and it wouldn't go any further because they were gravity feed, they had to turn round and back it up the hill. But we had a hell of a lot of fun with that truck too at the time. Our parents had a holiday cottage at
- 27:00 Bulli and my elder brothers used to drive this truck out to Bulli and have all sorts of fun shooting and fishing and so forth on the way. That was the days when you didn't have to have a licence for gun, and I think in the cupboard at home there we must have had about 20 guns of different types and calibres. Even an old Martini Henry. But as time went on of
- 27:30 course the elder brothers went off to high school and university and, oh, I went to high school too at that stage. What else...

Was your grandfather the one who originally moved to Ulmarra or was your father?

Father.

Where did he come from? What brought him to Ulmarra?

- 28:00 He came from Gulgong. I just don't know what brought him to Ulmarra, whether it was his wife or not, whether he knew her beforehand I never did find out. She was a school teacher, that was my mother and I don't think he knew her beforehand. She came up to teach at what was called Smalls Forest, which was a little village about six miles out of
- 28:30 Ulmarra on the Bulli Road. And in those days Smalls owned cattle runs right down as far as Amber. Blacks were still pretty bad in those days and the boys used to leave the shotguns loaded there at the house when they went to muster cattle, etc.
- 29:00 But they never had any real trouble with the blacks. They threatened them a bit at times. But she came there from Penrith to teach school at the Smalls School, which they'd built for their own children there. And I don't know how they met, but that's where mother and father came together and married
- 29:30 there.

And did he own the general store in Ulmarra?

Yeah

That must have been quite a central aspect of the community?

Oh it was, oh yes. There were two central stores, or two stores really in Ulmarra at the time, [UNCLEAR] and my fathers. But they were very busy stores too, cause everything was,

- 30:00 not anything was packaged at the time; it all came in bulk. Sugar came in 70 pound bags and flour in 100 pound bags I think it was, and all that sort of thing. They all had to be weighed out into packets. Whereas today of course it's all ready packaged in the factory before it gets there. So that made quite a bit of work and of course they had extra stuff to handle, like corn and chaff

30:30 and potatoes, sort of general store with all the foodstuffs as well.

What other items did they have in the store?

Oh, a lot of tinned foods, because there was no refrigeration then so food had to be such that it would keep – a lot of dried fruits,

31:00 tinned foods. The only cold storage was by ice blocks and the ice cream used to come around about once a week or so to replace the ice in your ice blocks. But it was very limited in its operation because the icebox itself was only relatively small and the ice

31:30 started to melt as soon as it got there, so probably by the time it was replaced the ice block had melted right away. So it was cold, not so cold all the time. But it did have its drawbacks of course. Then after that when the kerosene refrigerators came in

32:00 it improved a bit.

And did the family members, the kids work in the store?

No, my mother and my father were both very, very keen on education and I think it was through my mother being a school teacher she made sure that we all got quite a reasonable education. We were all educated at the Grafton High School, although it did

32:30 give lots of trouble for accommodation and so forth and the fact that we had to travel and stay away for the week. And the elder boys went on to university. One of them became a solicitor and the other school teacher. The solicitor then went into the army,

33:00 the eldest brother Doug, seemed to have an attraction for him too, and he finished up as a prisoner in Singapore. And he came back okay but died later...

Can you tell me about some of the challenges of living with 12, or 11 brothers and sisters?

33:30 **Was life difficult with that many people around?**

No, no it wasn't. I cannot remember a time when the whole family was together because when the youngest came along the eldest were away at school or university or something, or working. But I don't think we were ever together as a full family, three boys, ah, three girls and nine boys.

34:00 But we got along very, very well. We had a lot of outdoor pursuits in those days which aren't encouraged now. We used to do a lot of shooting, particularly duck shooting and kangaroo shooting, and all sorts of shooting, shot at anything and everything. And we fished a lot

34:30 as kids. Tishing was very much better then than these days. We did have some differences. My elder brother, the one above me, we used to have some arguments but my mother was a pretty practical person and she kept a set of boxing gloves behind the door and if we had an argument she'd throw them at ya, "Come on

35:00 out there and settle it." And we'd go out and flog a bit of skin off ourselves. That all settled down of course and later we became good friends. She was a very practical women.

That taught you self discipline, I imagine?

Yes I think so. Oh well, we had to be pretty self reliant too

35:30 with a big family like that. You couldn't go rushing to your mother or father with every little problem, you had to sort it out between yourselves – which we usually did. But we also had our interest in horses. We had a house block and another block with was the horses and cows and another block alongside that which was called a lucerne

36:00 paddock. And between the whole lot we kept about, oh, at different times we had half a dozen horses and we were always riding somewhere – that was our main form of transport around the local area. And milked our own cows of course and fed our own stock.

36:30 **Was your family religious?**

No, oh they went to church but they weren't very religious at all. They did follow the tenets of religion I would say, don't do things which were against the will of your fellow people and so forth. But they were not religious in a very

37:00 strong sort of way. They did go to church frequently but they didn't have much success with us going to church.

How big was the population at that time?

I really don't know, it was...

Perhaps you could describe or explain how

37:30 **stores or the variety of stores that were in town to give an indication of the size of things?**

There was, on the first corner there was a produce store, and not a very big one, but it contained most of the produce that was required on the farms, like seeding and so forth. And then across from that was a tailor's shop and next to that was

38:00 oh a house where a mechanic lived, then a bakery and my father's shop and then a garage, it was later addition in the place the garage was. At that stage there was mostly

38:30 bikes that he handled, and a fruit shop or what they called Tea Rooms Restaurant and across from that was a hotel and diagonally opposite that was another hotel – they were the biggest business of the day at that time I think. Next to the hotel was a retail store,

39:00 next to that was a bank and a butcher shop and a hairdresser and a school of arts and that was it. That was the business centre of town. And down the other road was the butter factory and a baking factory where the pigs

39:30 were slaughtered and baked and so forth.

So the town really was largely self-contained with everything you'd need?

Oh yeah it was, well it had to be because there was only a bit of a track there into Grafton and if you wanted to go to Grafton it was a horse and sulky job. Took several hours to go up, several hours to get back and there wasn't much more in Grafton at the time,

40:00 then there was in Ulmarra. Ulmarra was a bigger rural trading centre than Grafton was and it's only when the road were built to Grafton, the concrete roads, a lot of it was concreted and put in, that motor vehicles became available that Ulmarra started to die

40:30 and Grafton became more attractive centre.

I just need to pull you up there were at the end of this tape....

Tape 2

00:44 **If we can just continue talking about your childhood and Ulmarra, it was obviously a fit and healthy lifestyle out in the outdoors, along the river and shooting?**

It was, it was.

01:00 I don't remember the family – it was a big family – having any serious problems at all with health. We of course had the usual colds and that sort of thing, cut toes. My youngest sister cut her big toe off one day on the (sh...UNCLEAR) that was left accidentally on the lucerne paddock.

01:30 That was probably the most serious thing that ever happened. My younger brother broke his arm when we were driving the sulky under a wattle tree and he reached up to grab a wattle and pulled him out and the wheel went over his arm and broke it. They were about the only serious things I can remember that happened, and they weren't terribly serious.

02:00 **So you were a strong young man, were you?**

I think I was. I never had any health problems at all. All the family were quite healthy. We used to play football and swimming and surfing, a lot of outdoor stuff, shooting and fishing and so forth. But

02:30 I think it was a very healthy life. The food of course was fairly staple simple food. We didn't have anything like the various stuff you get in the delicatessen these days. Most of it was home cooked. Morning was usually rolled oats. That was the

03:00 staple sort of breakfast cereal. It was only later when these things like Granos and Weetbix and so forth came into vogue, but in the younger days I can only remember the rolled oats. Cheese was used

03:30 a lot – that's how I got my name actually, Mike. I was very fond of cheese when I was a little boy I believe and I had a picture book about Mike Mouse who died from eating too much cheese, so the elder brother started calling me Mike and that stuck to me ever since. I think my mother was the only one that ever called me Harold really.

04:00 I was Mike all the time.

She must have had quite good access to food and that sort of thing with your dad owning the general store. Was there ever a shortage of food?

No, no I don't think so, money was scarce at the time of course. A lot of it was during the Depression

years and had to live fairly basically.

04:30 We made our own ice cream I can remember, we had to churn away at the ice cream churn to make it. Most of the meat, it was all home cooked, never bought anything pre-cooked I don't think. The food was fairly basic but my mother was a very practical

05:00 person and I think she cooked very well for us.

Did you grow your own vegetables at that time?

Yeah, yep, yeah had quite a big vegetable garden and all the boys had to take their turn digging this and that and so forth. We didn't have the insect repellants we have

05:30 today, either, and a lot of it was lost to various insects, grubs and so forth. But yes, we had oh probably half the back yard of the house with vegetable garden and a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK pen too, had your own WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s. One of them used to disappear usually every week.

06:00 Ducks, we used to have ducks, too, at one stage.

Would they be disappearing within the family or outside?

Oh yes, oh no, within the family they disappeared.

Can you describe the property you lived on, the house and how it worked with the 12 or 14 of you?

Yeah well

06:30 we were never together all at one stage. It was in the street behind, or next to the main street in Ulmarra and it was actually three blocks of ground, three fairly big blocks and the house itself was built when I was, I think I was about eight

07:00 or nine or something like that, when the house was built. It was a big weatherboard house - that mark I've got there reminds me of it. In those days the timber for the house were stacked in a big triangle like that, so they'd weathered before the house was built. And they'd leave them there for probably a month or more out in the weather before the builders

07:30 started to use them. I ran round the corner one day just as my brother threw a stone at a magpie. It was on the other corner and I just collected there and it was a real beauty too. And strangely enough it never thoroughly healed, it was 50-odd years ago, no 70, 80

08:00 years ago. But the house itself was fairly big house, there was... I think there was four bedrooms in it and kitchen, bathroom, laundry and a big veranda right around, which was the main sleeping

08:30 area in the summer time. That was about it. It was built when I was, oh, when I was only a young boy. Prior to that we had lived in another house. I can only just remember the house, around

09:00 in a street which was at right angles to the street where our house was built, that was King Street. We used to get into all sorts of trouble around that first house, too, I remember. The Morans lived across from us and they had quite a big yard and they were the main transporters

09:30 of the area. they had oh, probably up to a dozen horses or more there, cart horses and trolley horses, and they did most of the transport and removals and so forth around the place, all the unloading from the wharves and that sort of thing. And they were rough tough family, Irish people, or the old mother was Irish,

10:00 she was a real old villain the old mother. But it was a source of entertainment for us kids mucking around there with the horse and trolleys and so forth. We also used to make our bows and arrows and I had a bow one day about that long made out of big stalk of bamboo and I just finished making an arrow

10:30 with a wire, fencing wire point on it, when one of their horses walked into the yard. And nothing would suit me better than to let fly into this horse's rump. The arrow stuck in tight and the horse went right up the road - they didn't get it for three days.

So you were quite a good shot even at that time?

11:00 Well we sort of lived with guns and anything, catapults particularly, we were good with catapults. You get thrown in gaol for what we did now with catapults, shooting birds and anything that moved really got shot at. We always had a catapult in our pocket. We even went to school with catapults in our pockets.

11:30 **Were the houses elevated in Ulmarra? Were they off the ground?**

Oh, ours was off to about that height probably, yeah.

So flooding wasn't a real problem?

No, no it wasn't there. Actually the only flood that I remember coming near our house at all came to within about, oh, 50 yards of our house, but the house was on a slight rise and it

12:00 didn't do any damage. The old chemist used to rush around and put pegs in the edge of the water to see how far the water was coming up and while he went back to do a another series somewhere else we'd shift the pegs out of the depth and he'd be throwing all sorts of alarmist stories about the flood rising, but we thought that was funny.

12:30 Yes there was a chemist shop, I forget to tell you that one.

Were there fishing vessels run out of the port area?

No, no, there was a lot of fishing done in the area but mostly net fishing, river netters. Oh, it was too far away from the mouth for any

13:00 outside fishing. Your outside fishing was done from Yamba. They just operated locally there. Cause the motors weren't as reliable then so they didn't go out quite as far. They'd fish usually within a few miles because the fish were there too then, plenty of fish.

And you

13:30 **mentioned the coastal steamers that were running back and forth between Sydney regularly?**

Hmm.

That must have been a really unusual link to the big city that not many of the other small towns really had?

It probably was. Had to be a fairly big river for these ships to come in of course. The bar was not always good, sometimes they had a bit of trouble when the bar showed up

14:00 but once they got inside the bar they could operate right up to well past Grafton. Grafton had a fairly big north coast navigation wharf, too, and then the smaller boats carried on from there up to Copmanhurst, which was about 30 miles up the river.

14:30 **As a lad, did you used to wonder where those ships went, or what Sydney, the big city, held?**

Yes we did sometimes. We were sort of saving up enough money to go to Sydney at one stage, myself and my elder brother. It was only a pipe dream. We had nowhere to go when we went down there. But Sydney was a mythical city to us at that stage. And of course Sydney wasn't so big at that

15:00 time either. It probably wasn't much bigger than say Newcastle is now, probably less.

What was the likely or predictable future for a young man coming through the primary school in Ulmarra? You said you got a bursary to go to high school, but what did most of the young lads do?

Yes, there wasn't much future

15:30 at all. They had in almost every case be satisfied with agriculture work. A lot of them worked on the dairy farms, 10 shillings a week and your keep mostly, that was about the standard. And the keep was dependent of course on the way the particular dairy farmer

16:00 fed himself and his family. But that was the main source of employment. If you worked on a dairy farm and agriculture, I think you usually got 15 shillings a week. But you spent most of your day ploughing and harvesting and so forth, and then you'd be up at about four o'clock

16:30 in the morning to get the cows in and milk until about nine o'clock. Then you'd have a bit of breakfast and out to the agriculture again. So it was a pretty hard life. There wasn't much else offering. Jobs like assistant in a store or something like that were few and far between.

17:00 I just can't think of, oh, sleeper cutting was another thing that was fairly common at the time because railway lines were being built in many areas and a lot of the sleepers came from timber products on the north coast here. So if you couldn't find a job elsewhere you went sleeper cutting and that meant ya

17:30 got a little tent and you went out in the bush with your own hard hat, provisions, and stayed there for probably the week or so cutting sleepers, stacking them, and then the railway inspector would come around and inspect them and put his stamp on the logs, on the sleepers that he accepted and reject some of the sleepers. It was hard going for

18:00 those chaps but there were quite a lot of them doing the sleeper cutting.

Was logging in general quite a large industry?

Oh, yes, oh, yes, particularly the sleeper cutting, that was one of the very important ones because they were building the railway lines on the north coast at that stage and that's where they got their sleepers. Little bit of fishing went on at

18:30 Bulli, that was one of the fishing centres, Bulli and Yamba, but they were only two or three boats operate out of Bulli. And I can't think of much else in the way of occupations apart from baker and butcher and that sort of thing.

19:00 **What did it mean to receive a bursary?**

Well it was a certain amount per year. I can't remember what the amount was, but it did give a chance for anyone that wanted to send their child off to some other town to help pay the boarding prices. Because the only way you could live in those towns was to

19:30 board at a private house and it would depend of course on what the private house owner wanted to charge. But I don't remember. It wasn't much on today's standards but it did allow some people to go on. I think there was only about five bursaries granted each year or

20:00 something like that. Most of us got bursaries, most of the family.

So was it based on particular skills or talents?

Skills, yeah.

What were your skills at school? What did you enjoy and what did you do well in?

I think I did well in all of them, the skills that were required in primary school, reading, arithmetic, geography and so forth.

20:30 Cause I always did like reading. The whole family did. I think my mother encouraged us a lot in the reading. We read anything and everything we'd get our hands on. And I suppose we could have gone to school, high school, if we hadn't got the bursary, but with a big family it helped a hell of a

21:00 lot to have the bursary as well. It made, it gave us a chance to get a secondary education which we might not have been able to get otherwise.

Your parents must have been very dedicated in their saving and commitment to your education?

Oh, they were, very. Yes, my mother particularly and my father

21:30 too. I think they saw that without education you were really back behind the eight-ball and they encouraged you in every way they could.

You mentioned one brother was a solicitor. What did the other members of the family end up doing?

Oh, well one was a school teacher, the second one was a school teacher

22:00 and my brother next to me, above me, he went into the artillery at South Head. When war broke out he joined the artillery in the AIF. And the brother next to him he went to Duntroon Military College and then he went off to England

22:30 and Italy and pretty fabulous military career, finished up major general, and he was in charge in Vietnam for some while too. And the other younger brother was with the Z Special force. He dropped by parachute into Borneo towards the end of the war.

23:00 I remember this. They were operating with the Dyaks and the Dyaks were offered 10 shillings a head for every Jap head, and it's only after some little while, they were working it out on the Chinese shopkeeper, they withdrew the payments.

Those slingshot skills would have come in handy

23:30 **in Z Special force?**

Yes, I never knew he was overseas. I was in Borneo myself at the time and they were up about 200 miles inland on the Baram River. And one day I got a message that my brother was coming up to see me and it turned out that he arrived,

24:00 he and another fellow had paddled 200 miles down the Baram River and called across to see me. I didn't know until then that he was anywhere near the area, but the war was just about finished by then. And another young brother, he was chief petty officer in the navy. He died in a

24:30 motor accident. Sister was a nurse. There was seven boys in the army, or the armed services.

All those jobs you've

25:00 **mentioned including the nurse and the school teacher and the solicitor, they all involve helping people out or being of service. Was that important values that your parents instilled in the children?**

No, I don't think it was especially. It just seemed to be something they were interested in and took up. I

think a lot of us had a chance to make our own decisions. We weren't really driven into anything

25:30 by our parents. I never wanted to get away from the area. I was quite happy to work in the area and I think each one just found a niche in what they wanted to do, and probably what you could do at the time, because

26:00 most of it was during the Depression years and jobs were very, very hard to get. And when anyone got a job they had to work at it to stay in it, otherwise they could get the sack very quickly.

Did you have a strong sense of pride of being Australian at that stage, or were you more sort of interested in your local identity?

I think more interested in being the local identity.

26:30 We didn't have much contact with other nations or other countries at that time. There was an influx of Italians at one stage for working the cane field when things were pretty bad in Italy, and a lot of them came out here to do cane cutting, which was a very hard and

27:00 laborious job. But we didn't see a great deal of them. They'd come as a gang to one of the cane fields down on the river and they'd stay on that cane field until they cut it out and move onto another cane field. There were quite a few more Aborigines around then, fair dinkum Aborigines, not these

27:30 white Abos [Aborigines] that get so much publicity. As a matter of fact, we had one old lady, Lilly, if I remember her name was, she seemed old to me then but she probably wasn't old, she used to come and do our washing every week for 10 shillings. And later on my mother bought a full washing machine, which was

28:00 one of the first washing machines on the market, and she dispensed with the old gin then. But we didn't see much of other nationalities, I think probably because transport was not so easy then to get from Europe to Australia where I'd expect to have been a very expensive proposition for any immigrant

28:30 wanting to come in. And there weren't the jobs offering that would attract many emigrants either. So we didn't see many emigrants, a few Irish...

Sorry, yes, we were just talking about the sense, your sense of being Australian or sense

29:00 **of national pride. Did things like the cricket or sport make you feel part of the bigger nation?**

No, not particularly. We were very interested in it. At the time when I was a young fellow the only wireless that was available was in the Nappers's garage

29:30 and when the tests were on in England half a dozen of our fellow boys would gather in Nappers's garage at night-time and listen to the shortwave radio of the cricket in England. And a lot of it was the commentator

30:00 tapping a board with a pencil to indicate a run had been hit, and there was that much static went on we could hardly hear it, but it was something for us to do. But apart from that we didn't get involved much. We all played football. We were more interested in football than we were in tennis or cricket. As a matter of fact

30:30 when I was in Coffs Harbour I was captain of the football club there and captain of the surf club. I was very keen on surfing. And that was just pre-war stuff.

Was that league or union?

League.

Was there,

31:00 **were there many World War I veterans in Ulmarra or did you have much knowledge of what had gone on in World War I?**

Yes, yes we did. See it wasn't that long between the two wars from 1918 to 1940. The World War I soldiers were still around, were still in quite fair health, and we did as kids get to know

31:30 quite a few of them and listen to their stories and that sort of thing. And I think that probably had an influence on our own later activities. I can remember a chap called Claude Wright and another called Bob Pullen, we used to spend a lot of time listening to their stories.

32:00 Oh, that's probably my daughter, I guess...

So you were talking about the old World War I veterans you used to enjoy listening to?

Yes, there weren't many of them in Ulmarra, but Bob Pullen, he was,

32:30 I think he was titled a wharf [UNCLEAR]. He controlled the movements of the north coast steamers.

They came up and down. He was in charge of the complex that operated the coastal steamers. And Claude Wright was a self taught engineer,

33:00 I think he was self taught. And the two of them were quite interesting. But I know there was others around that as kids I don't think we had much to do with the others. Cause Claude Wright lived in a little house alongside my friend's place, Wilbur Turnbull, whose father was a school teacher

33:30 out at Deep Creek. Because of that we came in contact with Claude Wright a fair bit, and same with Bob Pullen because we used to fish a lot off his wharf. Bob didn't object to us fishing there at all. He was a very decent and understanding chap.

And

34:00 **was Anzac Day celebrated in Ulmarra, or were ceremonies held in any way?**

I don't ever remember an Anzac Day ceremony in Ulmarra. It was after World War II but I don't ever remember one earlier than that, whether

34:30 there weren't enough members to get interest in it or not I don't know. They might have had but I don't ever remember.

Did you learn about the history of World War I at high school?

Yes, yes we did quite a fair bit on that. I sometimes wonder just how true it was,

35:00 how factual the set-up was, but we did in Modern History. Modern History and Ancient History were sort of conjoined at times, one seemed to run into the other, analogies between the two were brought out. We had some very good teachers.

