Australians at War Film Archive

Alan Cunningham (Al) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:53 **Okay Alan, can you give us a summary of your life?**

I think so, yes. I guess when I

01:00 look back and I was thinking about it before but I've come from an army family. My grandfather was, went up through the ranks and was commissioned as a captain in the field in France in the First World War and the family was fairly proud of his achievements, and then in the Second World War my father and all of his brothers served in every service, not

01:30 the navy, but armoured corps and air force and all that sort of thing. My father himself, being a married guy with two kids at the time, was in the transport corps and served around Darwin, northern Australia. And when I was a kid I readily joined the cadets, when I was at high school and in fact I had a double issue of it. I went to cadets, happily, through school

02:00 days and to the cadet camps, and at the same time I joined the Air Training Corps because I was interested in flying and I used to go to a flight at North Melbourne, so I was always in uniform. And then of course National Service came along in '57 and I was roped into that, happily. Did my three months at Puckapunyal and then two years afterwards as an army reservist

02:30 and realised that I liked the life. I don't know, it might have had something to do with my being a Virgo. I like being regimented.

Alan we're going to get into all of those details about your army and so forth but if its possible do you think you could just give us those headlines of sort of where you were born, grew up, educated and so forth just in a sort of headline sort of manner?

All right, born in Port Melbourne in a house as I've mentioned, grew up in Port until I was

03:00 10, then we moved to Preston. As the family grew, the house was small and so we needed a larger place, moved to Preston, had my teenage years around the Preston area, Victoria. Went to high school, Abbotsford Technical College, taught by the Christian Brothers. When I got my driver's licence, oh I did an apprenticeship

03:30 as a builder, that's right. When I got my driver's licence and got through the apprenticeship I decided that Victoria was a bit limiting so with two friends I left and did a two year trip around Australia. While we were going around Australia the credit squeeze hit, the thing that they euphemistically called the credit squeeze, and work dried up and so we found that we were doing a pretty eclectic

04:00 group of jobs, everything from planting cane to picking cane here in Queensland, picking cotton, rounding up wild cattle in Northern Territory to sell the beef to Hong Kong and the leather. So that, yeah we did a lot of rural stuff and lived off the land. We learnt to kill and eat our own because

04:30 in Queensland and Northern Territory at the time they had a policy of moving you on. It was a policy that was left over from the days of the Depression and so that you'd get to a place like Mount Isa, and the first person that would visit your camping site and the camping ground would be the local copper who'd say, "Are you aware that there is a thing called clerk of petty sessions allowance?" And that's designed for you to buy tea and coffee and sugar and bullets and,

05:00 "On your way mate." And so we did that and we experienced, you know Australia at a pretty low time economically but nevertheless being young fellers we enjoyed it, made the most of it and saw all of the country and it sort of just made me like it even more, you know. I guess while I was on the track with my two friends, and realising how vulnerable the building game was

05:30 to economic downturns, I decided that I'd rather use my head rather than my hands and started to think about the things I liked to do. And I knew I liked travel and I wasn't too bad at mathematics and gradually the thought crystallised that I'd like to fly, so that after I did the trip I went back to night

school and got the qualifications to fly.

06:00 The intention was to join the air force but while I was away the air force had upped its standards and army aviation was then a new and emerging thing, and so army service that I was comfortable with was offering me a chance to fly. So that when I saw the ad to become a direct entry army pilot I thought I'd put in for it and I understand,

06:30 I've still got friends around here in Brisbane who joined with me, and I understand from the statistics that there were two thousand applicants and there were 14 of us got into that course, so we were all pretty proud of ourselves and thought we were a bit special and formed a bit of a bond that lasts to this day. And that was my introduction to the regular army.

Can you then just give us sort of the highlights of your, if you like, in a headline manner of the

07:00 **rest of your life up till today, just in a summary, just a five minute sort of summary?**

Yeah, well a five minute summary, I guess such a big part of my life was the army and the biggest part of that was service in Vietnam. That's the one that sort of springs immediately to mind because it was the time of my life when everybody who went to Vietnam would know this, that you're on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

07:30 And the adrenaline was flowing at a high rate, to the extent that when you came out of it, it was a long time before you could come down from that rush I s'pose.

I'll talk to you about all that sort of emotion and those details, but if you can sort of tells us the units you were involved with in terms of firstly where you did your training, what units you joined and when,

08:00 **more or less just sort of dates and names if you like?**

All right okay. From '64 when I joined the direct entry army pilot scheme we were sent to North Head to do officer training and basically an introduction to the army because they wanted officers first and pilots second. Our course wasn't suitable for Portsea or Duntroon or Scargill. In fact Scargill didn't

08:30 even exist when we did our course so that the 14 of us were in splendid isolation at the beautiful location of North Head, the school of artillery in Sydney. None of us wanted to leave the place. We loved it. From there we were sent around to do various detachments to the different centres and schools with the army like school of infantry, school of artillery, school of armour, Puckapunyal,

09:00 Service Corps, Puckapunyal and places like that to get an idea of what all the arms in the services did. At the end of that period we graduated as officer cadets and then we were sent to either Point Cook or to an infantry battalion. The only reason they split the course is because Point Cook couldn't

09:30 take the whole 14 of us in one gulp so there was a six month break between the courses. I was fortunate enough to be posted to the 1st Battalion at Holsworthy as a platoon commander and because I was, I guess, an older officer cadet, I was accepted by the blokes. And then after I did my stint at the 1st Battalion and they were sent off to

10:00 Vietnam for their first tour or they were being readied for that. I was then sent to Point Cook to start my flying training. I completed the flying training at Point Cook and then I was posted to Amberley. The army aviation centre at Oakey didn't exist then, so Amberley was the place where we did our operational conversion. I was allocated to helicopters which I wasn't too pleased about because

10:30 I rather enjoyed fixed wing flying and then flew there for about six months, during which time I decided that, for one reason or another, I'd not carry on with the flying and have an opportunity to command troops in the Intelligence Corps. So I was then

11:00 posted back to Northern Command here in Brisbane and awaiting a course to join at Middle Head where the intelligence centre was then located, so I eventually got to Middle Head which was another delightful place to serve, another headland of Sydney Harbour. And it was fascinating to see the sort of work that

11:30 the intelligence corps was doing and the people that it was getting ideas from, including people like Donald Horn, who used to be a regular visitor in the mess and it was a sort of an intellectual buzz, just to sort of get away from the normal clodhopping of the army I guess or the general army, not that that's not fun.

12:00 But anyway, it was good to have a bit of intellectual stimulation. So after having completed the courses that I needed at the intelligence centre, I was then posted back to Northern Command to do a staff intelligence job, while a unit called 6 Task Force

12:30 was being shaken out on the ground in readiness for Vietnam. When 6 Task Force had established itself, the task force was a reasonably new idea stemming from, it was I guess an Americanisation of the old English idea of a brigade where you'd have arms and services grouped around a headquarters. I was given the job as the

13:00 GSO3, general staff officer grade 3 intelligence on the headquarters there and we were fairly heavily involved in many exercises around Shoalwater Bay which were designed to exercise the headquarters and the battalions and the units who were going to go to Vietnam. And they all phased through 6 Task Force. 6 Task Force was the Australian sort of footprint for 1ATF [Australian Task Force], which was the

13:30 unit at Nui Dat, the headquarters unit in Nui Dat and so that's where I was until such time as I was eventually posted to Vietnam. How are we going?

Going well, just, without going into any detail about your experiences there, just tell us sort of where you were for what time and then?

Okay when I got to Vietnam I was posted into Headquarters AFV, Australian Forces Vietnam.

14:00 They realised that there was a need for me to go to the Australian Logistics Support Group at Vung Tau. The logistics support group, even though it was considered to be in a rear area, a safe echelon area for the development of support, there really wasn't any such thing in Vietnam. I mean there was no front line.

14:30 It was on everywhere, so that ALSG [Australian Logistics Support Group] had local rocket attacks. It employed I think it was about 600 locally employed civilians who could have been anyone. They all needed checking out and to the best of our ability that's what we did, so we kept the place fairly secure. During this time

15:00 I was then co-opted to help out at the Divisional Intelligence Unit up at Nui Dat and I was also asked to do a few jobs for Headquarters AFV in Saigon including going up to the northern areas where our training team was deployed along the North Vietnamese border. That was mainly in the role of the courier but it was pretty interesting because you got to see the whole country.

15:30 So after 13 months largely based at ALSG and moving around the country I came home. In 1969 I was posted to Canberra where we saw the man land on the moon, and my wife fell pregnant again with our second child. And

16:00 the opportunity arose for me to go back again on the second tour to command the Divisional Intelligence Unit, which in my mind was the epitome of what an officer wanted to do in wartime, command troops and roll your sleeves up and get into it. I discussed this with my wife and she wasn't too pleased about it but at least it gave her

16:30 the opportunity of getting out of Canberra, which was quite cool and uncomfortable. We were in a walk-up flat at Watson. She didn't like it and allowed her to come back to live with her mother here in Brisbane and go to her own gynaecologist and generally, you know have the second child in familiar surroundings, so that was the understanding that we had. I went back again for another, a bit

17:00 over a year. I think it was about 13 months again, commanded troops, marvellous posting and then I was sent back to Brisbane on leave. I was then supposed to be posted to Perth. The fellow who had the job in Perth had a bit of misfortune. His wife died young from leukaemia so he was given compassionate grounds to stay there and I was then sent

17:30 to Singapore instead, which we didn't argue about. So two years in Singapore saw the birth of my third child and that was pretty exciting because it was commanding a unit of nine different services; army, navy, air force, UK [United Kingdom], New Zealand, Australia, and the work was largely

18:00 targeted against saving interests in Singapore. After Singapore I was then sent back to Woodside where the intelligence centre had moved, to be an instructor so I instructed at Woodside until such time as they decided to move again to Canungra. So

18:30 a large part of that period at Woodside was involved in getting all the courses and equipment and stuff moved back to Canungra. So I was a senior instructor there at Canungra, at the school of intelligence, where it is to this day and from there I was promoted to major and posted to

19:00 Brisbane as the general staff officer grade 2 intelligence, so I'd virtually done the full circle at that stage. Many happy years there working with the units and making sure that all Queensland units were secure, working in with all the different agencies around

19:30 the place. And then yeah that's right, that brings us up to '79, '80, '81 and I was then posted back to Canberra for three years. Yeah so Canberra, then that was a small stint at JIO [Joint Intelligence Organisation] and then defence security branch, which I didn't enjoy.

20:00 It was sort of going over old ground and there were younger and keener blokes there to do that sort of work, so it was at that stage of my career I asked for a non corps posting to come back to Brisbane because my family was Brisbane orientated. My wife had a good job here in Brisbane. My kids had been pre booked into colleges and I thought it was about time the army paid me back. I went to

20:30 see the military secretary. He arranged that I be given a non corps posting back to Victoria Barracks, which I was delighted to come back to and I came back in a logistics field. Knowing not too much about logistics it was a bit daunting but with the application of a bit of common sense I soon got on top of the

job, made quite a few friends in that field and then

21:00 a long standing camp commandant, the man who actually ran the barracks, decided that he would retire and I said to now Major General Peter Phillips, who was my boss at the time, would he mind if I threw my hat in the ring for that job, because I wanted to keep a footprint on the ground here in Brisbane for the stability of the family. And he said, "By all means, go ahead." So I did and I won the job.

21:30 So that gave me a good, long time here in Brisbane. I was more fortunate than a lot of army guys that I was posted to a pleasant area for a good length of time that provided the family with a bit of stability. So yeah I revelled under the grand title of Camp Commandant, Victoria Barracks until I retired in 1987. Yeah so that was that.

22:00 That was the end of the army career.

That's fantastic. Okay Alan, just going right back to your childhood in Melbourne, can you describe your childhood for us?

Yeah I had a pretty brilliant childhood. I

22:30 grew up in the heart of Port Melbourne within cooee of the Port Melbourne town hall and whenever I could I would head to the beach. I was a wandering child. I used to wag it from kindergarten. I walk out of the backyard at home and loved to go to the beach.

23:00 Course I probably took years off my mother's life. If I didn't go to the beach I'd wander over to near the North Port station and go to my grandmother's place in Evans Street, Port Melbourne. But I was a wanderer and I guess I can see that reflected right through my life. You know, I just wanted to see what was around the next corner, strange but yeah, a very

23:30 happy childhood in Port Melbourne. It was, you seem to always remember the summers when you're a kid. When I think hard enough I can remember the winters and I can remember small friends of mine having chilblains. I was always blessed with good circulation and I didn't have that but I can imagine, I felt the sting of winter and didn't like it all that much and you only remember the good times. But yeah, days

24:00 consisted of boring school work, glorious weekends, going to movies and seeing all the serials and acting out what you saw on the screen, usually on the many playing fields around Port Melbourne or on the beach. When the family, when my younger sister was born and the family expanded and we had to move out to the Preston-Regent area I hated it.

24:30 It was raw suburbia. Many of the roads weren't made. It was neither country nor was it city. It was an in-between grey area, and I can well understand Eddie Maguire wanting to break out of a place like Broadmeadows. Preston was never as bad as Broadmeadows I might add, but it was too far away from the sea for me, so that for

25:00 years after I'd moved out of there, on my weekends I'd catch the bus or the train back to Port Melbourne to see my old friends, and we then graduated from the local flicks to go to see the movies in the city. If we weren't doing that we'd be playing some sort of sport or swimming. So that yeah I guess the early teenage years in Preston was unrelieved drudgery and it wasn't doing my wanderlust any good. I wanted out of there

25:30 so I suffered school. I had to go back, where I was taught by the Christian Brothers when I left Port Melbourne, the greatest of ignominies was when I had to go back to being taught by the nuns in outer Melbourne, a blow to the pride. It wasn't too long before I was at that stage of education where I could go to

26:00 Abbotsford Technical College to be taught again by the Christian Brothers, which was always a great experience. It pains me a lot to see how a lot of these religious orders are in trouble now because the guys that taught us were men's men and not a plonker amongst them. You know, they were all good blokes.

Can you tell us about your father?

Yeah my father was a steady man. He

26:30 should have, in hindsight, he should have done more for himself rather than for the family. He was very family orientated, dedicated to the family. The job he had was that of a manufacturing grocer in South Melbourne, an old store called Crofts that was later taken over by Coles or Woolworths or one of those big ones, and he used to actually make the stuff that you get in packets.

27:00 It wasn't a terribly well paying job. They said that they'd keep the job open for him after he got back from the war, which they did but, you know his progression wasn't as rapid as it should have been. He was a manager there. After the take over, after

27:30 Crofts was absorbed by whoever it was who absorbed them, he was just summarily let go, and he was broken hearted and I remember sitting on the steps of the house consoling him. He was very upset and I said, "Look in my opinion your talent hadn't been rewarded to the extent that it should have been and

that something good was going to come up." We didn't know at the time that it would.

28:00 And so he applied and got a job at Sands McDougal in charge of stationery and I think his starting salary was twice what he finished up on at Crofts, and then he had even greater cause for regret that he hadn't done something about it earlier in the piece, but always it was for the family.

What did your father tell you about his experiences in the Second World War?

Nothing but joy, nothing but joy. He was fortunate that he didn't

28:30 go to New Guinea but it allowed him, as a poorly paid Melbourne boy, to see his own country. He was allowed to drive a massive big transport truck. He was in the 26th General Transport I think it was, and they went all over Queensland, Northern Territory and north Western Australia. And some of the jobs that he was given,

29:00 or one of the jobs that he was given fascinated him and the army had responsibility for taking food out to remote Aboriginals and they were very much in their raw state. They weren't employed on stations and I guess, but for the odd missionary, they had not much contact with white people, and to see that stage of Aboriginal history, at that stage of Australia's development, was a privilege

29:30 that he never forgot. He made a lot of good friends. A lot of the fellows that he joined with came from around Victoria, not all from Melbourne. There was one good friend he had from Colac and they were friends forever. But he, yeah, when he came to be demobbed, he just didn't want to leave. He loved it, you know.

30:00 I don't think he relished going back to a job that he had before the war.

Do you remember him being absent from home during the war or?

Yeah I do, yeah. And I remember that it was a long time before he came home after 1945. After, let's put it this way, his demobbing [demobilisation] took a long time and

30:30 whether it was by accident or design I'm not sure, but he had to, from memory he had to be demobbed at Frankston, somewhere down that way and there was great excitement when he'd come home and give a 'Yoo-hoo!' and he came down the back side way. And they were part of my earliest memories, of him in uniform, coming home yeah, and Mum wondering why it took so long for him to sort of

31:00 break the khaki bonds, but I know now why, yeah. He just didn't want to come home.

Do you remember your reaction to his arrival home that day?

Yeah, I was curious to start with. I thought, "Who's this feller?" I knew who he was but I thought I'd size him up because I was then

31:30 what five I s'pose, five or six and five and six year olds always size you up. Yeah so I sized him up and decided that he had laughing eyes and he had a nice demeanour and he looked good and smelt good and gave me hugs and I thought, well that's cool. And then he used to take me on his shoulders around the different drinking holes that he'd go to, to catch up with his friends.

32:00 Bay Street, Port Melbourne at that stage was a paradise for the average tippler. In fact the legend was that you couldn't have one seven ounce beer in, down one side of Bay Street and up the other, in each pub without getting rotten so there was the Rose and Crown and the Chequers, and all those places that he'd take me to on his shoulders. And being a very proud Dad of a little son, and I remember sitting on the bar and being fed pink lemonade till it came out of my ears

32:30 and generally watching the blokes have a good time.

How do you think his absence during the war affected your mother and your family?

It wasn't too bad. I can never remember grieving or grief or wailing or whatever because

33:00 as I said, he was a good provider and he was always family centric and his pay would come home regularly. The added consolation to them was that he was serving within the country. He was in and around Darwin and Townsville when the Japanese attacked but that was about the extent of the danger that he faced, and yeah, it was dangerous but I mean it wasn't overseas at least, you know.

33:30 And so yeah, the consolation they had, knowing that he was in the country and that the money was coming through and the mail seemed to be regular with the odd square hole cut in them, and the fact that Mum had sisters and sisters in law who were all very supportive. Looking back it seemed like,

34:00 because people didn't have cars or telephones, they saw a lot more of each other and it was more of a village atmosphere and so you had that support all the time.

As you were growing up as a young boy, what was your opinion of war, based on what your father had told you?

I thought it was jolly good fun. That was my opinion as a boy because I seemed always to be playing at it and, you know I never ever missed the opportunity of seeing a war movie. But,

34:30 as I say, because he had a reasonably pleasant war and because my grandfather came back alive and promoted with only I think a slight cough to show for a bit of gas that he got in the First World War, didn't leave me horrified about the prospect of wars. And yeah, the way people die and bleed on the screen is always so very neat too.

35:00 **Can you tell us about your grandfather?**

Not a lot. I remember he was a solid built man. He apparently revelled in his military service because from looking at some of the old papers he was in the Army Reserve, militia, whatever it was called in those days.

35:30 When the First World War broke out he was I think the rank of sergeant I think from his military militia days and then through active service overseas he was then promoted sergeant, staff sergeant, warrant officer and eventually given a commission. And I've gleaned those from his old pay books that one of my uncles has. After the war he

36:00 worked as a manager at, I remember the place. It used to make a lot of soaps and candles and things at the time. No it's missed me. And then he, after he sort of

36:30 he left that employment, he went to a small, he was a manager of a box factory called the OT in Port Melbourne and the reason that he did that is because it was just down the road from where he lived and, as I said, no-one owned a car in those days. It was good to be able to walk to work and do reasonably clean work. He had friends who had market gardens over at Fisherman's Bend, when Fisherman's Bend was just a

37:00 wild, sandy area and he went to help one of his friends get some crop in. I don't know, it was important that they picked this crop and get it to Victoria markets and they were all exhausted and went to sleep on the ground with potato sacks over them and as a result of that he got pneumonia and he,

37:30 I guess the pneumonia affected his, already affected chest that he had from the war, and the family used to, or I remember Dad saying, he used to say, "If only I could get into Fairfield hospital I'll be right." But they didn't give out gold cards in those days and the treatment of returned soldiers wasn't all that good,

38:00 hence the development of the RSL [Returned and Services League] I guess, because the fellers had to look after each other. There was very little support from the government and he didn't get into Fairfield and as a result he died early. He died about, he was in his mid 50s when he died, yeah.

What did you know as a boy of his war experience?

Nothing, no. I knew that

38:30 he'd been in active service. He didn't talk a lot about it. In fact he, funny thing, he, any spare time he used to involve himself in amateur dramatics in the Port Melbourne Town Hall, and I guess being an officer and being used to standing in front of people emoting or speaking in a loud voice, it

39:00 sort of encouraged the inner thespian and he used to do that for a lot of pleasure, yeah. But no, not a lot about the war because he was very circumspect. My grandmother, his wife, was a very introspective lady, very, very serene. I suppose

39:30 she had to be. She had, what, five sons and four daughters and my memories of her is if ever I went wandering and my mother would turn up at my grandmother's place all flustered and looking very florid, my paternal grandmother, Kate, would say, "Has he gone again, has he?" without turning too much of a hair, you know.

40:00 **Later on did you discover more about your grandfather's experiences during the war?**

Well I made it a point to do that. As I'd been through my career, I became more curious about what they did and then when I started to hunt his medals and found out that one of my uncles had them

40:30 I thought well I'll go back into the archive and see what I can find. But so far I haven't had too much joy. I know that he was presented with the usual three or four medals from the First World War. There was nothing in the way of Mentions in Despatches or anything like that.

Tape 2

00:33 **Can you tell us what you know now of your grandfather's war experience?**

No, as I said, I've tried the links through DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] on the computer and they are pretty obscure. I can't remember the units he was involved in because somewhere in my records upstairs I've got photocopies of pay books.

01:00 Now I haven't got the original documents because his sons are still alive. His youngest son is still alive

and he's got them all, curse him, but yeah, all I've got is a list of dates, joining, discharge, ranks achieved, what dates he was promoted and the units he served with, but.

Where did he actually serve?

France,

01:30 I'm not sure about Belgium, but certainly France, yeah.

As you were growing up as a teenager, how do you think having a father and grandfather who had both served in those wars, affected your opinions and impressions of war?

Well, I only had good memories of my grandfather and I only had good memories of my father.

02:00 My father, I can't recall my grandfather ever talking about his experiences and I guess I was too young when he died. My father's memories and his memories of his contemporaries whom I met, you know occasionally when they'd come around for reunions or they'd come out of the country to come to reunions in the city, were all good and you tend to do that. You tend to remember the good times.

02:30 I can't recall him ever talking about bad times except, you know the training periods and some of the situations he found as far as discomfort went but not caused by the enemy, so that overall the impressions were okay, yeah. My Dad's brothers saw a bit more than he did because they were unmarried when they went away.

03:00 So that his younger brother Jack served in, he was a Rat of Tobruk. He served in Tobruk and when his division was posted back to this area, he was redeployed in New Guinea, where he was shot in the back. Now Jack's Dad's younger brother. He was a little bit more circumspect about his experiences. The wounding,

03:30 the unknown of whether you were going to get out of the jungle, the long recuperation period, the way it affected his innards in that he couldn't sort of eat normally. He would always be on salads and light food like salmon. I remember he used to eat, even in winter, it used to sort of turn me off, you know. Where everybody was screaming for a steak and a hot meat pie, he'd be eating salads because of his

04:00 gut troubles so I gathered that it wasn't all cool, you know it wasn't all a great experience. Then again that was counteracted by my Uncle Ron who was in Armoured Corps and he didn't come home until about 1949. He was enamoured of Europe and so he stayed there. He didn't have a family to come back to but he had good experiences, so it was a mixture, but

04:30 overall it was positive, yeah.

Tell us about leaving school and deciding to travel around the country for a couple of years?

Well I didn't do that immediately when I left school. I left school and because my parents were working class people, the epitome to them would be to get a trade. A lot of my contemporaries were going to schools like Victoria Parade and

05:00 St Pat's College in East Melbourne and they could see that a technical education would probably be for me. Not knowing too much about what was what I went along for the ride which is why I went to, yeah Abbotsford Technical College, decided to get into the building game and I think the only reason that happened is because my mother used to, her favourite saint

05:30 was Saint Joseph who was a carpenter.

What sort of ambitions did you have when you were that age?

I was, like a lot of other kids, it was a big wide world and I didn't really know, you know. I knew that if my parents said, "Well okay, go for this apprenticeship in the building trade," then it probably was okay.

06:00 I hadn't thought about too much because you weren't subjected to worries or pressures or competition in those days. There were no great migratory groups to be in competition with. Work was plentiful. I never heard of anybody being out of work and so I gravitated towards the building trade. I found that the characters in that were every

06:30 bit as colourful as you found in Nino Culotta's They're a Weird Mob. That was a joy. The work itself was hard. That wasn't joyful while you were doing it but at the end of the day, and particularly when you turned 18 and you can go to the pub with your mates for a drink, you really felt like one, so it was the time of your life where a beer tasted really good because it took about the first four beers to fill the cracks in your tongue. So you worked hard

07:00 and you got, I guess from that you got good ethics out of it, good work ethics. At the end of my apprenticeship when we, myself and two friends, felt that we were ready to launch ourselves on the world, we did just that and so we headed for Sydney and we were all amazed to find, never having left Victoria before, that after you crossed the Murray there's a whole wide world outside of VFL [Victorian Football League] football

07:30 up there. The papers actually have other stuff in them beside men kicking balls. That was a revelation to

me. I thought this was wonderful and so I enjoyed Sydney, enjoyed working around Sydney. We did some interesting stuff there. We built a fellow called Douglas Levy's house at Palm Beach overlooking Lion Island on the Hawkesbury, and I mean that was just a joy to go to work.

08:00 We lived in Randwick and commuted to Palm Beach daily until such time as we got a portion of the house to lockup stage and he then invited us to sort of live in that lockup stage, and there we were living at Palm Beach for six months and every day was a joy. Every day Lion Island looked different and it was just wonderful to be there, but the work ran out in Sydney and we thought well we'd better move on, so we headed for Queensland.

08:30 We did work, before at Sydney we built the Narrabundah High School in Canberra, then Sydney and then we headed for Queensland. Canberra at that stage didn't have Lake Burley Griffin. We would walk home across the bed of the lake to our digs in, somewhere near Civic at the time. But then Sydney and then Brisbane and we did some work

09:00 around Tingalpa. Tingalpa was just a mosquito ridden swamp at that stage but they were building a few things there and then the credit squeeze hit, Menzies credit squeeze and it was I guess the late '50's, early 60's version of the recession we had to have. When they tightened

09:30 up money, the first thing that happens is that people don't want to build any more and so the building game is the very first game to be hit so that threw us back on our resources and we thought well we're young and we're fit and we're healthy and we're determined to do this trip, and harking back to my earlier observation that we'd never known anybody to be out of work. That was still the case, even in the recession. You could always find something to do so that we

10:00 found ourselves doing interesting stuff like building tennis courts. And then as we moved up the coast into the sugar areas, we got plenty of work planting cane and cutting cane, although the cutting cane became, it was a bit of a problem because they were just introducing cane cutting machines and the only work you could get were on sloping farms where the machines, the

10:30 machines prefer to work on flat ground. And we used to turn up at labour exchanges in places like Ingham, and being naïve and not realising the demographics of north Queensland we, I remember one time we went in there looking for work and being broadly ocker and saying Australianisms like 'wacko' and 'bonzer' and stuff like that.

11:00 And I remember saying this to a gentleman in a plaid shirt and jeans and a big broad hat and he said, "Parle Italiano?" [Do you speak Italian?] And I, of course I couldn't and this very Australian looking gentleman was an Italian. He was looking for people off the boat that he could catch up with the latest news, to hire, so work became pretty tight because there were a lot of hard working Italians up there. So

11:30 the further north we went, the hillier the farms tended to be, the less work was available, a bit of rough work like planting cane. We did pick cotton around the back of Rockhampton which I shudder to think of. You felt like a grazing cow all day long in a paddock with that job and then when you pick cotton all day, you had to lie on a verandah and

12:00 have your back straightened out by gravity, and then spend the next couple of hours jumping up and down on bales of cotton hanging from the rafters of the barn just about. They didn't have presses, so that was pretty full on.

You spent a couple of years travelling around Australia?

Yeah.

What would you say was the highlight?

Living on a beach north of Cairns.

12:30 There was literally nowhere else to go. You couldn't go too much further north because there were no roads. In those days the safest and most effective way to get to Cooktown was by sea. There was still a road through the bush but we were only in a 1952 Ford Customline utility truck and it was definitely not four wheel drive so that we found ourselves stuck in Cairns. And we weren't told to move on by

13:00 the police because there was nowhere really to move to. The beaches north of Cairns were marvellous, absolutely marvellous. They were pristine. They were uninhabited and I'm talking of places like Ellis Beach now which are northern suburbs of Cairns. Ellis Beach is where we lived. We lived on the beach. We were all as fit as buck rats. We could run up trees and pick coconuts so we lived

13:30 on a lot of coconuts and a lot of fish that we caught and it was an idyllic existence. Whenever we got our sustenance cheques, you'd have to sort of drive into Cairns to the post office and get those cheques plus your 12 and sixpence, clerk of petty sessions allowance for tea, bullets, sugar and whatever. When we got that money we'd head for the nearest

14:00 bakery. There were no such thing as franchise bakeries then but, you know in those days bakeries made bread that you could smell for eight blocks and we'd always buy a massive big crusty loaf because we were eating so much protein, our bodies were screaming out for carbohydrates, so that you'd buy a

massive big loaf of fresh bread and a pound of fresh butter and just slather it on and fresh bread, butter and Vegemite

14:30 until you were gorged and then you'd go back to the fish and coconuts again. But it was a lovely life. There were quite a few greens too that we'd have so it was a healthy existence, and swimming and just wandering around a community of Cairns and north Cairns and you get to meet people. We didn't have any money to go drinking. We never, ever spent any time in pubs. It was probably the fittest times of our lives, but people would find out there'd be three healthy young blokes living on the beach looking for work,

15:00 and so the word would filter through and you'd have a little job here and a little job there and that to me allowed me to understand why hippies evolved. And I've always had a sympathetic bent towards hippiedom.

What about girls?

Well girls were around. We were, as I say, we were all very fit young men, all very healthy and

15:30 we didn't have a lot to offer them in terms of monetary pleasure but by, due to personality we managed to make a few friends on the way around. Palm Beach was a good place for that actually. Palm Beach became a bit of a worry because there were actually some married women that hung around the Palm Beach RSL [Returned and Services League] club that were anxious to

16:00 make friends.

At what point did you feel you'd done enough travelling around?

Well I can recall we made a foray, yeah across Queensland to Northern Territory, across to North Western Australia but it was very raw then. There was no great road from Darwin to

16:30 Kununurra, so we came back to go down through the centre of Northern Territory with the intention of going down to Adelaide and then heading west again, which is what we did but somewhere down along the trip through the Northern Territory that we used to become terribly philosophical. When you'd be lying in your swag on the desert floor and you'd be looking at those

17:00 amazing skies of stars, that you know just to see that vista of gin clear sky and stars like that, you think, "God," you know. You start to think of concepts like God and destiny and all that sort of thing, and being I guess a randy young bunch, we'd be saying, "I wonder where the girl is now that we're going to marry? I wonder what she's doing. I wonder where she is?" and all this sort of stuff. So you'd start to think about that and then

17:30 those thoughts of mating would sort of lead you to, thinking of mating leads to settling down, leads to having a decent job, leads to, "What the hell are we going to do with ourselves?" And so that thought line was followed and it was about then that my friend, Bernie decided that okay the building game had whiskers on it because of the recession

18:00 and he was going to go home and transfer all his skills into becoming a technical school teacher. And he'd written ahead and in fact had secured himself a position at Preston Tech as a teacher. My other friend, Peter, didn't, was never involved in large building work. He always built houses and he had a

18:30 great support group of plumbers and electricians and things who lived near and around his family, so he decided he'd stay with the building game. I'd seen the writing on the wall and I thought well I'm not going to go through these ups and downs depending on the economy of the country and I'll start to use my head rather than my hands. And then I put myself through this little exercise of writing down all the things I liked and all the things I didn't like and then you sort of, when you look

19:00 at the page long enough it starts to become clear. So, you know I like travel and I like using my head and I like geography and I like flying. I'd done a little bit of flying with the Air Training Corps out at Moorabbin and I thought, "Well, you know why not fly?" So after we'd finished the trip I

19:30 directed all my efforts to learning to fly and where my parents had sent me to a technical college, I realised that I needed a higher standard of education so I went back and put myself through a night school in Melbourne. That was fascinating in itself. The learning process was good. I enjoyed that, more particularly because of the company that I kept. And I think I was the only Australian

20:00 in the class of about 50, 40, or 50. There were Germans and Dutch and French and Poles and all sorts of nationalities and when you go through a common experience you get close and so you found yourself going to their clubs, eating their food, drinking their coffee, again another revelation. I think I learnt more from the classroom than I did from the blackboard.

20:30 Again it sort of made, it changed my life to the extent where the old ocker Australian idea of socialising was, you know the cliché of standing around the keg and sort of admiring the girls from afar. Not for the Europeans, so you could actually bally up to a girl and say, "How do you do?" you know "How about we have a dance?" or something like that, without being snickered at or spoken about

21:00 behind raised hands, and I felt that liberating. I thought that was terrific, not to mention that some of the European girls were splendid looking, so the learning experience was quite a wide one. So I gained the necessary qualification with the intention of going to the

21:30 air force because they had jets and stuff, good, fast, big things. But the air force had upped their qualifications. They needed matriculation with two levels of science and two levels of mathematics. The army needed the two levels of maths and science but only at leaving level and I thought well I'd better make a move. Now while I was doing,

22:00 undertaking this night school, I was back off the track as you recall and I got a job, there was a plywood firm out the northern areas of Melbourne called Hancock's and I used to buy timber for them because I knew timber, which they would turn into veneer, and then I learnt the factory process. They said, their headquarters were in fact in Ipswich in here in Brisbane and they wanted me to join the firm as a

22:30 trainee manager and I was very flattered about that. I thought that was good. But I'd had my heart set on flying and so I said, "Okay thanks, but no thanks." And then threw my hat in the ring for this direct entry army pilot training course. That consisted of a lot of very intense psychology tests, physical tests, aptitude tests and I thought, "How am I

23:00 ever going to get through this?" And it seemed to go on for about six months but in the end the letter came through saying "You've been accepted," and the joy was palpable.

How would you describe your determination to achieve what you were after at that time?

Just like any person whose biography I'd read and it's all true.

23:30 I've said that to my own kids, that if you make up your mind to do it and you are focused and you don't waste effort on side fripperies, you'll get there. And I mean I guess even as a young man, I always tended to be a bit overweight but I'll tell you what, I was fit as a buck rat when I went in and I was running around football fields late at night on freezing cold nights, everything to sort of, you know get myself into that mental

24:00 and physical state that I imagined they'd want and I did it, yeah. And once you get there it's a tremendous feeling of achievement and when the whole thing culminates and you're going solo in an aeroplane owned by the military, out of Australia's oldest airfield at Point Cook, was just sheer bliss.

Can you describe that first experience?

24:30 Of going solo? Yeah I had, after 10 hours of instruction in the air you do your circuits according to a drill. You know you usually fly a square circuit. The instructor's there with you most of the time, well all of the time of course before you go solo. And then he makes sure you do all

25:00 your checks, your downwind checks, your finals checks, all that sort of thing and then when you roll to a stop with him sitting there and this is what happened to me. I think to myself, "Well I did make a few little cock ups there but yeah, generally that wasn't a bad little go." And then next thing I felt my back bone being pummelled and he said, "Righto I'm getting out," in the middle of the airfield and that's when sort of panic hits.

25:30 He said, "I think you're ready to go." "Okay." So he climbed out on the wing and waddled off with his parachute hanging off the back of him and towards the yellow and black chequered van, and there I found myself in charge of this four hundred and fifty horsepower Pratt and Whitney engine worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars, with the Royal Australian Air Force insignia on the side of it. And there I was rolling

26:00 so, you know you follow your drills. Then you're off the ground and you think, "Crikey, I can go anywhere from here," you know. You look out over the Bellarine Peninsula. You look out over Melbourne. You look out over Geelong, Werribee and there you are, on your own and yeah, you almost blow up with pride.

26:30 So then you find that before too long and you're up there admiring the scenery and remembering to check all your gauges and your valves and all this sort of stuff, and making sure your airspeed and altitude are okay you don't have too much time to think about that. Your chest is bursting with pride. I mean you think, "Christ, now I've got to get down." So then you find yourself that you're faced with that challenge and so you're on finals, you've got to be looking out for other aeroplanes and there it is. There you've got this whole big airfield to yourself and

27:00 then you follow your exercises and then you glide down and bang, your wheels touch the threshold, right at the threshold marker and next thing you're rolling to a stop. You don't realise then that your flying suit is saturated with sweat. You don't realise how much mental energy goes into the early flights. The first thing you want is a

27:30 very sugary, milky coffee and then you're given your debrief and usually around about the 10 hour mark you all go solo around about the same time, so that the Friday night in the mess was a riot, you know plenty of grog and you get your tie cut off

28:00 with a pair of scissors. I don't know where that came from that tradition but it's a stupid air force tradition. I had to go and buy myself another tie and then you're there and I guess the, when we're all lined up at the end of the course, all standing there in our flying suits, there was Sir Valston Hancock I remember was the chief of the air force and he was on his way out. He was an old time

28:30 air force identity with a splendid title and a splendid name, Sir Valston Hancock and he didn't know whether we were army, navy or air force because we all had green flying suits on. So he came along the whole line of us and shook our hands and said, "Welcome to the club." And I thought this bloody air force. It is like a club. Instead of driving Ferraris and things like that, they're driving around in Mirages and Sabre jets sort of thing, you know.

29:00 They're having a lovely time and I guess that was the only time that I was a bit soulful that I wasn't going to go on to fly air force type aircraft, because the army had smaller lighter stuff that was designed to work closer to the ground in support of the troops, which is a more dangerous role but you know you're flying. You know it's not automatic. You're in charge all the time,

29:30 yeah so.

Can you tell us about how you came to, or actually I should go back there, can you tell us about officer training?

Yeah, officer training initially, even though I'd been in the cadets and in National Service and I knew that officers were a peculiar breed full of quirks and quists who spoke in acronyms, I

30:00 thought, "Well, I'm going to have to become one to get where I'm going." And I guess I was always a bit of a rebel so that I always found that slightly amusing to do the officer sort of stuff, stamp the feet, yell at people and be polished beyond the spectrum, you know your brass and your leather and I'd think, "God what a

30:30 drag." But I think because I was so amused by the whole process, that's what got me through and in fact I can recall my first report, or after I graduated from officer training, you get a confidential report every year and my report was written by a very squiffy artillery officer whose eyes you could never see. All you could see was the peak of his hat and his nose and he

31:00 wrote 'This officer has a propensity for levity'. Now there were two words in that three word report that I didn't understand. One was propensity and one was levity so I headed for the dictionary and found out that I derived amusement out of certain situations, which I didn't think was too bad, yeah. And he didn't change me either

31:30 because I've always found that a lot of the military stuff is slightly ridiculous and I thought where I might have been a bit of a rebel in thinking that, I've found out that my best friends whom I see a lot of now, ex military types, laugh about just that, you know. It's a matter of being able to hide a larrikin sense of humour and

32:00 suck a very meditative tooth whenever some of the more ridiculous aspects of military life come up, yeah.

Why was it important to you to become an officer?

It wasn't. I didn't give a toss whether I became an officer or not. I just wanted to be a pilot but the way the army was structured, you had to be an officer to be a pilot. In fact one of the attractions of air force flying

32:30 when I first applied actually and was accepted, when the air force had lower expectations in terms of educational qualifications, was they had a course at Uranquinty in southern New South Wales where you could actually be a sergeant pilot and I thought, "How cool is this?" And you didn't have to worry about all that officer sort of stuff, just concentrate on flying and that was a hangover from the Second World War and Korea where they had to

33:00 put a lot of people through very quickly without all the other governs. The only reason I didn't accept that is because I put in. I was accepted. There seemed to be no challenge and all my friends said, "God you're going over to join the air force?" It sounded like you were going to be a Cistercian monk and be locked up forever, and like a fool I listened to them and so I babbled around for a few more years, and

33:30 including the trip around Australia. And I shouldn't have listened to them because when I eventually did join the army and we used to do our trips out of North Head during the officer training period, you'd always be doing something exciting like going to the range or learning how to fire artillery or drive a tank or something like that. You would see the same drab people standing at the same drab bus stops as you drove through

34:00 Sydney, thinking well, you know who's free here? But it took me years to wake up to that.

When you joined the army the Vietnam War was already under way?

The Vietnam War started in '62 according to my medal but it was very low key and there were a few advisors going up there. I think it, even at that stage, there were certainly no government commitment

34:30 to Vietnam. It was an interesting little stoush somewhere up there in a country that none of us had even ever heard of. I mean it was all Indochina. In fact I still think it was still split up on the maps in those days as areas like Kuching and places like that, but Vietnam didn't exist as an entity in Australian consciousness,

35:00 and so I guess they thought that for a place that no-one had ever heard of, it's not going to become terribly important so we won't worry about it. We'll just brush it under the carpet. But then as inevitably happens when America gets involved, they have a habit of thinking big and so I guess, yeah it became big, as we all know.

35:30 **But when you joined the army, did you have any thoughts about Vietnam?**

Never even heard of the place. See, yeah okay I joined in, permanently in '64. Vietnam was just coming into the consciousness of people, I guess but I know in '64 I wasn't thinking about Vietnam. I can honestly say I don't

36:00 think I'd heard of Vietnam in '64. I was concentrating solely on flying but then because you're living in a military environment and you're getting these sorts of reports and people know someone who was posted there and they've heard back what it was like, you know it seeps into your consciousness. Till

36:30 when I served with the battalion, with the 1st Battalion, prior to going to Point Cook, that then loomed very heavily into view because people were actually training to go to war as a battalion, not just as individuals. And then I think '65 was the year that it was really focused for me and of course all the rumours and the

37:00 methods and tactics of Viet Cong and how clever they were, and a bit of the history and all that sort of thing started to seep through, which I thought was a bit remarkable in hindsight because I mean South Vietnam, the population there consisted of two waves of people. They're all, actually the people who live there are ethnic, South Vietnamese and a massive big wave of people who came down in '54 from North Vietnam, and of course

37:30 Dien Bien Phu, the French massacre there at Dien Bien Phu appeared on newsreels but that was just stoush that the, "Frogs got themselves and they always seemed to be doing that sort of thing and always seemed to be losing and who cares about the French?" And that was the attitude sort of thing, yeah. So '65 it started to focus a bit.

When you joined the army in what sense were you thinking of it as a long-term

38:00 **career?**

Well I knew that it was going to provide me with a stimulation that I wouldn't have got in Civvy Street. It was either flying or being in charge of troops and I found that responsibility pretty fascinating because human beings are interesting people

38:30 and Aussie diggers are very, very interesting people. There is an homogeneity about them as a group. Individually they're totally different but there's always, you know I mean it always comes out, that larrikin spirit. The ingenuity to make do, the mischievousness, whatever it is it's always a challenge to

39:00 a person who wants to be a manager to that anybody whose managed diggers, particularly infantry diggers, isn't too bad at reading human nature and I guess that if this travel of ours through life is getting on with fellow human beings then that's a pretty good school to learn in so that I found that fascinating

39:30 and I could see that I'd be happy doing that as a career. It had a degree of prestige in those days. I mean before the war officers were generally respected as being a profession of arms. After the war everybody in khaki was castigated and that was a black period but then I guess

40:00 when people woke up to the fact that, you know nations need armies and need service people, the re-acceptance seeped back in but it was never to the extent that it was before Vietnam.

Tape 3

00:33 **You said that North Head was splendid isolation?**

Wonderful.

Can you talk a little bit more about that experience and the guys, those 14 people and why they became lifelong friends?

Well for starters we knew what we'd been through to get to that stage. The remarkable thing about that course of 14 blokes is that it split exactly half and half into

01:00 those 18 to 20 and those 25 and up, so that the older blokes tended to gravitate together but still

encouraged the younger fellers. The younger fellers were very, I don't know, just those few years difference were very

01:30 technically adept so that when… I remember there was a Scottish feller, Bill Davies, who was in the younger group and he introduced us to the concept of the Mobius strip and geographical concepts none of us had ever heard of, and when he actually drew one we were sort of amazed and so we were learning off each other. There was just a half generational difference

02:00 that was quite fascinating and it added another dynamic to the group. So that I guess not only had we had a common experience to get to that stage but we were all generally interested in each other as personalities.

Can you describe some of those personalities?

Yes we had an ex air force air traffic controller

02:30 who, I don't know, through the hierarchy of the air force he couldn't skip into the flying stream and he wanted to fly so he left the air force to join the army. You know his air force compatriots couldn't understand that because no-one has as good food as the air force for starters. He was also married, secretly. We weren't allowed to be married on the course. We weren't allowed to have wives,

03:00 girlfriends because it was such an intensive thing that you just didn't have the time to devote to the relationship but he had his wife secreted away in a suburb near Manly in Sydney, and two little sons as well so he did an extraordinary job to get through. There was an ex RAEME [Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers] craftsman who wasn't

03:30 all that brilliant at mathematics. I helped him with mathematical problems when we were both at Point Cook but he was one of these very stoic types. He used to ride bikes for a long distance. He was a road racer and he just had the most incredible focus and if he couldn't understand anything, he would just flog it until he did. He's become a very

04:00 successful share trader since he's been retired, living down the Gold Coast and quite wealthy. He went on to fly for the sultan of Oman and he admits himself he was almost totally ignorant of things mathematical. There was another friend who came from Thursday Island extraction. He was a dark bloke but his lineage was a Spanish Filipino,

04:30 Danish Ceylonese, but and his family sort of grew out of that mixture of people that are Thursday Island, very colourful, very polished performer. He was studying medicine before he joined the army. By his own admission he didn't do too well at medicine because he was such an attractive

05:00 looking bloke with all that racial mixture, that he had too many girlfriends and a motorbike so he found his medical exams were a bit of a chore and flying might have been something more easy to do, or at least it got him away from the girls. There was another fellow who grew up in Adelaide whose family was quite wealthy and his passion was playing the piano and the organ,

05:30 and he played organ at St Peter's Cathedral in Adelaide, magnificent organ player. He's now a light high up in the legal world in Adelaide. Another one was a country kid from Victoria who, unremarkable except for his focus again, but later on, after he

06:00 left the army and after Vietnam, won the highest civilian award for saving a life in Bass Strait in a storm. He was a helicopter pilot, used to fly out to the oil platforms in Bass Strait but when he was acting as a co-pilot he jumped into the sea and saved someone's life, and it was a remarkably brave thing to do in the waters, you know in the freezing cold.

06:30 We had another one who was Australian but grew up in America and he had an American accent. He was the first to be dismissed from the course because his attitude was a bit wrong and he tended to be a bit of a conman. He used to like looking at the stock market and was constantly encouraging us to put our meagre money into some of these wilder schemes that he had, but he

07:00 wasn't focused enough. He was brainy but he wasn't focused enough so I think he was the first bloke to go, of the 14 to be dismissed. We had another fellow from Tasmania, a real country lad. The quintessential tall, rangy, drawling Australian, bright as a button but unfortunately for him, I don't think his image measured up to this squiffy artillery

07:30 officer who was in charge of us, the one who all you could see was the peak of his cap and the nostril of his nose and so this poor fellow, because he didn't meet a stereotype, wasn't accepted, wasn't because he wasn't achieving. You know, he could have flown aeroplanes and he was doing very well at ground studies but he just didn't seem to fit this type, which was terribly subjective.

08:00 And I often, I think about that particular bloke because I think after all he went through to get there and there was this one person who was, had the power of life or death. It was a bit, yeah a bit arbitrary, very arbitrary in fact.

When you look back, you know out of those two thousand people, those 14 were chosen, what do you think they were looking for or what was their intention of choosing those people?

Well they wanted

08:30 someone who was obviously nothing wrong with them physically and who was bright enough to undergo the training and to fulfil the dual roles of pilot and officer. At that stage you only had Duntroon and Portsea. Duntroon and Portsea weren't demanding of you yet again to be technically proficient in flying. They

09:00 wanted you to do fairly normal academics, subjects like engineering and science and in the case of Portsea, not even that, just to sort of jump through the military hoops but we had that additional thing put on us which is why I think the selection criteria was so tough. And, as I said, it was only after we got into the course we realised how many applicants there had been and we thought well,

09:30 you know, we're not too stupid. We felt like it a lot of the time but, you know.

Can you explain what you'd do on a day to day basis, you said it was really intensive?

Well initially it was the usual army bull. You know, the fitting of the uniforms, the drill, the physical training, the academic stuff

10:00 like the organisation of the army, what all the acronyms mean, what we're capable of, you know all of the military subjects you do and the physical regime was pretty tough. It was, you know up at five thirty in the morning, out of bed, throw the body around doing physical

10:30 type stuff, back from that, clean your gear, get dressed, go to breakfast, come back, be ready for parade, you know all this sort of stuff, you know. It was interesting to see some of the North Queenslanders. They didn't take to the cold all that well. I remember the Thursday Island feller, he used to, when he was at that stage where they'd

11:00 give you about a five or 10 minute break to sort of polish your boots. He would have his feet cocked up on his desk with his boot in one hand and a brush in the other and he'd go to sleep and his facility for doing that was quite remarkable, you know so he'd snatch the odd forty winks wherever he could. So you'd go through the whole day and then you'd go through the night. You'd have night lectures so it was a mixture of physical stuff and academic stuff

11:30 and you did phases. You did certain phases of the course. They would take you I guess, from raw rookie to the things that corporals need to know then from corporal to what a sergeant needs to know and so you progressed to know what you needed to know at that stage for whatever rank. I found the initial part of it fairly easy because of my background in cadets and National Service that you could understand where things linked in.

12:00 But it was never, ever boring because you always knew that there was the challenge of learning things about organisations and weaponry and even personalities you needed to know. And then with that mixture of physical training as well you were always on the go, yeah so they were days that went

12:30 very quickly but when you were living through the physical side of it, it was, you know pretty much of a drag, especially early in the morning, on a winter's morning in Sydney at North Head. You would be expected to play your part in the normal running of the base like we were expected to do guard duty. Where the artillery soldiers were the normal guard at North Head, we would take our turn

13:00 at guard duty. And some of the nicest guard duty I've ever had was, I remember having to go up to the very end of North Head where they had a big water tower. There used to be fishermen would go through there to get onto the rocks to fish off the rocks and an occasional, I don't know, misguided lovers and sundry Bedouins and gypsies would get through because it was quite natural bushland there.

13:30 And people, it had to be guarded because there was a lot of valuable stuff lying around the stores and that and they didn't want people wandering willy-nilly through the area. But the best guard duty I ever had was sitting on top of the water tower at North Head looking back down the Harbour towards the city in the middle of winter at two o'clock in the morning, and just marvelling at the whole lot. It was just a light show and being warm as toast in your big officer pattern greatcoat,

14:00 and being able to afford a packet of fags that you can sort of light up and have a smoke. I thought that was wonderful, yeah.

Did you get any rec [recreational] leave and what did you do if you did?

Yeah we got, I'm trying to think about that. No, we got a break at Christmas

14:30 and we got a break at Easter and that was it. You'd get the odd weekend off, yeah that's right I remember. The Thursday Island bloke had a sister who was actually singing on the circuit in Sydney. She was quite well known and she used to play at places like Andre's nightclub but it's defunct now. All the

15:00 RSLs, all the theatres and she lived in a house at Crows Nest and it was fascinating to go there. She'd always, she and her friends would always be all over us and fill us up with good tucker and introduce us to friends, and in fact she was instrumental in getting Kamahl his first job when he first lobbed in from Malaysia. So there was exotic people floating in and out

15:30 all the time. Wilma Redding was another cousin, and all that crazy crowd that the theatre attracts, including the homos [homosexuals], who thought we were all delightful.

How did you blokes deal with that?

Well we were a bit uncomfortable at first because we'd never seen them en masse and with all such plumage and colour.

16:00 But when it became clear we just said, "Look we're not interested fellers," you know. That seemed to set the boundaries and they weren't pushy at all, you know. But again it was just like my experience of going to night school and mixing with a whole lot of Europeans. When you have that exposure to that theatrical sort of crowd, you no longer have the phobias and you can see the amusing side of it and how smart

16:30 a lot of them are, you know and why you get these growth areas like, you know when artistic people move into them. They seem to blossom, yeah. So it solved a lot of life mysteries I guess, moving through all these different groups of people.

So after the flying course, you did the conversion course?

Yeah.

Can you tell us about the conversion course?

Well the conversion course, when you

17:00 got to Amberley you were arbitrarily divided up into either fixed wing or rotary wing.

Can you describe what that division is?

Well the army required certain pilots to be trained to fly their fixed wing aeroplanes. They also required pilots to be trained to fly the rotary Bell Sioux.

17:30 I was always comfortable with fixed wing and I enjoyed fixed wing flying because you could seem to get places faster than you could with a chopper, but I was transferred into rotary. Now the reason why that was is that I think about two thirds were going to rotary and one third to fixed wing because rotary, helicopter flying was deemed necessary for the emerging problems that we were getting into in Vietnam, and they were more

18:00 operationally useful than a fixed wing aeroplane. And so I did my stint on helicopters and we basically flew around the training areas of Amberley and Mount Warning doing things like pinnacle landings on places like Mount Barney, Mount Warning, around that area. A lot of low flying, I mean with your skids at fence height

18:30 because that's what you needed to do, a lot of navigation exercises, a lot of re-supply stuff, was good training. I remember one exercise they said, "Here is a map. On that map down there at Canungra there is a platoon of soldiers that you have to drop supplies to. Where will you drop it?" And so on the map we had to pick out where we'll drop it and so the usual trap was you'd

19:00 see a nice clear spot on the map and you'd say, "Okay just about there." And they'd say, "Okay we'll go out there and we'll drop it there." So you'd drop your supplies there and then they'd say, "Now you go and get them." And then it quickly gave you an appreciation of how to read a map because the clear space that you picked out on the map might have been on top of a hill like that, and the last thing or what they were trying to do is to get you to empathise with the poor old grunter on the ground because he was the one who needed to get this stuff.

19:30 And it was very good learning so that's the sort of thing we did for close aerial support of the troops. Air force didn't like operating below about a thousand, fifteen hundred feet but in Vietnam they had to because they owned the Iroquois helicopters at 9 Squadron,

20:00 and as a result of Vietnam they no longer control that close air support which is why the army has Black Hawks and things like that, you know, yeah. So I flew around there for a while and there was

How difficult was it to, I mean what sort of flying techniques were different for you in that conversion course?

Well a helicopter is

20:30 totally different to a fixed wing aeroplane because in a fixed wing aeroplane if you work your rudder pedals then the thing at the back goes like that. On a helicopter the pedals that you use are a counterbalance and they help you balance the tail rotor. See with a helicopter you've got all these different forces acting on you. The amount of force that goes into turning the rotor

21:00 acts in the opposite way to the body of the helicopter, so it's just like having two pencils wound up on a rubber band. They'll react off each other so that the idea of the tail rotor is to keep the body of the helicopter balanced against this force, this twisting force so they're balance pedals rather than a rudder direction thing. The mere act of hovering, they're such a touchy

21:30 vehicle, certainly the ones I flew. The first attempts at hovering would take up almost a whole airfield. It was fairly comical to see a new pilot doing this, you know but literally when you first lifted the helicopter off the ground, you've got a thing called the ground affect. It's like virtually sitting on top of an air bubble of high pressure and if you move the wrong way without compensating the right way you can slide off that air

22:00 bubble which can be dangerous close to the ground.

Any accidents in training?

Not on my course, no. They did have some later on.

So no accidents on your course?

No, there was,

22:30 there were accidents later on. A very dear friend of ours was instructing a young pilot and things went skew whiff close to the ground on a mountain top near Mount Barney in a very rocky, granity area, and when our friend who was the instructor took over to correct what the student was doing, the aeroplane

23:00 acted in a totally different way to what it should have, which is probably why the student was in trouble in the first place. And what had happened is that the mechanics had put the medals in back the front so that when he kicked it one way it went the other way and the tail rotor shattered on a rock. That sent the thing into an uncontrollable spin and killed them both. There was

23:30 an accident at Point Cook whereby an army pilot barged in on an air force, both cadet pilots, fellow on his finals, tipped the air force bloke upside down so he actually landed upside down on the muddy field at Point Cook, was in winter so the other bloke had mud forced down his throat and into his lungs and

24:00 wiped off the bottom part of his face. And we thought that's it, curtains, but strangely enough he lived, so then it, you know there were accidents. In Point Cook for instance it was usual to have anything up to 28 aeroplanes in a circuit, in a tight circuit at any one time and it was pretty busy. The air traffic controllers were certainly earning their money and so were the pilots. So

24:30 yeah, it was intensive but I think generally speaking, yeah the training was pretty good.

Was it a big operation for the army to implement strategies for helicopters?