35:30 The science teacher, I recall, was explaining to us one day about the breaking of the atom and we thought, "This is a farfetched sort of a thing," and when I was in Borneo and the word came that Hiroshima had been hit I said, "Well,

36:00 that's it. That was the breaking of the atom." He was well before his time. He was right on it and that was probably - When was that? - '45 wasn't it? It would be 10 years before the atom was broken when he was telling us about it, what power there'd

36:30 be available if they succeeded in breaking the atom.

Were you as sceptical about what you were being taught at that age as you are now? Were you quite questioning about the information you were given?

Oh, yes, yes. I was always pretty sceptical. Unless some solid proof came out about it, I had doubts about what I was told unless I

37:00 went to some other source and checked it out.

And yet that scepticism didn't sort of get in the way of your decision to join the war effort?

Oh, no, no. I seemed to think it was only the right thing to do at the time because Germany was certainly a threat. There was no question about that. It was a direct threat to the rest of the

37:30 world. And we didn't know of course that Japan was going to come into it. I think we felt that we just had to go and do our share of it if Germany was going to be defeated. Probably the fact that all your mates were joining up too, you couldn't be left outside.

38:00 I think that probably had a lot to do with it.

How important was the idea of the Empire to you as a boy when you were growing up?

It was very strong because it was a very strong point in all the teaching. Empire Day and the Empire and 'good old England' and all that sort of thing. It was driven into us

38:30 quite strongly by most of the teachers in our formative years. And we did hold England in very high regard as kids.

Was your sense of belonging to the Empire stronger than your sense of belonging to Australia?

I think it could have been.

39:00 There was more sense of family feeling that we were part of the Empire and we were dependent on the security of England for our security. Australia of course was a smaller population then, and it is now. And I do think we

39:30 looked to England for support and guidance, more than we do now.

Okay Mike we're right at the end of that second tape. We might just do a switch again. Very well done...

Tape 3

00:40 **Mike, the Depression years, what do you remember of those?**

Only that there were lots and lots of people carrying their swags from one place to another

01:00 just hoping for work.

Sorry, I'll just stop you there. I'll ask you again your memories of the Depression years?

Yes I can remember hordes, when I say hordes that's probably not right but very, very many

01:30 people just walking from one town to another hoping to get a meal. If they got into one town they could apply at the police station and they were given a ticket for a meal. I just don't know whether it covered one or more meals. And they didn't get

02:00 another ticket from that town so it meant they just had to move onto the next town to get their second meal. And I don't know why but there was a chap called Bill Wiffen who my father gave permission to sleep in the shed at our place and he was there for

02:30 oh, I guess six months or more. He just lived in the shed and worked around the house, looked after the vegetable garden and that sort of thing. And I know he never paid anything for it but I just don't know why he got special attention. He was one of the lucky ones I would say, but it was quite common to see

03:00 five and six in a group moving from one place to another in the hope of finding work, particularly during the cane-cutting season. They'd cut out one farm in probably a week or so and then the work would cut out and mightn't have any more during the rest of that season. It was very, very hard.

03:30 I don't recall a great deal about it because I wasn't very old at the time and I probably didn't take as much interest or notice of it as I probably should of in

04:00 later years.

Was there much theft or robbery at the time?

No, no, I don't think there was. I can't recall any theft at all. There might have been petty theft of

04:30 a pair of socks or something from one another. But I don't think anybody had really enough funds to be bothered taking the risk of theft. That's between the people that were out of work. I remember quite a few of them used to camp in what was called the showground then at Ulmarra

05:00 and they camped in the actual grandstand, or it was called the grandstand. But I don't recall of hearing of any problems of theft among them at all. And there was no incidents of theft that I know of from out of work people to people that were living in the town. Oh, they might have

05:30 stolen an orange or something, but no real theft.

Was there just men on the move or was it families?

No, men, only remember men on the move. I don't ever, just what happened to the families, how they managed to survive, because I don't ever remember seeing any

06:00 young ones or any women on the road at all.

So school for you, you finished school at what

06:30 **age?**

I was about 17 I would think, it was high school. I think I went there in... I'd be 18, yeah.

And what happened after school? Where did you go to work?

I went to work with the electricity supply people, electricity suppliers to the Clarence

07:00 River, Grafton and South Grafton areas. And at that stage supply was generated from a power station, hydro electricity supply and supply was extend to Ulmarra and South Grafton and Grafton. That was the main

07:30 area that was supplied. Later, when the lines were extended further and the demand was greater than could be provided by the embodier power station, a steam power station, coal fired, was built at Killcare about, oh,

- 08:00 six or seven kilometres outside of Grafton on the Copenhurst Road. And then that allowed supply to be extended down to Coffs Harbour, Macksville, Belgian, Urangan, all those places and then up as far on the north side to take in Lismore and Casino, Ballina, Mullumbimby area.
- 08:30 And that gave quite a bit of employment in the area, in the construction of lines and maintenance of supply of all the things that were associated with it. In those days there were not of course the number of people here that there were then, or that there are now, I mean.
- 09:00 And you were very limited in the early days to what you could have in your house because supply was only limited quantity. I remember most houses only had one power point, which was a start, and if you had an electric stove you were very, very lucky. And you had a jug,
- 09:30 an iron and one power point. That's about the electrical installation that there were then. Cause as electricity become more favoured the demand went on for extra appliances. New appliances came on the market that we'd never heard of before.

So what were people using for lighting?

- 10:00 Kerosene lights, kerosene lamps. Mostly they were just the ordinary kerosene-based bottom with a globe on top. Then the more expensive ones called the Aladdin lamps, and they were a pump up job and they gave a much more brilliant light than the
- 10:30 old kerosene globe type. That was the main form of lighting, particularly if you were going fishing at night you had what was called a Hagan [?] lantern and it was basically a base to hold the kerosene and the globe on top of that shielded by a metal frame, and
- 11:00 metal top over it, and you dug a hole in the sand or something and put the lamp there and lit it and you kept it alight while you were fishing. That was a bit primitive, but it worked.

So while you were with the electrical, what was your particular role?

- 11:30 I was clerical work. I did quite well. After the war I went and did an accountancy course through tech [technical school] and I was in charge of the whole northern district: Lismore, Casino, Ballina, Mackay, etc., until computers came in and then I came back to
- 12:00 Grafton to run the whole account system back in Grafton with many, many headaches with the introduction of computers.

So you were initially posted down at Coffs Harbour?

No, I was in Grafton first for about, oh, I guess 18 months and then when the Coffs Harbour office opened I went to Coffs Harbour and I stayed there

- 12:30 until I enlisted. When I came back from the war I was at Grafton for some while, I think probably about perhaps 12 months, and then I got transferred to Lismore office, actually what they call the northern district office. And I was in charge in that until computers came in. We did all the
- 13:00 necessary work from Lismore that had to be done, such as meter readings and account issues and account collections and complaints and all that sort of stuff. But then when I came back to Grafton that was all centralised back in Grafton again.

So before the war do you remember what you were being paid?

Oh,

- 13:30 I don't know. It wasn't enough. I can remember when I first started work I was getting 28 shillings a week and I was paying 20 shillings for my board and four shillings off my bike on hire purchase, and I could splurge on the other four shillings that was left. I remember that quite clearly.

So what could you buy with four shillings?

Oh, you could buy a packet of cigarettes for sixpence, small packet of cigarettes, six pence, couple of chewing gums and such like. There wasn't much you could buy with four shillings but we managed to get by all right. We used to pool our resources between a couple of us kids.

- 14:30 We could see a picture every now and again by silvering a penny. I forget what it was silver dioxide or something and when the lights went out at the cashier's desk pass it over. Sometimes we got change on it, too.

- 15:00 I don't remember what I got after that, but wages were very, very low.

So your board included food as well?

Hmm, yep. It didn't include your washing though, had to make arrangements for your own washing. We wore socks a bit longer than normally would have

15:30 worn them.

So down at Coffs Harbour, where were you staying down there, in your own place or?

No, no, in the guest house. I'm trying to remember what we paid there for board. I think it was about 28 shillings. There was about oh, six or eight of us

16:00 used to stop there. It was at a time when they were building the Coffs Harbour Hotel and most of the other boarders were involved in the construction of the hotel in one way or another. The manager of the works was there and some bricklayers and other tradesman that were there. But

16:30 that hotel opened on my 21st birthday, I remember. Free beer all day and I was there, wasn't I there.

One of your better birthdays, huh?

Yes it was.

17:00 **And was there where you met Rita?**

In Coffs Harbour, yeah.

So tell me about that story?

Well just normal sort of thing, just happen to meet her at a dance and we... Dancing was one of the favourite pastimes at the time and I met her at the dance and she

17:30 seemed to take to me all right. And I met her parents and they seemed to be all right too. Her parents owned a banana farm just out of Coffs Harbour, which has now been broken up into household areas. I think there's about 40 houses now

18:00 on what used to be their banana plantation. But Rita was one of four girls in the family and two boys. We all got along very well together. She's been a particularly good wife, what 60....64th year now,

18:30 so she got over her apprenticeship.

So was there a courtship period and did you?

Oh, yes we weren't married for about two years I'd say, yeah. Yes, I'd say it was at least two years. I don't recall exactly.

19:00 **So before the war you joined the militia?**

Hmm.

Can you tell me about, what battalion you joined and what you did?

Well it was the 13th Militia Battalion. I think that's probably induced me to go to the 2/13th Infantry Battalion. But

19:30 prior to the war, probably because of interest by my older brothers, I was also very involved with the 15th Light Horse Regiment. They used to have a camp every year and sometimes it would be at Casino, sometimes Lismore sometimes Urbenville, some of the places. And it was a really good get together

20:00 these cavalry squadrons doing in all sorts of exercises. And I was still at high school when I joined and I think it was fourth year at high school when the headmaster came in and said, "Where's Graham today?" and somebody said, "He's in Light Horse camp at Casino," and I believe

20:30 he nearly exploded. But I got by all right. My elder brother was very involved with the Light Horse too. My eldest brother and my brother next to me also got involved in it later. And I think that probably gave us the grounding. When I went to Coffs Harbour and the 13th Militia

21:00 was being formed there prewar, naturally I gravitated into the militia having had a little bit of Light Horse experience. It seemed the rational thing for me to do. And then when war broke out cause I was interested in joining the 2/13th Infantry Battalion. I

21:30 applied for that and I went and was interviewed by the CO [Commanding Officer] for it, myself and another fellow, Russ Sanderson from Taree, went down for the interview. We were accepted in the battalion and so we went.

Before we actually look at your training and service with the 2/13th

22:00 **Battalion, just going back to the 15th Light Horse, what did you do on the camps? What sort of things?**

Oh, you'd have cavalry charges, drawn swords, tent pegging was one of the activities, peg about so big was driven into the ground and had to gallop at it and pick it out with a sword.

- 22:30 That was one of the activities. And we used to do all sorts of musketry practices too, race up to hillside, dismount from the horse and pass the horse over to the horse handler and he'd take three horses and dash back while you ran up and got in the firing position, boom boom boom
- 23:00 at targets on the other side of the hill. And machine gunners we used to have Hotchkiss machine guns, take them off the packhorse and then get them down and brrr brrr away at the targets on the other side - we had a lot of fun. And then you had to of course go back to camp and feed and water your horses and tie them up on the horse lines. Then
- 23:30 every morning you had to groom and feed and water the horses. It was quite an active camp while we were there. I've got some photos of some of the camps there, quite a few of them.

Did you have to provide your own horse or?

Yep, you provided your own horse but you got an allowance for it. I forget what it was. It was only a small amount. But the

- 24:00 country boys were all generally very interested in Light Horse because most of them were horseman basically themselves. We always had horses at home, horses and cows and just pick the best horse out you could. Then there were big horse race at every camp.
- 24:30 At the end of the camp you went to the racetrack, the actual local racetrack, and raced your horses. And another one was where you raced the horse to a certain point, unloaded everything off it, saddle and everything and your own gear, dumped it and rode around the track again and then put it all on again and the first one past the post was the winner sort of thing.
- 25:00 Oh, yeah quite good fun it was in the Light Horse really, and we covered a lot of ground. When you're marching around you might only cover some small number of miles in a day, with the Light Horse you can cover probably up to 30 miles, operating around the area. It was quite an interesting set-up.

25:30 Uniforms and clothing, did you have to provide?

Hmm, no they were provided, and not only that, you always had plenty of ammunition to bring home and go kangaroo shooting.

So you're using live rounds?

Oh, yes oh, plenty of live rounds there were.

So were there any accidents?

No, no I don't recall any accidents,

- 26:00 with the live rounds. Most of the Light Horse chaps were country people who were used to firearms. From the time they were bits of kids they'd handled small rifles and shotguns and so forth. They were, I think most of them were very safety conscious about the use of firearms. No, I don't recall any accidents at
- 26:30 all with them. I do remember one in the 2/13th, we were on a march from Ingleburn to Bathurst and one afternoon some of the boys went kangaroo shooting after we stopped, and the next morning at parade one chap looked down and saw that his rifle was cocked so he put his thumb
- 27:00 over the muzzle and went down, trying not to attract attention, and pressed the trigger and his thumb went right over the top of the battalion parade. That was one example of how not to do things. He eventually stayed with the battalion, too, without a thumb. He became a very, very good stretcher bearer.
- 27:30 But that was the only accident I remember with shooting. There were others. I didn't have any personal knowledge of with silly things
- 28:00 like climbing under a barbed wire fence. I can remember one chap, I never knew him, but he climbed under this barbed wire fence and pulled the shotgun behind him. That finished him. But silly things like that. But these are something our elder brothers forced into us when we were first using guns and rifles and so forth, was safety.
- 28:30 **So the fellows who's pulling the gun behind him it went off and shot him in the...?**

Yeah, killed him yeah, killed him yeah. Some silly things like that happened.

So given when you were in the 15th Light Horse you would have just been a normal trooper?

Yeah.

What were the corporals and sergeants like?

- 29:00 Oh, much like they were in the AIF I think. Mostly they were chaps that were really trying to do their best in the unit. I never recall any of them that were obtrusive or gave problems in any way. They were all helpful sort of chaps.

29:30 Most of them of course came from country occupations and used to horses and used to men, so it wasn't sort of difficult transition for them to take charge of a few men. Most of them were pretty self-reliant fellows.

30:00 Oh, yes, they were fancy uniforms, big, the ostrich feather over the top.

And pranks, what sort of pranks did you get up on the Light Horse camps?

No, I don't think we did much in the way of pranks.

30:30 I mentioned they used to have this race every year. I won it one year. I was very friendly with an old chap that had race horses and he said, "You can take Flytox, if you like, to the camp." So I took Flytox to the camp and it was a very good race horse.

31:00 So I never told any of them the name was Flytox. It came out, I won by a street.

Did you win anything?

Ah, I did win something,

31:30 Prince of Wales cup it was, yeah Prince of Wales cup. I don't know what happened to it eventually. It wasn't much of a cup, only that big. No I think it probably tarnished and finished up in the dump or somewhere. Yeah the Prince of Wales, he was involved with the Light Horse, somewhere or other, patron or something like that. And if I remember rightly when he was Prince of Wales he came

32:00 out and did an inspection of one of the camps. I never saw him, but I believe that's what happened.

So when you were at Coffs Harbour, the militia, the 13th Militia Battalion was being formed?

Yeah.

There wasn't a Light Horse to join...?

No, no, only infantry there. And we

32:30 were helped a lot by some of the First World War diggers too. They came and threw their weight in quite well with drill and tactics and that sort of thing. Cause they were out moved when we got there but they did help us quite a bit.

So tell me about the formation, how did it actually come together?

Well

33:00 there was a unit called the Australian Instructional Corps and they were based in Sydney but their instructors were allotted to various areas at different times and they were responsible for propagation of tactics and drill and that sort of thing. And they

33:30 wore a light khaki uniform to distinguish them from the ordinary soldier, but they were sort of looked up to, the Australian Instructional Corps. They were always very smart and very well dressed and so forth. And they were the nucleus of the formation really of

34:00 the new units in any place. They went to that area and gained enlistments in the area and then formed up the unit in that particular spot. And that's what happened at Coffs Harbour. A couple of these AIC [Australian Instructional Corps] chaps arrived and said they were going to form a unit there and wanted

34:30 volunteers. And after the volunteers got in, the AIC chaps did a fair bit of elementary training with them and they picked out corporals and sergeants and so forth to look after various squads, and that's how the thing grew up. And then each year there was a battalion

35:00 camp held at some particular place where all these companies from the different centres came together to form the battalion. And mostly it was at Rutherford in Newcastle and they'd hold the camp down there. And it was actually at Rutherford when I heard the announcement by Prime Minister Bob Menzies that war was on.

35:30 We were in camp at Rutherford at the time. So that's how they came together, little scattered bits all over the place formed mainly by these AIC instructors.

So what year was that when they were beginning to form the 13th Militia battalion?

About 1938

36:00 I would think, yes. We did two camps one at Rutherford and one at Taree. Yeah, I'd say about 1938 when they started to form it. That must have been when the threats were starting to develop.

So you suggesting that the battalion

36:30 **was formed, the militia was formed there because of the threats overseas?**

I think so. I think that's what induced the, start forming these units. I can't think of any other reason because money was very scarce, very tight and I don't think the government would have been passing out money unless there was some ulterior motive behind it. Because even in that time

37:00 Hitler and Mussolini were, I think, starting to make their voices heard.

And were you given a rank?

Not at first. I came up through corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, yeah. When I went to join the 2/13th

37:30 I was allowed to keep my rank - lieutenant.

Was that rare or common?

Oh, it was a bit rare because you had to be accepted first as a member of the unit. They put a bit of emphasis on the pride of the unit and so forth -

38:00 they only wanted the best. And then they formed this nucleus and then started brining in recruits and a lot of the recruits came in from all sorts of places and I can remember when we were first formed up at Ingleburn one sergeant had been at Long Bay Gaol as a guard

38:30 and whenever a bunch of reinforcements came in from Moore Park he and the commanding officer would go along the ranks and say, "Him, him, him," and they'd be sent back to Moore Park. Didn't want them - he'd recognised them as prisoners. Oh, we had quite a few rejected in the early days like that.

39:00 And CO, well we did have a good battalion, very good battalion. The CO put it down a lot to that that he hand picked them. But this Harper, he was a bit aged for a sergeant, but he probably been in Long Bay Gaol for quite a while and

39:30 he knew a lot of them. Oh, we had some villains come into here. He was able to tell us about them at different times.

I'll just stop you there and we'll change tapes at that point and we'll continue on...

Tape 4

00:40 **So Mike it was the sergeant - Harper was his name?**

Hmm.

Over the time he told you some stories about some of the crooks. What did he say?

Oh, just said, "You blokes have been in for such and such and you've been in for such and such."

01:00 They never got in the battalion though, they chased them back to Moore Park. Some other unit probably got them. We did get one chap, Snowy Green, I remember, he sneaked through some how or other, but he was a bad guy too, real bad guy. He got kicked out at the end at Bathurst.

01:30 The CO sent him back to base. We never saw or heard of him again. At that stage we had marched to Bathurst and he was a real trouble stirrer.

What had he done?

Well he was just a trouble stirrer in the battalion. He wanted to fight everybody around the place and he was a chap that nobody could get on with. He was just

02:00 a real troublemaker in any way. Anybody that gave him any instructions he'd argue against it and fight against it. He didn't want to do this and he didn't want to do that. And you wonder why the hell he ever got into the army anyhow. He was just a bad guy, a bad guy. And he thought he could fight, too, but he picked on young 'Darkie'

02:30 Mowbray one day. 'Darkie' had been a pugilists but he wasn't very big, and 'Darkie' gave him a hell of a belting.

So coming back to the militia days just the training camps and training that you did, can you talk me through some of those things?

Well, looking

03:00 back on them in the light of what experiences I've had they weren't very productive. That is the infantry ones weren't, we used to do various company and battalion operations but looking at it in the light of later knowledge we'd have got shot to pieces.

- 03:30 The things, you did like jump and go forward and one section would go forward and bang, bang, bang and that gave the other section a chance to move up through. It wasn't very realistic in terms of warfare because most of our instructors,
- 04:00 or not most of them, a couple of the main ones were World War I instructors or people that had experience in World War I. Some I don't think had had as much experience as they tried to make out they had, and their tactics anyhow were quite different from what the tactics or operating conditions in the Second World War. They didn't have
- 04:30 tanks and aircraft and so forth to operate with as we did in World War II. And even World War II would not have been, pardon me, the Vietnam War, we were very, very outmoded with our equipment in World War II in comparison to what they'd been using in Vietnam.
- 05:00 A number of planes and helicopters the various technical equipments they've got now that we never had.
- So was any of the training in the 13th Militia helpful?**
- Oh, it was helpful in a way. It did help to form
- 05:30 esprit de corps and the unit, you made yourself part of that unit. And everybody in the unit was constrained to work together to make it a practical working unit. But the actual tactics
- 06:00 I think were well outmoded and it wasn't until we got to Palestine and started getting onto some more modern training that we really started to come together as a cohesive unit.
- And what was the system, or how was one promoted? You said you went from corporal to sergeant to lieutenant, how did you actually**
- 06:30 **make each step? Did you have to apply?**
- Mostly it was a bit of examination and recommendation, yeah. The AIC blokes would say, "Are you prepared to do this or that?" and if you said, "Yes," they'd put you through a form of interrogation, question you and so forth. And then your name, if you were successful,
- 07:00 would be submitted and eventually it would come out in battalion orders that you were promoted to corporal or sergeant or whatever it might be.
- Once you were given rank, did you start to, did the men still respect you or did you start to get a distance between you?**
- Oh, no, no. No you never lost contact that way because you had been one of them
- 07:30 and you understood what it was to be in the ranks. You didn't have any reason to try domination or anything like that over them. No, I think there was quite a bit of respect for anybody who rose from the ranks. A lot of the chaps realised they would never rise from the ranks and they were quite
- 08:00 prepared to accept their position there. Just the same as it would be in a working business – one fellow gets an advancement and the other fellows stay there mending boxes or whatever they're doing in the place and they're quite happy to do that. A lot of them won't accept responsibility, wouldn't accept responsibility, and their quite happy to just be instructed what to do and when to do it.
- 08:30 **I read a quote about World War I corporals. This private said that if we'd have shown the Germans and Turks our corporals they would have surrendered and given up years ago?**
- Oh, the
- 09:00 militia was a good grounding in that it brought together blokes and taught them to live together and work together. It mightn't have been tactically or strategically very good but it did give a basis, probably like the Boy Scouts or something like that, living together and working together for one purpose.
- 09:30 **So, Mike, could you share with me now the formation of the 2/13th Battalion and the training you actually did, the march to Bathurst?**
- Well we were formed at Ingleburn as drafts came in from Moore Park, they were allotted, the battalion officers in headquarters did try to find
- 10:00 out what specialities they had, if any. And through that they either allotted them to either rifle companies or headquarter company, which consisted of signallers and cooks and drivers and all the other paraphernalia that keep a battalion running. And then training started mostly in drill formations
- 10:30 and rifle practice, going out to the rifle butts at Liverpool, doing a lot of firing practice. Then after about three months I think it was in Ingleburn there was another intake of soldiers coming in, recruits coming in and
- 11:00 there was no room for it in Ingleburn. But Bathurst camp was being built and it was decided that we'd

transfer to Bathurst. But as it wasn't ready we had to march up. So we marched from Ingleburn up to Bathurst. By the time that we got up there the camp was ready, or supposed to be ready for us, but it was still very primitive and it

- 11:30 was the middle of winter and the showers had a bit of tin around them from there to there like that and the wind used to whistle through them, so you weren't long in the showers. But it gradually got better and better. We then moved out of Bathurst in October 1940
- 12:00 and went by train down to Sydney to join the Queen Mary. Funny little side was that we did all sorts of exercise. Battalion headquarters marked out on the parade ground areas indicating carriages, train carriages, how many went in this one
- 12:30 how many went in that one and so forth. And they had the formation of the train so that they could mark this out. Also they collected nine pence from each person for pie and a cup of coffee at Mount Victoria as we were going down. And anyhow the train comes in for us to get in and it's
- 13:00 back to front from what, this training thing, all the plans were thrown, "Get on." So anyhow when you get to Mount Victoria the train just vroom straight through Mount Victoria. And from there on life right through the battalion, if blokes had to vent their anger on anything, it was, "Where's our bloody nine pence?"
- 13:30 It went all the way through, "Where's our bloody nine pence?" Even the recruits who came in, the reinforcements who had never been there, they still took it up, "Where's our bloody nine pence?" So they never lived that down, it went into the battalion welfare funds I suppose, they got it back some way or another, but they didn't get passed that nine pence. Anyhow we went down to Sydney
- 14:00 joined the Queen Mary. It was all very, very secret, but half of Sydney was there to see us off. The Queen Mary, the Aquitania the Mauritania and a couple of warships and away we went. We got to India and [Queen] Mary course was too big to go through the canal I think so we went ashore at Bombay and then went to a place called
- 14:30 Deolali, it was a inland British Army camp. And we stopped there for a while, had a good chance to look around parts of India while they were arranging another ship for us. And we went onto a ship called the Christian Hogians [?] and that ship, and that took us up the Suez Canal and landed at Qantara and from there we went on
- 15:00 by train up into Palestine. Trained there for, I think it was about three or four months and at that stage the 6th Division had taken Bardia and Tobruk from the Italians and the Greece campaign was starting to shape up,
- 15:30 so it was decided we would replace the 6th Division. And we went up replaced them and went as far as Beda Fomm up in Libya, up past Libya. And thought we were doing pretty all right until the Germans came in, Africa Corps, and they had much
- 16:00 bigger sticks than we had and they chased us back very smartly back to Tobruk. But we managed to get inside Tobruk without losing too much and then we stayed there from, that was April until the end of December.

Before we talk too much about Tobruk, can I just ask a few more questions

- 16:30 **about training and stuff? The march to Bathurst, you said that Snowy was a problem fellow, how were the other men relating?**

Oh, I'm not just sure what you mean, Michael [interviewer]. Nobody liked him, if that's what you mean.

Oh, how were the other fellows getting on, though, with each other?

Oh, quite all right,

- 17:00 yes they all managed to meet on more or less equal terms. Yes they shared quite well there. There was some incidents of thievery, but very, very little. Watch might disappear or something like that occasionally, but it was very, very seldom that happened.

What disciplinary actions were taken?

Well it was hard

- 17:30 to find the culprit, that was the trouble. Cause there wasn't much privacy in a hut full of soldiers and if you put your watch down and went and had a shower and you came back and it was missing, who could you blame? It might happen at night-time, anytime, but it wasn't common at all. I think everybody realised that

- 18:00 they had to depend on each other.

How long was the march between Ingleburn and Bathurst?

Oh, I just forget exactly. I think it was about a fortnight, something like that. We used to do about, roughly about 20 miles a day I think and then settle down for the night.

18:30 Mostly we camped; on odd occasions we got accommodation. I remember at Katoomba most of us were accommodated around the guesthouses there. It was a big patriotic thing they did. But other places like Meadow Flat where we stopped one night

19:00 and almost froze to death, we were out in the open. As a matter of fact I remember the cook, company cook prepared a big dish of vegetables before we camped that night, a dish about that big, in water, and in the morning they were just frozen, just one solid block. Oh, it was cold there, cause the middle of winter I think when we got there.

19:30 Oh, it didn't do us any harm I suppose. We had worse conditions than that later.

So were the fellows marching with full packs or?

Yeah full packs, rifles and the whole.

So were there problems with their feet, blisters and all that sort of stuff?

Well at each halt, whenever a halt was made, if a person had blister troubles

20:00 the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] man, regiment aid bloke, he'd put a bit of bandaid on or something like that, away we'd go again. No there wasn't much in the way of blisters or bad feet because we had been doing a fair bit of marching around at Ingleburn beforehand and everybody was properly fitted out for shoes and socks and so forth.

20:30 It wasn't like they put the new army boots on and marched straight off. They had quite decent fitting footwear.

So you mentioned that when you arrived at Bathurst the camp wasn't completely set up?

No.

What was set up at that point in time?

The kitchens and the huts were mostly

21:00 finished. There were things like windows and so forth had to be fitted in them and showers. The showers were just out in the middle of the open with this bit of tin around them, cold showers. If you were lucky you could get a dish of water from the cookhouse and throw it over each other to break the cold, like that. But

21:30 it made us a bit tougher, probably.

You showered every day, did you?

Yes because we did a lot of route marching around the area, hardening up as they called it, toughening us, and you'd come in fairly late in the afternoon each day and you really didn't mind having a cold shower. If you could get warmed up a bit, so much the better.

22:00 **And training, you said some of the training methods were old in respect to Bathurst?**

Yeah, well we'd had no experience. Nobody had had any experience since World War I and naturally a lot of the tactics were based on what had happened

22:30 during World War I and it was mostly a static war, trench digging and fighting from trenches, one trench against another sort of thing, and a lot of the training was confined to that area whereas World War II became much more fluid in

23:00 the general area. It wasn't in Tobruk of course, but the general area was much more fluid with tanks and airplanes and so forth and lots of movement. And we really didn't get very well acclimatised to that type of stuff while we were in Bathurst. It was more training in rifle and machinegun shooting and mortar firing

23:30 and toughening up exercise.

So once you got to Palestine, that's where training really got going?

Yeah, yeah.

Can you share with me what sort of training you did in Palestine?

Well actually it wasn't very much different from what we were doing in Australia. We did a lot of route marching around various places, over old battlefields like Beersheba and places like that.

24:00 Try to evaluate what was wrong at the time, why they didn't win this and why they didn't win that. And we still concentrated a lot on rifle shooting, machinegun shooting, that sort of thing. I suppose when we got into Tobruk it was handy to us, but we didn't do much on the movement side because we just didn't

have

24:30 the motor transport at that time. We were lacking in a hell of a lot of equipment because the government had allowed it to run down after World War I – they weren't expecting World War II to come up. And we were very short of arms and ammunition, arms particularly, when we were in Palestine. And when we went up the desert

25:00 we were still woefully short. We only had one Bren gun to a company and we had to substitute by captured Italian weapons. Most of the time we were operating with Italian Fiats and... What was the other one?

25:30 Oh, one was an 1890 Austrian machinegun, Schwartzslaus we were using. And we didn't have Tommy guns until very much later in Tobruk, we got the American Tommy guns. And they were a vicious thing, but they were effective too.

26:00 But we never had full strength in sub machineguns or light machineguns until well after Tobruk. We were working in Tobruk with captured Italian mortars and captured Italian field guns. The English had their own guns, English artillery regiments,

26:30 but we had what they called the bush artillery and we were working on captured Italian guns and captured Italian ammunition. In our forward posts we had practically all Italian machineguns, Schwartzslows and Fiats and Bredas and

27:00 we were virtually a rifle company in every sense of the word. At one stage, later in Tobruk we did get an issue of sniper rifles but they were very few and far between, one or two per company, the sniper rifles. But it wasn't until we got back to Australia

27:30 really that we started to get properly equipped with all the weapons we wanted, and a lot of them were American weapons.

My understanding of the battlefield is that sound is important to pick up the distinctive sound of an enemy's rifle to your own?

Oh, yes, oh, yes, you can tell the difference.

But therefore if Australian troops had a lot of Italian gear?

28:00 It might have confused the Jerries [Germans] a bit. And you could tell, particularly at night-time by the tracer, the colours of the tracers varied somewhat between the different manufacturers. It might have confused the Germans if they saw a tracer which should have belonged to Italian guns. I don't know whether it did.

What about confusing our

28:30 **own troops in respect to crossfire?**

No, I don't think so. They all knew that we were operating with all sorts of weapons and it didn't worry them at all I don't think. We were lucky in a way that the big Italian ammunition dumps had fallen into our hands

29:00 without being knocked out. And we had virtually unlimited ammunition so we shot hell out of anything and everything we could see, sometimes just for fun. When we thought the Germans might have been taking a bit of a rest or wandering around or something we'd just put a couple of belts through a machinegun in their directions. And particularly the bush

29:30 artillery, they'd pop rounds off at any old time, anything at all that they thought might just disturb them. Then the Jerries must have got wise to this because they sent over a fleet of bombers and they'd blow up the ammunition dumps, so we were a bit short then. I don't know why the Italians, oh, they did, someone thought of things like

30:00 that. They had this big Italian dump and everything was in it, huge big dump, and they left it. When, they never blew it up themselves, I don't know why, they probably got out in such a hurry they didn't think to blow it up, but why they didn't disburse it before any attack came I don't know either. Leaving them all in one spot was very foolish.

30:30 **Mike, back in Palestine you mentioned earlier you trained over some of the old battlefields?**

Yeah.

Can you talk me through a couple of those training methods and situations, some that worked and some that didn't?

Oh well, we didn't use them as training exercise really, only more or less for interest. Going over the old trenches that were dug there, seeing little bits of metal and old cartridges

31:00 and things like that which were still around the trenches. But it was more an interest than training because I don't think we did any real training which benefited us particularly there, more physical

exercise than anything else.

So were there skirmishes between other company or battalions in respect to training methods?

Oh, yes, oh yes,

- 31:30 we used to do a fair bit of that. And watching the wogs at night was another aspect of standing to. One particular night the tents, what we called the EPIP [English Pattern Indian Product] tents, the English Pattern and Indian Pattern, they were very, very good tents too.
- 32:00 And at night they'd roll up the sides into a big column at each corner, so that there were four corners under the tent and that allowed air and passage through. And the rifles were chained in a central position. And one night the Arabs came and they took the whole four tent sides
- 32:30 away with the blokes all sleeping inside the tent. All we found was the camel tracks outside the camp the next day, where the Arabs had taken them. Oh, you had to be on the watch there. Actually there was a night-time picket all around that moved, or suppose to move around the tents all night
- 33:00 but I think this particular night they might have been having a bit of a sleep somewhere else when the Arabs came in.

So the Arabs actually took the, what part of the tent, the top of the tent off?

No, the sides, the sides where they were rolled up on each corner of the tent. There were some shifty [suspicious] Arabs as they used to call them, thieving Arabs

- 33:30 **I understand that there was a standing order that you could shoot them if they were stealing anything?**
- Oh, I don't think so. I never heard of that. We'd shoot at them, probably, but not to hit them. No, I think you might have been in trouble if you shot
- 34:00 one dead. You'd have had to have a very, very good reason for it. But I never heard of anyone actually shooting one.

And what were the Arabs aiming to steal in particular?

Anything they could put their hands on. They were very, very poor lot. You couldn't get two bob out of the, you shook a lot of them down but anything that wasn't

- 34:30 securely tied they'd lift. Mightn't be any use to them but they might be able to sell to their mates further on. And we had a lot of them around our camp. Arab camel trains used to pass along by our camp quite regularly. They'd only pass within 10 or 15 yards of your camp at times.
- 35:00 You had to be watchful that they didn't pick up anything on their way. But rifles or anything like that were really good currency for them if they could get their hands on them.

And the brothels, I understand that some of the fellows went off to the brothels, is that right?

Well there was a brothel running in Syria when you were there.

- 35:30 But I don't think there were any other former brothels in the vicinity at all. There were in Tel Aviv. If anybody was on leave in Tel Aviv they could find a brothel. But when we went up into Syria, the north of Syria, there was a fair amount of VD [venereal disease] operating
- 36:00 so the MO [Medical Officer] arranged a brothel which was under control and nobody else was allowed in that brothel apart from Australian troops. And there were pickets on the brothel at night to keep it secure and so forth and
- 36:30 I don't know how many girls were operating in it but it did cut down the VD rate very, very considerably. And that was the only one that I know of that was operating up there and then we went up near the Turkish border at that time, at
- 37:00 a place called Latakia.

We might just stop there and...

Tape 5

- 00:45 **So Mike just coming back again to the brothels and stuff, was there much of a problem of VD when you were in Palestine?**

No, no, they didn't have much problem at all, just an occasional

01:00 case of it, that's all. I think we had a very good medical team with us and they used to give lectures pretty frequently and explain the dangers and the problems and what if they got infected, and I think they had a fair bit to do with keeping VD under control.

01:30 No we had very, very little.

What sort of things were the MO trying to teach the men through those lectures?

Mostly that they had to use French letters [condoms], not to go barefoot. No that was the main source. And if they had the slightest doubt at

02:00 all to go immediately to the Regimental Aid Post and get treatment. And he stressed that very, very much all the time and I do think that had a very good effect.

Were French letters handed out to the...?

Oh, yeah, yeah, they could get any quantity when they were going on leave or whenever they were wanted.

02:30 **And what happened from an army's perspective when a man actually got VD? What was the response?**

He got sent to hospital, to the VD hospital, or the VD ward, and was treated there and he had to be declared free of VD before he was allowed back in the unit.

03:00 I think a few probably did use it as an excuse to get out of action, get out of work, but mostly this occurred when we were in training areas rather than when we were in action, so it probably was not a terribly important factor in it.

Could a man not report it and just continue on

03:30 **pretending nothing had happened?**

Well, there had to be a short arm parade every now and again and the Medical Officer would do the inspection, short arm parade, and any suspected cases he'd whip out and do further checks on them. But I, oh, it depended entirely on what the situation is. Naturally, when we were in Tobruk there was

04:00 no need for short arm parade there. But when we were back in Palestine, oh, probably every three weeks or something like that, out of rough remembrance yeah.

What was involved in the short arm parade?

Oh, just had to flash the penis as they walked past and he'd check them all. He was sitting like this and they walk past. He'd

04:30 check it as it went past to see it had no sores or anything like that. And if there was a doubt at all then they'd be nominated to do a further check independently.

Did all ranks have to do the short arm?

Yeah, yep. But we were fortunate in a way we had, while we were in the desert, we had a very, very good

05:00 Medical Officer, Phil Good, he was good too.

Why was he so good, as you say?

Well he was a really devoted to his job. We had one earlier who wasn't quite so good. But when this Phil Good came to us he was from the South Australia and he joined us -

05:30 Where was it? Somewhere in the Middle East. I just don't remember where. But he was a real dedicated medical man and as a matter of fact he was given a MC [Military Cross].

06:00 He was a chap that mixed with the troops very well. He used to hold boxing lessons whenever he possibly could and he was pretty good, too. He took on the so-called pugilists

06:30 of the battalion there one day and beat him quite easily. But I think I mentioned it there, those notes that I had there, he, we were getting very heavily shelled at one stage because of the foolish British indicating where we were located and the big German guns were onto us

07:00 and Phil drove the regimental aid truck straight up into the shelling area,

07:30 and I don't know whether the Germans expected him, but he managed to evacuate the...

08:00 Anyhow, Phil was a good bloke.

Would you like us to stop for a moment?

Oh, no,

08:30 no.

Can I ask you a little bit more just about what Phil did?

Oh, he drove the truck straight up into the shelling area and there were quite a few wounded lying around, evacuated them all. And he was like that. He didn't worry about

09:00 his personal safety at all. Cause the truck had big Red Cross signs on it, but I don't think that probably deterred the Germans particularly because they were a long way back from us, with the big heavy gun. It was a big 210mm gun that they were using on us at the time, big naval guns,

09:30 and they came down with one hell of a bang. I think it was about an 80 pound shell that they fired and when they hit, they really hit. I remember one bloke lying alongside me, he was only from here to that box away and one crashed down, not far from us and,

10:00 "Jesus I've been hit." I said, "Don't be bloody silly." He said, "I am. Look at my legs." And he had three holes right through his calf there. He got out, Phil got him out. He was a cook, too, by the way.

10:30 That was when we were out at Algerdha [?] and it was a funny sort of a place. All communications had been disrupted and when we took the position there we had aircraft recognition

11:00 and flares to throw up in the Verey pistols, the white and the red or something, which our aircraft would recognise as friendly, but they must not have read the words right or something. While we were holding this position, which had previously been held by the Germans, they came over and flogged us just the same, although we sent the recognition signals up.

11:30 Oh, things were very disjointed at the time because the fluid war going backwards and forwards and we'd be in one spot today and another spot tomorrow, and you could understand that back at the airfields and probably back in Alexandria somewhere they couldn't pinpoint these positions as accurately as they should have, or could have.

12:00 **So is the incident where Phil Good brought the truck forward and saved some of the men, was he awarded the MC for that?**

Yeah, yeah, that's what he got it for.

12:30 **Did he survive the war?**

Yeah, yeah. He survived and he was with us right until the end of hostilities. A couple of others earlier, one was

13:00 a real drunk and whenever anybody wanted any attention he was too drunk to do it. But he didn't last long. The CO was a pretty sort of divisive sort of a bloke. A bloke called Bull Burroughs, and he turfed him very quickly.