No not really, no the strategies grew with the use of the helicopter and I guess

25:00 air support of troops on the ground had been growing since the first balloons went up in World War I. Basically the idea is can we get a look at the enemy, can we find out what he's doing and that's all that altitude will give you so you get a good view of what's cooking around the place, but it also provides you with a good platform for weaponry and other gizmos like people sniffers that we used in Vietnam.

25:30 And also the benefit of radio telemetry for the transmission of secret stuff from SAS [Special Air Service] patrols and it gives you the wherewithal to eavesdrop on enemy transmissions from altitude so that aeroplanes are basically a platform for

26:00 doing stuff off. Once you get through the Biggles factor and the fact that, you know it's a bit of a joy to be up above the steamy jungle, that's all they are. They're a higher platform and that's the way you're encouraged to look at them too. So I guess no, the strategies, I mean helicopters were never, ever used en masse like the Americans used them in Vietnam.

26:30 They didn't have air cavalry squadrons where you, you know, basically you had ground battalions who were air lifted in sections into areas so it wasn't a strategy so much as a new use of a new form of transport, and I guess this was the defining factor of the Vietnam war too when you think about it. I'm sort of jumping ahead of myself here a bit

27:00 but yeah, what made Vietnam different? There was a lot of contretemps in and around the RSL clubs and things after the Vietnam War, why were these Vietnam diggers so effective and the World War II guys had a bit of a problem with understanding why. And the answer

27:30 is the helicopter. See in World War II you had very, very big units who fought hard actions and then they'd be over and they'd be out of the field for sometimes months until the next big push. My Uncle Jack was a case in point, you know from Tobruk it was a big break and then New Guinea but in Vietnam the helicopter took you there daily if that was the requirement.

28:00 So that you finished up with a lot of twitchy young men who were seeing constant action and it was because the chopper could get you in and get you out so from that point of view, yeah helicopter warfare changed it a lot but, I'm sort of digressing here.

No that's good we'll go back to that too. I mean did you enjoy the training on helicopters?

I enjoyed the flying because

28:30 I was competent at doing it. I enjoyed it. I didn't enjoy the atmosphere around the flying school at that time because army aviation didn't exist then as a corps. It was a collection of blokes who had been taught to fly by the army

29:00 usually at flying schools, from the point of view of being aerial observation posts so that many of them were artillery officers and the one corps in the army that has more quiffs in its Officer Corps than in any other corps, is artillery. How this has evolved I don't know but they are very, very eccentric people

29:30 to the extent that at dining in nights I'd seen people with lace handkerchiefs stuffed up their cuffs. I'd seen a bloke taking snuff and they all tended to like to live in the oldie worldy sort of atmosphere and do these terribly, terribly British things that it was just so un-Australian that sometimes it was even hard to laugh at, you know. So that the early aviation

30:00 embryonic Aviation Corps was full of these people and after I'd stopped laughing they just became anathema and I thought, you know, "I can't do this any more." So that's when I started looking around for another corps.

Why do you think they congregated into that section?

Well because artillery, it was, flying was an artillery function. Flying was the only way that they could have an aerial observation

30:30 post and many of them were employed in Malaya through the emergency so that you could spot the fall of shot over the jungle canopies and things, you know so that it was only artillery officers who were given the chance to do the flying so the embryonic Aviation Corps was mainly artillery officers and which is one of the reasons too that our chief

31:00 instructor on our officer cadet course at North Head was an artillery bloke and that's why we did it at North Head. That was the school of artillery so that it was a pretty heavily artillery orientated course and it was populated by some very, very strange people. Being, well I like to think as a more pragmatic type, particularly after my experiences in the building game,

31:30 I found it very hard to adjust to that sort of culture and so I said, "No I'll look around for something else." I'd done a stint in an infantry battalion. I knew what they were all about. I was, as I mentioned to you before, I was part of the older group in our cohort of direct entry pilots and so I didn't particularly want to go back and run around the bush with a big pack on

32:00 and I was looking for something a little bit more cerebral and the Intelligence Corps suggested itself to me which is why I eventually went there.

How did it suggest itself to you?

Well because of the process of elimination. I said, "Well," you know, "I don't want to do that, that, can't do that and I think I'll do that," you know.

It was still pretty fledgling wasn't it at that point?

Intelligence Corps? No it's the oldest Intelligence Corps in the British Commonwealth. It's even older

32:30 than the British Intelligence Corps. It was formed in 1907 to counter the French and Russian influence in the South Pacific believe it or not and it's, the reason that it's not called the Royal Australian Intelligence Corps is because we're older than the Brits and therefore they won't give us the prefix Royal. It's a totally jealousy, Commonwealth, bull thing, yeah.

So what did you know of it and what they did?

Well

33:00 I knew what they did because of the training, my previous training and you're given an introduction to every corps and it fascinated me that the practise of intelligence is the pulling together of all the arms and services that are

33:30 the command of your commander, okay. And it means that you are always in the know and I guess what fascinated me about that was that as a National Serviceman you found yourself doing stuff, digging a hole in a field or laying out in the rain and not really knowing why. You didn't have the big picture.

34:00 With intelligence, you do because you're privy to the information that is flowing towards that central decision spot and it's your job to turn that polyglot collection of information into something intelligible that you can apply against the enemy and inform your commander, and then sit back and say, "Well okay," you know, "let's watch the results of this." So that you've always got your finger on the pulse. And that I found

34:30 fascinating because it's easy to get lost in a big organisation like the army and when you're there in the driver's seat you think, well cool, you know now I know what's going on. You know the reasons for things, yeah.

Is it hard to take a side step like that?

Wasn't for me, no.

Can you describe that process?

Well I just simply put in for a corps transfer and my CV [curriculum vitae]

35:00 I guess was sent down to the Intelligence Corps. They knew that we didn't have any Nazis or communists or anything like that in the family and I wasn't a security risk. I didn't have any exotic European or Asian backgrounds or anything like that and they would have said, "All right well he's certainly a candidate." They took me on to do some initial training while they did all the national security checks

35:30 and once I passed all those they said, "Well okay you've got your required number of fingers and toes and you're fit and healthy and reasonably intelligent," so there you go.

So what sort of things were you learning in the initial training?

In intelligence? Again basically how the system works, how intelligence is actually manufactured, you know how you,

36:00 it's again it's a lifestyle transforming sort of exercise you go through. You never, ever look at life again the same way. Once you've learnt the basic intelligence cycle, which is that you start off with a problem, you've got a problem, okay and then you do an appreciation of how I'm going to solve this and then you say, "Okay I'll need this sort of information." So you collect the information and then you shuffle it altogether and you

36:30 collate it and then you interpret it, and then the last stage is you disseminate it because knowledge is no good with the army if you're the only one whose got it, yeah. So it's a continual process of doing appreciations and you can do it yourself. I mean you want to buy a new car so, "Will I get a Holden or a Ford?" So you've got your problem and you do your appreciation. You start to gather all the bits and pieces about what's cheaper, what's more economical,

37:00 you know you collect the information, you put it altogether and then you interpret it so it's a lifestyle thing that you do all the time and that's a good little mental discipline when things seem to be chaotic around you. You can sort of, you know it's a focusing point so that that's generally what they teach you, you know. You learn about how

37:30 army intelligence fits in with other intelligence organisations, how they make, I mean this latest thing about ONA [Office of National Assessments] for instance and all the problems that they had disseminating that for Iraq, amazes me as an old intelligence type that that situation should never have come about. Because, I'm probably

38:00 diverting here, but I mean in the old days you'd have defence intelligence in the form of whatever troops you have in the country reporting to the government, then you would have another level of intelligence gatherers in foreign affairs, who usually had an entirely different outlook on what was going on. Where they'd be drinking cocktails with their little fingers up

38:30 in the air and hearing nice things about personalities and trade and how everything was hunky dory, usually the military types on the ground hearing a different picture. And that created a lot of confusion in the minds of prime ministers and it culminated in Malcolm Fraser's day and I understand he was very easily confused. But they then thought they'd invent this organisation called the Office of National Assessments which

39:00 brought the diplomatic or foreign affairs stream of intelligence into the defence side of it. They then sorted it out and then they went to the prime minister to say, "This is what's going on," and that was the raison d'etre for ONA.

And you don't think it was a good?

Well it was a good move and it should have worked well but it turns out, it seems to me, by reading the papers and listening to my contemporaries that ONA has sort of got a mind

39:30 of its own now and no longer there's that old streaming of, from different sort of areas, take place because you've got people like Wilkie who make up their own mind about what's going on, and that's not always a good thing yeah. Because that's another principle of intelligence. It's got to be concentrated at the highest source after it's been through all the filters so that you don't make mistakes and it also

40:00 provides a check and balance against, again, what happened in Iraq. I mean what happened in Iraq was exactly what happened at the Bay of Pigs in JFK [US President John F Kennedy] when there was a phenomenon known as 'group think' came into it. When everybody sitting around the big table knew that the president wanted to go to war against Cuba. They just went along with him. And as an instructor of intelligence I used to teach that that sort of thing shouldn't happen. You know your streams of intelligence should be so clear

40:30 that you give this briefing and that no one personality can override that. Well I'm sorry to say I think it

happened and I think yeah, the Yanks either keep bad records or they've forgotten what they should have learnt, sad to say.

Tape 4

00:32 **Can you tell us a little bit about the Intelligence Corps that you joined and how they accepted you into that?**

Yeah, initially I was on my own and I was given the keys to a classified library and told to find my way around it and to generally browse and read up, do a bit of background reading and the reason for that is that there was a

01:00 crusty old CO [Commanding Officer] of the school at Middle Head who was a very busy man, a very knowledgeable man and because Vietnam was very much on the boil, he had a lot of courses to be put through the school and not a lot of time to give to me individually, or as an individual. There were people being

01:30 trained mainly on the training team to do intelligence gathering tasks but even mundane stuff like how do they get their pay, how do they live? They were living in isolated areas in and around Vietnam and as individuals, not as groups so that they needed to find out from people who had been there, how they got their ammunition, how they got their rations, how they got their money, how they got out of the place and into the place, their mail

02:00 and a lot about general Vietnamese customs and practices so that they wouldn't step on anybody's toes when they got there, a lot about Vietnamese army tactics, a lot about Viet Cong tactics and so all those courses were very intense and extremely important for these blokes because it was life and death stuff. Now they were going on at the time when I got to the centre and so I was left pretty much to my own devices.

02:30 I was then shepherded, after I'd sort of read myself into a lot of this stuff, I was then shepherded around to different areas of electronic intelligence; aerial photographic intelligence, how to interpret, you know fuzzy pictures; counter intelligence, how you stopped them sort of looking over your back fence;

03:00 operational intelligence, strategic intelligence, a lot of geopolitical stuff. So that you, the idea of it was to try to graduate, or not graduate, we weren't graduating with it, but try to inculcate learning along the lines that any officer or soldier in the corps could I guess go to

03:30 a stockbroker in a pub and have an intelligent conversation and walk out of there and go to the next pub and talk to a wharf labourer and say, "How much do you earn?" Without getting your face punched in. So you had to be able to move within society and within many international type scenarios because your work generally is at headquarters level. You will meet

04:00 other people, other Poms, other Americans, Kiwi's, Frenchmen, Germans, you know whatever, and so you've got to be able to get on and not only get on but then be able to say, "Well okay, how do you do Pierre?" And, "What's cooking in Italia?" sort of thing, you know.

What was your first impression of the centre?

Well again it was, physically it was a fascinating place because it was, it had been there since well before Federation

04:30 and the whole headland is honeycombed with tunnels and dungeons and gun emplacements, and it was historically fascinating. It had fascinating neighbours. It had what was then called the school of Pacific administration, and that school used to train people to operate throughout the Pacific and particularly New Guinea and that in itself

05:00 would lead you to have swaps with lecturers so that you had a cross-pollination of ideas and yeah, it was rather ideal to have it there. It had a good basis for signals communication because it was close to the coast and yeah, it was physically a beautiful place to live and the facilities were comfortable

05:30 and it was close to a lot of the good action, particularly Fleet headquarters, you know the navy was there. It wasn't too far from Williamtown and Richmond and so you had air transport to take stuff in and out of places which became important a bit later on because in Vietnam is where the army first introduced the use of computers and no-one knew what these things were, and they were enormous. They were as big as that piano

06:00 and you had to have a secure way of getting them in and out of the country and usually air force obliged, because to take them through customs and they said, "What is that?" you wouldn't know. So for all purposes yeah, Middle Head was wonderful. It was also used as a base for what they called code of conduct training, and code of conduct training was not so much brutal but pretty physical

06:30 in that it taught people how to resist interrogation if ever they found themselves in trouble. And that course grew out of our involvement in Korea where we actually had I think about 80 Australians became

prisoner of war of the Chinese, and the Chinese used certain techniques and it was like a warning on how to resist this sort of stuff.

07:00 There was a lot of sleep deprivation and a lot of noise pollution and stuff like that, that would jangle your brain and next thing you know you'd be selling your soul for a toothbrush, you know so they taught them to resist that. Now those courses were done in and around those tunnels in dungeons down there where you could have light deprivation and all that sort of stuff, and it sounds pretty barbaric but it was considered to be one of the more useful courses that the army ran, particularly by the SAS.

Did you do the course?

07:30 I ran them, yeah.

So how do you teach people then to deal with that stuff?

Well, you've got to learn to raise their level of discomfort I guess. I mean we don't realise how incredibly comfortable we are in modern life where you want a drink of water, it's there. You want a hamburger, it's there, you know and levels of comfort are just part of our life.

08:00 Whereas in Asia or in eastern Europe just the fact that you're there, I mean anybody who's been on a train from Vladivostok would know, you know borsch and beetroot and cabbages and, you know what you want to live on for the rest of your life. So that it sort of exposes them to discomfort for starters and then you can introduce ideas of sights and smells. I mean they would never see anything that, and this is probably still classified stuff,

08:30 they would never see anything that was recognisably Australian. You would never smell a gum leaf. You would never see an Australian badge. You would never even smell an Australian cigarette. It was total sensory control with the aim of disorientating people to the stage where they'd start to swap information and, as I said, the SAS thought they were brilliant. Now those courses

09:00 stopped around about when the centre was relocated to Woodside and it came about because there was something brutal happen in Indonesia and whoever was the Indonesian officer in charge said that he'd done courses in Australia but he never, ever did a code of conduct course in Australia. He only did the normal foreign officers course stuff, you know. But then Lance Barnard,

09:30 who was Gough Whitlam's offsider actually rang the intelligence centre one Sunday morning and I happened to be the duty officer and he said, "Is that intelligence?" I said, "Yes, who's this? Hello minister." "Are you still running code of conduct courses there?" And I said, "I think you'd better talk to my CO." I wasn't going to tell him anything and anyhow push came to shove and it turned out we were but

10:00 and so he soon stopped them. Now it was for an entirely wrong reason. It was another example of a politician jumping to conclusions that he shouldn't have jumped to so they're not done any more and of course any good thing always pops up in another form, so that the SAS does their own now over in Swanbourne in Perth.

So the outcome of the Indonesian officer was to stop the code of conduct courses?

Yeah

10:30 it was something that an Indonesian officer did to an Indonesian soldier or person over there. He was on record of having trained in Australia, which meant that he would have gone to the school of artillery as well, you know but the Whitlam government was very paranoid about things, hence Lionel Murphy's raid on ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] and all that sort of stuff, you know. They were very, very, they looked over their shoulder all the time

11:00 to the point of being comical but because they had that attitude, the intelligence centre was pretty much in their sights, you know and the stupid thing about it is most of the people in the intelligence centre used to vote labour which I always found amusing, yeah.

That's sort of running ahead a little bit, can you tell us a little bit more about some of the early days of intelligence, what was interesting to you about,

11:30 **cause you were hearing a whole bunch of things?**

Yeah well, as I said, the major source of interest was how you could apply the effective intelligence gathering powers of all branches of the army, navy and air force. Your little SAS patrol would tell you things. Your army aviation, with an intelligence operator

12:00 in the chopper, would be gathering chemicals omitted by humans and, you know the normal things like camphor so you had people sniffers. You had electronic signals intelligence and it was fascinating to me to see all this stuff flow in to create a picture and you could say, "Hah, hah," you know, "this is what he's doing, this is what we know he's doing." Aerial reconnaissance, photographic

12:30 stuff, satellite stuff. It really is very, very interesting to know that if someone's out trying to kill you that's how he's going to try and do it, and it's I guess like boxing. You know if you can counter the punch then good and living at the sharp end like that was good.

Did you feel it was overwhelming at first?

13:00 Not really, no. I knew that there was a lot to learn and I found the learning process very interesting but the other good thing about the army is when you're getting swamped, there's always someone to ask because the army has the culture that no-one is expendable or non-expendable. Everybody has it in the back of their mind that if they get hit with a bullet, there's someone going to jump into their shoes. You know there's nothing

13:30 Napoleonic about the way we tend to think. No-one's immortal and so out of that culture grows the fact that it's a linear learning process and you know yourself in ordinary life, if you ask someone for help, well they'll give it to you. They're only too pleased to give it to you and if they can see, you know and it's more so in the services, especially in the army, yeah. So there's always a mentor

14:00 and if you meet a grumpy old bugger, you can always find someone else, you know.

Did you have a significant mentor at that time?

Yeah well, the old boss there was very busy. He was an inspirational sort of a feller. I mean he used to do, strangely enough, ham radio as a hobby. There was another fellow who spoke eight I think, languages,

14:30 certainly eight, may have been nine, who had a Middle Eastern background but was as Aussie as you could be and his hobby used to be cryptanalysis, was breaking codes. That's what he did as a hobby and never being as bright as that, it would fascinate me just being in their aura, you know and knowing that whatever you were going to learn was going to be 24 carat stuff,

15:00 yeah so.

So what happened then, how long were you there and what happened after that?

At the intelligence centre, when I was considered to be full bottle on what I needed to know for them to inflict me on the army, I was then posted to Northern Command up here to either pass on a lot of that knowledge that I picked up, to

15:30 sort of act as an instructor to units preparing to go overseas, and a little bit of counter intelligence security stuff to make sure that they were protecting themselves as best they could. There were a few groups around at the time that were interested in stealing weaponry from the army and there was a lot of money being spent on security

16:00 from everywhere from Wallangarra to Cairns, you know and Mount Isa and places like that and they weren't bikey groups. They were groups who, like OPM [Organisasi Papua Merdeka – Free Papua Movement] for instance, wanted a lot of weapons to go to New Guinea, to go over the border. It wasn't in our best interest to encourage that sort of thing so you had to be pretty secure, so I spent a bit of time doing that. And then

16:30 when my predecessor in the intelligence job at 6 Task Force got posted to Vietnam I went out to Enoggera to replace him and that's where I did my training for war, in addition to running the 8th Battalion and the 6th Battalion through their exercise

17:00 at Shoalwater Bay. And that was their shakedown exercises for Vietnam, to teach them how to operate. 8th Battalion was a bit unfortunate because it had a pretty bad exercise and was sent as an emissary to Malaya because it had, it didn't sort of pass the exercise. It failed and it had a lot of problems with aerial resupply and there was a lot of, the exercise was designed around their use of air

17:30 and they hadn't sort of studied it hard enough, so they went to Malaya and another battalion went to Vietnam. Eventually 8 got to Vietnam but that's the sort of thing you get involved with at a Task Force level. Now a Task Force is a pretty handy type of headquarters for an intelligence officer to work on because you usually work out of the one mess. You have immediate contact with all your

18:00 arms and services people around you. You form a very intimate working relationship and you get to know very, very rapidly how a biggish fighting machine works and how you can lay your hands on stuff pretty quickly and that in turn became handy for me to know when I went back on my second tour to Vietnam to command a unit because I found myself running intelligence operations in the field

18:30 and knowing how to call in air support and artillery support and engineer support, and all the other support I needed was very, very handy and a lot of the friendships and contacts I've made through the exercise period in Enoggera were there. I knew the guys. I knew how to get things done.

What were you hearing about Vietnam when you were at Enoggera?

Well at that stage

19:00 it was very much on the scene and you actually had battle maps. You had fire and manoeuvre that the Yanks had been through, that our blokes had been through. The 1st Battalion under Lou Rumfield

19:30 whose daughter's married to Lou Evers, yeah, he was deployed around Bien Hoa, which was between

where we eventually finished up at Nui Dat and Saigon in that area. There's a lot of good stuff come out from there.

What do you mean by that, what good stuff?

Well how Charlie worked, how the VC [Viet Cong] worked, how tenacious they were.

20:00 One of my good friends got his jaw shot off by not keeping his head down when he should have. We had to look for things, how they, you know how generally they operated. He got his jaw back too I might add, later on. Now he looks like Tyrone Power.

What specifically were you hearing about the VC?

That they were a very, very resourceful,

20:30 very resourceful enemy and very dedicated. They could make a lot from a little. They knew very well how to move, how to move whole battalions very rapidly. They knew how to communicate at a very sophisticated level.

21:00 They knew harassing tactics which brilliant guerrilla stuff and we knew that they had the capability from what they did to the French but up close they were refining it. We were also getting a feel for the support that they had within the population, or the lack of it, depending on what it was and

21:30 we started to get a feel for how they could swing in main force battle elements from North Vietnam so that all of those things were good grist for the mill, and so that when it came to the time round about the Battle of Long Tan in '66 it wasn't a total surprise that there was a major North Vietnamese unit in and around our Task

22:00 Force headquarters. It wasn't a total surprise. It made a lot of people sort of think you know, how can this many people move this quickly and under such concealment? But when our signals people, again intelligence signals, picked up their main headquarters radio signal moving, no-one was totally shocked. They tended to disbelieve

22:30 the intelligence because electronic intelligence wasn't generally used widely. It was still a very secretive sort of thing. The intelligence went directly to the commander but his troops were saying, "I don't know about this." You know, but anyhow that taught us that, you know North Vietnamese regiments can be swung in behind the local VC battalion and those sorts of tactics evolved. We became

23:00 very good at picking them out and at picking their tactics and at countering the tactics because of our ability to move through the bush and to live in the bush comfortably and we became quite prickly to them so the extent was that Phuoc Tuy province, which was our main area of operations was totally dominated by Australians.

Do you think in some ways more so than

23:30 **the Americans?**

A hell of a lot, God yeah, there was no comparison. I mean the Yanks, yeah I think the Yanks suffered from a John Wayne complex. They, I didn't meet an American commander who didn't give me the impression that he felt that he had a camera trained on him from birth, you know that he had to act.

24:00 I actually met General Patton's son who was still running around with his father's pearl-handled Colt 45s on his hip, you know, sort of ostentatious bullshit. They lack the old British feeling of the command, chain of command. Every one of them

24:30 wants to be Audie Murphy [most decorated US soldier in World War II] or that's the impression I got anyway. But if the word came from the top that this is the way you've got to do it, it would be questioned at every level so that there was, you know when push came to shove and you had to stick to a battle plan, very often it would disintegrate because they'd all be doing their own thing, and the first principle of war is selection and maintenance of the aim. You know you select what you want to do and then you aim for it so that

25:00 the Yanks had that permeating all levels from General Westmoreland down, and they didn't know how they should even monitor the progress of the war except maybe by body count. But their army thrives on bullshit, even to the extent of personal reporting. I mean I personally had to be the reporting officer for American exchange officers

25:30 and their reporting system went from one to a hundred points. Because they were sent out here they were usually presentable young men and very knowledgeable and all that sort of thing. And I'd give them a score of say 92 to 98 depending how good they were. If they got anything under 95 they'd be crestfallen. They looked like they'd been punched in the face, you know or they were ready to drag themselves out and slit their wrists, "Can't go home with," you know, "sub 95."

26:00 And I'm saying, "What's the point of having a one to a hundred score?" you know if I can't range up a bit so the whole culture is, thrives on unreality.

What was the point of Australia getting involved then, from your point of view?

Well the Yanks found that for political reasons they needed allies, like they do now, you know.

26:30 The American culture, a large segment of it, would very willingly go back to isolationism. You know, they're quite happy being Americans, let the world go on by themselves, just don't upset our baseball our burgers. Their egos can't let

27:00 them do that. I mean they're so involved in areas, all areas of the world and I guess the world is playing back to them too because we've involved in Americana, you know. I mean have a look at this Microsoft. It's on everybody's desk, so that and the globe is shrinking all the time so they can't extricate themselves but many of them would like to, which is why if they get involved in overseas adventures, they always want someone to hold their coat or go in with them, you know, same with

27:30 Vietnam. Vietnam they had Korea, Thailand, Philippines, ourselves, New Zealand and I think there were about eight or nine altogether that went in to do the thing but they were always very wary of Vietnam, because going right back to the Second World War and the American Generals, Vinegar Joe Stilwell and people like that who went through Asia. They said, "Don't ever get involved with a land war in Asia," because they could see

28:00 that the, you know the culture and the size of the place and the logistics and all the other associated problems, even like medical problems, you know malaria and foot rot and all the other things you get. It's just horrific, but they did it because they thought they could and when they first went in, this nation of such great wealth and

28:30 a lot of genius, they are, you know, bright people, first went in with Hill Fort. You know they sent their advisers in with stockades like you saw in the old western movies and it was like, "Where are the Apaches?" you know, "Where are the Indians?" And the sorts of war that Mao Zedong and Nor Jin Jap and all these other generals were fighting, was not

29:00 that war and they were, you know for all their gadgetry expertise, they're quite unwise in the ways of the world and the way that human beings think. And in fact their geographical knowledge is abysmal and it happens. I mean the old cliché, "Is it Austria or Australia?" that happened a lot, you know. I was even asked after a briefing that I gave a senior American

29:30 officer, to do him a favour at drinks at the bar afterwards and say a few words to him in my native language and I mean, you know and he was way up there so that their knowledge of the world is quite weak and they're starting now to admit it. I mean after 9/11 they came out and they said, "Look we had no Arabic expertise at all."

30:00 Which is another worry because who do they go to? They go to Israel for their expertise because they've been fighting the Arabs all the time and the Israelis are going to give them intelligence with a certain bent so they keep digging themselves deeper.

So as you got closer to going to Vietnam, did the reality of war start to hit home to you?

Yeah, the first unfortunate thing was the unpopularity

30:30 of the war because when we went away, we had to go away and board the aeroplane in civilian clothes and I thought this isn't right. So that when we got to Singapore, we then changed into our uniforms and then we flew from Singapore onto Ton San Nhut and Saigon airport and that was like Blade Runner. It was everything going everywhere. There were types of aircraft I'd never seen before in my life flying in and out there.

31:00 It was the busiest airfield in the world and all over Vietnam, all around Saigon, you could smell aviation gas and diesel fuel and just the sheer buzz of the place was intense. It was, I mean Saigon was I think built for seven million people and I think it had about 12 million in it then and it was just busting. The old French infrastructure couldn't cope.

31:30 You had sewage pipes rusting into drinking water and it was just, you know. Anyway and when I landed there it was Tet, the big offensive was on so that it was quite usual to see rockets going off around the city sky. I at first went to live in a bachelor officer corps in Saigon city and yeah, there was machine gun fire and tracer fire and rockets

32:00 and, you know the rattle of small arms fire all around the city, all the time, much like you see on the TV from Baghdad, you know, only a hell of a lot more busy yeah. So that you certainly, you're shaken into it when you get there. There's no chance for thinking well, I'll take a leisurely view of all this. The first bus they put you on after you get off the aeroplane is heavily barred for anti rocket and shrapnel and, you know

32:30 you're looking out at the, you think "Hello, here we are." And there's sandbags everywhere and, you know weaponry. Everybody carries a weapon, yeah it was just, the first days were just incredibly intense.

What were you going to be doing when you got there?

I was going to be working on headquarters AFV. What the specific job entailed I was never quite sure. I was given quite a lot of

33:00 work to do on pulling briefing notes together because we had to attend Americans briefings and briefings from the other nationalities, tell them what we were doing and get from them what they were doing and generally compare notes to see how things were going. They were also responsible for our

33:30 re-supply which we paid back every dollar I might add. Where the Koreans and the Filipinos and the Thais and everybody were into the American resupply system for free gratis and for nothing, we very nobly said, "Well we'll pay for all this, thank you." God we never learn, so that there was a lot of liaison done at all levels through logistics, intelligence, the combat arms and all that sort of thing. But, as I said before, my stint there lasted

34:00 a short while before I was posted to Vung Tau because there was perceived to be a need with the growth of locally employed civilians and we also knew that Vung Tau was a rest and recreation centre for the VC. After a certain amount of time in the jungle strangely enough your skin develops a green hue, Asian skin does, you know it goes a bit sort of more sallow than usual and

34:30 because that can be a bit of a giveaway, they like to, as we did, liked to give their blokes a break to soak up a few rays, so that they couldn't be easily spotted, yeah.

So can you describe getting into Saigon and where you went and what you had to, the specifics of what you had to do?