13:30 **So share with me, if you would, your time of moving towards and then into Tobruk, when you received the orders and how you got there?**

Well when we relieved the 6th Division we went on a place called Beda Fomm. Actually,

14:00 most of the company, most of the battalion went on a Beda Fomm, but our company, C Company, was allotted the task of looking after prisoners as they came in. We had a prisoner of war camp at a place called Barce. And Barce was a town which had been built by Mussolini

14:30 to accommodate Italian farmers who were willing to migrate over to North Africa and start relieving the Italian population a bit. And it was quite a lovely little town, a town about oh, probably 600 people or something like that would have lived in,

15:00 had their own little hotel. And anyhow we set up this prisoner of war camp on flat ground outside of Barce and we had up to about 3000 prisoners in there at one stage. They were coming in from all directions. And it was the simplest thing. We didn't have the number of troops

15:30 to do any real guarding of them. If they wanted to get out, they could probably get out. But we just dug machinegun pit at each of the opposite corners so that you could fire that way or that way, and that one could fire that way or that way. Every now and again during the night you'd just put a burst down along the wire that way and swing around and burst down the wire that way so that the prisoners never knew

16:00 when a burst of fire might come down. But we never lost any that I know of. We gained a few. I can remember some of the blokes were a bit, well there was a big Italian hospital there too and they had staff which were untouched, they weren't thrown in. But when we

16:30 were taking prisoners out to do work on the airfield and things like that, now and again they'd lose one and the guard would usually pick one up from the hospital and stick him in the rank to make the number up when they got back. And there was a hell of an outcry from some of them about this. They

didn't like the idea at all. I don't know how many finished up in a prisoner of war camp

- 17:00 who shouldn't have been there. But anyhow, when the Germans came we had to get out in a hurry and we just had to leave the prisoners there. "There you are boys. You're free. Go where you like." Oh, it was a hell of a mess. When they first came in we had no system worked out to feed them or house them or anything. All we could do is
- 17:30 drive a truck full of bully beef or something into camp and unload it in the middle of the camp and let them fight over it. And that went on for some days before we could form up some system of distribution properly among them. But they were coming in hundreds at a time and it was just impossible, so we just left them there when the Germans came. I don't
- 18:00 know what happened to them all. But they were a good lot of people in Barce. The Italian civilians there had no problems with us at all and we had no problems with them. They just stayed their own life, lived their own life. And the only trouble
- 18:30 we had there was when we were evacuating. And it wasn't the Italians, it was the Libyans that gave us the trouble because Barce had been the big store dump for a lot of their base requirements. And they had big storehouses of flour and meals and beefs and wines and all that sort of stuff
- 19:00 there, which we had been guarding pretty carefully. But when we were leaving, the Libyans came in to loot it all and they were blocking the streets and everything and we had to actually put a couple of machineguns over the roof of the trucks and fire a burst over them to clear them. They got out of the way pretty quick then, but we wouldn't have got out otherwise. And they were
- 19:30 running out bags of flour on their head, everything they could hang to and grab, had their supply depots there. It was a bit funny in a way, they had, must have been thousands of gallons of wine stacked in these storehouse, shanty and all sorts of stuff and before we
- 20:00 went we decided we'd get rid of this wine. So we bought a team of prisoners up from the compound and gave them axes and told them to smash the heads in on these casks of wine. Well look, wine was flowing that deep around the yard. We let them take a billy can each back to the camp with them, but by God they had some wine, reds and whites and all sorts of stuff.
- 20:30 And then we got out of Barce and we couldn't join up with the rest of the battalion. Oh, and we had to get out on Italian trucks - we didn't have any trucks of our own. Big Fiat trucks. And we were jammed into these trucks and we had to
- 21:00 take the coastal road to try and get out because the Germans were closing off the inside road. And we didn't join up with the battalion until we were almost back to Tobruk, but fortunately we got through all right. And then we went into Tobruk. Oh, before that we were cut
- 21:30 off by Germans and we were expecting to get hell chopped out of us and we didn't have anything in the way of decent digging tools or anything to make any sort of protection. And we were there trying to scoop out holes with our tin hats to try and get a bit of cover for this expected German attack. And fortunately they stayed about a
- 22:00 mile away from us and went around the side. We thought, oh, we'd be cut off later but we didn't. We got through to place just outside Tobruk and joined up with the battalion again. And when we went through the wire at Tobruk we felt reasonably safe because the Germans hadn't been able to really close on us. They did get
- 22:30 most of the 15th Battalion. The story goes, I don't know just the accuracy of it, was a British military policeman met the line of trucks and directed them down the other road where the Germans were. And it was thought, or said at the time, that
- 23:00 he was a German dressed in British military police, but how that was I don't know. But anyhow most of the 15th Battalion got caught there. Anyhow we got into Tobruk and fortunately the Germans didn't have sufficient forces up at the time to make a straight-out assault on it and we were able to disperse
- 23:30 around the various frontline positions and get into position to hold them off. And it wasn't until Easter, Easter Friday, I just forget when it was we got back in, but it was some weeks before the Germans actually attacked again. Apparently had to get their forces coordinated for the attack. But they were forestalled
- 24:00 a bit because the tanks came through, German tanks came through, and the theory in the German army was if the tanks took the place, the occupants surrendered. But that didn't happen. We just let the tanks go through - couldn't do anything about them - and got stuck into the infantry which was following them. And the tanks went forward to the gun positions, our
- 24:30 artillery positions, and the artillery men were into them over open sights. They got most of the tanks. I think two got back out, but they got the rest of them and we never
- 25:00 got the infantry past the front line, past the wire. Knocked out all the German infantry who were coming in and that quietened them down for a while, and they were prepared to just sit outside and play

guardian to us for quite some while. But apart from occasional

25:30 foray and patrol activity, there wasn't a great deal doing until the Germans went for Hill 209, which was one of the high points in the perimeter, and they captured it. And that gave them the commanding position over practically the whole of the Tobruk area.

26:00 And we had to go up and hold them back in again and that was one of the worst periods my company had in that area. We were under continual shellfire and sniping and so forth. But we managed to

26:30 not only hold them off, but we then moved forward and straightened the line up a bit to shorten it to give us more manpower in certain sector. And we were able to hold that right through until the end of Tobruk when the Germans put in a main attack to try and capture Tobruk.

27:00 But it was a bad area, no question about that, because the Germans were looking down on us from a higher position and we were down on the lower ground. There was no movement during the day whatsoever - you'd get your head shot off if you stuck it up during the day. But everything had to happen at night-time,

27:30 had to be fed and rationed and supplied with ammunition and so forth during the night. It was pretty testing because the Germans knew we were doing it, too, and we knew they were doing it - re-supply at night. So both sides would let go at any old unpredicted time at all.

28:00 And you'd have guns set up on the sights during the day, and during the night when you suspected there might be ration parties or anything you'd put a burst of machinegun fire across into that area and they'd return it the same. It was a tit for tat job. But at least you could move during the night, where you couldn't during the day.

28:30 **Can I just ask you about, going back before when the tanks ran over the top, you held off the infantry, the artillery were using open sights, you said?**

Yeah.

What does that mean?

That means they were just looking down, like shooting with a rifle, in close combat stuff. When they're firing normally, their working on the calibrated sights and allowing for the trajectory of the

29:00 projectile and so forth, probably in a certain spot. But when they're on open sights, they're just using them like a rifle at short range. That's only, it's a tactic which they only use under extreme conditions of course, when it's them or me sort of thing, you fire over open sights.

29:30 Pretty devastating of course if you get a hit. But those English gunners, they were good.

And where were you situated during that actual attack?

We were just on the right, they passed just on our side, around the 2/17th Battalion and

30:00 we were a couple of hundred yards away on the right. We missed the main bulk of it, but we were able to direct fire across at an angle to any German forces we could see there. But the 17th got the thing direct in front of them. We had some primitive weapons at the time, too.

30:30 I can remember we had what we called Molotov cocktails, and they were a beer bottle filled with kerosene and sump oil it think it was, rag wick out the top. The theory was, when you got close enough to a tank you lit this wick and pelted it at the tank. I don't know where they devised this bloody scheme. We were supplied with these

31:00 anyhow. Fortunately we never had to use them. And later on they supplied us with sticky bombs they called them, and they were as useful as a fur coat to a cat, too. They were a bomb around about so big with a handle on it and a split pin in the casing around the sticky bomb. And when you got close enough up to the tank you pulled this pin and whacked it on the

31:30 tank and that broke the glass encasing and the explosion went off. They never said what happened to you, but it was suppose to blow a hole in the tank. But we went out to this place outside Tobruk when we were going out there, we were issued with these sticky bombs, but fortunately we never had a cause to use them.

32:00 Oh, some bright spark worked it out.

So that time when the Germans attacked with the tanks and infantry, what orders were you giving your men? What were you telling them?

You shoot on sight, that's all. Of course the blokes have got to be pretty independent in their actions, they can't just wait on orders

32:30 to do this or do that and they know probably as well as anybody else where the danger is and what's required. So they just take whatever targets were available and hit it. We did have two pounder antitank guns with us and they got into it too, of course.

33:00 The actually infantry stuff was delivered by our own machine guns and rifles.

So as a lieutenant, and I think you later became a captain, in an engagement such as that, what's your role? Just to shoot the enemy or to check on your men, or what's your actual role?

Just to try and appreciate what the position is and take the most suitable action

33:30 at the time, direct your fire to where it will do the most good. But when the engagement joins there's that much noise and noise and distraction sort of thing going on that everybody has to be a fairly reliable individual and work

34:00 to do what they see is the best at the time. They can't just wait for orders to shoot at this bloke or shoot at that bloke. And that's what the basis of the training tries to impart to them that they've got to be self-reliant and do the right thing at the right time.

34:30 **Were there ever times you had to redirect fire for dangers?**

No I don't think so. No we were pretty well trained unit by this time. I'd say 99% of the chaps were pretty self-reliant blokes. They knew what was wanted and they knew, I'd

35:00 say probably as much as I did, what to do at a certain time.

So maybe, you actually went over to the base, I take it, of Hill 209, is that right where you were repositioned?

Ah, 209...

The hill the Germans took?

Oh, that was outside Tobruk

35:30 later. I was talking about inside, yeah. Oh, that was month later when the Germans took this Hill 209. No, at this time we were in the flat near the El Adem Road, the El Adem Road was a road that ran from Tobruk out through their perimeter and onto the El Adem airfield, that's where the Italian airfield was,

36:00 some few miles outside Tobruk. And that was where the German line was. They came in the El Adem Road and fanned out either side of it. One tank that was knocked out there just near the El Adem Road block, I remember one of our chaps was having a check on the tank later

36:30 and he picked up a camera out of the tank and he was playing with it and zrrrrr, apparently a time delay thing on it and he threw it away and smashed it, nice camera, "Bloody...", what did he say

37:00 "Bloody booby trap," yeah, "Bloody booby trap."

And what were the general conditions like, like the flies and?

Flies were dreadful, really dreadful. In the daytime it was hot, very hot and unless you were in one of the concrete dugouts,

37:30 which the Italians had built, but were too far apart to be really effective - we dug secondary trenches in between these concrete ones. And depending on the hardness of the ground, the rock below it, was how deep you could go. Mostly you could go down about, at the most about that depth before you struck a shelf of rock

38:00 and you couldn't get through it - we didn't have the tools to get through it. So you laid in that all day, it was, with the hot sun streaming down on you and you just sweltered and sweltered all day and you were just longed for nightfall to come so you could get up and breath. And normally we got the food up during

38:30 the night-time and if you wanted anything during the day the best you could do was open a tin of bully beef and have a bit of it. You couldn't eat much of it because you got sick of it after a while. But then apart from that we built another line of trenches, some hundreds of yards behind the first line, that was called, the front line was called the red line,

39:00 the next line was called the blue line. And the theory was you did time in the front line for a couple of weeks and then you moved back to blue line, blue line moved forward and took up your position, gave a bit of variety. Then there was another line going behind the blue line and it was a more or less rest and recreation one. And if

39:30 you were lucky you could get down to the sea at times and have a swim in the surf, which was something we really looked forward to, but you always had to have an eye cocked out for German bombers which came over and tried to spoil the surfing. But generally speaking the conditions during the day were pretty horrid, just lying cooped up

40:00 in these very hot trenches and the flies would come in hundreds. Very prized possession was a little bit of mosquito net which you could drop over your face during the day while you're lying there to keep the

flies off ya, it was worth gold. And then of course at night time

40:30 the ration truck, when it was possible, would come up from the company kitchens back behind and bring up the dixies of usually hot stew and water rations for the day. And they didn't wait around, they came up dropped the dixies and went for their life because the truck noises would carry.

41:00 But as the Germans were doing the same thing there was a sort of sanctuary for a while, and the first one that could get out was the safe one. There were some funny incidents, oh, boy, thought they were funny at the time. It was flat ground and it was night-time...

I'll just stop you there...

Tape 6

00:39 **Mike, I just wanted to pick up this tape talking as we were at the end of the last about some of the funny stories that came with bringing the meals and water up to the red and blue lines of an evening?**

I can't think of any funny ones.

01:00 **Could you talk maybe a bit about the procedure of brining up the food and the water?**

Yes, the food was cooked back at the company headquarters, or the company cookhouse, which was as near to the lines as possible but outside of the enemy's vision. And when things quietened down at

01:30 night-time the little service truck on which it was carried would come up somewhere behind the lines into as safe a position as possible. And the food was in those metal dixies, big pots like that, and there would be a ration party required to carry them from the truck up to the chaps on the front line and distribute them,

02:00 section by section, and they were broken down individually to the requirements of soldiers. And then later they were taken back to the truck and the noise of the truck was usually signal to the enemy forces to drop a few over, but it was a sort of gentlemen's agreement around the time

02:30 because if they dropped some on us we'd certainly drop some back on them too. So things usually went fairly quietly during the expected mealtime. But when the mealtime was over it would usually start up again.

Was water ever a problem?

Yes it was always a problem because we only saw rain once in Tobruk

03:00 and that was right near the end of the siege. All the water for what was about 35,000 at its peak, was drawn from wells which were just inside the sea line and they were filled by seepage by the sea, that's all. And the water pumps pumped it into the tankers and the tankers

03:30 eventually took it out and distributed it around the company levels, and most of the time we were confined to one water of bottle of water per day. And on a special occasion when we were in the blue line they might be able to drop us a drum of seawater and that would be the time you could have a wash all over with a drum of seawater, although it was salty. But water was always

04:00 one of the main problems. And then to make it worst of course the German bombers knew where the water points were because they had been Italian water points. And every now and again they'd come over and give them a shake up. They also did the bakehouse over that way. The bakehouses were done in mud ovens with a 44 gallon drum in them and various

04:30 rows of these. And you could always tell when the bombers landed close to the bread because the bread would drop straight down, there'd be no rise in it, just hard, so it was always referred to as bomb bread. But it had to be eaten, they couldn't turn around and make another lot.

But the water points and bakehouses were underground, is that right?

No, the bakehouses were on top of the ground.

The water points were?

05:00 The water points yeah, they were like a well, straight-out well, and they were just fed by infiltration from sea water. How they kept them going for that number of troops I just don't know. But it was wonderful thing and it was only once when we were on what was called the western sector, the Durnist [Derna?] sector, had a very rocky

05:30 gully area and we had these little dugouts which were virtually rock enclosures, and this rain came one night and it pelted down and all these holes filled up with water, everything we had of course was

soaking wet. But the

06:00 Germans and the Italians over the other side didn't do any better; they got soaking wet too. And in the morning it was a general truce either side trying to try and dry out blankets and gear and so forth. That was the only rain we ever had in Tobruk in 10 months.

Was sunburn and heat stroke a significant problem there?

No, we never got sunburn particularly,

06:30 and I don't remember any real problem with heat strokes. It was always hot but I think we had probably that much dirt on us and so forth that we didn't need any sunscreen. But also we weren't moving around very much during the day. You'd lay in your dugouts and you could get a bit of cover, probably a bit of shade from the side of the dugout, or that side of the dugout, and our work was mainly

07:00 at night.

How did you cope mentally with having to lie so still in your trenches all day in that heat? Were there particular things that you could think of that just took you away from that place?

No, I don't think so. You just tried to make your mind fairly blank and sleep when you could. Because we were working most of the night you

07:30 could get a few hours sleep in during the day and that helped pass the time away. And in between times you could try and clean yourself up a bit, try and clean your gear up. No, the days they seemed to pass reasonably well, except when there was any activity on -

08:00 that kept you awake and you forgot all about being tired and everything else.

Were you able to keep diaries or write letters or anything like that?

I wrote letters practically every day. I wrote a letter to my wife, I've got one here that she just produced for me, she kept it

08:30 there with a mate when she was younger.

And would you receive reasonably regular mail deliveries too?

No, no, it just depended on the light of the moon really when we could get destroyer supplies and mail up.

09:00 They couldn't operate in the moonlight nights because they left a trail in the water, etc., that the German bombers could pick up easily. So all the supplies had to come in in the dark of the moon and it was rather wonderful service they gave. The destroyers usually allowed about one

09:30 hour to come in drop their load, which was ammunition, food and everything else, pick up casualties on the other side of the ship and out of the harbour again. They had one hour in which to do it. It made some of our war favours look silly.

10:00 That's one letter. I must have had plenty of time on my hands when I wrote that, do you want to read?

Was that written from Tobruk?

From Tobruk, yeah.

Yes, I don't know if there's a particular section you think's important, if you would like to read whatever part of it you like?

Well I'll read some if you want me to go on there. Stamps are at present unavailable,

10:30 cables are not to be sent until stamps arrive, so I've postponed writing you this letter for some days, but have now decided to write it and post it whenever I can. I received a lovely parcel, number 11 of assorted sweets from you last night and I've nearly made myself sick on them all day. Thank you so much darling. I only wish you knew just how much

11:00 I appreciate them. I also received one from my mother the night before containing fruit salad, cream and cake. I don't think there was any need to say how much I enjoyed it, a change from the good old bully. Things are fairly much the same although the news

11:30 of the big pushed last night has worked wonders in the men and in the excitement and they have all forgotten how tired and dirty they are. I had no sooner finished writing you my last letter and boasting about our luck when it broke and we received a terrific shelling which lasted for hours and we got pretty badly knocked

12:00 about." Oh, Christ, must be getting bloody old. "I'll never forget those few nightmare hours expecting each second to have a shell land on top of me and blowing just, being just another case for the stretcher bearers. And afterwards I was a jack of all trades giving orders, disposing of wounded

12:30 and I was patching some, abusing others and I don't mind saying that one more pretty shaken lot. At times like this is when one sees the very soul of all men around him

13:00 cruelly exposed, you are their fear, you see their fears, their bravery, love for their friends, cowardice and shattered nerves. And when I was on the top of the trench you're watching to see what results the shelling is getting. You see a man squarely on the mouth of a dugout about

13:30 30 yards away and then the dust and smoke clears, you can see the roof blown in and you say to yourself... But out from the dust and fallen roof a man emerges

14:00 and starts cleaning sandbags and supports feverishly away. He whips out a field dressing and goes to work on something down below. Shells are falling all round and as he works the terror can be seen on his face,

14:30 but that doesn't prevent him doing what he can. Quickly he's finished and he's running along the shallow ammunition trench to me, five words explain the situation, "Jimmy's got it," he says, and I said, "Badly?" "The lot," he answers. He's covered with dust and terribly

15:00 shaken, he hardly seems to realise that he has escaped, Jimmy was his pal...a fine chap...shit, saving his army pay to get married after the war. I shove him into my dugout and quickly try to console him and give him a cigarette

15:30 but he's shaken, his hands, he's a machine gunner and will be no good for a day or two. I look up again and can see ammunition and fire in the pit with the dead man and a man races from the next dugout, picks up the blazing stuff and tosses it over the power of it. Luck is with him and he escapes unhurt. Another section

16:00 I can hear a man's screams getting less wild, more ammunition is alight and being thrown out, his friends are fixing him up, he's okay. I dropped down to miss another one which bursts near me, I put my head up as soon as the splinters are passed over, there's a rapidly increasing unearthly shriek. As my thoughts register quickly, "It's going to be almost on top of me," I drop

16:30 but I feel I'm too late, there was a terrific red flash in my eyes, ringing in my ears and lying there I can feel stuff falling all over me. I tried to rise for a second, I can't I think. There's too big a weight on me. I think I've been hit but I can't tell, I can't see a foot for dust and smoke. I realise that half the trench wall is on top of me and with an effort I shovelled it off. I'm surprised to find that I'm not

17:00 hurt, it only landed a few yards from me and for a while I don't mind admitting that I was pretty well shaken also. I told myself that I can't allow myself to be shaken at this moment and pull myself together with an effort. About 20 yards away I can see the stretcher bearer working on the chap until he can get him comparatively to safety. He's evidently been hit around the foot and the bearer has taken

17:30 his boot off and put it on the parapet, the parapet above here, and as he does the boot is wrenched out of his hand by a flying shell splinter and hurled yards away. There was a whistle and a heavy thud and he drops to the ground, the dud has landed against the parapet within a yard of him. And apart from a bath in dirt he's safe but slightly shaken, by the nearness of it

18:00 and the thought of what it would have done had it exploded. The shelling gradually diminishes in intensity and just on dark falls away almost completely. I make a quick survey of the damage that we'd escaped miraculously, quite a few have been hit but only one is dead. The wounded are cleared away as quickly as possible, equipment, rifles, guns, food, ammunition have been damaged or destroyed. A

18:30 quick check is made as they must be replaced tonight. I attend to that, by this time a few hours have past and I feel the need for a cigarette and a drop into my dugout. A man is now on the faint light and I can see a man huddled in terror in the corner of my dugout. "What's up?" I said. "Take me away sir, I can't stand this, take me away from all this murder." He's completely shaken

19:00 and soberly bitterly, he can't stand up unassisted. So I help him outside and call over a man to give him a hand away, he's a bad case of shellshock and needs a spell out of the line otherwise he may never recover. I think everything's almost settled when I hear a rifle shot about 20 yards away but I want that cigarette and take no notice. While I'm sitting smoking and cursing our hard luck and the enemy,

19:30 a young chap of 19 comes hobbling to the opening of my dugout. I then know the significance of the shot. "What made you do it?" I ask. The lad is broken up a fair bit but seemed to have regained his composure. "I don't know. I've been laying there next to him for hours listening to his moaning and all those shells and I don't know what came over me. I just felt I can't stand it any longer.

20:00 I feel sorry for him knowing that he could not have been normal." "Is it bad?" I ask. "No it's a clean wound. I put a dressing on it, it's okay." I started him over on his way back and the night was almost over. Jerries have arranged too well to the position so we decided, so next night we move the unexpected way, 300 yards closer to him and under cover of darkness quietly but working like demons we dig

20:30 in new position and by first light we've occupied the completely new and well-camouflaged position. And we silently laugh as each night he regularly gives our old position a bashing. I went back to my old

post last night for a jacket I left there but a shell had since landed squarely on it and I didn't bother to look for it thanking my lucky stars I came quietly back.

21:00 Well I just got carried away with the description when I started writing and I'm afraid that this is just five pages of assorted description which should never have come to you at all. But as the wogs say, "Inshallah," which is written, which is written, what is written is written or it is the will of God. Well the light has just about failed and there are a few things

21:30 I must do before it does. I'm still well but no so happy due because I haven't had any mail from you for nearly a month so when it does come I should get a week's reading out of it. Once again, thanks for all the sweets and send my greetings and all, best kisses.

22:00 That was written the 18th of June 41. What now?

22:30 **Does reading that take you back to when you wrote it?**

Hmm. Yes it's bloody silly. I never cried when I was a young fellow at all but I must be getting old.

How important was writing letters like that to your wife?

23:00 Very, well it was the only means of communication we had and we just used to look forward very much to getting mail. A lot of the mail was lost too at sea cause it came up with destroyer on the dark of the moon, and if a destroyer got sunk well the mail went down with it. Sometimes they were able to recover some of the mail,

23:30 bags might float up or something like that, but generally speaking we lost quite a lot of mail. I had a brother-in-law in the destroyers too, in that Tobruk run, we were pretty well represented.

Did actually writing about the experience help you to cope with it and to deal with what you

24:00 **had experienced?**

Well I don't think so, I don't think so, but at the time that's just what was all in your mind, there wasn't much else to occupy your mind with and sat down and wrote. Sometimes wrote too long a letters but the time was on your hands during the day time.

24:30 I don't think I ever wrote another letter as long as that or as detailed as that.

Were you concerned about worrying Rita, about talking too much about what was going on?