Well Saigon was basically a ride from Ton San Nhut airfield through this chaos on a shuttered bus

35:00 to a seedy old concrete block of a place called the Buewers Hotel which was a bachelor officer quarter. It was populated by mainly Australian, American, New Zealand officers, as opposed to another pub that had in, what the Yanks called, enlisted men where they had privates and things. It served totally

35:30 abysmal food. The first meal I had there was some beef thing on toast that was grey and it looked like something that a mother bird would regurgitate for her young and it didn't get any better until we got onto Australian rations. The daily routine was up early in the morning, into the shuttered bus to the headquarters.

36:00 Do your, you know pick up, collate all the stuff you needed to do, jump into your jeep, run it over to the American headquarters or where else you had to go, pick up stuff and then back again, mainly paper pushing. But, like I said, I only did that for about three weeks and then when I was given the chance or when they said, "Okay there's a need for an intelligence officer at Vung Tau." I thought, "Well beauty, that's closer

36:30 to the action and it's also on the coast and it's going to be less humid."

What were the other blokes at the quarters saying about their experiences?

Well most of the conversations tended to be along the lines that they were overwhelmed. We were all overwhelmed by the sheer size of the American effort.

37:00 You know in a country of what we were then, 15 million people with an army of 35,000, we have no idea that that's one of their manoeuvre units, you know our whole army is, I mean they would do tremendous feats of logistics, like they actually made the highway from Vung Tau to the main road of Saigon. They made the highway

37:30 from that junction to Saigon. They had flotillas of machines that just laid down asphalt on basically sand, you know and did it well. They had squadrons of boats coming over the shore with goods. They had whole supermarkets dotted around the country that held stationery items and hygiene equipment and

38:00 stuff that units need to operate, you know and you wouldn't need to sign for anything. You'd just walk through with a shopping trolley and take what you needed, and of course most Australians would sign, "E Kelly" and the bills never, ever got back to Canberra. But it was so easy to pinch stuff that in the end you were satiated and you didn't want to do it any more and that was entirely their idea, just to load the country with

38:30 consumer goods so that you didn't feel like you needed to pinch stuff. Their currency situation, I mean circulating wasn't American dollars, it was Vietnamese dong or piastres and military payment certificates, and the military payment certificates were usually garishly coloured things with photographs of half naked ladies all over them but they meant one dollar, two dollars, five dollars, whatever, you know. And they

39:00 would change a whole country's currency overnight, every now and then, just to stop black marketeering. The effort and the logistics was just incredible and a day didn't go by that we weren't gob-smacked by yet another American excess. The country is just so wealthy it's just unbelievably wealthy.

What were the American intelligence blokes like?

39:30 Fairly limited. There were bright ones but in the main they were limited because they'd come from a

background of insularity, you know, they were very American centric and they found it very hard to be empathetic with Vietnamese people. I mean once you get an American on his high horse about democracy, I mean his brain goes out the window and they can't see that there's another way of living,

40:00 and that was another point of difference between us and the Yanks because we'd had this more control I guess, more British approach to analysing the whole thing and we also had the experience of working with the Brits in Malaya where they had the emergency there. I mean the Malaysian emergency was one where they, the Brits actually thought about it to fight the Chinese Communist terrorists

40:30 including resource control and that was a pretty brilliant thing that worked in, that they didn't deprive anybody of food. But they made sure that they had spots where they cooked it before they dished it out and you could only have cooked rice in the jungle for a little bit of time before it goes mouldy, you know so no-one starved except the CTs [Communist Terrorists] and that was the intention, so we didn't practise resource control to that extent but we kept a

41:00 pretty good watch on what was harvested because Vung Tau area was a very rich agricultural area. We made sure that every unit had a secondary philanthropic role, that units were encouraged to adopt a hamlet or a village or do good stuff for them. Instead of wasting a lot of the stuff that might have finished up at the dump -

41:30 blankets, groundsheets, jerry cans, stuff like that, that they could use, we would give it to them and that formed a bit of a bond. And it certainly, even if they didn't love us, they could realise there was a human quality there behind the uniform, whereas the Yanks were a total alien being to them. They didn't understand the Yanks at all.

Tape 5

00:36 **I just want to go back to before you actually went to Saigon and those protests that were going on in Australia, before you left for Vietnam, what was happening in Australia?**

There were just the rumblings of discontent but it was still pretty, it was still a popular war. There had been an election

01:00 just won on the fact that we were there and everybody felt, still they felt right about it. It was, so that was 1968, Tet '68, yeah it was only till late probably '70 that the rumblings really hit the peak.

01:30 **You said earlier though that you had to board the plane in civilian clothes, why was that?**

Well the government was very aware that our movements were being watched and they were aware of that because of the signals intelligence they were picking up from places like Hanoi, "The Australians are sending more," you know and it was done

02:00 partially because certain elements of the community weren't too happy with our commitment there, but most of them were happy, okay. It was done because they didn't want to see great movements of troops and things to Vietnam. Now that being said, the battalions and larger units that went via aircraft carrier, via the [HMAS] Melbourne and [HMAS] Sydney,

02:30 their embarkation times were kept totally secret, even from wives and family but the silliness of that is that when the aircraft carriers finally sailed out of Sydney Harbour, you know the word was in Hanoi but at least they had the protection. There was nothing that could be done about it once they were sort of on their way.

03:00 You know the North Vietnamese didn't have submarines. They weren't game to bring in China and Russia to sort of sink our troops because had they done so, the ship would have really hit the sand, yeah so it was done for a security reason in the main but then it eventually became a political thing, yeah.

03:30 **Before you left for Vietnam, how prepared did you think you were for what you were going to face?**

Well I knew that I knew more than the average digger because I'd been involved with teaching what was going on there, and I was confident that the information that I had from my predecessors was good accurate stuff.

Were you seeing footage of what was going on there at that time?

04:00 Not a lot, you know there were certainly super 8 stuff around. It was photographed by everybody who could afford to go to an ASCO [Army Service Canteen Organisation] canteen. Everybody had a video camera. All my kids were photographed on my video camera, you know so there was a lot of that, gave you the feel for the place

04:30 but the reality is always different, you know when you're out there early in the morning and a beautiful Vietnam dawn, when you're bumping down a rough road to grab someone or dig something up or

whatever. I'll never forget the smells. You know you see beautiful things. You see lovely green rice paddies and you'll see a little boy in charge of 60 ducks

05:00 guiding them with a long thing of bamboo or someone else riding on a back of a water buffalo but all everywhere is the morning smell of charcoal fires when they're cooking their breakfast and it's just like incense. It's like church incense and it's quite evocative and very unforgettable and it's quite a pretty country Vietnam.

What about your first impressions when you stepped off the plane in Saigon?

05:30 Like a punch in the face. The weather wasn't all that bad because it was still the cool season. It was what, February March '68 so it was cool by their standards but still tropical. The noise, the chaos, just the total movement, it was

06:00 pretty mind boggling. I mean your first view of Saigon you think, "How the hell am I ever going to find my way through this city?" It was just, it went in every direction and it seemed like it went forever and when you see your first Honda motorcycle, 50cc with four people on it you think, "Good God, how are we going to get …" you know, just the sights and the smells

06:30 yeah, pretty much of an eye opener when you're first there.

Can you draw a sort of picture for me of what you saw when you first arrived, imagine walking through that airport for me and….?

I've got to think back to that. I know it was a bit of a rush and we were straight off the aeroplane. We pulled up in a Qantas aeroplane and we were

07:00 down the steps onto a baking tarmac and into one of these battered busses with the windows, no glass in them, just windows full of bars and the busses had obviously been through a bit, meaning Saigonese traffic cause they had things all over them. They weren't painted. They weren't shiny. They were battered old things and driven by

07:30 a Vietnamese bloke and initially you think oh God, you know, this is good, where's he going to take us? And you expect an army environment. You're just gob-smacked sitting in your bus seat watching all this chaos all around you as you go through these incredibly jam-packed busy streets with noises and diesel fumes, trucks belching diesel.

08:00 You don't know where you're going but eventually you find your way or the bus find its way to a place that they say, "That's where you're going to sleep for the night." And you think well okay. We were offloaded, shown our room by another Vietnamese and I thought mmm. The rooms were French hotel style. How many of us to a room? Two

08:30 to a room but the rooms were high ceiling, cool, white sort of marble floors, seedy, you know they'd been there since the '30s, ceiling fans and it was obviously an old French establishment. The water supply from the hotel was drawn from rainwater on the roof that went to an aqueduct underneath the foyer, the main foyer or the lobby of the hotel and that was a

09:00 good innovative Vietnamese idea because the French plumbing was atrocious. You'd turn on the tap and faecal matter would come out of it because the French would dig the one ditch down the street. They were too lazy to dig two ditches. They'd dig the one ditch and lay sewage pipes and water pipes in the one ditch and of course over the years they'd rust into each other and the result was that, so to keep the hotel population healthy the Vietnamese and probably

09:30 I s'pose a few French worked out that rainwater off a flat roof of a hotel going down to an aqueduct, an aquifer underneath the lobby of the hotel, guaranteed the hotel's water supply against any outside interference, and also added as a cooling architectural feature on the floor of the foyer, which worked quite well so that you had pretty good fresh water. The bags were dumped in the room. You were still

10:00 uncomfortable in the uniform that you'd slept in all night on the Qantas flight and which was now getting very perspiry and, you know you felt the grime in the collar around the neck because of the traffic fumes and the dust and God knows what. But then you were taken down to be introduced to the other occupants of the hotel and I was happy to see that there were Australians there. They

10:30 brought you a drink and my first drink I said, "I'll have an orange drink." And I remember being presented with this large tall glass that was orange drink but it was this brand new drink called a Harvey Wallbanger which I'd never even heard of before so I scoffed it and I think I was drunk before I'd drunk the last bit. It was mainly vodka and I thought, "Oh God." Anyway so that was the introduction. There was a bit of drinking done up there.

11:00 After I was told the routine of the hotel, meal hours and all that sort of thing, I was told to go and get a weapon because that night I was to do guard duty and take my turn to do guard duty on the roof of the hotel. I was amazed to be told to go down to the foyer and see a man and, "He will give you a weapon." The man happened to be a Vietnamese in a black pyjama suit

11:30 and he was the concierge in charge, believe it or not, of the weapons. As an intelligence officer, by this stage the hairs on the back of my neck are standing out horizontally and I thought, "Well this is cool,"

you know, “every time I’ve seen someone in a black pyjama suit, they’ve been a VC. Here’s a VC in charge of the hotel weapon store.” So he opened up this very ornate timber cabinet, similar to this thing and said, “Well what do you want?”

12:00 And it’s all there, you know weapons from all nations and there were Browning automatic rifles and Armalites and SLRs [Self Loading Rifles] and machine guns, M60s. You name it, he had it and it was like a weapons museum. So I said, “Look just give me that automatic shotgun there please?” And it was one of the few weapons that I was familiar with cause I used to do a lot of rabbit shooting when I was a kid and so he gave me this lovely automatic shotgun,

12:30 and I said, “And the ammunition I want is slugs,” you know, “not just birdshot. I want something that might stop someone.” So he gave me a pouch full of this ammo and there I was and my turn came at about, what time was it? It was about two in the morning, two or three in the morning I remember and I had to spend an hour walking around the roof making sure that no-one

13:00 did anything nasty to us, with my shotgun, and in that early morning time it gave me a pretty good look at the quiet, early morning time of Saigon. Now the Buewer’s Hotel is on the verge of Saigon in the quarter known as Cholon which was a Chinese market area and I was interested to see how the locals

13:30 lived. And they lived basically on wooden racks where the vegetables were spread out in the day time but they were sleeping on them and one family was going to bed late. And because it was the rainy, well it had rained, it wasn’t the rainy season but it had rained, and there was a big puddle outside where this family was living. I remember this family washing up in the puddle before they went to bed, doing their night time ablutions

14:00 and then I went for another couple of laps around the hotel roof and looked around and then came back just in time to see the man in the next toast rack coming home and he was a cyclo rider. He was a taxi driver and before he went to bed he urinated in the puddle. And I thought “Well that’s his toilet and that’s their washhouse.” And I thought, “This is going to be very interesting.” So it gave me an idea of the sort of

14:30 cramped living standards of hygiene and whatever, you know that I was about to sort of get used to seeing.

To what extent were you surprised by what you saw when you first arrived?

Well I was never bored I’ll put it that way. Everything I looked at I found fascinating and I guess from that point of view I was always surprised.

15:00 I s’pose one of the things that even lead me to gravitate towards the Intelligence Corps was I’ve always been a very curious person. I’ve, you know I wonder about things and I like watching people and yeah, I was never bored. I was constantly amazed at the things I saw, from little things to big things. You know it’s hard to sort of pick out any one. I mean that example was one about how they co-existed.

15:30 I don’t know. Was the question directed towards the Vietnamese people or the general atmosphere?

The general atmosphere of what you were observing in the streets of Saigon.

What overall impressed me was the energy of war, full on war, around a city that was undergoing the Tet infiltration. It was, you know I mean everywhere you looked

16:00 there was movement. There were aircraft in the sky. There were fighter jets moving in to strafe or napalm some position. There were transport aircraft. There were navy aeroplanes, ground support staff and then you sort of, your gaze would drop down to city skyline and you’d see tracer bullets and you’d see the odd zip of a rocket. But all the time noise. And

16:30 the other thing was too that I suppose it had not so much a blackout but because so many generators had been knocked out, there was a lot of natural light around Saigon, a lot of hurricane lamps and candles and things so it had this sort of unreal yellow pinpoints rather than big neon and stuff, you know and always the smell of aviation

17:00 fuel and diesel and the odd bit of explosive stuff, you know. So all your senses were sort of, you know you were listening, you were looking, you were smelling and yeah.

How dangerous was it moving round the streets of Saigon?

You weren’t allowed to. They had curfews. Anybody caught out after curfew could easily have been shot, not by us I might add. They had the Saigonese police, we called the White

17:30 Mice. They wore a white uniform and if you were moving around the streets day or night and you heard a whistle then you’d listen and you’d shuffle on and then if you heard a second whistle, you’d be very wary. If you heard a third whistle, you’d stop because after that they’d shoot, no questions asked. Three whistles and you’re gone.

In terms of the Tet Offensive

18:00 **what did you actually observe in Saigon?**

Well, I was quite new when the offensive was on and I observed all those things that I told you about, you know the tracer bullets, the arcs of rockets, the plumes of smoke where rockets had hit, the noise, the action on our side. The stories that would come through, there was, I was there

18:30 about a week I think, there was a signals detachment, Australian Signals Detachment was hit by Viet Cong infiltrators out near the Saigon racecourse. And I've got to remember this but anyway there was one or two killed, Australians, and that sort of brings it home because most of the dead are someone else's, and that was my first experience

19:00 of Australian dead. Yeah, the Phu Tho racetrack I think it was called, yeah.

How did that affect you?

It just brings it a bit closer all the time, yeah. You think, "Well they were Aussies," you know and you realise then that your backside's not fireproof, that you know, you become very

19:30 soft skinned I s'pose, yeah.

What about the Vietnamese casualties during that Tet Offensive, what were you observing there?

Well, there were a lot of them but strangely enough there was a lot more casualties taken on the other side, on Charlie's side but he never, ever admitted that. That was one of his tactics. He never, ever admitted how many he'd

20:00 lost and he did remove bodies from the battlefield as best he could, not for humanitarian reasons, just for purely propaganda reasons. But when you uncover sort of blood tracks and mass graves and you see that his effectiveness had been blunted, then you know that

20:30 he was suffering more than he dared to say he was. On our side I didn't see initially a lot of Vietnamese bodies. You know there was the odd bit of carnage whenever a rocket hit or if you happened to be going passed a place that they'd specifically targeted, you might see the odd body.

21:00 But no, that first week, no, first week or two.

How did the Vietnamese civilians deal with that carnage?

Remarkably stoically. They seemed to take it in their stride but they'd become I think, mentally hardened to a lot of it because, as I said to you before, in '54 there was a big wave came down from the north and they'd been through it. They'd seen

21:30 the French war. They were used to it and I think that they were being a very practical people. The Vietnamese are. They were focused on where they were going to get their next meal from and how to keep a job and how to not get in strife with the authorities, and that took a lot of energy but they were pretty stoic. They're not a demonstrative people.

22:00 I've seen many of them cry and howl and all that sort of thing, but when you compare them, I mean they're more controlled than we are, than, you know westerns tend to be. One stage there we, just a hop down to Vung Tau, there was an area of Vung Tau rocketed by rockets from a place called Con Son Island which was a swampy island off the Vung Tau

22:30 Peninsula. And I went over there to do an odd bit of crater analysis and by doing that you look at the crater and you look at which way the explosive had gone and the blast and all that, so you could work out where it came from. And I remember seeing in this fairly primitive group of huts a bright pink bristle brush, and I thought that's incongruous,

23:00 didn't look right. And I thought I'd better check and see what it was. And I picked it up and horrifically it was part of a child's skull. It was, the pink part was the inside of the skull and the black, blue, black bristles were his hair, didn't have a crew cut. You know I sort of showed it to one of the soldiers with me. Now the woman who was there, it turned out it was her son and she was totally stoic about it, you know, "He's gone,

23:30 that's it," you know. And yeah, that was, that sort of thing's pretty shocking when it first happened to you. You know you think it's a bit of plastic and it's not, it's part of a human and you get quite dispassionate about it after a while. You look at it and you think well gee, that's thin, that bone's got.... you know you sort of, you know, you detach yourself from the humanity. Anyway yeah, so they're fairly stoic people.

24:00 **During training how were you prepared to deal with those sort of situations?**

You never, ever trained what to deal with the reality of death. No, you're never trained to deal with that. It's just the school of hard knocks that teaches that. You are trained to know that it's, that you're going to see it. I mean that's your profession. You're a professional widow and orphan maker

24:30 to put a sort of macabre sort of a thing in there. But and you know it's going to happen but I guess it's just idle curiosity when it does. It's a bit numbing when you see it but because military training leads

you along a certain path, you don't go into

25:00 Fred Nile bouts of wringing the hands sort of thing, you know you just don't. You have to harden yourself to it because you know it's a fact of war. It jolts you. It shocks you. You think, "How curious is that?" And a lot of it's idle curiosity. You think, you know you're quite detached. You think, "Why are they all smiling, all those bodies?" And they do. Dead people smile because as their muscles relax they go into this smile. You know you think

25:30 existential thoughts like, you know, "I wonder if they're seeing paradise." You know, but you're quite detached from it, you know, yeah but anyhow the Vietnamese are pretty stoic.

When you were in Saigon, those battalions that you had trained back in Australia, where were they?

They had gone to, usually they went over there on aircraft carriers and they

26:00 sailed into Vung Tau harbour, and Vung Tau harbour was a protected area behind the Vung Tau Peninsula and that harbour in turn lead up the Song Hai River to Saigon. But what they did, they were actually offloaded, they came over the side, down rope ladders onto barges. They were shepherded into Vung Tau and bussed or trucked,

26:30 trucked with their weapons ready up the highway through Ba Ria to Nui Dat where their battalion areas were.

How much were you able to keep track of what they were doing?

All the time, you knew where every one of our units were all the time.

Were you particularly attached to those units that you had trained?

Yeah, cause it's good to sort of meet them there

27:00 say, "Here we are again fellers. Now it's for real," sort of thing and you reacquaint yourself with the officers and the blokes in the battalion and, you know usually the intelligence, every battalion has its own intelligence officer. He's an infantry bloke. He's not Intelligence Corps but you trained them, you know and you say, "Well here we go." They always have questions for you when they arrive, you know, "How do we do this, where do we go from here?" dah, dah, dah. "Here's your map, on your bike."

27:30 So yeah, you always maintain your contacts and you always remain interested in what they get up to.

Can you describe exactly what your daily role was in Saigon?

Basically clerical tasks and liaison. There's an enormous amount of boredom can be involved in pure clerical intelligence work at that strategic level

28:00 and I guess it can be very tiring when you've got to go through lots and lots of reports that don't throw up anything different to discern a pattern. So you've got to be alert enough to pounce on every small detail and that's where it gets tiring, after you do a lot of reading.

28:30 You can't, we couldn't afford ourselves to be influenced by trends of thoughts of the Americans if we were going to be in any way independent of what they were producing cause it was too easy to say, "We think there's a big push on here and it's coming through the powers that be," dah, dah, dah, you know. You think, "Okay I'll go along with that. It's too hot. I'll go along with it." You can't afford to do that because so often they were proven to be wrong.

29:00 You learnt to pick the units that were good at intelligence. You learned to pick the fact that if you had to rely on American marine unit for instance, they were usually good; very, very good operators, the American marines. The American army is a shower. It's made up of, I'm going to be terribly racist here but you've got all Hispanics and Blacks and lower socio economic

29:30 groups, and even their instructions on how to put all your basic pouches together are written in diagrammatic kindergarten English because English in many respects is not their native tongue, you know Spanish or rap or whatever they might call it. I don't know, but it's, you know they're terribly ignorant people, a lot of them. Consequently it goes up and down. Consequently because they were

30:00 unimpressive people, there was not the esprit de corps that you would expect from their largely white officer governors, you know, and that's why they developed epitaphs for themselves like grunts and pigs and things like that. There was no respect and the American army was the first to start smoking green tobacco in any quantity. Drugs generally weren't a great issue. I mean in spite of

30:30 all the war movies you see, they're all blown out of their brains and doing, that's not a reality at all, untrue. They did smoke drugs but not to the extent that you'd see them, you know crazy round the streets, none of that. That was, you know, there were little cells of them, mainly Negroes that would, there was one bad case at Bien Hoa where one of the American army post offices hadn't delivered mail or lost

31:00 bags and bags of mail, and it was because it was an all Negro post office that got on the stuff and they

were just smoking themselves stupid and just burnt the mail. They couldn't care about it, you know there was no, none of this, "The mail should get through," thing and that was more shocking to the average American soldier and totally unknown to us. It was just an amazing thing. You don't burn a soldier's mail, but they did and that gave you an idea of

31:30 how un-cohesive they were, you know there was no great esprit, yeah.

How important was it for the Australians to operate independently of the Americans?

Totally important, otherwise we would have gone mad. We would have been, we would have suffered more casualties had we been working integrated with them because the Americans are very trigger happy people. They've grown up in a gun culture. I mean I love guns. I'm still a member of a sporting club but

32:00 you know it's responsible hunting that I'm interested in but the Americans' culture goes right back to the extent that where they're legally given a gun by their government, that's it, you know they just can't keep their fingers off the trigger and I mean our guys trained. They were dreadful at moving through the bush. They had no idea about moving through the bush and they wondered why we were so successful

32:30 that we could move whole battalions through the bush without being detected which is, you know what the Viet Cong said, "We didn't know that." They thought that our first platoon was a whole battalion, you know because at all stages you knew where you were. You knew how to map read, you knew how to communicate and you know discipline and so our soldiers didn't smoke, didn't wear aftershave, didn't do any of that sort of stuff that the Yanks did all the time.

Aussie soldiers weren't smoking dope at all?

33:00 I detected a couple of cases in one of the battalions and it was a mixed Australian, Kiwi battalion and when they were sprung they said, "Well we ran out of money." And it was the end of the pay fortnight. They used to get paid fortnightly and they said, "We couldn't afford a carton of beer so one of the local boys brought in some grass for us." Now once they got paid and they could afford beer again, they gave away the grass

33:30 so it wasn't a habit as such. It was just a fill-in and that only happened once, to my knowledge, yeah. There were probably other occasions but it was certainly not widespread.

What about alcohol, was there a lot of heavy drinking?

Yes, lots and lots of it and I think a lot of the troubles that were post war were exacerbated by the drinking because alcohol's a depressant

34:00 and it wouldn't have helped them from some of the things they saw. I mean in the short term it gets you over the hump and it allows a group of young men to be macho and laugh about the horror that they've seen and try to out-horror each other as a coping mechanism, and it certainly allows you to sleep and forget about everything from mosquitoes to bad dreams,

34:30 you know. And it was probably the only thing they had going for them because the movies were crap, whenever you could get it. Yeah, that's about the only thing they had to do and they smoked in camp but out in the field they didn't, yeah.

You talk about the Americans being un-cohesive and sort of sloppy and stuff like that.

American army.

American Army I mean, can you give us

35:00 **specific examples of what you're talking about?**

At one stage there was, I think it was the 25th Division was working to the north of us in a place called Long Khan Province which meant that their air of operations came down to touch our provincial border. We were down here in Phuoc Tuy and we had to send, in fact it was the

35:30 bloke I told you that finished up the trade commissioner of the North West Pacific. He went up there to be a liaison officer for us and he said he attended this briefing in a big circus- like tent and at the front row was the general in charge of that American division. And he said he sat, Greg sat down the back and he could see this figure in a big

36:00 swivel chair right up the front with a baseball cap on and lazy curls of cigar smoke appearing above the head. And the first person that came out was the S1 which meant personnel and he was reporting on personnel matters for the whole division and I think his briefing consisted of "Yes we've discovered 14 cases of VD [venereal disease]," or something, you know, dah, dah dah. "They've been referred now." "Okay." So the

36:30 lazy smoke didn't increase in intensity. It just kept drifting up towards the ceiling and second fellow that came out was S2, Intelligence and he said, "Yes we have an idea that the enemy is there." And sort of put his big, fat hand on the map and drew a big red duck egg that encompassed about five thousand square metres which wasn't terribly specific and still the lazy smoke

37:00 was drifting towards the ceiling and then the S3, I think I'm getting these numbers right, was operations and he came out and he said, "Yes we've got elements working down this road and up that road and there we are." The lazy smoke kept drifting and on it went down through to logistics, "Yes we've had a resupply." "Yes, yes, yes." And then it got to, I think it was S5 or S6 or something, which is amenities and it was a junior, second lieutenant, fresh faced, came dancing out on the street and he said, "Well sir

37:30 I've got the pleasure to tell you that tonight the divisional movie is Mary Poppins." And then the cigar smoke started to get a bit more frenetic above the baseball cap and for the first time in the whole briefing the general leaned forward and said, "And have you seen this movie, S5?" And he said, "Yes sir I have." And he said, "And what do you think of it S5?" He said, "Sir, it sucks," and that was it. That was the end of the briefing so the whole thing had gone through without the general asking a question, other than about what the bloody movie was

38:00 that night and that was pretty typical of their priorities. Most of them just wanted to get home and wear the medal, you know. As far as being interested in the future of the Vietnamese people, they couldn't have given a toss and it was pretty typical of the whole thing. We, in a rather more

38:30 serious approach, did get involved with the populations, gave us a human face, maintained the connection even after the war to the extent that we've seen in Vietnamese migration and trips back to do philanthropic sort of work for schools and hospitals. I've been back to Vietnam and I couldn't see a lot in the way of

39:00 large American philanthropic stuff being done there and you get the very strong impression that they don't like to lose and they're not generous in defeat and for all those reasons I think, you know American society needs a bit of a shake-up, anyway.

In your intelligence work though, you had to liaise closely with the Americans,

39:30 **how did you deal with that?**

Well I don't want you to get the impression that my criticism of the Americans means that I hated them or disliked them as a group. They're a very personable bunch of people, very generous, very hospitable, give you whatever you wanted, would put you on a pedestal because,

40:00 you know you were sort of interesting to them. You were their favourite little possum for the week or whatever, you know and they were, yeah interesting to get along with but very close with each other so that to actually get intelligence at a personal level out of someone, if they didn't actually own or know of

40:30 that particular thing you wanted, it was very hard for them easily to go to their contemporary to say, "I don't know this but maybe he does." And I'll give you an example of that.

Tape 6

00:31 Yeah, the example of the compartmentalisation I suppose of Americans and the way they didn't easily react, inter react with each other, is I had to go to Saigon to their American headquarters to return some, to do a monthly reconciliation

01:00 of money that they used to give us. Now the money was for a thing called the incentive reward program and they would give us tens of thousands of dollars, American dollars, not MPC [military payment certificate], real dollars, to reward people who would come in with information of weapons or whatever. And my safe was crammed full of American dollars and receipts so that if someone came and said, "Look here's an AK47…" I think the reward was

01:30 400 piastre or something, but the equivalent in dollars. If it was a rocket launcher it was a bit more. If it was a machine gun, it was a bit more. If it was information it was worth whatever you could come to grips with. Anyway, the idea was that you would keep a record. You couldn't really give receipts per se because that meant that you would have been jeopardising the identity of the people coming forward but your records were

02:00 fairly meticulously kept, so you'd go back with your bag of money and your bag of records and you'd say, "Here it is, reconcile that." And then they'd top you up again. Money was no object. Anyway I'd done this several times and I'd been there, I think it was on the third trip and I got onto reasonable talking terms with this bloke who was reconciling my cash and anyhow I said, "Look, you haven't told me where you're from." And he said, "I'm from Vermont." I said, "Oh north-east, yeah, nice and cold

02:30 up there I understand, yeah, yeah." And we got talking about Vermont, you know, "Oh, you know about my country?" I said, "Yeah," I said, "I like to look at maps." And he said, "I know nothing about yours." And I said, "Well that doesn't surprise me." Anyhow when he's talking, the fellow who sat next to him, you know a couple of feet away, said, "What you're from Vermont?" He said, "I never, ever knew that." And they'd been, I knew that they'd been working together for at least four months but it turned out they'd been working together for a year.

03:00 He said, “What part of Vermont?” And he told him. He said, “I’m from there. It’s my town.” Now they’d lived in the same town in the same state, and Vermont’s not a very big state, and they’d worked alongside of each other, it turned out they were seven months they were there and they’d never, ever discussed personal details. Now I know that’s not a requirement of the American army and I know it’s not a requirement of their intelligence system but that’s the way they are, you know,

03:30 they just… So that from that extent when you ask me how easy was it to liaise with these people, personally fine but when it came to anything more than that, you needed to set up a whole new system of links and thereby hang your tail, yeah.

How was the mateship or comradeship different with the Australian army?

What, in between Australians?

In terms of, yeah, Australians relating with other Australians?

04:00 Totally open, we like reacting off each other. We got a lot of fun with each other’s company. It was like a, I s’pose in many respects, a big boys own adventure except when the bad stuff was happening. You know, in any group and I mean there were 50,000 odd blokes had gone through Vietnam and you’ll always meet the bastards and the prickly personalities.

04:30 But generally speaking we’re a fairly happy breed, a fairly happily uncomplicated group of blokes. It really doesn’t take much to make us happy, a cold beer and a cold shower and clean gear and, you know that’s pretty much it. And as far as interaction goes, it was very, very easy. If you wanted to tell

05:00 them something, you did and they’d accept it. If you wanted to know something you asked them and they’d tell you. The only time I met a prickly type of bloke was a RAEME engineer, a RAEME officer who, I had to go out and steal a jeep because I didn’t have enough vehicles to do the job that I was supposed to do, covering five different areas of the province. And so we went up and stole a jeep from the Yanks, and

05:30 when this bloke saw it being driven around my unit area, he came over to see me and he started to berate me about, you know, “What’s all this?” You know, “Foreign cars.” And I said, “Well what’s your problem?” And he said, you know, “You are going to overstretch my mechanical ability to have it fixed,” you know. “I know that I’ve got to fix so many Land Rovers but you’re,” you know, “how am I going to fix yours?” I said, “Who’s asking you to?” I said, “I’ll take it down to

06:00 a garage I know run by local friendly Viet Cong and I’ll get him to fix it.” but he was totally, you know, he was one of these people who couldn’t sort of think laterally and he was a very professional, very lovely bloke but, you know, he was sort of so intent on doing the right thing that he couldn’t see the answer. But, you know, examples like that of prickliness are understandable and that was about the extent of it

06:30 **Back to your life, can you tell me about the trip to Vung Tau, is that right, after leaving Saigon, how did you?**

After I went to, yeah after I was posted to the headquarters in Saigon and the intelligence officer’s position

07:00 came up in Vung Tau, then I went there to do the work that I described. First it was, you know we had to do a lot of sort of work on vetting all the locally employed civilians who were, yeah what did I say, about six, seven hundred of them working around. They were doing all sorts of things, menial work to packing work. A lot of

07:30 potential to create trouble but generally speaking, yeah there was no trouble. They were given good conditions, good money and they were a good workforce and I can’t think of any instances of sabotage at all.

But you were worried about sabotage?

Yeah, I mean when you’ve got

08:00 all of those locally employed civilians whose backgrounds it was very difficult to check, and when you thought of the security infrastructure in Vietnam generally, not only Vung Tau, I mean you couldn’t walk down to the police station and say, “Well how’s Wing Tee Tan,” you know, I mean, “What’s she like?” And they’re likely to say, “Well

08:30 come back tomorrow,” you know, “and I’ll tell you.” And then they’ll go to her and they’ll say, “Well do you want a good report or a bad report, give us a sling.” You know, so you were thrown very much on the mercy of these people, but for their own good they had to be reasonably careful about giving us a pretty good product and so we got, we made sure that we didn’t hire anybody too high profile. They were basically peasant people who wanted a buck

09:00 and we made sure we drew them from elements of society where they weren’t too high up the food chain so that they didn’t have too much influence, you know.

So how would you recruit them and what would you do?

Well they would go through, they'd go to the, Jack Balsey, what was his unit? Civil Employment, Civil Affairs, something like that unit, on a normal recruiting thing

09:30 and you'd have big queues of them and the officer in charge of that unit and his staff would go through them to make sure that they were clean, they weren't diseases because no-one knew what job they were going to do at the time. It could have been food handling or anything, you know and that they met the physical and mental criteria in as best possible. And once they

10:00 were selected on that basis, then they were handed over to my section to see what background checks that I could do on them. They were all fingerprinted. The fingerprint base in Vietnam was probably the most reliable thing. And so they'd go through that sort of a check and they knew that by giving fingerprints that they would be checked on. They were told that anyway. It was all above board and fair and so that was one aspect of the duty. The other was the actual

10:30 security of the camp itself to make sure that everything was hunky dory and no-one could drive a truck full of bombs through the front door, front gate.

Can you describe that camp, when you'd walk in what would you see?

Okay when you came from Saigon you would drive down a rutted highway, south down the peninsula of Vung Tau and then you'd turn east onto an

11:00 even more rutted highway towards sand hills and dunes on the eastern beach of the Vung Tau Peninsula. Now those sand hills and dunes were totally unoccupied and they were wasteland which is why we selected to go there. We didn't want to upset the people by putting our camp right in the middle of where they were living.

11:30 And for a practical purposes, we knew we could go in there without being worried about mines or all that and we had fairly fresh fields to start. So what our engineers did is bulldoze roads and things through the sand hills. It was quite an engineering feat actually. It was just pure sand hill but they turned it into a water producing area. They went down to the water table. They had sealed roads, blue metal roads, which when you

12:00 think about it, it's pretty hard to do on sand, you know and they did all this. They built substantial timber buildings for our hospitals and big ordnance warehouses and sheds, metal galvanised king strand huts for headquarters signals buildings, all that sort of thing. They built a rest and convalescent centre on the beach, again on

12:30 out of, on American designs, made out of American lightwood but even built a swimming pool for troops to immerse their bodies because they'd been, you know the sort of environment the troops had at Nui Dat, they'd get a shower, but I mean you couldn't really cool down and so most diggers were always wet. They were wet with sweat or wet with monsoonal rain and

13:00 there were a lot of skin troubles and rashes and things like that, so that a big Olympic size chlorinated pool was just the bees knees. So our dear old engineers did that and then in a fit of remarkable sensitivity they called it the Harold Holt memorial pool.

Warped sense of humour.

Yeah, we thought that was delightful so that yeah. This sand

13:30 dune area became a populated hutted area. It was always heat blasted. I mean you couldn't grow trees there but there were patches of green grass that people nurtured and I suppose the gardener comes out in all of us, you know. There were little beds of flowers around the hospital that the nurses, both male and female, planted and around the dining

14:00 areas they made an attempt to, you know put a bit of turf down so it was to make it homely, and in between walking tracks were metal pier steel planks they used to call it with the round holes punched out of them and that stopped you getting sand in your boots. They had communal deep trench latrines that were always a source of fun when they burnt those off. Yeah it was made to work pretty

14:30 well, yeah. You always had a good drink of water, and being on the coast it was much cooler than being in the jungle.

So it was a significant camp, what was the…?

There were five thousand, six thousand people there working in ALSG, Australian Logistics Support Group, plus the locally employed civilians and, like I said, it consisted of rear base workshop areas, ordnance

15:00 stores. All the truck units were there, the service corps units that took the supplies up the road to Nui Dat. There was the reinforcement infantry troops were there waiting to replace individuals as they were killed or groups, you know, yeah.

Why was it important?

15:30 yeah, again it was surrounded by barbed wire. It covered acres and acres, have to think about how big it was. It was probably a kilometre half in length and about a kilometre wide from the beach back inland, and a kilometre and a half in length along the beach

16:00 which housed all those five or six thousand troops, and the whole thing was surrounded by wire. The Defence and Employment platoon was integral to the base in that they were infantry troops who did all the patrolling for any incursions. You'd get the occasional local trying to sneak through the wire

16:30 to pinch stuff, that was about it, you know.

And did you have trouble from VC in that area?

Only in so far as rocketing went. They had a delightful weapon called a one twenty-two millimetre rocket which works out at about five inches, five and a half inch rocket and it was a thing that they, it was a very long rocket. But they transported it easily at night and to set it up it was done basically on

17:00 a pair of sticks or a tripod made out of bamboo, aimed in the general direction of the area in which they wanted to create mayhem and then light the fuse and stand back sort of thing. It was primitive from that point of view but when it hit, it covered a fairly big blast area and so the town of Vung Tau was rocketed regularly. The areas that copped most of it were the fishing villages around the western side of the peninsula because

17:30 they faced onto this Con Son Island, and an area called the Rhun Suk which is a big swampy area where Charlie could get into fairly easily to set his rockets up undisturbed and then line up one, half a dozen of them and light the fuses and then nick off into the jungle sort of thing. But it was enough to sort of stop and make you think now and then and his tactic was designed to slow down the logistic

18:00 support effort from the Vung Tau Peninsula because, as you know yourself, if you've got troops out looking for more rockets, they're not doing something else, you know.

What was the strategic point of having it in that location?

Well it was near a port facility and an airfield so Vung Tau had its own airfield, wasn't as big as, nowhere near as big as the Saigon airport but you could actually fly into Vung Tau airfield.

18:30 And that was only a mile or so away from our base, and the port facilities were the best in South Vietnam, in Vung Tau. The French used to call it Cap Saint Jacques, and because it had ready access by river up to Saigon it was the biggest port to Saigon as well so it allowed us to resupply Saigon and Vung Tau and it gave

19:00 us a secure place for our supply ships like the [HMAS] Jeparit and the [HMAS] Vendetta and those ships who used to bring up groceries, peas and beans and, you know cold beer, yeah that sort of stuff.

What did you enjoy about the work at Vung Tau?

Well again it allowed me to slip easily into the

19:30 infrastructure of the country, without being too worried about getting my backside shot off. It allowed me to sort of get to know their systems like the administrative justice and the police and the interaction of their signals school, their marine school. Our Navy Seals were based there, or they weren't called seals. They were just, we called them bubblies, our navy divers

20:00 our underwater demolition mob. The signals people had a brilliant big signals array on the hill. At the end of the peninsula there's a big rocky hill that they could get terrific signals from and it allowed me to sort of work around there and observe the country in a more leisurely fashion which

20:30 stood me in good stead for my second tour but once systems were in place at Vung Tau and I was able to sort of happily leave my staff to get on with more routine things, I was then able to go up the road to the divisional intelligence unit at Nui Dat and help the CO at the time up there, a fellow called Geoff Bosco, with certain things he was doing

21:00 which were, you know active operations against Viet Cong infrastructure in the field which is pretty exciting, also to have my services volunteered as a courier for sensitive stuff to go up north to as far as the nearly demilitarised zone for the training team and to take sensitive stuff to them if I needed to, so it allowed me the luxury of absorbing

21:30 the country at my own learning pace and to get out and see more of the place, you know.

Can you describe some of the intelligence things that you were doing with them in Nui Dat that were important to the infrastructure?

Yeah, well I thought that I could probably get onto that on my second tour. I'm not on my second tour yet. This is just the first tour.

Yep sure.

But basically just to sort of give you a short answer, they were doing things called Acorn Operations. We called them Acorn Operations because the

22:00 call sign for the Intelligence Corps is Acorn and basically what that is, is to neutralise, put out of action, those elements in the villages and in the hamlets that were supporting the Viet Cong directly either by recruiting or taxation or proselytising or even assassination squads, so you had all those people doing that in support of the people in the bush and in addition

22:30 supplying them with food and drink and all the means to survive so that we saw a good target for our unit to be those sorts of people and that's what was being done up there when, you know when I was posted to Vung on my first tour, yeah.

Was it confusing sometimes to work out who was on whose side?

Yeah, my word.

Can you describe

23:00 **that a little?**

Well let's put it this way, the national guard or the Vietnamese peasant is black pyjamas, for all good practical reasons, it doesn't show the dirt and the stereotypical VC was a man in a conical straw hat with black pyjamas and thongs, or usually sandals made out of rubber car tyres. And that's in fact what he wore

23:30 but when it comes to picking out whose the goody and whose the baddy, you've got to be pretty careful, otherwise you'll be standing all over, you know a pretty fragile society, as they tend to be in wartime so that the technique that we used. And now I'm sort of getting into my second tour, when I took over command of that unit in Nui Dat, the technique used was that

24:00 I would send out, and my predecessors had sent out, good intelligent NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers], depending on their level of intelligence, would depend on their rank. I mean an intelligent corporal might go out or a not so bright staff sergeant, you know would go out to districts to work with other Australian elements that were put in the districts of the province. See the

24:30 Phuoc Tuy province was more, it was like a miniature state. It was about 45 kilometres across from east to west but within that province there were five district and each district had a district headquarters, and then those district headquarters was where the Americans would put people whom they would term 'advisers' to the district chief.

25:00 And we would put in certain trades people, mummies little helpers, call them what you like. They could be anything from well diggers to paramedics who could help women deliver babies. Even so there were medics, there were well diggers, there were construction people who could fix the local

25:30 school if ever it was damaged. There were all sorts of philanthropic efforts like that attached to the district headquarters into which we very cunningly inserted our intelligence blokes who always had a secondary job anyway and they were all linguists. They all spoke the language. Now when you work out a cell like that you can move easily amongst the village people, and

26:00 because of the size of the hamlets and the village it doesn't take you long, like you know in any country town, to pick up the gossip, who's who and who's doing what and who's sleeping with who and all the usual gossip. So that when a name comes to notice, and I always made sure it was two or three times, not just once, that person would become a person of interest and would be observed. Now

26:30 once the observation went to the stage where you think okay this is it, they're actively involved here, then they'd be put on a blacklist and then we would go out at two or three in the morning and kidnap them, simple as that. It was body snatch operations and from that sort of a shakedown, we were pretty well 90 per cent right most of the time because we were

27:00 careful in the selection. And the reason we were careful in the selection, it was too easy for some villager to badmouth another villager, you know. He might have been a rival butcher or whatever, you know, so we were very much aware of human frailties and did the selection much on our own bat. And that's how we sort of picked the goodies from the baddies, to answer your question.

Can you explain the kidnapping process?

Yeah, you went in there at the black of night, armed to the teeth, very quietly

27:30 burst through the door and grab them out of bed.

And how many people would be in that operation?

Usually, depending on how many people you went out to grab. There'd be my unit members. There'd be the members of the 10th Military Intelligence Detachment which was a Vietnamese Army unit, very, very closely aligned to mine. In fact, we were amalgamated okay and in fact the

28:00 OC [Officer Commanding] of that detachment lives here at Darra and then later on when it became a bit awkward for us to do those sorts of operations, we then involved a unit called the Provisional Reconnaissance Unit which were basically field police, pretty tough mob but they were soldiers who had the power of arrest and

28:30 many of them were ex VC too strangely enough, who had had bad things happen to them or their families by the VC and they were turned, you know so they…

So once you'd kidnapped them, how would you bind them and would they react, how would they react?

They were, they had a bag put over their head so they wouldn't see where they were going. They

29:00 were bound. Their hands were bound at the back. They were marched to whatever vehicle we had at the time, usually a Land Rover and either singularly or in company they'd be taken back to Nui Dat and questioned. And usually the questioning was done along the lines that, in many cases we'd start off knowing the answers to the question we were going to ask anyway and wait to see their reaction. Very often it was total shock and they would just give you the lot

29:30 and plead pressure or whatever, as I would have done.

What does that mean?

Well, they were forced to do it, you know they didn't mean to but, "I'm sorry I made a mistake," sort of thing or they'd hang out and be a bit defiant, in which case usually a lot of the information we had would be cross checked. And we could say to them,

30:00 "We can volunteer information about people they were working with," which again tended to shock them that we knew as much as we did and then that would open up, or if they were even more hard case then we'd say, "Well okay we're not going to waste any more time with you. We'll send you onto your system, your interrogation system, which might not be as comfortable as ours." And that tended to break a few of them as well, you know because what we had to do with them from then on after they were

30:30 proven, again by the ministry of justice, to have been involved with the Viet Cong, they would be incarcerated and the central interrogation centre, the Vietnamese themselves would see what they knew. If they were not talking or uncooperative or they did talk and they couldn't be re-released they were sent long term to places like Con Son Island, which is off the coast of south

31:00 Vietnam, which is now a beautiful place to visit if you want to go backpacking, yeah.

What happened there?

They were incarcerated. What would have happened had they gone on, I don't know. They probably would have been in the Asian way re-educated, you know, had the conflict gone our way they would have been re-educated and told to accept the situation or as happened, you know the other side won,

31:30 they were let out and made mayors and given good jobs, yeah.

What were the interrogation techniques that we used?

Basically you start from a position of knowledge, like a court of law, that any good barrister doesn't cross examine unless he already knows the answer, and so we were able to approach a lot of those interrogations like that. You never, ever used force. There was one case that

32:00 they said that the water torture case in the early '60s, by a bloke who's now living down near Benalla and I think that consisted of throwing a glass of water in someone's face, that was a bit defiant. But I mean it made such a ruckus that, you know you didn't resort to that sort of stuff anyhow because not only did you not want to, but force always lead to what they felt you wanted to know, you know, rather than the truth. But the

32:30 Viet Cong were such inveterate record keepers that nearly everybody that was bowled over by our troops in the bush always had a diary on them, written in tiny little handwriting, very neat tiny little handwriting and it would be to the nth degree about his sister or his cousin supplying them with this, that and the other thing on this date, and I'm going home, my birthday's in, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, here's all my

33:00 contacts and my boss is so and so. And you could gradually put it all together, like a giant big jigsaw puzzle and this is, we were getting so much information that that's what lead us to develop, or department of defence to develop, the first computer for the field, and this bloody big clunky thing appeared at Nui Dat and in fact the initial one was a system of cards and rods that you just pulled the rods out and the cards would fall, you know. It was just incredible.

33:30 Anyhow when we got an electronic one that would break down more often than not because of the heat, dust and humidity but it still allowed us to churn a lot of this mass of information so that it was delightful for me as an OC of a unit to be able to walk into someone who was being quite cheeky and

defiant and say, “Well all right we know who you are and what you’re doing.” He said, “Oh yeah?” And you’d say, “By the way, is your boss still bleeding when he coughs,” you know and you’d have little personal details

34:00 like his… We knew his boss had TB [tuberculosis] on one occasion and they’d go bang and you’d see their head go back and this glazed look and say, “Well, what else do you want to know?” So we got to that stage where we had a lot of detail and the sheer fact that they were in this alien Australian environment. Being fed Australian army rations was enough to break anybody.

34:30 The interrogations were always done with an Aussie, an Aussie linguist, a 10 MID [Military Intelligence Detachment] person, usually an officer from 10 MID and someone else, another witness from the unit to sort of make sure that things, you know breaks were given and all that sort of stuff. We weren’t too kind. I mean if we were hot on the track of something, just like you pair are doing to me too, you’d keep going wouldn’t you? And that’s what we used

35:00 to do, you know there were no such things as coffee break and things so yeah, you’d do that.

What were some of the worst situations for you in that?

In what, the body snatch operations? I fell into a buffalo wallow in the black of night and it was about six foot deep. I went in behind a staff sergeant of mine who

35:30 kicked the door in. He has his weapon ready and the person inside the house made a sudden rush for a rice bin in which there was a hidden exit thing and so the rice was in a big drain and this person dived into the rice bin to sort of wiggle their way out the back of the house, and Barney, the bloke who went in first, got such a fright to see such fast movement at that time

36:00 of the night, that he jumped back and pushed me and I fell into this bloody buffalo wallow, and in the black of night no-one could see what was going on. It was just total pitch black, a moonless, starless night and I thought, “Christ I’m supposed to be in charge of all this,” yeah. So I finished up with a weapon that didn’t work, it was full of mud and I was a very unimpressive looking officer, I can tell

36:30 you, yeah.

How would it start at night, I mean would you brief everybody on what you were looking for that night?

Yeah well what would happen is that the information, the initial information that made this person a source of interest would be sent back, along with details to the nth degree about where they actually lived, you know what house it was so you couldn’t go on numbers because houses

37:00 weren’t numbered but it was the third path past the triangular shaped rice paddy, you know that sort of thing. And you would, your maps were so detailed that, you know your grid squares were there and you knew exactly what was going on. Now the information was kept very tight between myself, the bloke in the field and one or two warrant officers. We would plan the snatch and then at the last minute brief the

37:30 Vietnamese attached to us and I made that quite clear to them that even though it wasn’t, yeah it was a degree of trust entailed, and even though we knew that they gave us a hundred per cent loyalty, the fact that they could have just said something inadvertently around the place was not on. They understood that so they were always a state

38:00 of heightened alertness all the time so that I might say something to Phuong like, “We’re going out tonight.” He’d say, “Beaut okay.” And then later on, towards maybe an hour or two before we’re due to move, I’d say, “Right, we’re going now.” And they would either leave with us from our unit or I might rendezvous with them, you know on the way to where we’re going to pick someone up.

38:30 It wasn’t always either a snatch of a person or persons out of a house. It was, some of these things were done in daylight based on information received, and one of the better ones we did was at a place south of Dat Do, Long Sen I think the village was. Anyway, the information that Phuong got this time was that

39:00 a platoon, a whole platoon of, a mob called C25 Long Dat District Medical Platoon, was in this house. It was unbelievable information and I said, “A whole bloody platoon in daylight?” And he said, “Yeah that’s the information.” I said, “It’s got to be bullshit,” you know. He said, “No, no.” He said, “My informant’s been very good in the past.” And so we went down there in broad daylight and this house was a bungalow.

39:30 It was on a raised concrete slab, Californian bungalow style of place, very well built place for a Vietnamese village, all terracotta stone and terracotta tiles, everything like that and we looked around and it was all very nice and very cool but no movement, and anyhow we started to, they were all, the Vietnamese were insistent. They said, “They are here, they are here.” And so we started to tap at our rifle butts around floor like this

40:00 and one of my soldiers went into a bathroom, smaller than that one and was tapping away and it was tap, tap, tap and it was a hollow sound, you know so he said, “Hey Skipper,” he said, “this could be something.” And so they were very, very good at hiding things and they were, being very petite, slightly built people, they could make very small holes that they could get through, and so we levered up a tile

with our bayonet tips not much bigger than that and there it was, a beautiful little

40:30 square trapdoor and everybody was excited that they'd found this bolt hole. And then Phuong said, "Shush, everybody shut up, shut up." And I must admit I didn't hear it but he'd heard something down the hole and everybody listened and it turned out that it sounded, the sound of a woman weeping. And anyway Phuong shouted out something in Vietnamese.

41:00 He said, "Righto," he said, "you down there come out now or otherwise we're going to throw some gas down." And anyway the weeper realised she had been sprung and was weeping even more loudly and wailing and she said, "I'm down here with several others." And we said, "Well come out now." And she said, "I want to come out but they won't let me." All in Vietnamese, and we said, "All right, well okay, if you don't come out

41:30 now, I'm afraid we're going to have to throw poison gas down." There was consternation. There was a bit of movement and no-one's coming out so we got a yellow smoke grenade, wasn't poisonous. It was just a lot of yellow smoke and threw that down, and so the yellow smoke was starting to fill the hole out and they were shooting out the hole like penguins off an ice flow, you know just pop, pop, pop, you know all coloured yellow. It was quite a bizarre sight.

Tape 7

00:32 **Just taking that story of the day raid back up again from, if you like perhaps when you heard this woman weeping?**

Yeah, the sounds of weeping and anyhow Phuong told everybody to shut up and we listened and sure enough, you know you could hear it and so then the words were made, you know, "Come out now. How many of you?" dah, dah, dah, and you could

01:00 hear sounds of consternation down the hole. But they still weren't going to make the move because they didn't know what was waiting for them at the top of the hole, until we threw the yellow smoke grenade down and then they started to pop out, as I said, like it reminded me of penguins off an ice flow. It was pop, pop, pop and counting all these people you thought, "Oh this is terrific, what a great bag we've got here." But there was one holdout down the hole and they used to, whenever

01:30 they dug these holes, they always dug them in an L shape so that it gave them some blast protection in case anybody threw a grenade down and anyway we heard, we said, "Is that it?" And I think it was the wailing woman said, "No there's one more down there." And so one of the Aussie linguists said, "Okay come out now or I'll come down and get you." He said, "No, no," and he said, we could hear the word 'che', which meant death, you know.

02:00 And I said, "What did he say?" to Peter Lewis, one of my soldieries. He said, "He's going to stay down there and," you know, "die." And before I could do anything about it, Peter was down the hole with a 45 automatic pistol and I thought, "Oh no, God strike a light. I don't want to have to write home to his mother." You know, and then I could hear a muffled gunshot and I thought oh gees, and it turned out, luckily Peter came out of the hole and I said,

02:30 "What happened?" And he said, "Well he heard me coming down the hole so he topped himself," you know and just put his gun to his head and killed himself so yeah, that was that operation. I've got actual photographs of that but then what we did is we blew the house up because the word had gone out if you were harbouring these units and people like that, then you can expect to lose your house.

03:00 Very similar to what the Israeli's are doing now and it concentrates the mind a bit, you know when they know they're not going to have a roof over their head that night if they're caught doing that sort of thing. And so we set charges around the house and we always, we took an engineer mini team with us that's right, blokes very highly skilled in the use of explosives and so that house was blown up. And I've got photographs of sort of walking through the rubble of it

03:30 but the peculiar thing about that is, on these Acorn Operations they were so very successful, we liked doing them because they had a very high success rate. Our SAS liked us doing them because what they were doing in the bush, we were doing in the towns. And we were complementing each other, the Vietnamese, we, the SAS, everybody saw how successful

04:00 they were, but the Americans didn't like it much because they weren't in control and they weren't getting a lot of kudos. Now to sort of take you back to the politics, Phuoc Tuy province was our area of operations but in the district, the Americans had a presence and when the Americans were reporting that we were getting these results as a result of these Acorn Operations, Saigon

04:30 must have said, I wasn't privy to any messages, you know, "They're making fools of you lot." You know, "Why aren't you in there involved with it?" With the result that an American major with a Russian name, fellow called Sascha Tourke, T O U R K E, brackets dickhead, unquote, went to my brigadier and said, "I've got a proposal that I be put in charge of these operations," which is just

05:00 Walt Disney stuff. The brigadier felt duty bound to pass on his opinion to me and I told the brigadier in no uncertain terms that I wouldn't allow that or if he were to direct that this happen that they would cease, the operations would cease. And he quizzed me as to why I was so adamant that I didn't want the Yank to barge in and I said, "Not only," you know, "are they not renowned for their security

05:30 but I know that his headquarters has been infiltrated and that sensitive stuff has been leaked out of his very own headquarters." And he said, "That's a pretty serious accusation." I said, "Yeah." I said, "I'll prove it one day." I didn't know at that stage, you know I s'pose the sudden rush of blood to the head as an impetuous youth as I was then at 29 or whatever. I didn't know how I was going to prove it but I knew I was right in what I was saying. So anyway,

06:00 as a result of this house in the C25 platoon being captured, as we were marching these people out along this track towards the main east west road to Dat Do an ARVN sergeant, A R V N, Army Republic of Vietnam, in uniform and thongs, came bouncing down the track on his little Honda motorbike

06:30 and he said to the lead hostage, being marched out by us in the background, "Eh do, eh do." And I didn't know much Vietnamese but I knew it meant, "Where are you going?" And I said to Phuong, "Quick, grab that bloke, grab him." And I said, you know cheeky bastard, I said, "What's he want to know where they're going for. It's got nothing to do with him." So I said, "Ask him why he said where are you going?" And so

07:00 he was asked and he said, "I want to know where he's going because I live with him." And I said, "Hah hah." I said, "Where do you work?" He said, "I work at the provincial intelligence operation coordinating." I said, "Is Major Taki your boss?" He said, "Yeah, yeah," he said, "I'm his operation sergeant." I said, "Thank you, thank you." And, you know at that point you believe there is a God. You know there's a God, you know and he's just fallen right into my lap.

07:30 I must admit that was a month or two after I'd made this promise to the brigadier but I didn't realise it would be fulfilled so quickly. And I was just so chuffed to take this bloke back and frogmarch him into the brig and say, "Here he is, Sascha's little helper." And it was two weeks after that that Sascha was returned to CONUS, the Continental United States,

08:00 yeah.