Well I never did after that one. I think that was the last letter I wrote describing anything in detail. And I realised

25:00 later that I shouldn't have read it at all, shouldn't have written it at all, but, oh, no these things happen and later on when it's gone it's too late to do anything about it.

It's quite a priceless message from the past, though, for you to be able to read it now and?

Hmm, I didn't know Rita still had it as a matter of fact,

25:30 she produced it this morning.

Thank you very much for sharing that with us. Can I ask you, was writing letters and receiving letters from home, was humour a way that you dealt

26:00 **with some of the more traumatic experiences?**

Yes it was, you tried to make it sound a bit funny sometimes rather than being a sad as it was. There wasn't much relaxation in any form other than writing a letter. You couldn't go out and play football or anything like that and it was just

26:30 one way of passing the time really and keeping in touch.

And you hadn't been married very long at all when you set off on your five year stint had you?

No, no, oh, no very newly married.

Were you concerned at the time about marrying, given that you were going to war,

27:00 **or did that make you more resolved to want to do it?**

No, I think it made me more resolved and I think it made Rita more resolved, too. We'd been going together for several years and we were pretty firmly committed to each other so we both thought it was the right and fair thing to do. I think her

27:30 letters, which were constant during the war, helped me a lot. She worked all the work with the [Australian] Comforts Fund too and it gave her a sense of satisfaction knowing that she was doing something for the war effort, making gifts and sending them away and writing stories and

28:00 letters and so forth.

In terms of communication within the camp at Tobruk, I heard there was a newspaper called the Tobruk Truth?

Yes.

Did you ever come across that?

Yes, yes, I had some copies somewhere. I just don't know where they are now.

28:30 I did keep some copies and it was a really excellent publication. It was usually only one foolscap sheet but it detailed the elements of the world news of the day and gave any little funny stories they could write up. It did a lot for the morale I think, to know that somebody

29:00 back in the base area was passing out information which the troops in the forward areas would never have got otherwise. See we didn't have any communication with the outside world, so we didn't know whether the Germans were in Istanbul or Cairo or where they might have been. But the paper always took, or the sheet always took a

29:30 bit of a swipe at Lord Haw Haw, who was the German commentator, and put on some funny little stories in the paper as well as giving a resumé of the important news to date. And it was a well received, well looked for paper. There weren't that many copies of it. A couple would come out to a company and they'd just be passed around.

30:00 It might be days before you'd read it, get your turn to read it, but they were good. I don't know where they might be. I saw them not very long ago.

As part of the 2/13th were you actively patrolling of an evening?

Oh, yes, oh, yes looking for enemy locations

30:30 or listening posts, things like that. I didn't go out every night of course. Patrols were rather difficult thing because the country was so flat and so featureless that it was very, very easy to get lost. And we had cases, I remember one German officer walked into our wire there one night and he was very

31:00 upset when somebody put a bayonet to his throat and brought him in. He said, "I've fought all the way down through France and across north of Africa and to be taken in such humiliating conditions." He was very upset about it. But you could get lost very, very easily and it

31:30 was a means of, well we used to work on the north star a lot, that was our guiding light. And sometimes we'd lay a line behind us as we went, but we worked it out on the map first, you'd take 200 paces that way, 200 paces that way and back and so forth and hoping you came back to your start position. But it was very, very difficult

32:00 and we used to lay all sorts of traps there for unwary Germans, I don't know how many we caught. But if we could find the signal wire we'd cut it and tie a grenade to the end of it and pin it either side then pull the pin. So that when the line would come along looking for it he'd pulled the grenade out. I don't know how many we ever caught but that was one typical joke we used to play on them.

32:30 **But the patrol must have been actually quite exciting or quite a nice break from the waiting for things to happen?**

Well it was in a way, but it was terribly nervy too because you never knew when you might run into an enemy patrol and you had to have your ears standing out like that all the time, and your eyes looking down at the ground to see if there was anything suspicious and try and pick up any

33:00 possible enemy movements that were around. It was nerve-racking business that, and the fact that you might get lost and finish up in the German lines instead of your own. It was very nerve-racking, and different to... Here, say, you'd have landmarks to go by, fallen trees or other things that just gave you a sense of direction, but there was nothing.

33:30 And of course as the night wore on of course the stars moved a bit too, that put the calculations out somewhat. We didn't have much in the way of other, you know site recordings or anything like that that they'd have these days. I've been reading about the Vietnam War. I never realised

34:00 until I read this rather detailed account how much had changed in the way of technology. The Yanks with their hundreds of planes and all the various instruments they had, not only in the planes but in ground forces for picking up all sorts of messages and things. It was just so far ahead of what we knew

34:30 in World War II that I was really, really surprised.

I have read that Australians effectively controlled that no-man's land between the two lines?

We did, we did, it was not very often that we met Germans. They were inclined to build up fairly strong defensive lines guarded

- 35:00 by a lot of tripwires out in front, and the tripwires were attached to mines there, jump up mines. And if you kicked one of those tripwires, and they were tins about as big as a jam tin, or not as wide as a jam tin, half a jam tin, they'd jump up out of the ground and explode about that height, and of course you coped it. But they tended to rely on them
- 35:30 to protect their area more than patrolling to see what we were doing. Now and again they'd find a listening, or sight a listening post out in no-man's land, but usually they got clear of it when any of our patrols were around. They didn't stop to fight, they'd just slide out in the dark
- 36:00 and probably report on our patrols. But one night we stumbled across one place where we knew they'd been camping, which was fairly close to our lines and in those days we, oh, our patrols carried the American Thompson submachine gun because
- 36:30 we didn't have any of our own. And the next night Lieutenant Pigney and two other chaps went out and occupied this before the Germans did - well it turned out they were Italians not Germans. When the Italians came up to occupy the post during the night, Pigney called out to surrender. One of them did
- 37:00 but the other fellow dropped, went to go into a firing position and Pigney nearly cut him in half with the Thompson. But that's the sort of thing that they did. The other fellow surrendered and he came back. But they did depend on that sort of thing more than patrolling.
- In your opinion, did that more**
- 37:30 **proactive approach of patrolling and being on the offensive when given the opportunity, did that give you a psychological advantage?**
- I think it did, I think it did. If we'd have just been prepared to sit back in our trenches listening all the time waiting for something which might occur, might not occur I think we might have got in a state of mental fear. And the fact that you went out patrolling
- 38:00 you had to keep your wits about you, you had to be alert all the time. I think it gave you a better feeling than sitting back just hoping that nothing would happen and just listening all the time. I don't think it achieved much physically but clashes were not very frequent. Only one clash that I remember was a bad one was when
- 38:30 the Poles were relieving us, when they came in from Egypt and our patrol went out, was out with a Pole to give him experience and show him the ground and etc., and they met a patrol from another company and challenged them, and this Pole was silly enough to answer
- 39:00 in Polish. And of course right at that stage three of them were killed.
- 39:30 **We might just stop there mate and change the tape.**

Tape 7

- 00:43 **Mike I wanted to talk, sorry we were talking about letter writing and patrols and some of these sort of things that were able to help**
- 01:00 **you deal with I guess the emotional pressure that you were put under in the situation. Did religion play an important role for yourself or for other guys in the front line?**
- Well it never did for me. I was never very religious. I don't say I was irreligious but it didn't have any real consequence with me. A lot of religion seemed to me to
- 01:30 be very, very shallow and seeking to convert somebody rather than doing good, and it just didn't go over with me at all. My mother and father were both, I suppose you'd say, reasonably religious. They used to go to church fairly frequently, but they tried to get me to communion
- 02:00 not to communion to... Oh, when you go in the Church of England - what is it? Something they go and teach you...
- Confirmation?**
- Confirmation, yeah, they go and teach you all about. Myself and my brother were in the lounge room of this
- 02:30 person's home when he was trying to teach about confirmation and he left and went and left his pipe on the table and I picked it up and I'm puffing away at it, I'm about 15, and I'm puffing away on his pipe, when he walked back so that was the finish of my confirmation lessons. I smoked till I was about 30, I think, then I gave it away then, cause

03:00 smoking was one way of passing the time in war time. We got them for free.

Did the padres play an important role for some of the other guys in your battalion?

Well unfortunately I don't think they did. Padres as such never came forward to a front line.

03:30 They were content to stay at battalion headquarters fairly well back and send their messages from there. But the Salvation Army, on the other hand, made every effort they could to keep the frontline troops supplied with what little, you know nice things they could. If they had extra cigarettes or lollies or something like that

04:00 they'd make every effort they could to distribute them. And they would actually come up to the front line to do it. And they were particularly good as far as mail was concerned, getting mail up and making sure that writing materials were available to the troops. But with the padres, we never saw that sort of

04:30 really trying for the welfare of the troops. I might have been one-eyed there because it might have happened in other battalions quite differently from what I saw in ours. Talking about the Salvation Army, when we were up on the Turkish border, border of Turkey and Syria,

05:00 we had a Salvation Army padre there and he turned out to be quite a drunk because wines, etc., were very cheap up there and you could get a bottle of wine for what would be about a shilling, something like that, poor quality stuff too. It was bitterly cold, blizzards used to come round Mount Qassab [?] up at

05:30 Turkey and sweep around and join us, just where we were on the Turkish border. And he started to like this wine and he was getting drunk pretty regularly, and he told us one day, he said, "I came from a Salvation Army father and mother and as far back as I can remember I was playing on the street corner

06:00 with the Salvation Army band. And I married a Salvation Army girl and I never ever knew any other life until I joined the army and I'm making the best of it now." But the Salvation Army back in Australia must have heard about him and he got withdrawn. The last I heard of him he was running a bike shop in Sydney. That was his experience,

06:30 but he was a good little bloke underneath it all.

So you lads were responsible for reclaiming one of God's men?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well there wasn't much to do there during the day except try and sit around braziers which were fed on coke, which you got nearby, and listen to the wind whistling around outside.

07:00 It was a pretty sort of a dull life there.

Can I just take you back to Tobruk, did you require medical attention during your time there? Did you fall ill or were you injured at any point?

Oh, I got a little bit of a cut up the arm there at one stage but I didn't even go to the Medical Officer with that shell splinter, got me up the arm. But that was the only time I ever got hurt and

07:30 no I don't think, oh, I might have gone for sore throat or something like that at the time, but I don't recall every having to go to the RAP for any medical attention. I was always pretty healthy.

Did the RAP system work effectively?

Very, very, yes,

08:00 well it did in our battalion anyhow we had a really good Medical Officer and a good staff. And they were there for any work that they were required for at all. Yes, they were excellent.

And they were positioned on the blue line, were they?

Yeah. They were, unless you really needed attention, you know

08:30 urgent attention you had to wait until night-time or something to get back to them but, cause they were too bulky to operate in the front line area. Each company had their own stretcher bearers and it was the stretcher bearers that did, putting the bandaids on and that sort of thing, anything than that you had to wait until night-time to get back to the RAP.

09:00 Would you be able to give an estimate of how much time you spent on the red line, blue line and back at HQ [Headquarters]?

Probably about, at a guess I'd say a third of the time was spent on the red line. Yes

09:30 I think that would be about it. Might have a bit more than that, might have say 10 days on the red line, 10 days back on the blue line and then probably three days back around the beach areas where you could have a swim and clean up a bit. But the changeovers were quite a problem because the changeovers had to be done at night, they had to be done quietly, so

10:00 a number of changeovers were restricted to as few as possible. Like I mean you couldn't go changing over every night or that sort of thing.

What sort of responsibilities would you have at company headquarters?

Mainly to see that communications were kept with any units in the company.

10:30 Seeing that food and rations were properly bought up and distributed and seeing ammunition requirements were kept up and that whatever fields of fire were necessary were adequately covered, that would be about it. And keep in touch of course with battalion headquarter as to what

11:00 had happened and what was possible.

I understand the big problem at company headquarters was the Stukas?

Oh, yes they were nasty little boys. But they got tamed after a while too. Early in the piece they used to come over in big formations and they would come down almost to their gun

11:30 barrels to drop their loads. But they got a lot of casualties too and after a while the gunners had a plan to pick out number five say, coming down, and all guns would concentrate on number five and when they got in number eight or number nine or something. And where they used to go zoom down like that and away. They'd come like

12:00 that and then like that and then like that and then sometimes they were just doing a little attempt at a drop and then on the way again. They lost a lot of planes. And after a while the troops got, didn't get used to them, but they knew not to take any great notice of the shrieks

12:30 because when they came down most of them were fitting with shrieker devices and they came down with this terrible shrieking sound which was intended to scare the hell out of everybody. And of course after a while it didn't. It had an effect at first. Then when they came down low of course they couldn't climb again quickly, they had to fly out over the defences and anything from the harbour out to

13:00 the perimeter was ready to have a lash at them as they were flying out. Quite a lot of them were damaged or brought down between the harbour and the outer perimeter. They gave it away after a while. I mean they lost a lot of planes and they didn't come over in anything like the numbers they had

13:30 in the early days. Is that still operating? I can tell a little story here?

Yes, yeah?

It mightn't go over well?

Oh, that's okay, mate.

I think coming back to the battalion headquarters one day in a truck with a fellow called Scattergood and he was a hard case fellow, he used to drive a truck and the planes came over and he says, "Look at them,

14:00 look at them, the three most useless things in the bloody world, a man's tits, the Pope's balls and an ack-ack [anti-aircraft] gun."

The ack-ack gunners, though, did establish quite a reputation for themselves didn't they in Tobruk?

Oh, yes, yes, they did. But a lot of them

14:30 missed too. He was a hard case this Scattergood.

Well they were after him, weren't they? The trucks, I'm sure, were the prime targets for those guys?

Yeah that's right, yeah any trucks of course threw a great plume of smoke up, dust up into the air.

Was there constant road repairs required as well?

No, oh, no they never repaired roads. The ground was so flat

15:00 if one road got chewed up, they were all just dust tracks. If one got chewed up you just moved side of it on a bit more firmer ground. There were a couple of paved roads right back in the town itself but not out in the outlying areas. It was a hard fine packed sandy

15:30 soil with clumps of camel bush growing all over, the camel bush probably about so big, and that held the soil together really. But after the trucks had been over it a few times the camel bush is broken away and just became this sandy ground, and then we drove onto another section. And eventually when the

16:00 winds came there'd be terrific dust storms in Tobruk because all the broken up surfaces would just lift, and you wouldn't see from here to the wall in them. Many cases of people getting lost in them. You just had nothing to orient yourself on at all in the middle of these dust storms. So when the dust storm came

on, you tried not to move around any more than was absolutely

16:30 necessary to.

You mentioned the waves of Stuka bombers eased up as the siege wore on and you had things like your patrols going on during that period, did you have a sense that you were getting on top over that period? Did you grow in confidence over the Germans at that time?

Oh, I think we felt that we could hold them off.

17:00 We'd been there so long and had held them off and we weren't believing any of the propaganda that was going on over the radio and so forth about the mighty German forces. And we did feel that we could hold them off, and towards the end of the siege we were pretty confident

17:30 and we were well armed at that stage too. We just believed that we could inflict sufficient casualties on them to knock them out. It got a bit more hectic toward the end of it when Rommel bought the paratroopers over from Crete to do the landing

18:00 on Tobruk, assisted by a armoured drive and infantry drive from the ground. It did look as though we might have a bit of trouble on our hands then, but fortunately the 8th Army pushed up from the Egyptian front. They had information of the intended move and they struck a few days before his move.

18:30 Well his move never came about in Tobruk because of that, but had it come we could have been in serious trouble because he was able to mass far greater forces on one sector than we could put there to oppose him. And I think he probably would have got through. But morale

19:00 was always good. I don't think there was every any time when the morale slipped and we were feeling, "Oh, were beaten, only a matter of time," that sort of thing.

What about that initial withdrawal into Tobruk, the German tanks hadn't been stopped at that point in the war?

No, no, they hadn't been.

Was that in the back of your mind?

Well it was really because we were

19:30 under equipped, very much under equipped and very much under strength of the German forces that were coming down. The British tanks that we had supporting us were no match for the German tanks and many of them were in a bad way with broken tracks and broken track links and that sort of thing, and they were mostly only mounting two pounder

20:00 guns where the Germans were mounting heavier guns and heavier tanks. And we really had no alternative but to fly before them. And I think it was probably bad on the Germans' part that they didn't do better than they did on the run back from Benghazi and

20:30 collared most of the forces. As it was, they stayed out in the outer ranks down toward the desert and seemed to be more content to try and herd us back between their forces and the sea. And we were able to get through before them and get back into Tobruk. But I think if they'd have shown a bit more drive and cut us off from getting back to Tobruk,

21:00 we'd have probably been all prisoners.

I read that you Australian boys won Rommel's very high respect. What did you lot think of Rommel and his Africa Corps?

Oh, we respected him. We respected him and he was there with them all the time too. He wasn't fighting the war from back in Berlin or somewhere.

21:30 No, he was right up there seeing what the job was. I think I mentioned in that one about Eddudha [?] that we nearly caught him that night, but he managed to get away. It could have changed the whole course of the African war if we'd caught him.

What did you think of, I don't know if your aware of

22:00 **Morshead's comments at the time that there would be no Dunkirk here, there'd be no surrender and no retreat, did you know about that at the time?**

Yes, yes, well that was something more or less expected for him to say. He wasn't going to say to the Germans news agents, "Yes, if you push us we'll surrender," something like that. Oh no, I had a lot of respect for Morshead. He did

22:30 work hard and I think he was a very good leader.

Did you have that sense though that there would be no evacuation by sea and that you had to hold this ground or you were done for?

Oh, yes, oh yes, that's right, that's what it was. Oh no, there was no thought of evacuation or anything like that, it was just, "We're here, we'll stay here."

And you did?

We did.

23:00 I understand relations between the Australian troops and the British troops were very good?

They were. Also the Scottish troops. We had Scottish troops in Tobruk too, the Northumberland Fusiliers, and they didn't speak our language

23:30 very well but they were good troops. And the English troops, particularly the 7th Armoured Div [Division], they had been in Abyssinia and through some misdemeanour, I don't know what it was, they were sentenced by the Army High Command to do some, few more years before they were called back to England. So this happened

24:00 just before the Tobruk siege, so they were a pretty, not sour lot, but they were a pretty vindictive lot. They were prepared to have a go at anything. And they were really excellent, and their artillery particularly was the Queen's Royal Horse Artillery. They were excellent. They'd shoot at anything we wanted them to at all.

24:30 And they were really efficient gunners with it. No, we got on very, very well with the English troops and the Scottish troops too. They were really the only powerful backup we had. And they never flinched at anything, they'd have a go at anything.

25:00 And they'd shoot with open sights when the Germans broke in at the El Adem Road and a lot of them got knocked, but they fired their guns right to the very muscles there.

25:30 And the Poles, did you have any personal experience with the Polish?

Yes, yes, when the Polish forces were coming in, or before they came in, there was a small contingent came to each company, two or three Poles, usually the OC [Officer Commanding] of the company and one or two of his supporters. And they stayed

26:00 with us for, oh, I think it was two or three weeks or something to get to know the country before their main forces came in. And we found them very good. They were laughing, happy sort of people and they're only interest was to get stuck into the Germans. They weren't worried about the Italians. They didn't want to be an Italian front, they just wanted

26:30 Germans. And they were good. They were with us when we were breaking out of Tobruk at the end there and we got on very well with them. We had some Czechoslovakians in there at one stage too, Indians

27:00 and, Indians were a bit of trouble because they had to have their lambs or whatever it was brought in for them alive and killed ceremoniously and so forth. They didn't work, they were taken out after a while. Try and think who else was there, Poles,

27:30 Czechs, Englishman, Scotsmen. Didn't have any Irish. We didn't have any New Zealanders right until the finish, they weren't actually in Tobruk, they came up with the forces from the frontier. They were a bit cocky too, they come up telling us how to run the war,

28:00 and they'd been there for about seven days at that stage, telling us how we should conduct ourself, didn't go over real well.

Being with so many different cultures must have really added to your sense that you were defending the world against the Germans?

Yes it probably did. The Germans were our main enemy

28:30 and the fact that so many, as you say, were united against the Germans, it did tend to make one feel that we were on the right side, that the Germans were on the wrong side. I don't know whether that was justified or not but we did feel that way.

And how did you feel about the poor old Italians?

Well I think most of them

29:00 were forced into it against their will. They were conscripted into it and I think that was a diminishing factor in their success. I remember herding a mob of Italians in there one day and one young fellow said, "Please don't tell them to hurry up, sir," he said. "We're all very tired." And I said, "Where the hell did you learn to speak English?" He said, "I've

29:30 been in Canada for a long time. I was a logger in Canada," and he said, "I came home to see my old mother," he said, "and they bunged me in the army." And I think he was typical of a lot of them.

The world's worst holiday?

Yes. Oh, when we were in Barce we had this prisoner of war camp, a couple of thousand in the prisoner of war camp

30:00 and we had very, very little trouble with them. We had a couple of them there, an armourer and his assistant, they did daily courses for our troops on their machineguns. They used to come up every day from the compound

30:30 and do this course on their machineguns, and we thought that was pretty good.

You did rely on quite a bit of their equipment didn't you, on that retreat, in particular in Tobruk?

Oh, yes, that's right. We were very dependent on it. That's why we were glad to have their assistance. But most of them were no trouble whatsoever, except when we first started the compound there was a

31:00 hell of a lot of prisoners coming in and we didn't have the right organisation for spreading the rations between them. Some were getting more than their share and others were getting less; that started a few arguments. Then it started to rain at one stage and we were wanting working parties to fill in holes on the aircraft

31:30 in the airways which had been bombed, and some of them weren't really happy about going out. And the guard told this party, I think there were five in a party, to come out and one fellow just put his arms like that and said, "Go to buggery," sort of thing. And this chap's just went down on one knee and put five rounds in them,

32:00 killed two of them straight off. Well we got the working party real quick. But that was the only real trouble we had.

Was there a policy for taking POWs [Prisoners of War] either in that push along North Africa or once you were doing patrols?