How significant was that raid?

Well, it busted one of their platoons. See the major Viet Cong manoeuvre battalion in Phuoc Tuy province was D445 and D445 was structured like any battalion. You had your support platoons with mortars and RPGs [rocket propelled grenades]. You had your infantry

08:30 platoons. You had your medical platoon. You had your administration platoon and the platoon was called C25 Long Dat District Medical Platoon because I'm sure that it was a platoon of the battalion and it was given a district name because that's where it hunkered down. I mean that's, their house was blown up. That's where they lived and I suppose that it gave them ready access

09:00 to medical supplies being near the coast too, because you could move around the coast more easily at night by small craft to pick up things. You know, you could probably take a boat down to Vung Tau and go to the chemist and say, "I want so many Aspros," or whatever they use, you know. And the reason why sea travel was probably safer for them is because we had these areas called free fire zones and you would leaflet drop the whole population

09:30 say, "Do not go in that area. If you're caught in that area you will be shot." And that was that, you know, no ifs, buts or maybes so that coastal travel then became pretty good for them. And I guess that's why this medical platoon was based where it was but, you know, it makes sense when you think about it, so yeah.

What was the demeanour of these people as they came out of their hiding place?

Very scared, very scared. If you touched them, you'd feel them trembling,

10:00 very, you know eyes going everywhere, every sense alert thinking, "Oh gees what's going to happen now?" you know, as you would imagine, shock. They weren't, we didn't put bags and hoods over their heads in this particular instance, because they were being marched out to an area that they knew anyway. It was nowhere near our base was so they couldn't sort of report on it

10:30 which is why he was recognised by this ARVN sergeant and it takes them a while to settle down but that's why it was pretty important to get them back quickly and subdue them to pretty intense interrogation straight off while they were unsettled.

How did they react to seeing their home exploded?

They were pissed off, yeah but the, sorry yeah

11:00 when the owner-occupier was actually, yeah when the occupier was actually the owner they were very, very angry but these people that we got out, they were happy campers. The actual owner of the house wasn't there when it went towards heaven but I'd imagine he wouldn't have been very pleased when he

got home from work.

Would there be other people around while you were blowing up these houses?

Initially, yeah, intensely curious but then you'd tell them

11:30 to get back, you know and you had your own linguists and linguist saying, "Okay stand back. If you've got anything around here that's likely to be damaged, including that red WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK , take it." You know, and then they would all stand back and get a bit of vicarious pleasure out of seeing a big house go up because they didn't own it, human nature.

So

12:00 **and what were the final consequences of that raid in terms of your operations?**

Crikey, I know they had knapsacks full of records. It gave us a good insight into the level of medication because they actually had medicines and things with them, again plenty of records. It's like a snowball effect, you know, one thing led to another

12:30 The actual memory of what happened to them individually I really can't recall, but being caught in the field with their documentation, they would have gone into the system as straight POWs [Prisoners of War] and probably would have finished up on Con Son Island.

And after your lucky find of this bloke?

Incredible yeah.

Did the Americans come onboard in terms of?

Well

13:00 it gave them even more respect for what we were doing. You know Sascha had reached out and tried to sort of buy in. He was rebuffed and sent home. The Yanks then said, "Well look let's leave well enough alone." And whenever I had to give a briefing to combined Americans, they would all come into the Task Force on Friday afternoon from memory.

13:30 Yeah Friday afternoon follies and when I was asked to brief them, if I wasn't out on the field, usually that briefing task would be left to the headquarters intelligence staff, after I'd told them what I'd been doing. But if they wanted an up-front briefing like a coup, like a little coup like that one, I'd give them a first-hand account and they'd all gasp in amazement and dance out happily,

14:00 you know. But yeah, that's about the extent of it but they were content to leave us alone, and then as Richard Nixon became more involved or realised that they were sort of in a quagmire that was becoming increasingly hard to get out of, he came forward with a thing called the Nixon Doctrine.

14:30 And the Nixon Doctrine simply said, "Let the Vietnamese fight their own fight while we disengage." And so that got interpreted down the scale so that when it got to me, the brigadier came to myself and Phuong, actually came over to my unit and said, "Look I've got bad news for you." He said, "We've got to stop the Acorn Operations for reasons of this Nixon Doctrine." And I

15:00 said, "Well that's a bit of a shame because we've got quite a few that we can pick up and they're still out there doing harm." And he had a bit of a lisp the old brigadier. I remember the lisp, you know, "You will stop it." And I thought what a shame, what a shame. So I got together with Phuong, my opposite number, and I said, "Look we've still got all these people that we can get." Phuong didn't know who they were because, as I said, I kept the blacklist to myself, "Still a lot of good work to do out there. Why don't, in the spirit of this

15:30 Nixon Doctrine, we hand over to you and the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit?" Which is why I mentioned them before, and being field police with the powers of arrest, but then having the possibilities of dubious leaks to the VC because that's in fact where a lot of them come from. They could have been double agents, we kept them on a tight leash as well and we said, "Look we'd like you to operate with us if you wouldn't mind doing

16:00 the actual arrests." And they said, "Fine." And then I said, "On the understanding everything's kept very tight till the last minute." So where I might have given Phuong an hour or two's leeway, they got five minutes and they would go in and they would be the visible presence then. They would go in and do the scoop but it was based on what we had been able to slip into the system in the way of information so we were seen to be obeying the law

16:30 and I guess we were, philosophically, yeah.

During those Acorn Operations how many people did you actually kidnap and interrogate?

At one stage there we were running at 45 a month. Sometimes they'd be grabbed in groups. I remember we did an operation up around Phu My which was a town along the road to, along the coast road to Saigon. It was on the border of our province

17:00 and the next province over, Bien Hoa and that was an intersection area for the passage of a lot of

weapons we would know would go through Phu My because of the immense numbers of reports we were getting from there. And we found that we couldn't, you know it was impossible to sort of grab them individually and so what we did is we had to, we

17:30 used infantry support and we had artillery support and cavalry support to surround the whole village. We virtually kidnapped the whole village and then put up hessian screens and things to process these people through in the field and so I think out of that one we got

18:00 probably about 20, yeah, it was a figure of about 20, I think from memory.

Can you describe that operation in some detail for us?

Well that was a matter of, you know knowing, see Phu My was a smallish village on the highway and it was between the Long Hai, yeah there were two groups of mountains, three. There was the Long Hais and the Te Vies and the May Tao's

18:30 up the north, the Thi Vis and Long Hai. Long Hai was south of Dat Do. These were the Thi Vis yeah. Thi Vi Mountains were to the west of the province and Phu My was a village on the highway between the Te Vie Mountains, and this Rhun Suk swamp area, so it provided a good crossover point, checkpoint for the VC between this Rhun Suk swampy area where they hid. And the mountain chain

19:00 which was a good infiltration route into the province and further north and knowing that this traffic was going through Phu My we thought you know, a lot of these people are implicated. We actually got the names of the people who were spruiking a bit of knowledge about what was going on and I forget which one of my soldiers was up there. I tend to think it was a corporal but he was very good, a good operator

19:30 and so we compiled a list from the information that he was getting, pretty thick and fast. I mean, as you can imagine, these rural people are pretty simple. They're not stupid and they're cunning but their outlook on life is pretty simple and so they'll talk and they'll chatter like country people do. And from that information that was being picked up, we got this core list of

20:00 about 20 names and because it was too many to grab all at once we had to sort of cordon this village. That's when I asked for the support of infantry and armour to do it and, I might add, was given it readily. You know there was no qualms or quibbles because we'd had many successes and they weren't going to question the outcome of this one so, yeah what we did is we rounded them up and

20:30 isolated them from the other villagers, made sure that, kept them all as separate as we could from one another. We had a truck with some steel pickets and some rolls of hessian and rolled them all out and made little interrogation cells in the field, in the paddocks, right in the edge of the rice paddies. And

21:00 the only untoward thing that happened was one person who was not saying anything and we knew was right up to his eyeballs in it, was taken behind one of these hessian bags with a lot of noise and commotion and one of the NCOs fired a rifle shot. I thought gees. I didn't know he was going to do that but it made the others start to talk. They thought they'd taken him behind the thing to blow his head off

21:30 and it was a flash of inspiration that happened to work, you know something that under the Geneva Convention you don't do, yeah. So things like that happened, yeah it wasn't all according to Hoyle.

How significant in the progress of fighting the war were those kind of operations?

Well the information that we were getting back from the diaries was that we were doing

22:00 an intense amount of damage because the soldiers in D445, and other field units were actually complaining that they weren't getting what they should have, you know the support they should have been getting because that, they didn't actually come out in the diaries and say, "Those bloody Australians are doing this…" you know, they'd say, "because we can no longer contact Win Te Wah or Win Vang Trung," or whatever, you know.

22:30 And we knew from the diaries why they couldn't, because they were in the bag, yeah so it was pretty effective, yeah.

How much sympathy was there for the Viet Cong among the Vietnamese?

Depended on, well face to face they never, ever sympathised with the VC because they saw that they were an embuggerance

23:00 on the road to progress. The Phuoc Tuy province was a very rich province. It had, it was bounded on east and southern side by water so there was lots of fish, there was lots of jungle produce out towards Wen Mok out in the east. There was lots and lots of beautiful quality grain rice. There were more

23:30 jungle animals in the hills, the matos, deer, monkeys they ate but mainly deer, so they had protein, they had fish, they had rice. They had lovely soil to grow vegetables in, soil that you'd die for, just beautiful red volcanic soil, sugarcane, bananas. The whole lot was there and most

24:00 of the people who lived in that province just wanted to simply get along and get married and have kids

and have a good feed and, you know have a bit of a peaceful life because, you know they'd been fighting since the '50's for God sake, you know. There was always strife in the north and then the French weren't all that generous with them and, you know so they just wanted to get ahead and do their thing. Now they could see that when we moved in,

24:30 "Oh God here's some more of these round eyed bastards and who needs them?" And all that sort of thing and so initially the atmosphere was pretty surly and the village most, the closest to Nui Dat was a village called Hoa Long and they hated us the most because even though they weren't treated badly or anything like that, our trucks would go past and there would be dust and there'd be, you know this, that and the other thing and it was just a bad neighbour type

25:00 scenario. But they, as a result of that bad neighbour-ness, that village was always a good source of recruits for VC. Further out away from the task force they could see that we had a pacifying effect on the whole province and so they were quite happy to play our game and to say, "Right, fine, here we go. We'll peacefully coexist provided we don't get into trouble." To the extent that when they knew D445 might have been

25:30 manoeuvring around one of the major district towns, they would volunteer information, no, not always but far more often than what they did in the past because they knew that we could head him off in the bush with our, you know their houses and produce sort of thing, burnt or blown up, yeah. So to that extent there was a mixture of feelings but yeah, the feeling I got from the Vietnamese

26:00 was much the same feeling that I experienced as a small boy in Port Melbourne when the Yanks were here during the Second World War that, you know you didn't mind them as allies but God they gave you the shits because they had lots of money and beautiful uniforms, and they swaggered and that is never designed to make friends I'm afraid. And so most Vietnamese thought of the allies,

26:30 not particularly the Australians but, because I mean Australian soldiers in uniform are daggy looking. You know there's nothing smart about our uniform. We're real dags and I guess our dagginess sort of endeared us to the Vietnamese a bit more than, say than the Yanks but that was the feeling I had, yeah.

What were your thoughts about what those people were going through?

I constantly put myself in

27:00 their situation because not only had we to work in their countryside but I was also getting not only good intelligence feedback from my soldiers living with them in their villages, but you'd get the local gossip as well, and you'd get the compassionate stories and the sad stories and the, you know you had a pretty good finger on the pulse of what was going on. And so from that point of view, whenever you went out, if someone had had a bit of misfortune you'd take a bag of lollies out

27:30 for the kids or whatever, you know. It was just designed to, you know normal human relations I guess to show the human face. I mean my unit used to support a Cao Dao orphanage. Cao Dao was one of their religions and there was an ex province chief's wife called Madame Tuic-ya used to run that orphanage. Now we

28:00 would provide them with tinned rations, mosquito nets, blankets, you know the stuff that was being processed through. She had her own laundry and would wash all this stuff and then it would go to the kids and we would have the odd sports day whenever we could, a game of netball or something like that, raise a bit of money and send it down to them

28:30 and we did that in conjunction with 547 Sig Troop. There were two units supporting her orphanage, yeah, so that's the sort of thing you did. You made sure you got involved with them because even though the Yanks were sprouting all these buzz phrases like, you know, win the hearts and minds, all that sort of thing. They never, ever truly believed it because they couldn't identify with the Vietnamese as people

29:00 as readily as we could. You know there was a lot of Australians used to hate the Vietnamese because, you know, "They are the reason I'm bloody here and they're all," you know you'd hear all the epitaphs, the slaps and the, you know but that sort of feeling came from the diggers who probably never, ever got out from behind the wire. They were mainly, you know in the base. If you mixed with the people you realised that, you know they were like anybody else.

Can you describe

29:30 **your personal relationships with the Vietnamese people?**

Very warm I like to think, yeah very warm, to the extent that yeah, I would visit Phuong's family. I'd be invited to his house and I'd dangle his kids on my knee and their families never, ever came to the Task Force because it just wasn't allowed but I'd be invited home. I'd meet the families of all of his

30:00 soldiers. After the war he finished up in prisoner of war camp for seven years after the fall of Saigon and when he was finally released and he escaped by boat to Australia he, one of my ex soldiers, Ray Williams, was on the beach at Port Pasir Gudang off the coast of Malaysia. He was seconded to Foreign Affairs as a Vietnamese linguist. There was still a lot of VC getting out of

30:30 Vietnam then too because they weren't getting the jobs that they were promised so he was there to sort

the wheat from the chafe and Phuong recognised Ray and ran up and said, “Hey Mr Williams, do you know me?” And of course Ray didn’t know him because he was then weighing, Phuong then weighed 45 kilos after his incarceration and he was quite a muscly, stocky little man. And so anyhow Ray penned a letter off to the director of military

31:00 intelligence. He didn’t know where I was posted this time and the letter eventually found its way to me. I wrote back through the system, said, “If he’s coming to Australia, tell him to come to Queensland.” And when he eventually landed at Wacol I paged him, “Win Bah Phuong, Win Bah Phuong,” over the old loud speakers and this little figure detached himself from the crowd and ran across the parade ground and hit me like an octopus, all arms and legs, crying his eyes out. He said,

31:30 “You’re the only one in Australia I know.” I said, “Good on you Phuong, let’s go for a meal.” So on a personal note it was pretty close, pretty close and I still remember all of their names and I can sort of look at the albums and name them all so it wasn’t in my case certainly a matter of being faced by an amorphous group of Asian faces. It was, they all had personalities and I think that was

32:00 reflected in a lot of the loyalty that I got, you know we enjoyed working with each other and there was trust to the degree that they understood we could give it.

Just going back to when you first, you went home from your first tour of duty.

That’s right yeah. I got home and my daughter was then walking and talking and I pulled up at

32:30 my mother in law’s house at Mitchelton after what seemed like a very, very short time, from leaving Vietnam and this little girl ran down the path and said, “Mummy, Mummy, Daddy’s here.” She knew that it was Daddy because Daddy was in uniform and there was a photograph somewhere in the house, “Daddy’s here and guess what, he is a boy.” And she was overwhelmed that I was a boy because she was living with her grandmother, her mother,

33:00 her mother’s two sisters. It was a house full of women and there I was, you know there was a boy coming home, you know so yeah, trying to think now when the next one came along. It’s probably about five minutes after that.

Just talking about your family, when did you have time to meet your wife?

Well I met her when I was flying at Amberley, yeah. In fact

33:30 let me think about this. Amberley, that’s right. I met her while I was doing my officer cadet training at North Head and I came up with my TI mate to Brisbane to have a holiday with his family, rather than go back to Melbourne cause it was winter and the Beatles, as I recall, were in town and everybody was going ape about the bloody Beatles

34:00 and I finished up in this party at Clayfield amongst all these people who’d seen the Beatles and I didn’t care, even know who the Beatles were. Saw this girl who thought was pretty swift and I hung back to the extent that I didn’t approach her to say, “Let’s have a talk,” or “Can I take you home?” And one of my friends swooped in like a

34:30 seagull on a hot chip and finished up taking her home but we never forget each other and so we started to correspond, that’s right had another break before I went to Point Cook, took her out some more there, flew at Point Cook, had a break in between the primary and secondary phases of flying, came up to see her again,

35:00 got to Amberley. Things got real heavy then, then we got married in ’66, and then I went to Vietnam in ’68, yeah. So we had a little daughter. Let me think about this, now when did Stuart come along? I’m trying to think about how I impregnated her with Stuart.

35:30 It would have been passing her in the passage at some stage, I know that. It was pretty potent old times, yeah. He was born in ’70 so okay,

36:00 yeah he was born in 1970 so, you’ve got me. I don’t know. I forget now.

That’s all right, that’s okay, just going back though to what it was like to go back home after being in Vietnam that first time?

Mind blowing. It was one of those things that you think, “Where are people’s heads coming from?” You know I mean,

36:30 Okay.

Just thinking though seriously about that visit home.

Yeah so, well anyhow it was such, you know the modern transport is so good that you’re sort of whisked out of that environment in Vietnam where its adrenaline buzz, buzz, buzz for seven days a week 24 hours a day and you’re on a

37:00 commercial flight. It was a Pan Am flight I remember. We came home, got to think about that. I don’t know whether it was R and R or the last trip but I remember one Pan Am flight was pretty memorable

where they said to this mixed group of Australians and Americans, “Okay the champagne is free all the way to Sydney.” And we thought, “Wow this is terrific.” And they were dispensing the champagne fairly liberally and I remember having

37:30 two glasses and then by the time the aircraft got to height of about 35,000 feet I was out to it and didn’t wake up until Sydney and that was their idea, the cunning buggers, because champagne bubbles expand at altitude and you go to sleep and they didn’t want any trouble. And I can remember the captain’s announcement. He was a Spanish American, and he said, “Gentlemen, on behalf of Captain Hernandez and his Spanish fliers

38:00 you have now arrived in Sydney,” you know. “Yeah, beauty.” Quick morning flight from Sydney to Brisbane, army car to pick me up, out to Mitchelton, head’s still spinning with all this travel and non stop movement, and I was sat down with a very delicate little china cup and saucer and given a Devonshire scone and said, “Now tell us what you’ve been doing?” Bloody hell, enough

38:30 you know. It’s just too much of a, yeah, very hard to settle back in.

How long were you in Australia before you went back to Vietnam?

About 11 months I think, yeah posted down to Canberra where I worked in the Directorate

39:00 that’s right, yeah was about 11 months. Yeah, I was there for July, the man on the moon, ’69 and I yeah, I had to move back before Christmas because the bloke I was replacing wanted to be home for Christmas and I thought it was a pretty fair thing and that’s what I did so I went back the second time but more closer to the sharp end this time. Jan wasn’t

39:30 too pleased with that, my wife and she actually confessed to me years later that she never, ever watched the news at all over the two years I was away, and yeah. She never said that and I thought, “Oh well it’s a pretty telling sort of thing to say,” yeah.

What was the mood in Australia when you were back in Australia before you went back the second time?

40:00 It was getting a little bit nastier. People like Jim Cairns were starting to make a bit of a noise on the streets, but Jim Cairns was always considered by the general run of the population to be a bit of a dope or at least an eccentric. So not much notice was taken of Jim, but people were attaching themselves to Jim’s coat-tails

40:30 and making their voices heard and of course as the birthday ballot was biting and more and more people were involved and, you know I can’t really say it was anything to do with body bags coming home, because quite frankly it was safer to be in Vietnam for a lot of young Australian men than it was to drive a car on the roads here. I mean over the period ’62 to ’73 when we left, 11 years

41:00 we lost 508 killed. In the same period I think there was that many killed every year on the roads here. So it wasn’t a case of carnage turning people off. It wasn’t that at all. It was just that a lot of people could see in the ’70s, it was the year coming into the ’70’s with the year of the invention of the yuppie idea, and I guess they didn’t want their lives destroyed by being

41:30 swept up in the ballot and I think the protests were done not so much from esoteric reasons, but self interest really.

Tape 8

00:32 **You talked about how your methods of interrogation gathering intelligence, what were the interrogation methods that you were hearing about the VC?**

VC never captured any of ours to be interrogated. In fact the only two soldiers unaccounted for, Australian soldiers, in the whole of the Vietnam War were two

01:00 possibly three, but I know two for sure went missing in action and that was a result of an SAS extraction out of the bush where the chopper comes in low and fast, drops the rope, you attach yourself to the rope and they lift you out. These two guys fell off the ropes back into the jungle. Now we think they were probably killed on impact and their bodies are still out there, but that was

01:30 our record compared with the Americans who had hundreds missing in action and it makes you wonder how that situation can ever arise when they don’t know where their own people are. And this MIA [Missing In Action] thing that they’re going on in America, you think, “God how did they lose them in the first place?” you know. So it sort of gives you an indication of what I was talking about.

What’s your theory about how they lost them?

Well

02:00 chaotic fire and movement. They didn't know where they were in the bush a lot of the times, literally did not know and so if whole units were being lost then, you know people were sort of flagging off from those units and being lost even further. Added to that propensity that the Yanks have for, see I've used that word again now that

02:30 I've learnt it, have for wanting to do their own thing, for not wanting to follow orders. They just charge off. There were a lot of mentally unstable American soldiers who went in there because they were probably not very well educated and not very mentally stable in the first place but also exacerbated that by ingestion of drugs. A lot of Negro's would have felt that living

03:00 with their little near white-yellow housemaid in a village somewhere was far more preferable to going back to the south Bronx. There are all sorts of sociological and tactical reasons why they went missing, but it still doesn't exonerate the American command system for not knowing at least where they were last seen, you know. And it just boggles your mind to think that that could happen, but

03:30 I mean when you look back on the scale of warfare, they did things in such big numbers, I mean to the extent that they wouldn't miss equipment. Why would they miss the odd man, you know they're just stacks on the mill and whole divisions would go. A little anecdote, when they were packing up the Melbourne when we were pulling out of Vietnam, and we were loading stores onto the Melbourne to go into the holds and on the decks, we had to borrow an American Highster crane, one of these massive big cranes

04:00 that lift tonnes. And at the end of the exercise, one of our engineers said, the Yank, "Well where do I drive the crane back to?" He said, "Drive it on board the bloody boat." You know, "I don't want it back." Just, they're items of barter, you know. So yeah, I s'pose everything being done at such a gigantic scale they were bound to lose a thousand or two blokes missing in action, yeah.

Were there

04:30 **stories from them about interrogation or POWs that were?**

There were movies made. There were, you know the most authentic stories of interrogation were out of the Hanoi Hilton and mainly airmen in Hanoi in the jail up there. There were indications and sightings of white soldiers being held

05:00 in the hills by Montagnards. The Montagnards are the mountain people. They would have, could have been French or American. Quite a few French people were being kidnapped, ex rubber plantation owners but if they were white they would almost certainly be American. There were cases of white men seen in charge of Viet Cong units and people think they were Russians.

05:30 I've got no, I believe that those stories are true but no Australian was ever subjected to an interrogation because no-one got caught, yeah that's that.

Can I take you right back to your first operation, can you talk a little bit more about some of the work that you were doing there on that camp?

So where are we now, on my first tour?

Yeah?

At Vung Tau?

06:00 Well again the work was fairly routine because it was a matter of a lot of security checking, a lot of, you know the job was to physically secure the camp and to make sure that, you know we weren't being infiltrated or robbed or whatever, all the nasty things that can happen. The secondary area was the personnel security. That's the security of the personnel

06:30 that we hired. The third leg of the job was local liaison with police and justice ministry. 53rd Logistic Support Group was an American group where we used to get a lot of our supplies from, all of which we paid for. The Signals units that took advantage of the beautiful high ground at the

07:00 end of the peninsula for their aerial displays, my liaison with the navy explosive ordnance demolition divers. They used to, they had a fabulous place to live. It was like a marble cave dug into the side of this hill by the Japanese and on the hottest day it was just so cool. It was beautiful.

Why did you have to liaise with them?

Well we wanted to make sure that they were on tap for any

07:30 visiting ships, either delivering the troops or supply ships and they were able to provide us with support in so far as clearance diving went. I mean the Viet Cong had what they called swimmers and they would attach limpet mines to boats and blow them up and that was done regularly so we used the navy clearance divers to make sure that none of our shipping was blown up and I was a point of liaison for that.

What you'd

08:00 **hear that, there'd be rumours that there may have been something?**

Yeah, but as a routine matter you'd make sure that they gave a particular vessel coverage while it was in port. There were about, I think there was a dozen of those navy divers and they used to do work up and down the coast and do jobs for the Americans as well.

And did they tell you when they found stuff?

Yeah and render it innocuous and bring it back and show you and say, "Well this is the latest stuff," and that would all go into the museum or, you know

08:30 you'd swap it around amongst the groups to say, "This is new." And they were always coming up with innovative stuff. There was one, yeah one explosive, it's a bit delicate to talk to you about it. It was hidden by women in their woman part and that was about

09:00 same diameter as that glass, and it was made of brass and it was a round ball. And the reason it was made of brass is so they didn't get toxic shock from steel and they would simply hide these grenades in their vaginas, and move into an area in a marketplace, produce the thing, throw it and bang, off they go, you know and that was designed specifically for women to carry, yeah. And they

09:30 were quite hefty bloody things too, yeah but, you know that, those innovations in ordnance were always of interest to us so that you knew, you know what to look for and what it meant and all that sort of stuff.

Well when did that first become known about?

Market grenades, which wasn't their real term, they had a more vulgar term but…

Can you tell us?

They were just called snatch grenades. They were in existence from

10:00 the day I arrived there and I think before. I think they were first heard of in '66, '67, yeah.

Did you ever manage to talk to any women that had carried them?

No, I didn't.

Were women used in the VC quite a lot?

Yeah,

10:30 on one occasion we used to do, to go back a step, we used to do pattern analysis on movements around our province and at a certain time of the year the VC would like to go into villages to steal or demand by way of taxation, polished white rice. The crazy thing about it, if they had of stayed in the paddocks and

11:00 ate the unhusked rice, they would have been better off healthily and all that sort of thing but it was a status symbol to eat white rice. I don't know if you recall the days when it was a status symbol that you didn't eat brown bread. It always had to be white bread, you know so they were the same with their rice. And anyhow, we did this pattern analysis, got a bit of a word that they might have been hungry and coming into the rice mill at Wah Long and so the 8th Battalion was alerted

11:30 and they set an ambush based on the information that we passed to them and the ambush was, a fellow by the name of Chad Sherren was in charge of that ambush and he's now the funds raising manager for Legacy in Brisbane. And Chad had his ambush set and actually saw these VC go into the village

12:00 and then he thought well they're going to come out the same way. And he did an unforgivable thing. He actually moved his ambush after it was set at night and he moved it to sort of make sure they got them, nearly got into big trouble about that. But it turned out the move paid off for him because they walked out right through his ambush and there were 28 people killed as a result of that, and there were more killed coming out than there were went in because what they were doing was recruiting and kidnapping as well to be,

12:30 act as porters and things, carrying bags of rice. But of the people killed there were some women. Now I was there at probably after the last shot was fired but pretty early in the morning and we had to fingerprint and photograph bodies and collect them and do all these, go through the pockets and do all the other stuff we did, and

13:00 there was one young lady there who looked beautiful even in death, absolutely gorgeous kid she was, and I remember the Vietnamese soldiers saying, "Dep qua," you know, "How beautiful, what a pity," you know, "She's dead," and everything, very serene poor kid. But if I can skip to the future then, just for this one story. After we pulled out of Vietnam in '73, the Labor Party sent a lot of

13:30 politicians up to Vietnam to dig up stories about how nasty we may have been to the population because they were ingratiating themselves with the new Vietnamese government for purposes of trade, and they were saying, you know, "Were we brutal?" and, you know, "What sort of brutality?" all this sort of stuff. They were trying to dig all sorts of stuff. One of the things that our wonderful ex Governor-General, Bill Hayden, did was to talk to the head chief at

14:00 Wah Long and he said, “Oh yes,” he said, “the Australians buried all these bodies in our best rice paddy so we can’t grow rice there any more.” And questions were raised in the House that not only had we wrecked a rice paddy, but we actually killed some women in this ambush. Now I was, when the questions were raised in the House, I was holidaying up at Coolum with my kinds

14:30 and I was in a borrowed army tent so it sort of stood out on the foreshore. Next thing this army staff car glided up and said, “Are you Major Cunningham?” I said, “Yes I am, how did you guess?” And the driver said, “Look you’re wanted back in the city straight away.” I said, “Why?” And they said the minister wants to see you, Mr Killen. And I thought gees. So anyway, that wrecked that holiday.