Oh, well we took prisoners wherever we possibly could. Oh yes, we never

32:30 sort of said, "Well your finished," and shot him down or anything like that. No, if anyone was prepared to surrender they were virtually safe, there's no questions about that. We'd have expected the same under similar circumstances.

Was there a procedure where people laid down and searched for weapons or anything like that?

No, no, we were a bit probably

33:00 impractical in that way because I don't think we believed that once a bloke surrendered that he was likely to go berserk again or anything like that, he just went in the compound and that was that. As a matter of fact when the Germans chased us out of Barce we just had to open the gates of the compound and leave the whole lot of the prisoners there, some thousands of prisoners. I don't know what the Germans did with them,

33:30 whether they put them back into their units or sent them back home or what they did with them.

What about, in Tobruk itself you mentioned the poor officer who wandered into the wires. Was there a compound?

Yes, there was a compound in Tobruk, yeah. We never had many in it but we had a compound there and the Germans and the Italians would not mix with each other in the compound. Germans stayed one end and they made sure the Italians stayed that

34:00 end.

Quite a contrast to how you were getting on with the other nationalities?

Oh, yes, quite a contrast, no they didn't want to have anything to do with them. Oh, there pretty hardy lot the Germans. I think they thought they were going to win the war hands down and they could look down on everybody else.

I did hear that some Italians worked in the hospitals

34:30 **as nursing aides in Tobruk. Did you hear anything about that?**

I didn't, but I was only ever in the hospital once and that was on a visit. Went to see a CO when he got bumped in the head. I don't know, it's quite possible there could have been.

35:00 But when we were in Barce of course the Italian town was still there, and we got along quite all right with the Italian population. They had, oh, I don't know, probably 300 or 400 Italians in the town. It had been set up by Mussolini as a model

35:30 colonisation area of Libya. It was quite a nice fertile little valley, just this one particular little valley and

a nice clean white sort of town with palm trees and so forth, very pleasant little town. And that's where we set up the prisoner of war camp. But they

36:00 never worried us. The Libyans were the only ones that gave us any trouble, they were pretty hardy, shifty sort of characters. When we had to evacuate Barce they were more or less running wild, looting, grabbing everything they could get their hands on. But the Italians didn't, probably thought later they should have.

36:30 **How far behind the 6th Div were you on that push across North Africa?**

Oh, virtually we crossed them as they were coming out of Tobruk, we were taking over. There wasn't much time between

37:00 the two of us. Like I don't think there was any time when there was a period when there were no troops in Tobruk.

In the initial push beyond Tobruk, when the 6th Div got across to Benghazi, were you, did you face any direct conflict or were you simply having prisoners and the like fed back through and

37:30 **cleaning up behind the 6th Div?**

That's right, that's all it was. It wasn't until we got up to Beda Fomm and started to get worried about the German forces coming down from Tunisia that things started to get really serious and we had to take up defensive positions along the ridges, down the other side of Benghazi. But

38:00 we didn't have anything like the forces there that could have stopped the Germans. After the first initial fight we just had to get out as quick as we could. I think if the Germans had of shown a bit more activity they could have cut us off completely, but they let us out of the bag.

Did you feel like you were ridding North Africa of the

38:30 **Germans? I mean it was quite a smooth push westward, wasn't it?**

Oh yes, oh yes, we felt quite cocky then we weren't coming up against much opposition at all. "Yes, we'll clean this out quick smart." But it was a bit different stories when herds of tanks come flying along and you're only got rifles to attack them with. You've got to turn out and go then. So they

39:00 had the superior weapons and superior movement to us at the time and it took the British forces a long time to build up because they'd had such a belting at Dunkirk and in France that they just didn't have the necessary resources to reinforce the troops that we would have liked to have. Whereas the

39:30 Germans came out of the French fighting with all their equipment still intact, well most of it anyhow. With Britain it was a different story.

Mike we might just stop there and swap tapes...

Tape 8

00:45 **Just before we start talking about the evacuation of the Australians, I just wanted to cover some of the medical problems that were faced. I realised that you remained pretty healthy**

01:00 **through the experience, but was dysentery a problem for many of the troops?**

It was a problem we had to be aware of all the time, had to take all sensible precautions you could to avoid dysentery. And a lot of it came from the trenches on the other side. When Tobruk was freed eventually we went out and had a look at the German and Italian positions

01:30 and they just had trench and a bit of an inlet cut into the side of a trench with a pole across it, and shit was that high in it. And the flies were there in millions and even some dead bodies within their minefields not cleared away, just there rotted away. And it was there

02:00 that we decided that most of dysentery was coming from because we did really endeavour on our side to keep away all possible causes of dysentery but we still got it. And that's where the flies were coming from. When the wind was in the right direction, we got the flies.

What about other sores

02:30 **from the fleas and things like that? Was there trouble with healing sores?**

Ah, rats were one of the problems too, rats. They used to find their way into places between sandbags and it was when we were out passing the time, if you're in a rear position to just lay back in

03:00 the dugout, put a bit of a biscuit up on the sandbag, and wait for the rat to come out, and shoot him. Or

sophisticated, you put an electric detonator just under the biscuit and when the rat came out you popped him with the electric detonator. That was one way of passing the time.

03:30 **Were ammunition supplies then not a major concern?**

No, no, we always had plenty of ammunition. I remember when, back in the rear position one day I knocked a few rats off like this with the detonator and the battalion sergeant major came across to see what the noise was. He was greatly taken with this idea

04:00 of knocking the rats off, so I gave him a few detonators and away he went. He came back later with blood streaming off his face everywhere. The silly coot, he hooked the detonator up the wrong way and blew himself up.

I think that's called karma mate, rat's revenge?

04:30 Yeah rat's revenge it was.

Now can I ask you about hearing the news that the Australian troops were to be withdrawn, I think it came in September?

Yeah.

How was the news received?

Oh, we were very happy about it. The Poles were coming in to relieve us and all the battalions were

05:00 evacuated and replaced by Polish or Scottish troops and English troops. But the Black Watch [famous Scottish regiment] was one of them, incidentally. And we were the last ones to go out.

Just before you describe what happened to your battalion, could you explain to me what was involved in the procedure to evacuate the troops? It must have been quite an operation to perform?

Oh yes, it was, and it

05:30 was done very, very expertly. The troops could only be taken out in the dark of night of course when there was no moon. And there was an old sunken Italian ship, or partly sunken, and it was used as a landing barge. And the troops that were going out went into that and sat round in the hulls of the ship and so forth until a destroyer

06:00 came alongside, and they just went straight into the destroyer and away she went again. But they got a lot of them out. I don't think there was a casualty in getting the whole of the garrison out like that. It took, oh, probably month or more to get them out. But when our turn came, were sitting down in the ship waiting and the ship we were

06:30 to go out on got sunk, so they said, "Sorry boys, you go back in the line." So we were there for another two months, three months, yeah.

Was it Her [His at this stage] Majesty's Ship Latona, was it?

I think it was, yeah, I think it was.

Was she sunk within earshot or eyeshot?

No, no, we only got the word later. Somebody came and told us, "Your ship's been sunk. Goodbye. Away you go again."

Tell me how did

07:00 **the boys react to that?**

Well they weren't terribly pleasantly excited about it but they took it quite calmly, "Oh, bugger it," you know, "Back again." They were pretty good about it all. But we didn't think we were going to have much trouble. We thought, "Oh well, go back to the line and things will be quiet until we can get relieved again, probably next moon."

07:30 And we were put back in one of the quieter sectors on the rocky front, on the Derna side, and we didn't have much trouble there until the rain came - that gave us a bit of trouble. But we did lose a few men in the patrol one

08:00 night, but most of the time it was long range shelling. We'd get a fair range of shelling during the day time and it was pretty unnerving because it was all rock, hard rock, and the shells burst right on the top of the rock. They didn't dig in at all so every splinter that came off the rocks travelled somewhere

08:30 on the surface. But they seemed to be more intent on shelling us from a long distance to keep us on our side of the border. And then we stayed there for, oh, some little while. We actually we got a rum ration. The Poles took pity on us, and I don't know how they arranged it but we used to get a rum ration, what 1/64th

- 09:00 of a gallon I think, 1/64th of a gallon per man per day. And that was more rum than we could sensibly use, too, because quite a few of the chaps didn't drink at all and you couldn't go dispensing four or five tots of rum to those that did like it, so we finished up building up a bit of a reserve on rum before we were moved out of that area.
- 09:30 But then when the push from the front came we had to come out of that area and join up with the forces pushing out from Tobruk to join up.

Was it strange to be within the camp now being run by the British and the Poles?

No, no, I think it was

- 10:00 main... I think to a certain extent they felt sorry for us because we'd been there so long, and we got special treatment.

Did things stay pretty much the same? Were the procedures the same?

Yes, yes.

Direct handover?

Wasn't much change at all, no we got along very well with them. We used to get bits of extras on the rations

- 10:30 at time that we hadn't got before. Whether the transporting was better or not I don't know but we did get more or less special treatment.

Can you whip me through the day your battalion marched out of the road on, along the road out of Tobruk, to be the only Australian battalion to enter and leave via that road?

Oh, when we were leaving

- 11:00 unfortunately my company officer, the bloke who looked after the papers and roll states and all that sort of stuff, as he got to the truck he remembered he'd left some book he wanted back in the dugout. So

- 11:30 he jumped out to get it and landed fair on top of a mine, blew his leg off, and that was a poor start to exit from there. But we were in trucks and the intelligence officer, John Martin, organised we went straight across the desert to what was known as a break in the frontier wire, down in Egypt. And

- 12:00 he did an excellent job of navigation right across and we came straight out on that break in the wire. And we went from there to the railhead in Egypt. The army engineers had been pushing the railhead out from Cairo towards the border as fast as they could. They were just dropping the lines and running a train on them. And we joined it there.

- 12:30 They were all cattle trucks. We just crammed into these cattle trucks and away we went. They eventually took us, with a change of trains, back to Palestine, and things were nice and quiet and happy there.

Was there a strong sense of pride amongst the lads that were leaving?

Yes, yes, I think there was. But

- 13:00 later on when we'd settled down in Palestine I went to see a show in Cairo and it was a show called Desert Victory, and I realised then how some of these fakes are made. It portrayed, or it was suppose to portray, the actions of the British and the Australian forces in busting out of Tobruk and how they did it. And I can

- 13:30 recall practically every sequence that was in that and some of them were absolutely out of order completely for what they were suppose to be. There was one opened up with the shelling of the German positions ready for the breakout and I knew damn well that that was a shelling had occurred on my company front from the German side because I could identify

- 14:00 things that were in it. And other things, blazing tanks, setting these German tanks on fire. And what happened was the German recovery of tanks were much better than ours and they had recovery tanks which could come in when things were reasonable, hook onto a tank and pull it back out with a,

- 14:30 you know, no matter how badly the damage and it could go back to their workshops and get repaired. Whereas ours just had to pour a bit of petrol into them and set them alight and burn them. And this picture showed these burning tanks, supposedly German tanks that had been set alight by our gunners and so forth, and they were our own tanks being destroyed. And the whole picture was just full of fakes like that. I thought, "By hell, it will be a long time

- 15:00 before I believe some of the things I see in pictures now."

So this was actual film footage shot on the front line?

Oh, yes, yes.

So you were mentioning earlier that war correspondents you'd rarely see, but you'd see men with film cameras?

Oh no, oh, this was after everything had quietened down.

What about the shelling, you were saying, of your company?

Oh well, that was recorded by somebody. I don't know who. Whether it was a war correspondent or not. But I never saw one there.

15:30 But I could place the shelling that occurred and it showed tanks in all sorts of actions and supposedly attacking German positions and so forth. But there was a planned attack in, I think it was May, which never came off. But there was a lot of planning and practising down in the rear areas with these tanks.

16:00 And that was supposedly the push out from Tobruk. It was actually tanks practising about six months before, back in the back areas, all sorts of things like that.

So by the time you'd returned to Palestine and come down to Cairo, was there already a sense of the myth of the siege of Tobruk having emerged? Were you aware that it would, that there was a myth around it?

No, no, don't think so,

16:30 we just felt, "Well we got out of that and we were lucky to get out of it," sort of thing. That things worked in our favour whereas they could have very easily worked in our disfavour.

Were you aware of your nicknames at that stage as the Rats of Tobruk?

Oh yes, oh, yes Lord Haw Haw in his nightly broadcasts he refereed to the Rats of Tobruk

17:00 always, yeah.

Was that a source of pride at the time?

No, I don't think it was a source of pride. We just accepted it and more or less sneered back at Lord Haw Haw the way he was sneering at us. And the Rats of Tobruk, I don't know whether they were conjoined or not but there was quite a few rats in the area there,

17:30 and some were jerboas, jerboa rats which lived mostly in the open, but there was a lot of grey rats too, when they got the opportunity, lived in dugouts or whatever they could get a bit of food. And whether that had any effect on him calling us the rats, he aligned us with these

18:00 other rats that were in Tobruk or whether he just meant we were straight out rats, so I don't know, but the name stuck.

Was it important in a way to have personalities like Hitler and Lord Haw Haw as you say to give the enemy an identity? It's always that these strangers, these people that you didn't know anything about that you were shooting at, did you, when you thought of the

18:30 **enemy did you think of the personalities like Rommel and?**

No, no, I don't think that ever occurred to us, Simon [interviewer]. They were just the enemy and you took what chance you could to hit them, but you weren't thinking when you did, "Well, this is one for Rommel or for Lord Haw Haw," or somebody else, no. If Hitler had appeared it would have been a different matter of course.

19:00 **How shortly then after your withdrawal from Tobruk did you return to Palestine and go on R&R [Rest and Recreation]?**

Oh, I'd say, I don't remember for sure but I think it was probably about three weeks,

19:30 four weeks, something like that. And it was spaced out over the battalion of course, didn't all go at once, went in lots. Some went to Tel Aviv, some to Cairo, some went down the Nile down to the old historic Nile, places around Khartoum and those places. But...

20:00 **Can you tell me about your leave and what you got up to?**

Well I didn't get up to anything really. Irwin Pinkney and myself, Irwin was a friend of mine, we stayed at Sheppard's Hotel and we went and saw this Desert Victory, roamed around the bazaars and went out to the pyramids and climbed the pyramids and climbed inside the pyramids.

20:30 Went out to a date plantation and had a look at that. Went for a drive down to Alexandria. And that was about our effort. We didn't do anything spectacular at all.

Did you have a sense of breaking from the war effort or was it still constantly on your mind that you were?

21:00 Oh, I think we just felt free that we could move around again without being alert all the time or being

constantly on watch and listening and seeing what was happening out in front of you all the time. No, I think we just went there to have a look at Cairo and have a look at as much of Egypt, or we did

- 21:30 do a trip up the Nile in one of their boats, just to see what we could of Cairo and Egypt, see the thieving mobs that were there.

Do you remember your first shower out of Tobruk?

No, I can't place it really, I should,

- 22:00 cause we came out of those cattle trucks pretty dirty and grubby. No I can't, but I can remember showering in Shepheard's Hotel - nice long hot shower and soaked myself in it. But that was quite some time after we came out of Tobruk.

What about your first beer?

Yes

- 22:30 well they had beer on for us when we got back to Palestine. What was it? Lion beer in Palestine? Lion beer and some other beer. But I didn't drink much at the time either, a small bottle of beer and I'd had enough.

- 23:00 I can't remember the name of the other beer but it was quite a popular Palestine beer. I liked the grapefruit best, they had big grapefruit orchards near where we were camped and they were beautiful grapefruit. And after not having any fresh fruit for a long time I can remember more or less

- 23:30 gorging myself on these grapefruit. You could get a hat full of grapefruit for a pair of dirty socks.

What had you heard of the Allied version of Syria, the Allied push into Syria? Did you hear much news about that?

We did not get much news, we just knew it had happened. But

- 24:00 when we were up in Syria later we heard more about it, got to know more about it. But at the time we didn't get much information on it, cause all the news we got was either through the Tobruk Truth or on the radios, which we didn't have radios in the trenches of course. We relied on the Tobruk Truth and it was

- 24:30 usually a very abbreviated version of what had happened because they just couldn't produce full size newspapers. And we just had to try and read between the lines and think what was happening there.

Were you confused about the politics and the way the Vichy French and the Germans and Syrian connections were?

Yes, yes, we sort of never knew whose side was

- 25:00 going to have who on it. We were always a bit wary about who our Allies might be. Today they might be one side and tomorrow they might be the other side.

But Syria itself was quite safe at the time when the battalion moved up?

Yes, yes quite safe. We went up

- 25:30 to a place called Latakia on the Turkish border and it was quite safe. We were camped in a olive grove there. And we never had any trouble with the locals. We could buy quite a lot of things from them that were luxury to us then. Little nuts,

- 26:00 oh God, I can't remember the name now, I like them too, little nuts with a slightly hard shell on them and split down the middle.

Pistachios?

Pistachios yes, oh, we could buy them very, very cheaply - a tin of condensed milk or something and we could get a whole bag full of pistachios. Things like that were a luxury to us.

- 26:30 **Did you know what you were, what the purpose of the battalion being there was? Did you have an expected assault that was likely to come?**

Yes, yes, there was an expected German paratrooper drop and I think the reason behind it was that Syria had been taken by the Allies and was then under Allied control. The Germans'

- 27:00 force needed it for the push down to the Suez Canal to close off the Eastern Mediterranean. And I think they were prepared to go to a fair length to retake it. But it turned out that apparently didn't have the forces necessary to do the job. At one stage we were issued with shotguns with a big shot in them,

- 27:30 about as big as a little fingernail, to catch the paratroopers, but we never had to use them. But it was a cold, miserable area up there. But funny part was little kids around the place could speak about five

languages cause they were in a mixed area, and they could speak Turkish,

28:00 French or English, Egyptian. Only little kids about that high and they could talk anything.

You must have heard of the success of the German paratroopers in Greece and Crete?

Oh yes, oh yes we did.

Was there an anxiety about the possible use of them against you?

Yes, well they actually brought a battalion of paratroopers over

28:30 to Tobruk for the invasion and they were operating, or they were in camp just outside the area where we broke out of. And they were considered to be the surefire thing to take Tobruk. And actually the Black Watch struck them when they made their

29:00 attack outside Tobruk. But they didn't turn out to be so wonderful, they were beaten fairly easily. We followed the Black Watch and we managed to build up a few decent supplies that they had, some of their equipment and some of their fruits. They had cases and cases of things like dried apples and dried apricots and all the sort of luxuries

29:30 we hadn't heard of for months and months - we gorged ourselves on them. But they were taken back out. I don't know what happened eventually, but they didn't take any part in.

The fellows had been caught quite dramatically by surprise at Crete by paratroopers, it was a new way of using troops?

30:00 Yes, yes,

Were any specific training guidelines developed for you by the time, you were in Syria expecting paratroopers, were you taught how to deal with that sort of assault?

No, it was just more or less left to the units themselves to devise ways of dealing with the paratroopers. The only suggestion at the time, the main suggestion was turn the Bren guns,

30:30 try and shoot the plane down first if it was low enough and then bore it into any paratroopers that you could. But there was no specific tactic developed at all, I think it was just too new to get through the army headquarters strategists.

So then was

31:00 **that a nervous period?**

No, no, we didn't really believe it was going to happen. We made precautions for it and did what we could against it, but it didn't seem to be an immediate enough threat for it to get all hotted up about it. And as I said, it never came to light anyhow. But I think

31:30 probably at that stage the German forces were too preoccupied elsewhere to be able to think of running a parachute attack on that area.

In terms of your equipment, you'd come out of the desert in Tobruk and into, was it winter in the Syrian-Turkish border?

Yeah, yeah.

Were you provided with extra

32:00 **facilities to cope with that winter?**

Oh, we got our greatcoats back in Palestine, they were left in there when we went up and we got them back. And apart from that we didn't have much. We used to make braziers out of petrol cans and things like that and fill them up with coke that we could buy from the local Syrians there, and sit around them most of

32:30 the day with the coke fire burning and try and heat the huts up a bit. But then a lot of us were in tents too, it was only the cookhouse and so forth that had these huts. And most of us were in tents and then one night we got quite a gale came round this Mount Qassab, snow and ice and everything else

33:00 and blew the damn tents down. We had about six inches of mud icing, mud around the place, tents down. It wasn't a very happy interval at all.

And was it from your position in the Syrian-Turkish

33:30 **border that you were called out to return to Australia as a trainer?**

Yeah, yeah. Yes at that stage I had to make my own way down to the Suez because there was no sort of official stuff going down. And I can remember I called into Haifa and I couldn't get through to the French

- 34:00 authorities in Haifa, what it was all about. And I reckon they put me on a ship to Corsica, I think it was. I finally got through, I finally understood what they were talking about and I said, "No I'm not going to Corsica. I want to go to Australia." Anyhow it got down the Suez and
- 34:30 then we joined others there and we went on this meat ship called the Dorset Star. It was a New Zealand ship and it had been a meat ship and all they did was clean out the hulls that had been carrying the meat, put some stretchers in it, hammocks at least, say, "Well there you are. Ta-ta and away you go."
- 35:00 Anyhow we got half way across the Indian Ocean and got word that there was a Japanese sub [submarine] just in front of us and we turned and went south, right down to the Antarctic, and we were there for some days. And this old ship, the toilets were temporarily built along the decking, along the scuppers, and the only shower was a four inch
- 35:30 salt water hose that came down on the deck. And you stood under that and turned it on and she come down whoosh and nearly blew you overboard. Anyhow, coming up from down the Antarctic back up towards Fremantle the toilets got washed overboard - fortunately there was nobody in them at the time. And we got back to Fremantle and she was loaded with quite a bit
- 36:00 of ammunition for the Australian forces back home here, battling the Japs. And there was something like 200 tons of gun cotton and quite a lot of artillery stuff and so forth in the hulls, which we didn't know about when we boarded, but there wasn't much we could have done about it. And when we got back to Fremantle the wharf labourers had a strike; they wouldn't unload it.
- 36:30 Anyhow, we had about 200 blokes on board and we chased the wharf labourers, got them right off the wharf and told them to go to buggery, and they got quick. And our troops unloaded the whole things themselves, the troops that were on it, unloaded it onto the wharf and I don't know what happened about it after that. But we joined another ship and came around to Adelaide, from Adelaide
- 37:00 the army was at it's best in Australia then. There were two machine gun officers from the machinegun battalion from Townsville, and when we disembarked at Adelaide the movement control officer said, "Oh yes, you're to report to Townsville straight away," so they put them on the train and sent them to Townsville. When they got to Townsville, the Townsville officer said, "No, you're not here
- 37:30 at all. You go back to Adelaide." And it took the train about two days then to get from Adelaide to Townsville. So they went back to Adelaide, "No you should be back at Townsville," so they went back to Townsville again. Talk about army bureaucracy! It was great! I don't know what happened to them after that.