15:00 And I had to go home and get into my uniform, go up to the Australian government offices and walked in and here’s old Jim giving me the eyebrow and he said, “Hello Major, would you like a cup of tea?” I said, “No thanks Minister, what’s it all about?” pretty angry I was. And very conspiratorial he leaned over his desk and he said, “Is it true that in the massacre at Wah Long...” I said, “Hold it there” I said, “a massacre is an entirely different thing to a military ambush.” I said, “It wasn’t a massacre.

15:30 It was a military ambush.” He said, “Okay I stand corrected.” He said, “Is it true that in the ambush there were three women killed?” I said, “No, that’s not true.” I said, “There were six women killed.” His head almost sunk into his shoulders when I told him that, and he said, “Not a word. I don’t want to hear any more about this. Thank you very much. I’ll go back to the House and tell them that there were some women killed,” you know. So out of the 28

16:00 there were six women killed. Now out of those six women killed there were, two had RPG rocket launchers and two were carrying bags of rice and two had AK’s and at night time in black pyjamas, you don’t give a damn. So the idea of trying to brutalise our troops by telling stories about them after the event is just, I found just the lowest of low things to do.

16:30 And the rice paddy that we were supposed to have wrecked, I remember vividly where it was. It was on a T junction where, you know how vehicles cut the corners to go around and there was a little triangle, and that’s where they were, on that triangle and nowhere near a rice paddy but again, political capital tried to be made by the Wah Long district village chief who didn’t like us anyway, and by the lovely Bill Hayden

17:00 who was only too anxious to sort of lend credence to his story, which I hope makes you all very healthily cynical about politicians.

Did you get information from those VC that were killed that day?

No because they were dead but the…

I mean diaries?

Certainly the diaries and photographs and fingerprints proved who they were.

Can you tell us about the process of gaining that information?

Yeah, well the diaries

17:30 link in one to another, you know they’ll link personalities. Because they had a reasonably good national ID [identification] card system, on reflection it was pretty good. Fingerprints were generally reliable and you could work out whether that person had ever been registered, you could work out from clothing. You could work out generally

18:00 from fingerprints who exactly they were. Very often it was difficult to sort out names in many respects because Asian people have several names in the course of their lives. They’ll have a home name, they’ll have a village name and they’ll have a temple name but the fingerprints and photographs sort that out and so you can eventually work out who they are. The diaries help.

18:30 The other way that we, you did it was a fairly brutal and up-front way, is you simply laid the bodies out in the marketplace and wait until the relatives claim them and then you claim the relatives and find out, you know, who they were and what were the circumstances of them being there. So it’s not rocket science, you know, yeah. So they were the sorts of ways that we got the information.

Going back to

19:00 **the camp, there were five thousand people on that camp?**

This is at Vung Tau yeah.

Vung Tau, yeah sort of for the first tour, what did people do for fun on that camp?

They tried to keep healthy as best they could and they had the best scenario. We in the jungle used to call them pogos because Vung Tau, you know even though

19:30 it was in a harsh environment of sand dunes, you still had the chance to cop a sea breeze. You had the benefit of being able to throw your body into the saltwater and get rid of some of these rashes and things that we were all getting. The mode of dress worn by the diggers was the rag giggle hat, no shirt,

just dog tags, a pair of shorts and army boots with the socks rolled

20:00 down around the top of them, very comfortable. So that you had, your skin was exposed to the sun and yeah, so you weren't uncomfortable in your mode of dress. The climate was pretty good. Again inter unit sports, they would have, I remember when they opened the Harold Holt memorial pool, they had volunteers for freestyle and breaststroke and backstroke and, you know

20:30 all that sort of stuff so it was the inter unit thing going on.

Many women on the camp?

Not a lot but the ones that were there were very highly thought of and regarded, and respected. There were nurses from the hospital. There were Red Cross women. There was the old Red Shield person. A couple of Yank Red Cross women used to come around every now and then and liaise with their Australian counterparts

21:00 to the extent that every now and then they would say, "Righto you fellers, how about in the main officers' mess," you know, "you give us a ladies night." And so, you know you'd send the Vietnamese out to bring a few punches of palm trees in and put them round the place to soften it up a bit and say, "Well do you want a pink fluffy drink?" or something, you know and do the cocktail circuit, which made us all sick. But they'd enjoy it as a social occasion.

21:30 We had nuns come down, nuns from the orphanages, Vietnamese nuns and they'd enjoy the odd vodka and orange and, you know it was just a matter of women getting together in reasonably civilised circumstances and seeing all the young officers on their best behaviour and being terribly attentive was all nice. It sort of made us feel a bit soft and furry round the outside and made them feel a bit special, which was good for all of us, yeah.

22:00 **How did the men deal with not being able to have sex and the access to that part, did they get toey?**

Yeah, very much so. The majority of them were pretty good about it but, you know you can't sort of keep a cap on it forever. The local girls at Vung Tau were all too willing. They had bars and they had,

22:30 you know the usual camp followers that have been following armies for centuries, you know they had bars that were off limits. They had bars on limits. They had bars where sex was not allowed and they had bars mainly populated by American Negro's and you had bars populated by Vietnamese marines who were all out of their scones because they'd been in constant action for 10 years, and you never know when someone's going to let a grenade go. So the bar life was pretty varied and plentiful. The,

23:00 it wasn't, you know there was diggers didn't release themselves on the bars every night as a matter of course. It was like a weekend thing. If they could be spared, they were given time off so it, maybe one or two nights a week that they could sort of get out and if they managed a liaison with one of the local young ladies, then they did it. It wasn't done entirely ethically I might add.

23:30 They, condoms were available and the doctors made sure that they all had condoms with them when they went out. If they were over amorous and went through their stock of condoms then they had no compunction relying on producing an anti malarial pill and telling the young ladies that this anti malarial pill was also anti

24:00 contraceptive so that in the heat of passion there was a few fibs told. Didn't see much in the way of cross racial progeny, so by and large they must have been fairly careful, yeah. And I think any that were begot, and I know of several families who have got Vietnamese Australian kids who were conceived

24:30 up there, yeah but not too many, yeah but, you know the usual male tricks when they're trying to

What were the stories of the men coming back to, the local men coming back to their wives having experienced jungle craziness?

There was a lot of domestic violence but I would say at its height, whenever say a major unit like one of the marine

25:00 battalions would come back to Vung Tau where its base was, from working up north and they would have seen a lot of action there, a lot of very disturbed young soldiers in those marine battalions. This is Vietnamese, so that whenever that battalion was back in town, Vung Tau was a good place to stay away from because you did get examples of domestic violence. You had bashings and beatings and stabbings and grenades and shootings and whatever.

25:30 It was a bit of a pressure cooker. The Vietnamese people are very moral peoples generally. I mean if a woman was married to a bloke and he was away then she wouldn't play up, but you could expect the bar girls would and in the normal course of mixing, if a married woman happened to be getting her fingernails done by a bargirl or something, and she was seen

26:00 in the company, then that may have, in those instances, may have set the blokes off to give her a bit of a clip, you know, when they got back. But that was about the extent of it I think, yeah. There was a lot of jealousy between single blokes and bar girls, you know. I mean Vietnamese women are very, very

beautiful women. They are very graceful and their national dress, the ao dais is just a glorious thing to see, you know, to see young schoolgirls riding their bikes through Saigon, they all look like a

26:30 flock of swans, long necks and flowing ao dais and it's the most graceful national costume for women I've ever seen. And when you get the interbreeding of French Vietnamese, Franco Vietnamese, they're just spectacular looking so that when you get a very good looking woman like that and there were several rivals, you know, you could expect fireworks.

Can you describe the atmosphere of one of those

27:00 **bars in town, give us a bit of a picture of…?**

Yeah the first, I was horrified. I like Australian pubs with big, wide verandas and airy swinging doors. They were all designed along the American style of dark, neon everywhere, noisy, horrible thumping music and the smell of bourbon and coke,

27:30 which is a drink I find vile, you know I'm a scotch drinker. I just cannot stand how they ever drink scotch with it but when it's put into a plastic drink like bourbon so that, where that makes me gag even now to think about it. I sort of got to the stage where somewhere, I forget where it was but it was a bar somewhere and they said, "What will you have?" And I said, "Well I'd like a whiskey and soda." And the Americans call soda, any soft drink is soda, so that was translated as bourbon and coke and I sort of threw it down

28:00 in this dark bar and oh, I still, my gorge still rises when I think about it now, you know. My son in law drinks bourbon and coke and I said, "Just give me a sip of that. I want to go back to Saigon circa 1968," you know. I just have a sip and all those memories come back so yeah, bourbon and coke, lights, darkness, you know coloured lights, darkness, throbbing music,

28:30 heavy smoke. They're all smoke traps. Yanks for some reason or other love their cigars and smoke them right down to the butt where you've got black tar dribbling out the end of them, you know, yeah. If you want to do your body some damage, it's a good place to go, you know one of those American bars.

What about in daylight, the town?

The town of Vung Tau is,

29:00 it was then, mainly a mixture of lovely old French colonial buildings with ornate curlicues and things on them and terracotta tiles with reasonable looking gardens around, smallish plots.

29:30 Some tall three storey industrial buildings, commercial office type buildings, a lot of modern ugly concrete buildings but a mixture of old and new. It's very much like any Asian city. I mean have you been to Asia? Yeah, well you get a lot of concrete feel about it. In those days it was very dusty and very crowded. The road that

30:00 went right round the circumference of the peninsula was not sealed properly. There was a place I used to love to go to eat called the Café Obez de Roche Nua on the Black Rocks and it was good. Its short name was Sur Noze and they had a beautiful seafood set up there and it was all French cooking. The woman who ran that was a Franco Vietnamese, spectacular looking woman called Anna and her sister

30:30 and it was probably the premier eating place in Vung Tau, still fairly cheap, you know. I personally believe that in Anna's Sur Noze restaurant it was, you know more deals done there and coups and plots hatched than anywhere I've ever seen, because the president used to have a palace just around the beach from Anna's and the local rumour was, and even from her own mouth, that she was very friendly with the president, and

31:00 I'm just trying to remember which one it was now. I don't know whether it was Khe or Min, yeah, I don't know I forget but anyway, yeah, but anyway she was there.

Can you describe the interior of the restaurant?

Well, it was seaside chic I s'pose. It was right on the water. They had a fascinating enclosure hidden from the restaurant by a

31:30 bamboo screen. It went out to an enclosure that went out to the sea. It was brilliant. They had a jetty on four sides and this seawater enclosure and from the jetty they had pigpens with bamboo slatted floors through which the pig droppings would fall, and the ducks that would float on the, it was like an Eider duck. It could live in salt or freshwater, would pick

32:00 out what it wanted from the pig droppings and plus the, you know the bits of greenery that fell through the floor. The rest that sunk down to the bottom was eaten by the fish so that she had fish, ducks and pigs all at the one thing and that was like a little mini ecosystem and fed the restaurant. It was absolutely brilliant, yeah and of course the restaurant scraps would go out to the pigs and so the whole, it was spectacularly run yeah, and having a Scottish name, the frugality and thrift of it all

32:30 rather appealed to me.

Did you spend time with the officers or who were your mates in the first tour?

Well, I guess that I would have done most of my drinking with the officers yeah, because being an officer myself it wasn't, you didn't sort of go out of your way to mix with the diggers because what you did made them feel uncomfortable, you know they didn't want an officer hanging around while they wanted to go

33:00 and talk about you behind your back and I think we all appreciated that and that's the reason why we have officers and sergeants and ORs' [other ranks] messes, you know just to get away from each other. Yeah so, we stuck to our own sort of band but it didn't, it wasn't to say that you didn't make very good and close friends through the different ranks, you know. In fact one of my soldiers was a National Serviceman who was

33:30 a customs bloke, worked on customs and I was given a shotgun which I have since returned to the police, and rather reluctantly. It was a beautiful Savage shotgun by a Yank as a gift, and I remember hoisting, I saw Steve, my customs, he'd left Vietnam and been demobbed and was back doing his civvy job and he went like this to me as if to say, "Well if you're going to come through the gate,

34:00 come through me." So I could get through quickly and to get home to where I was going. It was at Sydney, so I dumped my zippered green bag on the counter, and it was so crammed full of gifts for my wife and babies and things like that, that the zip busted and this shotgun poked out and I thought, "Oh, sprung." And he looked at me, rolled his eyes and he said, "Have you got any pornography Skipper?" I said, "No mate." He said, "Through you go." So, you know you kept in touch with them.

34:30 It was pretty good.

How did you change from, you know the time you got to Vietnam on that first tour, to the time you went home?

I was very hyperactive. After my first tour I was, I couldn't settle and

35:00 in fact on R and R [Rest and Recreation] it was a brilliant R and R, which was only a week's break over a year. At the end of the R and R I knew I had to go back and so my brain said to me, "Look forward to it," and I did. I was actually interested to think, "What the hell am I going to go back to here?" At the end of the tour when I thought, "Well okay, that's it. That's my lot done and I won't be back here again." I took a good long look

35:30 around Vietnam and went to the back of the aircraft and used the toilet while we were flying over the Delta so I could say my farewells in an appropriate manner, but I still couldn't settle and I don't know, I became, what's the word? Not hyperactive,

36:00 I don't know, discontent, just, you know I wanted to move, wanted to do things, you know and I guess after being busy for so long that you're, you know you just can't get in a hammock and swing away, you know. I s'pose I'll be like that for the rest of my life, you know I really do after two goes, yeah. My wife certainly saw the change in me,

36:30 you know she…

How did she deal with it at first?

Well, she was pretty happy to see that I was back again and to share the load of two kids. When I went back for the second time she was pretty upset and so that farewell was done I think, from memory, from her mother's place over at Mitchelton, and all of our friends came

37:00 around to give me a farewell and she coped with it with her girlfriends by getting sloshed on champagne. And I kept on saying, "Well I'm going now." And she'd say, "Are you still here?" you know. So yeah, she coped with it in a pretty Aussie sheila sort of a way, you know.

I can't imagine going from, you know those experiences in Vietnam and coming back to such a completely different culture and lifestyle.

Yeah.

37:30 **I imagine the adjustment was…?**

You never get used to it. Yeah, Jan will tell you now, I've never been the same since I came back and it changes all the way you think. I mean I was born a Catholic and raised a Catholic and that but, you know it creates your doubts and experiences like that shake you to the very foundations of your being, you know and you think well what is it all about?

38:00 **And yet you're not overly emotional about that?**

I can't see the point. I don't know why I'm not, you know I don't think I'm a taciturn person but I'm not an emoting European either, you know I can't go beating the breast and screaming and that otherwise, you know, people think you're strange but I, yeah I've never been the same. And it

38:30 it was definitely a life changing experience, war. It is. I mean, you know you're seeing things daily that you don't see in a lifetime back here and when you realise that by circumstances the powers that be can put you in charge, like literally you've got the power of life and death over people, is a pretty sobering

sort of a thought, and then you've got to determine

39:00 what sort of a person you are so that you can use that power, you know, hopefully for the best. But then when you think, "Well," you know "you're nobody special," and fate has just given you this, you know you think, "Oh crikey I hope I've done the right thing," and so, you know I guess I'm subjected to nightmares and restless nights and things thinking, "Well," you know, "have I done the right thing?" you know. I did things there that I wasn't too

39:30 proud of, including paying a bloke off in public. He was a bloke who was selling information to both sides and I wanted him out of my hair so I paid him off in public, fully knowing what the consequences would be yeah, so, you know those sorts of things aren't too Christian but they were considered necessary

40:00 at the time, or I considered them necessary.

Did you regret that in the future?

I only, I wasn't sorry that this particular person was out of my hair but I was a bit upset about myself for being so sneaky about it, being creatively sneaky about it.

But I guess that environment produces those tough decisions?

Well when he was being paid he was totally, you could see the fear in his eyes, "Who's watching us?" you know and I knew what was going to happen so

40:30 yeah that was a bit ruthless but it was clean.

Tape 9

00:33 **Going back when you were back in Australia, why did you decide to go back to Vietnam?**

This is between the first and second tours? Well my, now you've got me thinking about the birth of my second child here, born in '70. Okay yeah, July '70. He was on the way. The second child was on the way.

01:00 I was given the opportunity of going back to actually command troops rather than be an intelligence officer on a headquarters. To me, it is, it was and it was a very unique experience to do that, not too many people have that privilege. I was a bit flattered that I was short listed and when it came up that I was a choice

01:30 then I said to Jan, "I think this could be a good career move if I can keep my bloody head down long enough." She wasn't overjoyed but she could see that if I could live through a second tour in Vietnam, it would be a good gamble to take for career purposes and it would put her neatly back to her Mum's place at Mitchelton where she could go under her own gynaecologist to have the second baby, and get her the hell out of Canberra

02:00 where we were living in a walk up flat at Watson I think at the time. So for all those reasons it was considered between the two of us that I go back and have another lash.

How difficult was it to leave your wife pregnant in that situation?

Pretty tough, it wasn't an easy thing to do. I mean any venture, you've got to, you can't go away with a negative

02:30 mindset because it's going to affect those people who you're going to be commanding so you've got to be positive going forward and be fairly bright looking back because, you know I didn't want to leave her in a gloomy sort of a mood either, so that was the reason why we had the champagne party at Mitchelton where everybody got rotten and wondered why I was still there at the end of the party so yeah, we did it in as mature a way

03:00 as possible.

By 1970 there was a lot of protests going on about the war, certainly in the States and here in Australia, what were your thoughts about the justice of being there?

I actually provoked the ire of some of my seniors for some of my views of Vietnam. I was in a position to see the actual

03:30 Viet Cong soldier. I think over two years I'd spoken to about 400 of them or been certainly in on the interviews when they came in out of the field and told us what their circumstances were, and not in all cases, but generally the story went along the lines that, "My father had a hectare of rice paddy in a village

04:00 and he owned two water buffalo and I would see him working very hard to sell his rice or his produce, and he would look back over his shoulder at me and I'd be sitting on the verandah and he'd say, 'Son,

some day when I die, all this will be yours.' And I couldn't see much future in that. Then when I saw foreign people come into my country being able to wear nice clothes and carry weapons and go out

04:30 with nice looking women and eat good food, I thought there might be something more to this. Then my friend came to me one night with a shiny AK47 rifle and told me to look how admirable this weapon is. It was the first bit of machinery I've seen in my life and it was beautiful. He would then ask me, 'Would you like to come out to the bush with me and fire it?' And I jumped at the chance, excitement at last.

05:00 He would then take me to a high spot overlooking a road and we would shoot at me-i trucks, American trucks, and I would be very, very excited and then he would explain to me, 'We have just done something illegal. You'd better come back to the bush with me and not go home.' I naturally would go. I was a bit frightened of the me-i, the Americans." He would be then

05:30 given his own shiny AK47 and then they'd form the comradely Robin Hood type brotherhood living in the bush but at no stage in the first three, maybe four months was any communist doctrine ever told them. It was we band of Vietnamese brothers versus the foreigner and he wouldn't understand anything about communist ideology until he'd been living in the bush for some time.

06:00 And so after having heard that story quite a lot, you start to think well, you know the movement of the yellow peril is certainly a reality and the domino theory could be a reality, but these simple people aren't driving it. It's the politician, including the communist politicians. And Ho Chi Minh and people of his ilk were

06:30 you know quite single minded about what they wanted to achieve. Now with the benefit of hindsight, even Ho Chi Minh would agree that communism isn't a thing that works terribly well but it does work better in Asia than it does in Europe and I expressed the view at one stage that probably what China needed after its hundreds and hundreds of years of warlord-ism and strife and internal friction that

07:00 a totalitarian regime like communism might have been exactly what they needed to sort themselves out. And it sort of seems to be coming to that now, that where the Chinese are learning the benefit of the rule of law albeit they came to the rule of law through a pretty harsh system, no less did the English or the Japanese. The English would hang people willy-nilly; hang, draw and quarter them willy-nilly, behead them.

07:30 Even their sovereigns were beheaded but through all that brutality the rule of law seeped through and so people started to respect authority. Japanese were exactly the same thing, through the Tokagoas and, you know the rule of Bushido so the any society that's had a fairly harsh and strict background, including the Germans, the Prussian idea, they've always got now a strong sense of the rule of law, and the benefit of the rule of law.

08:00 And I think this is what the Chinese are coming to now and this is what the Vietnamese are learning. The Vietnamese are probably more Irish in their viewpoint than the Chinese. Where the Chinese can be likened to the English in Asia the Vietnamese can be likened to the Irish because they've got a more open sunny demeanour and they've been exposed to French influence which is

08:30 laissez faire so that already there are stirrings in Vietnam where they think, "Okay, we've been through this catharsis. We will re-evaluate where we're going," and to go to Vietnam now, to go to sit in Saigon and look down on the streets from a rooftop beer garden, you wouldn't believe you're in a communist country. It's just all these young people there making a buck as

09:00 best they can. It's all thriving and the other thing that struck me when I was there in 2000 was that 80 per cent of the people I was looking at on the street weren't even born when I left Vietnam so it gets things into perspective for you. You think why am I beating my breast and agonising about the past when they all weren't here? So you can re-evaluate your values

09:30 and your experiences from that point of view. You think well there's been a hiccup in the history of Vietnam, but it's going to go on.

To what extent do you agonise over the past?

I agonise about instances and I, you know certain things sort of wake me up. I mean there was one instance of a kid, a young

10:00 boy playing with a white phosphorus grenade in a village and it went off, and white phosphorus is a very vicious stuff. It gets into your skin and keeps burning so no matter how much you douse them in water it just burns and burns and burns. Well this kid, we had to put him on a blanket on a groundsheet in the back of the Land Rover and drive him as fast as we could to the nearest medical facility. The kid died but the amount of leakage of

10:30 bodily fluid went right through that Land Rover and you just couldn't get it out so that the Land Rover had to be destroyed. And he died a horrific death this kid and individual cases like that, not so much big set piece battles sort of. I think I can remember that more vividly than I can the Battle of Coral where, you know I think there were about 500 killed there and that came

11:00 down to hand to hand fighting where they got through the wire and turned our guns around on us, and all that sort of stuff. Now, you know I took a very small part in the Battle of Coral.

Can you tell us about your part in that?

Basically it was the Australians set up a fire support base, Coral. They knew that the Vietnamese forces were moving on Saigon. They wanted to have another bash at Saigon just after Tet and

11:30 the Americans could see that the area in which we were operating in, Bien Hoa province, was a very good approach point to Saigon because it had rivers and strips of jungle. It was good cover, so the Yanks said to us, "Can you form a blocking for us there?" And this is a very potted history of it all but it's in a book written by Lex McCauley who happened to be a warrant officer in my unit, Div Int [Divisional Intelligence] unit yeah, so

12:00 we put in this blocking force. There was Fire Support Base Coral in Balmoral and then the Vietnamese, north Vietnamese regular regiments were probing those and eventually put in an attack this particular night and all hell broke loose, including engagements of this regiment and our battalions and including them breaking through the wire and turning one of our artillery pieces

12:30 around on us, and they were repulsed I believe by engineers. But the carnage the morning after, there was so many of their killed, that every intelligence officer from around the place was asked to chopper in to sort of sort out the mess and go through the pockets, because it was just such a rich mother load of information from all these bodies. And so it was a pretty messy and

13:00 bloody job that I had to do, going through all these things, along with other people I might add but, you know we got a fair bit out of that. And then on the way back from Fire Support Base Coral there was an American aeroplane, a Bird Dog, flying top cover for our convoy going back south and that was actually shot down and landed about from me to your car away out there. And I found out later that it was a very good friend of

13:30 mine that was piloting it. I actually saw him burn to death with a guy called Peter Douglas was standing next to me, but his name was George Constable and he was a fairly high ranking, well thought of army aviation figure, you know, very charming bloke George. But he died right before my eyes on the way back from Coral, and I'm sad to say he was shot down by some irresponsible

14:00 local forces which was like our side CMF [Citizens' Military Force] who were idling pot-shotting at him, you know and so things like that sort of weigh on your mind a bit, senseless waste of life, yeah.

When you were back in Australia before you returned for the second tour of duty, to what extent did you find the disparity between the

14:30 **reality of Vietnam and what people were thinking back here?**

People back here had an unreal view of Vietnam. They, movies started to be produced and, you know they started to see this overarching crap on the screen that they, you know human beings would rather believe

15:00 that stuff than believe the straight mundanity of life I guess so as film makers do, they always tend to over-ice the pudding, over-egg the pudding and so that became a reality to the public. The press itself made sure that there were, it depended on whose view they were taking at the time, but I mean if they were anti-government, the body count went up and that

15:30 and emphasis was placed on that. If we were winning, they tended to report favourably but it was a very fickle time and the press didn't do themselves any great favours I must say in Vietnam, because there was one pig of a man who was based on a Perth paper. He was an out and out liar whose name escapes me. I think his first name was

16:00 George but anyway he used to say that he was at places where I knew he wasn't, and report on totally fictional things. In my own case I was interviewed by, Ron Saw was there at the time but it wasn't Ron Saw who did the interview. It was, again it'll come back to me but I was photographed nursing a Vietnamese orphan child from this

16:30 orphanage that we supported and the story as it was sold to me, was that he was going to do a philanthropic story about how we get involved with the people and that. Well when it was screened in Australia it was, you know me scooping up bodies after an Australian operation, you know it was just totally over the fence, you know to the extent that he was banned from the Task Force as being an out

17:00 and out troublemaker and bloody liar, and that sort of thing used to happen quite a lot. There were some genuine journos [journalists] but the majority of them were a bit Errol Flynnish, you know, they wanted to be the headline rather than the story breaker, you know. And the egos of some of them was just absolutely sickening to a normal Anglo Celtic male like myself, you know, you could see these egos that were just

17:30 out of control.

How much do you think what they were doing and writing about affected the opinions of the people of Australia?

Very much so, very much so because I mean you had journalists writing for papers like The Melbourne

Age that's always been out of contact with the city it lives in, you know it doesn't understand Melbourne at all. You have old granny's Sydney Morning Herald. You have sensational newspapers, The Sun and that and it depends. I mean

18:00 the headlines reflect the standard of journalism all the time, they really do. You know you'd get fairly straight forward pieces out of news magazines like The Bulletin. They'd be pretty close to the truth. Sydney Morning Herald wasn't too bad, you know.

Why do you think it's so hard to get the truth reported

18:30 **in wartime?**

Because of the way that journalism is structured. You have different grades of journalists and the lower grades would sell their left testicle to get a by-line and when I actually quiz them and heard them saying, you know, "I'd do anything to get a by-line." You'd say, "Anything?" And they say, "Yes." Because it was usually over a jar of beer, and then you'd say, "Anything?" And then they realised what they'd said which meant including

19:00 tampering with the truth and if it was going to sensationalise their story and give them a high profile, then they would bloody well do it. I'm sorry, that was it. They'd do anything to get that by-line and they weren't a very ethical bunch at all and in fact I came to the conclusion that for every reporter there should be a disclosure statement at the end of their articles saying, you know, "I vote this way or that way," or, you know, "have a bias towards," you know. They're just,

19:30 something has to be done because I mean it's getting out of hand and you can see it yourself in The New York Times when people just invent stories. Well that sort of thing happens, you know and it's getting worse and worse. Ethics are slipping in all professions but journalism is a leader.

Going back to your opinion of the films that were being made at that time about Vietnam, what was it specifically that was so different from the reality that was depicted in the movies?

Well I guess from the point of view of a moviemaker they wanted non-stop action. They wanted

20:00 whiz bangs and noise and lots of blood and carnage and stuff like that. Well that wasn't the reality. Death can be a very undramatic thing, you know. It can be a single human being walking through the bush, one gun shot, bang and he drops silently, not a lot of blood, not a lot of drama but he's not there any longer, his spirit's not there and it's not whiz bang-ery like that, you know.

20:30 If it is then it's out of control and on the battlefield you can't, you know it's not the place you want to be if you can't control it, so that most soldiers who have been in action they, you know, I guess they used to watch 'warries' as they call them as a source of amusement. "Have a look at this dopey bugger," you know. And their amusement in turn would come from the chiacking and the comments would come from the audience rather than the action on the screen because it was just unreal

21:00 kinetic movement, but it wasn't reality, you know.

I think probably we all have images of what the Vietnam War looked like based on what we've seen in films. Can you describe what it really was like in the jungle, what the battlefield was like in Vietnam?