Mike, I just want to get an idea of whether you were told why you were coming back to Australia? Didn't you have to leave your battalion?

Yes,

- 38:00 only on loan, that was to bring, try and bring moderner wartime practices back to the training battalions here because they were still training troops with World War I officers and so forth and still training for a World War I war.
- 38:30 Whereas we were supposed to be a bit more modern and were able to use explosives and all that sort of stuff. And when I got back to Australia I found that there was an entrenched opposition to making any great changes in the training establishments here. So I paraded myself before the brigadier who was in charge
- 39:00 of the camp first, told him what I wanted. Oh, I went first to the battalion commander. He couldn't do anything about it so I said, "Right, parade me to the brigadier." So I went before him and told him what was wanted and what I thought was wanted and what I thought our rights were, and oh no, he couldn't do anything about it either. So I sat down then and I wrote to the Minister of the Army, who was Forde at the time, and he took
- 39:30 me very seriously. But the only thing was that someone along the line threatened me with a court martial for going over the head of the brigadier. But Ford saw some sense in it and within a matter of a couple of weeks we got a whole trainload of stuff at Dubbo - mines and explosives and all sorts of stuff -
- 40:00 everything I'd asked for.

The request of a captain to the minister?

Yeah. So we did some quite serious training then at the Dubbo camp with explosives and so forth. We never had any casualties there out at Dubbo. I think they were frightened at the camp that half the people were going to get blown up.

I'm sorry Mike, I'm just going to cut you off there. We're right on the end of this tape.

- 40:30 **We'll pick up...**

Tape 9

00:51 **So Mike can you share with us the promotion that you got at Tobruk?**

Well

01:00 in the early days of Tobruk I was the Officer in Charge of 14 Platoon of C Company and I had been with C Company from the time the battalion was formed. And during sometimes in Tobruk, I just can't remember when it was, I was posted over as Second in Command of A Company. And I served

01:30 with that company commander for probably about two months I would guess. And then the company commander of B Company had earlier been the adjutant of the battalion. He was a Duntroon graduate and considered himself pretty classy and above the ordinary hoi polloi

02:00 of the soldiers. And he was over as OC of B Company but he complained bitterly because, not to the CO but to everybody else around him, that he didn't go to Duntroon to get shot at. He wanted to go back to Duntroon. He wanted to live the life of Duntroon graduate sort of thing. So the CO very smartly heard of this and turfed him

02:30 back to division quick smart. Unfortunately he got a job then as gas officer class three at divisional headquarters, when there was no gas being used, not likely to be used. And later on he became Director of Tactics at Duntroon Military College. Anyhow, because he'd failed the grade I got

03:00 posted across as OC B Company and got my captaincy out of it. That was that.

Were you disappointed not being captain of C Company where you'd spent so much time?

No, no, the present CO that had been there all along, a chap called Harry Chiltern, he was an excellent company commander,

03:30 a really good fellow, and he was still there. I wouldn't have liked to take over from him at all. I don't know whether you knew them but that time Chiltern's fruit markets were in a pretty big way in Sydney and before the war Harry used to do a fair bit of travelling

04:00 overseas in connection with his fruit market business. Actually it was his father's at that time.

How did your role or job change from that of a lieutenant to that of a captain?

Oh, well it was more directional and organisation as a captain rather than

04:30 just a leader of the platoon troops. In a platoon, the Platoon Commander was the 'Johnny on the spot' for whatever tactics were to be developed and seeing that his troops were being held together properly and did the job they were suppose to do. Whereas a company commander was more or less coordinating the work to be done by the three different platoons of the

05:00 company. He didn't do actually the physical work. He did the organisational work and directions for anything he thought was required in the place for the safety and wellbeing of everybody.

Excellent. Now a couple of time you've shared with us how in Syria you almost caught Rommel.

05:30 **What was the circumstances surrounding that?**

Well it wasn't in Syria, it was, I've given the notes there that give the circumstances around it. But when the German forces were caught between the 8th Army pushing up from the frontier and the Tobruk forces pushing out from the Tobruk line, Rommel's team were caught

06:00 between the two on what was called the Bypass Road. That was a road runs around Tobruk built by the Germans after Tobruk was holding out. And the night we attacked them

06:30 it was thought that, well prisoners told us that Rommel had been there directing the forces that particular night, but he got away. And in the morning we found one staff car shot up pretty badly by our troops and bloodstains and so forth in the

07:00 car, but prisoners told us that Rommel had been there. Whether he was in that car or not we don't know, but he got away. Had we got him it might have changed the course of the war. We did get 160, I think it was, prisoners out of it, and killed quite a few. But things were a bit dicey. In those days we had a couple

07:30 of tanks operating with us, our own tanks, and it was the first time, I believe, had ever operated at night with infantry. And I think the tank crews must have been jittery because as we went in the tanks turned on us, chap on either side of me was killed and fortunately I managed to get up to the tank and belt in on the side with the rifle butt, managed to get through to them

08:00 that we weren't Germans. And they went, but they got lost altogether in the darkness and the light and

the confusion. And prior to that there had been, I think it was seven different German tanks, were sitting across in front of the infantry to protect them while they dug in and consolidated. And that's

08:30 why we had the tanks there. Our CO would not go into the attack until we got tank support and chased these other tanks out of the way, otherwise it would have just been suicide. And I think in the dark they sort of got lost and had our troops and thought, "Oh, well this is it," and so forth and swung the guns on them. But however by this time our

09:00 artillery had been shelling this German position heavily and the tanks, German tanks, withdrew. And at that stage we went in, but I think that's probably when the tanks got confused because their night vision is practically hopeless and they didn't know what was happening around. I suppose they felt endangered, fired off a few bursts,

09:30 that sort of thing. Got two of our chaps unfortunately.

Did they hit you on the flank or on the rear?

They were just ahead of us like that and turned down on the flank, yeah. It was a dark night and one of those accidents that happen without any substantial reason really.

10:00 That night we caught two English officers back, they were in the German hands and we recaptured them. One was Lieutenant Austin, he was the son of Austin the car manufacturers, and he'd been in an antitank unit and he was telling us later the tanks just came over the hill,

10:30 boom, boom, boom, knocked out his three guns in short time and he got taken prisoner. And another chap, he was a captain, can't remember his name at the moment, it will come back to me later, he was from the Northumberland Regiment and he got captured too. And he was telling us later they got their hands up in the air and no sooner they had their hands up in the air

11:00 when the Australians were attacking and they were deprived of all their cigarettes and tobacco they had. But this Austin, he was a typical cartoon Englishman, slim bloke with a little moustache and so forth, and he was carrying submachine gun and he stayed with us for a couple of days while we were in that particular area

11:30 after the attack. And then it looked as though we were in for another serious attack by German forces coming at us across the plains and he then said to me, "Hey, say, old man, can you show me how to work this bloody thing?" He had the damn thing for two days. He was a really, I think he only got his

12:00 lieutenantancy because he was the son of Austin. Captain Clarke, yeah, he was from the Northumberland Fusiliers. He was a good officer. Anyhow we got, the three of us got into this little stone sanger [fortification] and we were determined, and we knew that if the Germans came across we had no chance of stopping them,

12:30 that we just didn't have the forces there to do it. And we thought, "Well the only thing we can do is get into the sanger, cover the approaches and if anybody's silly enough to stick his head out of the tank to have a look around we can get him." But fortunately they didn't come our way, they turned and went over to the New Zealanders and the battle took on over there.

Well, after all, the New Zealanders, did think that they could tell

13:00 **you what to do at Tobruk?**

Yes, oh, yes, they learnt pretty quickly, I think.

So, Simon had taken us up to the point of training, you'd got all that equipment that you asked for from the Defence Minister?

Yes.

What happened in respect to training the men and new schemes that you put in?

Well one of the things we did train them for was

13:30 proper use of cover and effective supporting fire from other units and then moving when other units had suppressed what opposition there was. And also the use of explosives, we did a lot of work with explosives and never had an accident with it either. And

14:00 well it was half and half. At that stage the troops hadn't come back from the Middle East and we weren't sure that they would, but yet they were needed in the [Pacific] Islands because the Japs were threatening there. So what we were trying to do was combine training such as could be used successfully under desert conditions and also be useful under jungle conditions.

14:30 So, and after sometime there, some three months or something I think it was, I went to the Jungle Training Centre at Tenterfield and I trained troops there for some time. But there we were getting in first intake troops, young fellows mostly about 18,

15:00 and the first day they came into camp the dentist got them and pulled half their teeth out and the doctor

got and shoved needles into them everywhere. The poor little coots. They weren't much good for a few days. Not only that they were only issued with jungle clothing and it was the middle of winter in Tenterfield, so you can imagine how happy these poor kids were. They'd get out on parade in the morning and you couldn't

15:30 help feeling very, very sorry for them. They could just crawl out from under the blankets and sick and sore and sorry. Anyhow after they got over that, we did train hard and all those troops went off to join units in New Guinea at the time. And I spent about, oh, I think about three months there. I was getting a bit frustrated with myself.

16:00 I applied to go back to my unit, which I did, and joined them for the Finschhafen show. From there on I was back with the unit for the Finschhafen and Borneo operations.

Before we get to that, can I just ask in respect to getting the supplies how the CO responded to you when a court martial had been mentioned before the supplies come?

Oh, he seemed to take it all right then.

16:30 He more or less felt, I think, that it was out of his hands, he couldn't do anything about it and he couldn't have just asked for them and gotten it himself. And I think he thought that my, the weight of my experience probably turned the table in them supplying these materials. No, he didn't get upset about it at all.

17:00 **Now the training methods that you were using, were they training methods for desert warfare or jungle warfare?**

Oh, they were a combination of both. We were trying to train troops who would probably go to the Middle East as reinforcements, although it wasn't very likely. And training them also if they had to go north as jungle troops,

17:30 and it was just in the very, very early stages of knowing what conditions were in the jungle. At that stage we didn't even had any jungle uniforms. We still had to khaki uniforms which stood out like a lamp on a post sort of thing. And we had to devise ways and means ourselves of dyeing these

18:00 various khaki pants and jackets and so forth so that they did resemble a bit of green jungle. But things weren't organised at all. They still had brown boots and tin helmets that stood out like landscapes in the jungle. We weren't prepared for jungle warfare

18:30 at all. However, it was a case of learn and learn fast. The main thing was to learn to be able to move under jungle conditions without drawing undue attention to yourselves. You couldn't just go charging across a barren landscape or anything like that. Had to

19:00 use and learn how to use the particular jungle conditions, make the best of concealment and surprise. Apart from that there wasn't much you could do except locate the enemy and engage him and that was probably one of the worst features of jungle warfare, that

19:30 when you're moving forward you had to be somebody who could spot them before the main body became engaged. And he was called a forward scout and it was damn near a suicide job for the forward scout because he moved forward of any main force and surveyed the landscape and tried to line up any

20:00 enemy that might be there in concealment or otherwise. Quite frequently he was the one that got shot first. But it was a job that just had to be done to protect the main body, and if he got shot or shot at it would disclose the Japanese position then there could be measures taken accordingly to deal with that. So

20:30 in many ways it wasn't much different from jungle warfare, except concealment and surprise in locating the enemy were the main considerations. There were so much scrub and jungle in which and enemy could be hidden that it was difficult to locate them

21:00 before they located you, particularly if they were just lying hidden. That was really the main difference between the jungle training and the other training. The other training depended on more or less shooting ability and accuracy and so forth, cause you could select your target there reasonably well.

21:30 Hello, you knocked off already?

Do you want a quick drink?

No, no, I'm right thanks.

In respect to the forward scouts, was that a position that was volunteered by the men or you assigned?

No the section leader usually decided who was going to be his forward scout, but he had to...Yes, I will have a drink. Thanks, Louise.

22:00 **Do you want me to pause?**

Oh, oh...

The forward scout and the possibility of, did men volunteer for the position?

Yes, yes, some of them did volunteer for the position having done a job successfully once or twice as a forward scout and located what they were looking for they got a sense of pride in being able to do this. And it was a hell of a dangerous

22:30 job.

So an officer wasn't assigning a man in a sense to his death if he...?

No, no, but if there wasn't a volunteer for it he would have to assign somebody and he always did try to make it as fair as possible, or, "So-and-so done the job and so-and-so else had done the job, it's now your turn

23:00 to do it." But there was no rejection that I can remember of anybody being assigned the job as forward scout. They knew that it was something that the safety of the troops depended on and that they depended on him to do the job, and I think they felt in most cases that

23:30 it was only their fair and just job to do. But as I say it was a dangerous job because you were the first bloke that drew a lead from any Japs.

It, just in respect to your training, when you were training other troops you obviously were used to desert warfare?

Hmm.

Was the whole side of jungle warfare, that would have been new to you?

24:00 Oh, it was quite new. I had to learn what I could from reading and particularly I talked to a number of 6th Division troops, troops that had come back from sickness and other things, and I did get quite a bit of information from them which I wouldn't have got otherwise.

24:30 But it was all new, new fields.

Finally, earlier you'd said that you got a whole lot of explosives, you trained the men in finding suitable cover and also in the area of other company's support fire as you're advancing. Can you explain those three areas just in a bit more detail of what you were actually teaching the men?

25:00 Well, only the explosives weren't used in the sense of destroying the enemy in an advance or anything like that. They were only designed to give the troops more knowledge in the use of explosives when they had to blow anything up,

25:30 such as dugout or anything like that. They weren't used as, what you might call an offensive weapon. They were used more as a destructive weapon to destroy dugouts or anything that could be blown up successfully. Because if a person doesn't know anything about explosives you can't say,

26:00 "Go and blow that wall down," or something like that. He's got to know how to handle them and what precautions to take, how to use them. And that was the main purpose of explosives really. At other times they could be used for various other things such as blowing bridges

26:30 or crossings, anything like that where some, it's necessary to remove something before you can go across it. The only problem is then you usually haven't got the explosives when you want them. They say, "Oh, they're engineering stocks."

And the other area of cover, suitable cover,

27:00 **what were you teaching there?**

Well all we could do was try and teach them the best means of making use of cover. Looking at the country and deciding what will provide cover from any particular direction and what the approach should be

27:30 to get from A to B, instead of just walking straight across a flat ground or something, is there some way you can get around it in which you can be provided with some sort of cover and you may not be noticed. It's not an easy subject. You've got to have a fair bit of country knowledge really.

28:00 Anyone whose sneaked up on kangaroos or rabbits or something knows instinctively how to make use of cover, but a city boy probably got straight across and not get a shot at them. But that's about all you can do with cover is just teach them how to make use of whatever cover if need be, in a prone position, crawling,

28:30 or any other position rather than just walking straight ahead.

And finally, just the area of support fire in respect to...You were talking about you've got one

company that keeping a position held down so that you can move forward?

Well of course it just depends on the circumstances too, but usually

29:00 if one company is to do a job other company will be placed in a position where they can give covering fire, or not, might not be companies but platoons or even sections, previously placed in positions where they can give covering fire in the event of the attacking force coming under fire,

29:30 they can blast it from the side. And because it should be a bit unexpected it can help to divert enemy activity from the main attacking force.

So what are you saying? That they're hitting them from the flank or?

Yeah, getting in the position on the flank where they can provide covering fire for the lot

30:00 that's probably coming up the middle.

So the enemy think that the major attack is to the right or the left rather than in the centre?

Yeah, yeah, the whole thing is trying to fool the enemy into actions will not be to his advantage.

So you applied to move back with the 2/

30:30 **13th?**

Hmm.

And that was granted?

Oh, yes.

What happened then?

Oh, I went back, given command of a company again. Don Company this time and...

They were already in training in Australia, were they?

No, they were in New Guinea and I went straight back in New Guinea for the Finschhafen operation.

So had they been engaged in anything before the Finschhafen operation?

31:00 Yeah been to Lae, operation in Lae, a boat landing at Lae that there was a lot of walking and slogging under bad conditions. But there wasn't really any enemy activity at Lae there, Japs pulled out. But most of them were, got back into the hinterland,

31:30 but at Finschhafen they were a much stronger force and they were prepared to fight it out at Finschhafen.

So just for the sake of the time line, you arrived back in Australia from the Middle East on what date, what year?

Oh, 19...

32:00 1941, '42. Oh, gosh, I can't remember the dates now. I think it was 1943. I think it was 1943 when I went up to New Guinea, but unless I can turn up something, I just can't remember what

32:30 year it was.

Do you know how long you were training for, training in training camp?

I guess it was about nine months, I came back from the Middle East at the end of '41 was it? That would be end of '42, maybe at the end of '42

33:00 I think when I went up to New Guinea, then we came back from New Guinea to Ravenshoe in Queensland, trained there again and went to Borneo in '44, was it?

33:30 I think it was '44. I just forget the dates now, Michael. When did the war finish? In '45, wasn't it? I think it was '45. We were up in Borneo for, well from the time we left Ravenshoe and we spent some time at Morotai teaming up with the American destroyers that were going to land from, and we went on land at Labuan

34:00 and then at Morotai, not at Morotai at Miri and then the war finished in, somewhere about October '45, I think it was, so it must have been probably about May or something when we left north Queensland I'd say.

So just share with us

34:30 **now the battle at Finschhafen, what actually happened and your role?**

Well it was mainly jungle fighting on the lower reaches. Finschhafen was quite a good little shipping

bay, but the shores were all fringed, heavily fringed with coconut palms and

- 35:00 heavy jungle undergrowth and the Japs held on to that fairly strongly. But their main force was at Sattelberg, that was, it had been originally I believe a Catholic monastery or something like that to try and infiltrate some religion into
- 35:30 natives. But the Japs were holding that as their strong main point and it was probably about 3000 yards back from, pardon me, Finschhafen beach. And that was the scene of most of the fighting, and there was skirmishes all the way up the road to Sattelberg.
- 36:00 We bought a tank in at one stage but it didn't do any good either, it got becalmed in the middle of the track going up to Sattelberg and the crew spent a very unhappy night in this tank. But anyhow Sattelberg was taken and then the Japs had to flee westward, what was left of them and
- 36:30 they went down across the Masaweng River, held out there for some four or five days, if I remember rightly. And we had a bit of trouble crossing the Masaweng River because it was fairly wide and up to about chest deep. Anyhow once we got them out from the other side of the Masaweng River,
- 37:00 mostly with artillery and machinegun stuff, they moved back along the Rye Coast and we chased them all the way back to Sio, which was the next harbour on the northern side. And at Sio they virtually capitulated, they were broken down by that time, their
- 37:30 recovery system was very, very poor. We came to one place when we were chasing them up the coast, about half way between Finschhafen and Sio, I just can't recall the name of it for the moment but it was a Casualty Clearing Station, they had about probably 100 beds made out of palms and cloths
- 38:00 and anything they could lay wounded or sick chaps on. And that was supposedly a staging point for the boats to pick them up and take them back elsewhere to get better treatment. But a lot of them died and some of them we just buried alongside the bit of a bunk they were lying on, they just dug a hole and tipped them out
- 38:30 and buried them and then put another bloke in the bunk. But it didn't matter to them. They all died before we left there anyhow, they got sick very quickly. Then we chased them up as far as Sio and they were just a straggly mass by that time. They were just getting out as quick as they could along the coast. What did get away from Sio
- 39:00 eventually I think finished up at Madang and then most of them were captured in that area. But at Sio I got dengue fever and I came back to Finschhafen and went into the Casualty Clearing Station there, oh, for about a week or something I think. As far as that was concerned, the New Guinea
- 39:30 war was over and I returned back to the unit and we then came back to Ravenshoe and we trained there for the Borneo operation.

We'll just stop there and...

Tape 10

- 00:41 **Mike, again the landings at Finschhafen, what was your actual role? What happened that day? Can you talk me through the events?**
- Oh, there's nothing really spectacular about it.
- 01:00 The landing craft hit the beach, Japanese fire, and fire from the landing craft boats and fire from anything else that can plug it in. And we get ashore and just clean up and consolidate, try and get a foothold as quickly as possible, and then after having consolidated be prepared to
- 01:30 get your stores and so forth behind you and move forward to clear the Japanese out from that area. They didn't take a great deal of shifting from the beach area because I don't think they intended, or I don't think they expected, really, a landing to take place there. Their main line of march,
- 02:00 as you might call it was from Sattelberg across the inland area of Finschhafen and up the coast to Sio. I think they probably felt that if they held that high country included in Mount Sattelberg they were right. They'd be very difficult to defend
- 02:30 any point along, well practically any coast, because you concentrate your forces at one point you can get a landing at the next point which is unopposed. And unless you've got enough points to cover the whole of the coastline, the only thing you can do is try and fight on the best fortified spots
- 03:00 that you can pick. So I don't think they really intended to fight to the death sort of at Finschhafen. I think they intended to get back to Sattelberg and say, "Right, you get us here if you can."

So just on, I mean that was your first amphibious landing?

Yeah.

Were the seas rough? Did the boys

03:30 **get seasick at all?**

No, no, quite good. Oh, we did lose a couple of people when the landing craft hit rocks out from the water and a couple of the chaps went overboard, underneath, but that was the only real

04:00 incident. Cause we lost others with enemy fire on shore, but in the landing that was the only problem. Because mind you we had a couple of warships there pounding the beach before we went in, too.

So the couple of chaps that went overboard on the landing craft, they were jolted forwards were they or?

Yes cause they were carrying their gear and packs

04:30 and so forth and they just had no chance when they went over.

And wildlife like crocodiles and snakes weren't a problem at that point?

No, I don't remember that we saw any crocodiles there. There were plenty of snakes but I don't remember them ever having caused any casualties of any sort.

05:00 There was another place, Morotai, where we were and snakes were like flies. There were just literally hundreds of snakes there. We were just training with the American destroyer fleet there before going onto Borneo and clearing out a few scattered Japs that were still on

05:30 the island. But we could be sitting in the tent at night-time with just a hurricane lantern on a bit of a table, it was nothing to have a couple of snakes crawl over in the night-time, like that over the table. I don't know that anybody ever got bitten by one but they were just literally hundreds of snakes on Morotai. And that was a place

06:00 where there were a lot of sea snakes too. We couldn't go and swim there, around the edge of the island, because we had to be very careful of sea snakes because there were plenty of them around there. Had to wear boots to walk out over the coral and swim.

So you'd landed then and you were, your stores had been landed and you were on the move

06:30 **towards Sattelberg?**

Sattelberg.

Can you share with us, I guess, the trek towards Sattelberg and then when you engaged the enemy?

Well, it was a track probably only about, oh, only about from here to the wall wide, say about 10 feet wide, muddy track, of course, as everything was in New Guinea. But after the harbour area was secured

07:00 we were able to land trucks, jeeps particularly, and jeeps did most of the haulage, hauling guns or stores and so forth. And it wasn't long before this section of the track we were using just become a real mud hole. And the jeeps were then fitted with chains and as

07:30 they came to a corner it was expected that any troops there would get out and give them a push to get them through the mud. And it was a big problem because some of them had to haul 25 pounder guns to get range onto Sattelberg and bogging was one hell of a job, they'd be right down to the trailer bed sometimes in the mud

08:00 it was as deep as that. And that was one of the biggest problems, I would say, in keeping supply up under muddy conditions. The Japs, they didn't have much chance of getting supply at all because their supply would have originally would have come in through the Finschhafen harbour

08:30 and the only track up to Sattelberg was closed to them. So where they got their supplies from, I don't know, but I don't think they had sufficient supplies to carry them on for long and that's why their final attack came on Sattelberg, they got out and started heading up towards Sio, cleared the area. I think they were just probably starving to death.

09:00 **So just in respect to you and the troops you were commanding, were you working your way up the hill?**

Yeah, yeah, bit by bit we'd take one position and then secure it and move onto another one, might be only 200 yards away, just depending on the cover that was available and what cover and protection you could get when

09:30 you go there. Might be a big bamboo clump or something like that and you could get into that, and then from there you could move onto some other location which was well defended, but would give you

opportunity for an attack from there. And that's the way we'd sort of leap frog up. Sometimes

10:00 one company would pass through another company so that the first company could give them support as they moved forward. Took about, oh, I think 10 or 12 days, something like that, to get up to Sattelberg, then it held out for a while longer. It was originally, I think

10:30 a Roman Catholic Mission Station, I think that's what it was.

Were the Japanese using particular tactics against you?

Oh, mainly they depended on letting us go to them, hiding, just laying low in position and just letting us go to them. And that's where

11:00 the forwards scout's job was so valuable and yet so dangerous. We didn't want to walk a whole body of troops up into a concealed Japanese position who could then cut you to pieces. And the forward scout's job was to get there beforehand and locate where these Japs were. It was a very,

11:30 very dangerous job.

Did you lose many casualties?

Yes, yes, lost quite a few, not all were killed - a lot were wounded. But it's pretty hard fighting in the jungle because you can't see your enemy until

12:00 he opens fire usually, and then it might too late. But what we did make use of a lot was American aircraft; they were very good. When we did find any trouble, rather than just try and slap bang hit into them we could call in aircraft strikes. And they didn't seem to like the aircraft very much, particularly the

12:30 Lightnings. They'd come in and flog the places to pieces and usually the Japs tended to pull out more easily after that. But the Lightnings also frightened us, too, because they'd come in, before they come in they'd drop their belly tanks, they were carrying belly tanks for extra fuel and when they got over they'd go boom and let their belly tanks go

13:00 and you'd see them come down like that and you'd say, "Christ, is that going to hit me?" That was a really frightening experience to see these belly tanks flying down out of the sky and you felt it was coming straight at you.

Now in the recent Iraq war there was a lot of friendly fire turned on American or even British troops, what about during that time were you actually hit by any

13:30 **friendly fire?**

No, I don't recall we ever were. No wait a minute, wait a minute. There was one case. I just can't recall what it was now. I should remember it. Oh, there was one

14:00 case just before we did this attack on El Daba. It wasn't very friendly fire. It came from our side, landed a shell right in the middle of the leading platoon and killed, I think it was 17, and wounded another half a dozen or so. Just wiped a platoon out, really. And I still believe that there was a broken driving band on the

14:30 shell because I was talking to the Platoon Commander at the time and I heard this strange sound, which wasn't a shell sound, and I hit the deck and hit it fast. And the chap I was talking too was killed and the shell landed fair in the middle of the platoon, virtually wiped the platoon out. It was our own shell. I'm sure of it.

15:00 And that was the worst effect of friendly fire, I think.

So you got to Sattelberg?

Yeah, and then it was a case of just trying to exterminate the Japs from that area. They pulled out to the west on the inland track,

15:30 it was only foot track stuff, towards Sio and went across the Masaweng River. They stood and fought for a little while on the other side of the Masaweng River but after that they broke and went west fairly quickly. We did used to get a bit of fire returned from them sometimes down the track. They'd apparently been

16:00 carrying a couple of light artillery pieces with them, which they were dragging by hand, they'd fire a few shells in our direction. And we'd call the artillery up with air strikes on them and they'd be quiet again. And this happened a few times back along the track towards Sio but they were just a beaten force then, just doing what they could to delay us. They didn't do

16:30 any real damage. But we were fairly good mobile force in those days. They tried to stop us at one place, fired a few shots, few shells back at us. They were along a little creek, and we

17:00 decided to attack this and we lined up 12 Vickers guns on the little bit of a ridge behind us and we had

to go through kunai grass to attack it, and the kunai grass was just about head height. And it was planned that as we got to a certain spot these Vickers guns would open up on the Jap positions and give us cover until we nearly onto them.

17:30 And it was a really frightening experience that we got under that and suddenly 12 Vickers guns firing about 600 rounds a minute each, passing over your head, just a few feet over your head, it was a frightening experience. I remember a chap near me, he hit the ground that quick he lost his gear.

18:00 But after, you got used to it after a few dozen yards and you knew it wasn't so bad. But it was a very frightening noise they make. They make one hell of a din if they go over your head in a burst like that, yes. Anyhow when we got to the riverbed the Japs had had enough too, and they scampered out the other side as fast as they

18:30 could. So we had no more trouble with them after that. Yeah, one thing there that might interest you,

19:00 the American, what do they call them the fast American boats. They caught several Japs outside this area we were talking about where they had their evacuation unit. They caught several of their boats loaded with Japs and they ran straight up with their guns blazing and then turned side on like that

19:30 and the great wash from the side swamped the Jap boats, and that was a tactic they tried on several of them, vroom like that, with a great wash of water, and down went the Jap boat. I can't remember the name of the place, and I should.

20:00 **So did the Australians at all capture many Japanese?**

No, no, in fact our CO was pleading for us at one stage to bring in a live Japanese prisoner. But we didn't have any intention of bringing in a live prisoner, I don't think. Except one,

20:30 a big Medical Assistant in the Regimental Aid Post, he was carrying one in. And he wasn't a very big Jap and he had him over his shoulder carrying him, and it was hot and dirty and so forth, and this chap was pretty hot and dirty, too. The Jap leaned back behind him and apparently pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, or a piece of rag or something, and went to wipe the face

21:00 of this chap that was carrying in because the CO had been pleading for a prisoner. And this chap got such a shock when the Jap started wiping his face for him, he hurled him off his shoulder put the big boot into him and killed him, so we didn't get a prisoner. It was the nearest we got to one I think.

21:30 **Did the Australians not want to capture Japanese?**

No, we didn't want them, no. We had such a hatred of them that we regarded them almost as with a mad dog, just have no sympathy for them whatsoever and no sort of sense of feeling that they might be doing it for their country the same as we were doing it. No, we had

22:00 that feeling towards the Germans and the Italians, but certainly not for the Japanese. Probably because of the press propaganda that had been put out about the Japanese as much as anything else. But we just had a real hatred of them like you might have for a mad dog and didn't give them any sympathy whatsoever.

So the press propaganda was far worse

22:30 **in respect to the Japanese than it was about the Germans?**

Oh, yes, yes, far worse, probably because the threat was more immediate in Australia from the Japanese than it was from the Germans or Italians. That war was on the other side of the world and if you didn't read the newspapers you could sort of forget that it was happening. But you couldn't with Australia when they were talking about evacuating

23:00 everything north of the Brisbane Line and coming down south. Things were starting to look a bit ugly at that stage. Later on they said no, they never intended that, but that was definitely the intention at the time.

Did you or the troops know anything about Changi through to the Burma railway, any of the events there?

No,

23:30 no we didn't know that till after the war. We did know a bit about it when we were in Borneo because we captured one prisoner of war camp there in Borneo and the prisoners were in a really shocking state, and it was only assumed that they were kept like this everywhere. They

24:00 were just skin and bone, these prisoners. And then the Japs did practically nothing to keep them alive. They gave them a little bit of food and worked them hard and they just didn't have any sympathy for them whatsoever. We nearly got caught up in that Ranau

24:30 trip too, you might of heard of it where the prisoners there were marched from Ranau down to Sandakan and only one survived all the way down. Toward the end of the war our battalion was given

the job of going to take this Ranau Japanese centre and all the orders had been issued for it and we were all prepared to go when

- 25:00 it was found out it was too late, the Japs had already moved the prisoners out and were on the march down. So that would have been our last engagement. After that we decided it was time to come home. Or actually most of the battalion went on to Japan, but the CO wanted me to go and I said, "No. I've had enough. I'm going home."

Given obviously

- 25:30 **there was, well no prisoners actually captured in respect to the Japanese and partly propaganda, were there other reasons why in a sense that was the attitude amongst the troops?**

Yeah, we just hated them. We didn't consider them, probably wrongly, so. As ordinary human beings, they were about one or two scales down from human beings.

- 26:00 And probably that was the result of propaganda which had been issued against them to make the enemy out as being a bad fellow and had to get rid of him. It seems like later some of them are fairly decent.

Were there things done that you saw or even heard about that in hindsight

- 26:30 **you think weren't particularly fair towards the Japanese?**

Ah well, I can't recall anything in that line but the attitude of all of us was, "They're our enemy in every way. We've got to get rid of them as hard and as fast as we can."

- 27:00 And there was no sympathy for them in any shape or form. I think probably most of them were over fed with propaganda and so forth, particularly the kamikaze pilots and that sort of thing. But that was the effect it had on our troops, "They're vermin. Get rid of them as quick as you can."

- 27:30

- 28:00 I remember these Vietnam troops seemed to be very aggrieved that they didn't get welcomed home. There's a claim they should of, but we came back, met in the Victoria Barracks, given a voucher for one civilian suit and said, "Ta-ta."

- 28:30 Goodbye," and away we went. And it was pretty hard to get a civilian suit at the time too because there weren't many tailors around.

After you'd fought sort of Finschhafen and Sattelberg?

Sattelberg.

Yeah Finschhafen and Sattelberg,

- 29:00 **you then trained with the destroyer fleet, the American?**

Yeah, yeah, well we came back to Ravenshoe in north Queensland and trained there, oh, four or five months I think. We used to go down to Cairns every now and again and do embarkation practice, climbing up and down the sides of the transport and climbing back down in the transport into landing craft and

- 29:30 landing on beaches and then back to camp again. And then we went to Morotai and we had to familiarise ourselves with the American ships that would be taking us over. American destroyers they were. And we spent, oh, some

- 30:00 weeks, probably a month or so, in Morotai getting to know these Americans that we'd be travelling with and also doing landing exercises in the boats. And we got to know them quite well. As a matter of fact, I was very surprised, the captain of this destroyer I was with, he

- 30:30 was asking me about Australia and I think he knew more about the Australian landscape than I did. And he had a really strong knowledge of Australia and its cattle population and horse population and people population. I felt a bit silly because a lot of things I didn't know, but he did. But he

- 31:00 was describing to me the way they came across the Pacific Ocean from there to Australia. He said, I think there were seven ships he was talking about coming across, and he said, "Day time we'd go lickety-split as hard as we could until night-time come. That stage we'd all see each other and close to each other, but night-time," he said, "we spread all over the sea."

- 31:30 He said, "We'd be miles and miles apart, when morning came we'd all come together again and away we'd go." Their navigation wasn't too strong. I forget what he told me. He'd only been in the navy, oh, some very, very short while when he got command of this destroyer. But that's how the Yanks were doing it.

- 32:00 But they did a good job when we got up to Borneo. They really pasted the place and I think shells were

two bob a dozen. They really fired them out.

So share with me what actually happened from the point of leaving the destroyers to the point of landing?

Well, at

- 32:30 Brunei where we landed with these American destroyers and we embarked into landing craft from the destroyer, some couple of miles outside and landed on Labuan Island. From there we had quite good artillery cover from battleships and
- 33:00 destroyers and aircraft, but there was no opposition. And then it was decided we would take the Miri oil fields – they were the big Shell oil fields in Miri – and we did expect that the Japs would put up a fierce fight for them. So the support fire was very, very strong there
- 33:30 and we re-embarked on a LST [Landing Ship Tank] with landing craft tanks – that’s their means of getting ashore. And we had supporting fire from several destroyers, Chop Suey I think was one of the cruisers and
- 34:00 all the American landing craft were mounting 50mm machineguns and the destroyers outside pounded the beach, the American 50mm guns raked it with thousands of rounds, the Liberator bombers came over and belted everything flat on the beach. And then we landed and there wasn’t a Jap in sight.
- 34:30 They had spotted the attacking force from up in the high ground behind and I think they decided that they weren’t going to beat this force and they got out and went down what was called the Reaem [?] Road going out into the inland of Borneo and virtually they stayed there all the time after we had landed. They used to give us a little bit of trouble sometimes
- 35:00 poking around at night-time, but not really any trouble. And it wasn’t until the very last day of the war that we sent a patrol out to Reaem Road to see what was happening. They went out in a jeep with MG [machinegun] cover and so forth and the Japs met them
- 35:30 and shot one chap. And he was a chap that had been with us right from the start. He was wounded in, I think it was Tobruk, and evacuated back to Australia. When he got fixed up he rejoined again and came back to us and the last day of the war he got killed. That was the end of it. Then
- 36:00 a day or two later the Japs surrendered when the bomb went off at Hiroshima. Strangely enough, when I was at high school I had science teacher called Taylor and he was very much ahead of his time, I think, and he told us very clearly in the science classes what power would be available if they could break
- 36:30 the atom, and this was years and years before the atom was broken. And when the news came through that they’d dropped this bomb on Hiroshima I said straight away, “Well, at last they’ve broken the atom.” I couldn’t help thinking that this chap Taylor was so far ahead of his time in knowing what could happen
- 37:00 if they broke the atom.

You’d spoken at bit earlier about Tobruk with the Germans about some of their mines that blew up and blew different things. What sort of booby traps and mines did the Japanese use during your time against them?

Oh, they were only simple things like trip wire things put across tracks covered by,

- 37:30 you know, bits of fern and so forth, so if you kicked them you pulled the pin on a grenade which was alongside the track which of course blew up. But they weren’t very sophisticated at all, not like the German ones which jumped out of the ground to about shoulder height and then blew about 60 or 100 steel balls in all directions.
- 38:00 I nearly got hit with one of them myself one day after the Germans were beaten in Tobruk, and we were sort of getting ready to come home myself and another fellow went out to have a look at the German positions, which had been in front of us. And he was, oh, a bit of a hasty sort of a bloke, you know, rush here, rush there, sort of thing.
- 38:30 And he was walking around this German position and kicked one of these pins. And instead of it jumping out, it must have been a bit old, it only came just out of the ground, hit him all up the back. I think he had about 27 pellets or something in his back. Didn’t kill him. But
- 39:00 we managed to get him back and evacuate him back out, but he wasn’t much good after that of course. Also in this field I remember there was one dead Australian whose foot was tangled around a string and it had blown the top of his head off, and he must have been there for probably months and months. They’d just left him
- 39:30 in front of their position. Nobody ever tried to extricate him or... The Germans must of put up from a hell of a stink from him at that time. Because he would have been killed, oh, probably four or five months earlier than that when there were casualties in that area.

We'll just stop here and change to our last tape.

Tape 11

00:43 Oh, are you on?

You were going to say?

I was going to say my young brother would have some interesting tales to tell. He parachuted

01:00 in the Dyaks in Borneo and lived in that area with parachute crew for some time chasing Japs around there. I didn't know he was even in the army until he paddled down, 200 miles down the Barren River with a mate and saw me down in Miri.

01:30 He was telling me that they were offering, I think it was 10 shillings a head for the Dyaks for Japanese heads. He said they found out after a while they were working their debts off on the Chinese storekeepers.

Just with your experience of both fighting the Japanese and also the Germans, what, for you and for your

02:00 **men, was the scary enemy or the more, the scary experience?**

I think the Germans were, possibly because they were more in the open, you know, it was a open warfare, whereas the Japanese were mostly fighting from cover and hidden and you never saw any big

02:30 quantities of them at any time. Whereas in the open country you saw the massed formations of tanks or infantry or whatever they were and they were more scary, I would think, than seeing a few Japanese dug around in the green trees. But neither were very much favoured.

You've

03:00 **mentioned a few times in your sharing about the Vietnam conflict. Is there any particular reason you have a interest in that, given your experiences?**

My younger brother was in charge of Vietnam.

So your interest in Vietnam just in respect to the service of your younger brother?

03:30 Really, yeah.

So the war ended for you, where were you and when did you return home?

Well I was in Borneo when it finished, in this place called Miri. And then the Japanese forces for occupation of Japan were being formed, and the CO wanted me to go on to Japan

04:00 with him but I already had five year service so I reckon I had enough at that stage, so I said, "No I'm out, I'm going home." So I went down, found my way down to Labuan and picked up a troopship, can't remember the name of the troopship, which was coming back to Australia, and it was loaded mostly with Singapore

04:30 prisoners from war. I found it quite interesting talking to quite a few of them because my brother, elder brother, was a prisoner in Singapore. And that got me home to Australia. And I landed at Brisbane and trained down to Sydney.

05:00 That's where they gave me the ticket for a new suit and said, "Thank you. Ta-ta. Go home."

A lot's been said in respect to Vietnam about post traumatic stress syndrome, what do you think of that given your experiences of war?

I think a lot of it has been brought about by one or two advocates that flogged this to death. I don't think our soldiers,

05:30 they should have been any more traumatised than soldiers anywhere else. And I don't think that they really had a right to be traumatised because they got far more support in aircraft and bomb runs and so forth and artillery than we ever got.

06:00 I was surprised in reading about this Vietnam war just how much advance had been made in the instruments which would pick up various sounds, the oh,

06:30 microscopic sounds which could be picked up, from the aircraft even, to determine where enemy were or even what was there. I was really amazed at the equipment some of these aircraft carried in them. I was also surprised at the bomb

- 07:00 loads and the fire support that they got from helicopters and the heavy bombers. We never saw anything like the support they had; never anything like it. No, I think a lot of it was undeserved from some few
- 07:30 advocates who were trying to make out that they were the heroes of the land or something like that. They didn't want to join the RSL [Returned & Services League], they were Vietnamese soldiers and they wanted to form their own Vietnamese Association. Why the hell did they want to do that? The association was already there for them with the Returned Soldiers' League and if they wanted to change it well they could go in and change it -

08:00 they weren't bound by any rules. But I didn't feel really that they had a case that way.

What's the one thing you'd like to say to future generations about war?

Certainly try all means of pacification first, but I don't see the

- 08:30 alternative being taken up. When you get one state which will not come to terms with other states, no matter what the conditions are, but they want to assert their own rights without opposition from anybody else, I think it comes down to war eventually, and that's what has happened.
- 09:00 It's what happened in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Jerusalem, Israel, Palestine, Syria. They all say they've got might on their right and they go and do what they like no matter what happens to the other people, and they just won't come to conciliation. I think that's the whole
- 09:30 trouble. And somebody in one country gets a bit power mad and thinks that if he's got ten men in the army, he can beat the army that's only got eight men in it, sort of thing and get his way. I can't see an end to it really. I know there should be, but I can't see. Even the Iraq war
- 10:00 there wasn't any attempt at conciliation really between Iraq and the United States. The United States said, "We're going in. That's it." It appears their reasons were fairly groundless now. I mean Hussein might have been the dictator and knocked a few people off,
- 10:30 but I think that's likely to be happening anywhere. And they probably could have achieved results without the great expenditure they've gone to on it.

Is there any you'd like else to add to the Archive as we've come to a close?

- 11:00 Not that I can really think of it. There was seven of us in the services by the way, seven brothers. I wonder if they're still requiring any gear
- 11:30 in the war museum down there. I've got as few things down under the house which I should have got rid of years ago, things like an old sleeping bag and such like.

Well, Mike, we might stop it there. Thank you very much for your time. Both Simon and I and the Archive greatly appreciate it.

Hmm.

INTERVIEW ENDS