Parts of it were very much like savannah country Australia where you could actually see the ground from

21:30 flying over in a chopper. A lot of it was very thick, close country with bamboo forest that you just couldn't move through. I guess it was pretty much like north Queensland, you know going from the coast inland but where their rice paddies were, I found that very beautiful. It was very serene

22:00 and orderly and you had water and greenery and, you know bunds and animals and always that pervasive charcoal smell which I found absolutely delightful. I loved it when I went back there, to smell that again. In fact I'll get in the bath here one day and just keep it going all the time. Around the base of Nui Dat it was, the base of Nui Dat was in a rubber plantation. Now a rubber tree is not what

22:30 a lot of Australians think a rubber tree is. They imagine a rubber plant when they think of rubber trees, with big broad glossy green leaves. Well they ain't like that. I rubber tree is more like a little oak tree and they're, you know they're a tree shaped tree so yeah, we had rows and rows of rubber trees through which we put our tents. In the autumn you

23:00 would have the fall of leaves and crunchy leaves underfoot. You'd have little grey squirrels in the trees. The soil underneath and plantation was red laterite. Whenever we gouged a road out, the roads would be red, much like Australian roads so that there were collections of rows of tents and galvanised king strand huts, and the odd wooden building scattered throughout this area

23:30 in the middle of which was an airfield called Luscombe Field, named after another army aviator, Phil, I forget. It was something Luscombe, George Luscombe I think. Yeah so, it was much like a rather large bush camp, you know with an airfield in the middle of it and roads going through the rubber,

24:00 through which soldiers would come and go and curse the dust in the dry season, and curse the mud in

the wet season, and yeah.

You spoke earlier about how soldiers were sort of constantly wet. Can you describe really the conditions under which you were fighting this war?

Yeah well, the normal course of the day, I mean

24:30 you weren't always in action but the normal course of the day was that the average Aussie soldier would sweat and he'd sweat because of the humidity and it was a tropical environment. And he was encouraged to drink his six litres of water a day, whatever it was, which the medics later revised and said, "Well maybe we're wrong about this," you know maybe, because they used to look at the Vietnamese and realise that they'd exist on a level just

25:00 above that of dehydration. They didn't drink a lot at all. They had a lot of moisture into their bodies through eating of watermelon and fruit and stuff like that but they didn't drink vast quantities of liquid. So that a couple of our doctors used to look at this beautiful smooth Vietnamese unblemished skin and say, "Well hang on, we're getting a lot of rashes here and we're doing this. Maybe we're doing something wrong." So I guess, yeah the digger was ingesting a lot of his water and when he could a lot of his, the sugar probably wouldn't have done much good for his skin.

25:30 On top of that you had paladrin and quinine and all your other medications. The drug of the '60's and '70's was tetracycline. If you cut your foot you'd get tetracycline. If you had a headache you'd get tetracycline. Tetracycline all over the place and a secondary thing of tetracycline was it used to stain your teeth yellow, so whatever it was doing to your teeth must have been doing something to your skin, so that was the dry season. You'd be sweating. In the wet season okay

26:00 you just, you got wet. You couldn't do anything else about it. You couldn't carry an umbrella everywhere. You couldn't wear a plastic raincoat because it would make it even worse so for one reason or another, people's skin got affected. There was, you know red dust got into everything and really what you needed was a bloody good Turkish bath and a sauna, you know just to get it out of the pores of your skin, which is why they'd send the diggers down to Vung Tau to get into the saltwater and

26:30 go to some steam baths that happened to be round in some of the bars too. They were pretty well popular.

You spoke earlier about some of the Vietnamese soldiers having problems when they'd been coming back from being in action, what about the Aussie soldier?

Well, that was always a pretty private thing. I mean we didn't see them come back en masse to go to their families en masse, and I

27:00 know that there were troubles. I didn't have any myself in so far as any violent outbursts. I used to get irritated over small things but, and some diggers did lose it but there was a pretty insidious program going on there towards the end. There was a cell in the, and this hasn't been widely reported, but there was a cell inside the mail exchange at Redfern that actually used to write letters to

27:30 soldiers and their wives saying that the other party was playing up, and it was all designed to destroy morale. Now that has never, ever hit the papers and has always been vehemently denied by the postal workers' union but it was going on.

How do you know it was going on?

Because we had people telling us it was going on, from with inside the mail exchange, yeah and it was a straight

28:00 24 carat propaganda effort by those on that side of politics who didn't believe in the Vietnam War and thought the best way to go against it was by attacking the diggers and their families, and that led to some pretty bad consequences because when you plant the seeds of doubt and you're away for a year, I mean not like these bloody wusses going to Iraq now. They're away from eight weeks and the prime minister greets them when they come home. We were away for minimum tours of a year, thank you very much

28:30 and if a marriage is not solidly founded on trust then it's going to create a bit of havoc, and that unfortunately is what happened, yeah.

What about problems from the Australian soldiers being in action, did you see any evidence of people suffering from mental problems or

29:00 **other health difficulties?**

Yeah, I saw the results of a sergeant who went off his nut at, where was the ordnance unit? I think it was an ordnance unit on the northern end of Luscombe Field in Nui Dat, and it was at Christmas I think

29:30 where he walked into the sergeants' mess with an automatic and I think a grenade and just let rip at everybody and yeah, there were a few killed there, which was very, very out of character, being, you know fairly senior in rank, and he just lost it. There was

30:00 a young officer called Converey who was fragged by one of his soldiers. The grenade rolled into his sleeping bag and tent and killed, because he was unpopular. He was, young Converey was not a very strong personality. He was commissioned but he was a bit immature in my opinion and when they put him in charge of the platoon he

30:30 I think, without talking too ill of the dead, I think he tended to sort of use his rank more than anything else and the diggers didn't appreciate him and so he was removed. I think the digger who did that may still be in jail in Tasmania I think somewhere, yeah. There was

31:00 another driver who went for I think, manslaughter for driving in a stupid, erratic, very negligent manner through a village, and I think killed two Vietnamese kids. They're the ones that immediately pop to mind and I'm sure that there are others but generally they were memorable because they didn't happen all that often, you know.

31:30 **What do you think it was about the Vietnam War, about the conditions of that war that made it different from previous conflicts we'd been involved in?**

Well, as I mentioned previously the major difference was the constancy of the action, the use of the helicopter in and out of the battlefield constantly. The troops were being rotated through the bush all the time. In the course of a year's

32:00 average tour of duty, you didn't have much time to have a break. I mean there were no month long breaks as there was in the Second World War and I suppose to that extent even Korea was a bit more major unit and set piece because in a guerrilla war like Vietnam, it doesn't take much to make you stand to. It only takes a couple of guerrillas out there in the bush with a rocket to plunk

32:30 it between your tank lines at night time, and everybody's on stand to with all senses alert. You don't know what's coming so that it's a pretty effective form of warfare and very cheap to wage and it keeps your opponents on their toes and there is no front line which is why they invented the snatch grenade, you know I mean you went shopping. You didn't know who was armed and

33:00 dangerous so for all those reasons, yeah it was a very different war because it was constant and it, I can't say that it lacked direction but I think the direction was misguided. The mistakes that the Americans made were so

33:30 obvious to even the lowest of our diggers that it didn't engender you with a lot of confidence and I think that, I don't think there was a digger went through there that thought that it was going to be out and out victory and that we would march triumphantly into Hanoi. I don't think anybody believed that. I think that we all thought it would probably finish up in stalemate along the DMZ [Demilitarised Zone] as it very nearly did.

34:00 But like I say with the passage of 30 years they're all sort of learning the ways of the delight of a dollar and….

In your opinion what were the major mistakes that were made?

Well first of all the selection and maintenance of the aim, the first principle of war. No-one selected an aim and no-one maintained that aim because it wasn't selected. The Yanks did then what they're doing now.

34:30 They didn't' say "We are going in to do A, B and C. Keep it simple. This is what we're going to do in Iraq, then we're going to get out." I mean Colin Powell knew that lesson in the first Gulf War. He said, "We'll go that far and that far only and then out." Young George wants to avenge his Pop and there's a great deal of groupthink involved in this Iraq thing so that they haven't,

35:00 you know their aim has been to go in and create havoc but they haven't thought it through and the same thing happened in Vietnam. They said, "Now what are we here to do? Are we here to totally subjugate the country? Are we here to break through the 1954 Paris Peace Accord agreements and invade North Vietnam?" It was all up in the air

35:30 and they didn't have a direct clear, crystal clear aim, which you must have, even right down to sub unit level. Okay, "Your aim, take that hill." "When?" "By 0600 hours," you know simple stuff so that your orders can flow from there down to your soldiers but we were waffling in Vietnam and I guess, you know the Brits knew that that's what the Yanks would do. We

36:00 knew that they would probably do that too but we went along again but I think at that stage in the '60's the army was looking for a bit of relevance and there was, when I hark back, there was a real fear here about this domino effect. People poo-poo it now and they say it didn't happen but it was palpable then because China was very powerful.

36:30 Mao Zedong was in his 11th year at that stage, you know 1960, after the revolution and they were going. I mean from Australia's point of view, if Malaya had of gone and Malaya was already going through the Chin Ping CT idea, if that, and Thailand had gone then our trade routes out through the Malacca Straits were stuffed. We couldn't get anything through there if we wanted to and a lot of people forget about the geopolitical

37:00 consequences of these things. I mean it's fine and good to say, "We can fly it out." But you can't do that. You can't fly shiploads of stuff out in an aeroplane and you can't go the other way around the Pacific because it's just uneconomical, so it puts very real economic pressures on us if that whole chain had have gone. I mean Bunkarno was making a big problem there. He was allying himself with the communists as well until he changed his mind and then they went and slaughtered them all. So

37:30 it was a very volatile time and we had pretty good reasons for going but people have conveniently forgotten now. And all these guru's like the Alan Ramsays sit there in their ivory towers and say, "Well we knew." But they didn't, otherwise they would have said it at the time.

How did that sense of a lack of aim, impact on you as a commander?

I guess the only way that we could live with it is by insisting with the

38:00 Americans that we had our own playground, you know we didn't want to be involved in their larger picture which is why we said, "Give us that province there and we'll look after that for you." And with not too much trouble, that's exactly what we did so that most Vietnam diggers have to be reminded from time to time, even though the war didn't turn out our way, we never lost a battle, never, ever did

38:30 and we're highly thought of and we were very skilful and we did it very, very well indeed so that gives us that sort of grip on respectability that we all want, to carry on the Anzac tradition I suppose, you know. But had we been another amorphous unit working with the Yanks it would have been far worse for military morale and far more dangerous as I've

39:00 already said, because their tactics, even down to minor unit tactics, were just horrifically stupid. Starting off from the Apache forts in the initial deployment to Vietnam. They used to come to us and be taught movement through the bush. They used to have these patrols called LRRC Patrols, L R R, long range reconnaissance patrols, and they were trying to be like our SAS but it never worked.

39:30 And so you'd teach them, you know it's common sense, you don't talk, you use sign language. You don't smoke, you don't wear aftershave. You watch where you're standing, you don't crackle twigs and rocks and things and you move slowly and you keep yourselves apart by several yards depending on the terrain, so that if one goes, you don't all go. So they were taught all those fire and movement minor infantry tactics and things but

40:00 we were absolutely gob-smacked to see that some of these movement techniques that they were taught in the jungle, they'd get to where they were going, A to B on the map and once they got to B they'd say, "Righto this is where we're going to camp for the night," you know "it could be dangerous." So they'd point all their weapons outwards and fire off for a minute their ammo to mow down whoever might have been hiding in the bushes. Now Charlie used to think, "Gees I wonder where these blokes are? We'll just wait. We'll wait till five o'clock,"

40:30 you know, and then, "Oh yeah they're over there, okay, go get them fellers." I mean it was just that stupid. They had no sense of self preservation. Again, you know you've got to pull yourself up and say "not all of them" but, you know that was, it just happened so often that it was breathtakingly stupid things to do, you know. And you think they're the super power.

41:00 And then I hark back to a German carpenter, a young German carpenter on one of my first jobs as a builder, before I joined the army and he'd been through Russia and Europe and that with the Wehrmacht and I said, "What was the worst enemy you ever had to face up to, Hans?" And he said, "The Americans without a doubt." I said, "What, pretty vicious, good fighters?" "No, no," he said, "they would stand back for two weeks and just pound your positions with artillery until the blood was running out

41:30 of your ears and then they'd send in their lowly ranking Mexican soldiers to sniff us out, and by that stage you were so shell shocked you didn't know which way to fire." But it was just sheer force of arms, not intelligence or tactics and that's what they tried to use again over there.

Tape 10

00:33 **Can you tell us about Phuong and how you met him and what he was doing at the time?**

Yeah, Phuong was a young officer at the 10th Military Intelligence Detachment, Vietnamese ARVN Unit and he was I think the 2IC [Second in Command] to a wonderful Vietnamese bloke called Trung, T R U N G. Trung was the boss on my first

01:00 tour and he worked closely in with Geoff Bosco who was my predecessor at the Div Int Unit so that with my working in with the unit at Nui Dat I got to know Phuong and other officers. Geoff Bosco was posted home and Trung was promoted and sent to Hue and the aftermath of the Tet

01:30 fighting around Hue, he was killed, a wonderful feller. I remember we gave his wife, on the farewell, we gave his wife a kangaroo skin purse into which we put some Australian money as the custom goes, yeah. But so Trung was killed and then Phuong was promoted and became the OC. Now when I went back on my second tour I'd already known him from the first tour so that the trust and the interaction and the

02:00 shared humour and all those things, as best you could, was already there and so the working relationship was very good, yeah.

So what did you do together, how did you help each other in your endeavours?

All right, well he, because his unit was attached to the Task Force through me, it evolved that I was the OC and he was like the 2IC.

02:30 But with the division of responsibility obviously between the Vietnamese and the Australian Army but we all worked in as best we could as a one unit entity. Now I would support his unit in the provision of rations and war stores, such things as, you know sheets of galvanised iron for making revetments and barbed wire, paint even, you know

03:00 for their compounds where their families were. Their families lived at the place called Vanh Kiet which was a little army outpost outside of, the other side of Wah Long anyway, where the women and children lived. Now the Vietnamese army follows that sort of tradition where very much you have camp followers

03:30 because where they move, so does the pots and pans and the wives and the kids and the chickens sometimes, you know and because their support systems and logistics aren't as sophisticated as ours, that's the way that they live. If the whole battalion moves, then the families go there and that's where their meals are cooked. After having eaten army food, I think they might have the right system.

04:00 But anyway because his family was so close, he would very often invite me home and I'd get involved in, you know playing with the kids and it was just a little bit of home and he felt comfortable inviting me into his home. I felt comfortable being there. I found it was charming, friendly. The food was sublime and

04:30 it cemented the inter reaction a hell of a lot.

What did you two share in common that made you close like that?

Well we were doing similar work. We were doing the same work. We'd had similar backgrounds. We found out that we were both born in the same month in the same year, September 1939 so we were both born in the year of the rabbit and because he finished up having 11 kids I said, "Well that's a pretty apt sign."

05:00 You know and we could joke with each other, you know along those lines. We, you know it was very much a professional relationship with the odd visits to the family but that's about the extent of it, you know but it was always a very warm and trusting relationship and I knew that if I wanted some pretty sensitive stuff from what they call TTM which was their

05:30 DMI, Directory of Military Intelligence that I would get it and he was, he never hung back. I mean it was open and sharing so yeah, we became quite fond of each other and quite friendly to the extent that when he finally escaped out of Vietnam, and that's a story in itself, how he got out of Vietnam. He… Will I tell you that?

Sure.

Okay,

06:00 He was posted to Saigon when Saigon fell. The Australians left Vietnam in '73. Saigon fell in April '75 from memory, when the North Vietnamese came crashing through the gates of the Palace, and so when Phuong and his companions were being lined up, it was automatic that intelligence officers would be

06:30 shot because they were working most closely with the Americans and the allies. Phuong escaped it by saying that he wasn't an intelligence officer, cause he naturally got rid of his uniform. And he said he was simply a liaison officer. So he was able to fib himself out of trouble to that extent that he stayed alive. But they said, "All right but as a liaison officer you're not entirely guilt free in our eyes. You're going to

07:00 prisoner of war camp," or re-education camp, as they called it. So the re-education camp as near as I can put it was somewhere near Vinh, town called Vinh, V I N H, which is just over the border in North Vietnam, a very cold part of the country and he was given a bag of corn grain and an axe, along with other people, and a shovel and told to build his own compounds, which they did, and they lived on a fairly poor

07:30 starchy diet which he endured for seven years. Now in that seven years, his wife, who I used to visit at Vanh Kiet with his kids, had been taken over, simply taken over by a North Vietnamese as a commercial proposition. She was an excellent seamstress so he said, "You're living with me now, you're coming with me." So there was, it wasn't a love match or anything like that. She was there to make stuff and

08:00 sell it for his benefit. So Phuong was left without family backup but as most Vietnamese blokes did of his age group and rank structure I guess and having taken a big lesson from the French, he had a mistress and her name was Mhoung and she was very fond of him. She was a young professional lady in Ba Ria

08:30 province which was the capital city of Phuoc Tuy province, Ba Ria township sorry. So Mhoung took it on herself to visit him whenever she could and to take him tins of meat and bully beef and more rich food to sort of sustain him and she virtually kept him alive he says. A little tragic story there, that she

09:00 that's right, he couldn't bring her out with him because he went back to his town of Sok Trang where he grew up and was born, and they were all sent back to their place of origin after they were considered to be re-educated and the deal was that every morning at nine o'clock he had to report to his local police station,

09:30 and it was an open ended commitment. He didn't know for how long he had to do this which made any employment prospects for him very, very dim indeed because if he found work the bloke would say, "Well I know that you've got to go the police station at nine o'clock every morning," but you never, ever knew for how long. It could have been, "Oh you're here, okay, you've checked in, off you go," or, "sit there all day." And wait for them to do their bureaucratic thing, so it made employment very

10:00 difficult and he was a bit despondent. He was mooching along the wharves where the Song Nai River I think, one of the rivers anyhow, down in the Delta, comes in and he overheard this buzz that there was a boat going out which meant that they were going to make a break for it. As he approached the skipper of the boat he realised that he went to school with him so he said, "Hi, remember me?" And he said, "Oh yeah." He said, "Can you take me out?"

10:30 Told him the story and the bloke said, "Well yeah," he said, "but I can only take you, no other members of your family, you're it." And Phuong did a quick summation. He thought, "Well okay if I can get out at least I can get money together to sort of support them and all the rest of it." So he took that option. Now when he contacted me, my instructions were, "Look be very careful," you know, "we've still

11:00 got this thing going, he's been in their hands for seven years. They may have turned him." And I thought, "Okay here we go again, John Le Carre and all this stuff." But anyway when he came racing towards me, he finally made it out here through [UNCLEAR] and he came racing towards me over the parade ground at Wacol and I said, "Let's go and have a meal and let's chat and…" you know. Now his English was better when I knew him in Vietnam and he forcibly had to put most of it out of his mind while he was in prisoner of war camp,

11:30 because they just treated anybody with a high degree of suspicion who could, was fluent in any way with English. And he's still not back to where he was actually, yet he speaks fluent French because he, you know so our methods of conversation was English, French, you know and I don't know much of French or Vietnamese but we managed to make ourselves understood to each other. Anyway, I was curious about how he'd made it to

12:00 Malaysia and I said, "This boat," I said, "how did you get out of the place?" you know. He said, "We went down the river." I said, "What time?" He said, "Just after dark." I said, "And why weren't you spotted?" And he said, "Well," he explained to me that when the Americans bugged out of Vietnam, they left this very sophisticated infrastructure of TV channels from radio, Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, AFRTS which we used to transpose to be radio farts.

12:30 But because they have these TV repeater stations and TV had become accessible to a lot of these areas, they also had a stock of American TV film that the Vietnamese would absolutely love and the North Vietnamese lapped them up, and there they were sitting watching this brand new thing, TV. So rather than guard the river, they'd be all sort of glued to the box at seven-thirty and I'd say, "Well what was the program on at that time?" He'd say, "Oh," he said, "cow

13:00 skin." "Cow skin?" I said. "Yeah," he said, "Clint Eastwood." It was Rawhide, yeah so while they were all watching "Cow Skin" with "Crint" he was sort of floating down the river, you know, and getting out of there, yeah so then, you know that was it.

How did you come to leave Vietnam?

I finished the end of my tour and

13:30 I was driven and flown out in the usual manner, yeah they drove me to, where'd I go? Yeah, my warrant officer drove me out of Nui Dat to Luscombe Field in the middle of Nui Dat. They put me on a Caribou, flew me to Ton San Nhut,

14:00 transferred me by bus from one stage of the airfield to the other onto Qantas, Pan Am, I forget which now and home in no time at all. I was put in charge of a number of other troops going home. I remember there was a heap of SAS troops heading back to Perth, all of which had a ferocious thirst and we lobbed into Sydney about six o'clock in the morning and they said, oh gee.

14:30 And I was what was known as the draft conducting officer. I had to make sure that they all stayed nice, and they said, "Do you know this town Sydney, Skipper?" Cause they were from all over the West. I said, "Yeah I know a few spots." And they said, "Anywhere you can get a drink at six o'clock in the morning?" I said, "You've got to be kidding." And they said, "No we're not, we'd love a drink." And I said, "Well come to think of it, I wouldn't mind either." Because your body clock's all out of whack. And so the brilliant thought hit me, "The Kings Cross RSL opens early." And we went to the Kings Cross RSL,

15:00 all got squiffy until about midday when we had to join our flights to go back to Western Australia and Queensland, yeah a wrung out sort of a trip home. And again, you know just familiar smells and sights and sound and you just don't believe it, you know. You have peculiar longings for things like thin pork sausages

15:30 or a good old Aussie meat pie, that you just never, ever saw over there, you know, a good cup of leaf tea, cause all we drank over there was coffee, and it's a bloody terrible drink if you're thirsty, coffee because it makes you even worse, you know. So, you know little pleasures like that started to creep up on you but…

Was it as difficult the second time to adjust?

Harder, harder

16:00 yeah. Because the second time was more bloody I guess, yeah it was harder the second time and I'd changed even more for, you know if you talk to Jan, there was this, you know I was jumpy and irritated by small things.

16:30 And, you know you realise that it's not a very pleasant way to be. It's a funny thing. I s'pose because you want, you're in total charge of your troops and the reason you were is that you didn't want to see any of them killed, you became a control freak and this freakishness has never left you, you know. You think,

17:00 "If that's not spot on, then it should be and I'm going to make sure it is," you know what I mean. And it makes people who live with you pretty uncomfortable sometimes, you know when you want everything tickety-boo so yeah I guess, you know that's one of the facets in which my personality changed. I became an utter control freak. I'm starting to let go a bit now because having grandchildren makes you realise the utter futility of it

17:30 all, especially when they're dropping ice-cream all over your foot, you know, yeah.

Looking back on the Vietnam experience as a whole, what was the most awful experience of that time or the most difficult?

You know individual things pop to mind like the phosphorus kid with his burns, the

18:00 grief of parents when their kids bodies are laid out in the market square. The meaty like smell of piles of corpses bleeding all over you. It just smells like animal meat, like a butcher shop. The, there's strings of things like that

18:30 stand out, you know. It's like a slide show. You start to think and they just keep coming so that I guess it wasn't just one thing that stood out. It was quite several, quite horrific things. You know even that first instance of the kid's skull, you know they're things that you never forget. Some things are more shocking than others and you think well, you know how did

19:00 I handle it at the time? And you start to question your capacity for empathy and pity and, you know sheer humanity but one of the things the army's good at is to teach you how to hide this stuff, especially if you're in a position of authority and I mean there was one, I wasn't going to mention this, but there was one case after those 28 people were knocked over when they

19:30 started to sweep that ambush sight early in the morning, one of the VC got up and ran and he was chased by an armoured personnel carrier and hit as he was trying to jump over a bund, between the rice paddies, and flattened with the track of the thing. And one of my staff sergeants, when we were photographing the bodies, he was face down this particular bloke and Bernie

20:00 said to me, you know, "This one's messy, Skipper, how am I going to get a decent photograph of him?" I said, "Mate you're just going to have to flip him over." And as he did, the top part of his body cracked away from the bottom part of his body and that, you know, that sort of gory thing I don't like talking about because it seems like I'm trying to glorify gore. But I mean they happened, and you asked

20:30 me the question about, you know what sticks in my mind. Well things like that do. And I remember Bernie turning away to dry reach and me chiacking him as his boss, saying, "Come on mate," you know, "roll it together." And, you know trying to make light of something that's sickened me as well and because you suppress those feelings, they come out years later. You really have no control over that sort of thing, you know,

21:00 yeah.

And then the best of experiences, I mean I know that war is complicated sometimes cause there's really great things that happened?

The best of the experiences I thought were seeing another form of beauty. Seeing the country, parts of the country that were untouched by war, you know just the serenity of a lovely rural tropical

21:30 rice growing culture with their balance of aesthetics and religion and straight physical work. It all seems to be a real life. I enjoyed seeing echoes in the village life in the interaction of the people of what life used to be for me as a kid in Port Melbourne, where everybody

22:00 knew each other and that warmth and sharing between village people, I found utterly delightful and I could easily slip into that sort of lifestyle myself, you know. I'd love no complicated automobiles or mobile phones or all of that stuff and the smells. Their decorations, the simple delights they have in simple house decorations.

22:30 Where we tend to be stiff upper lip and a bit coldly Brit about it all, you know we don't, we think the display of ghoulish colours is a sign of immaturity and unsophistication, whereas they delight in them and so do the Italians for that matter, but we're all starting to learn slowly that there's nothing wrong with colour.

So that was the hippie in you coming out again?

I guess it was, yeah I just, you know I got off on that sort of thing and yeah, the incense and the charcoal.

23:00 Yeah, I found that their culture, I didn't particularly like the cities because cities are cities anywhere but village life and inter reaction with the people. The Vietnamese people themselves have got, they're very European in their outlook, compared to Chinese or Koreans. Chinese are very reserved, they're not

23:30 without the sense of humour but they're reserved. The Koreans are gruff bullies, very ill mannered people, but the Vietnamese I found were a delight, yeah.

Did you feel proud of the way you commanded your group?

Yeah, I did because I got on well with all of them. I think I only had to charge one bloke through all the time I was there and that was because

24:00 he did something stupid and everybody agreed he was to be charged but because it was, there were few officers. There was myself and Phuong and I think I had one or two attached to me at various times. We were thrown together. We had communal showers, communal toilets. We had one big tank shelter, the mess in the jungle which was our bar club where we had our table tennis table. And so

24:30 every night, you know you'd have, or not every night, but whenever you could you'd have a drink there at the bar. It was called the Huy Bin Club which in Vietnamese meant "peace" and we had all the hippy insignia and bound the bong sights on the wall, totally in your face. You know the hierarchy didn't like it at all, but and it was a bit like 'MASH' [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital TV Program] from that point of view. But yeah, so we would drink and experiment with

25:00 the odd bottle of Mateus Rose or beer or whatever took our fancy. And it was all cheap and we found it fascinating that depending on what drink you were drinking at the time would sort of dictate which way the conversation was going to go, and what philosophies you'd explore. So yeah, we'd all do that together and it was a way of keeping out of trouble. We had

25:30 the odd blue movie around the place. I remember that. I remember when this Task Force commander was a bit of a puritan. He came from a class at Duntroon that were all a bit anti this and he found out that the blue movies were fairly rife throughout the Task Force and that because ASCO, which is the services canteen organisation, used to loan projectors out to the units, he was a bit frightened that most of the troops were wasting their vital bodily

26:00 fluids in watching these blue movies sort of thing. So he actually recalled all the projectors and that upset the troops to no end, and he said to me one day, he said, "Where's your projector, you haven't returned yours yet?" I said, "No, I'm not going to either." He said, "Why's that?" I said, "Because I have half my unit is Vietnamese." I said, "This is a way of life. They, la movies bleu is what they've been watching ever since the French were here and I can't possibly take it away." So he said, "All right, in your case I'll make an

26:30 exception." Which was a windfall to us because being the only MASH type unit in the whole area that was allowed to show blue movies, we made a fortune. We were selling cans of beer to visitors at 10 cents a can extra, and the money rolled in and it was absolutely wonderful. And I came home one night from an operation

27:00 and we had blue movies in this blacked out massive big tank shelter, and I was late getting in, with a couple of other soldiers. And I said to the soldier who was collecting the money and the fees at the door of the tent, I said, his name was Slim Etherington. I said, "Slim, did you save me a seat?" He said, "Yes sir, front row, up to the right." I said, "Good on you mate."

27:30 So I walked in and I was ducking and weaving, you know to get out of the beam of the projector and they're all say, "Sit down you bastard," and all the chiacking was coming from the crowd cause my head was superimposed over this colour. It was a coloured movie and I saw from the reflection of the screen where I should be sitting, so I sat down in the front seat middle. And it was a colour movie of two blonde Swedish, gorgeous girls getting it off together, a lesbian act and one of them had a little gold chain around her belly and underneath her groin,

28:00 and a voice came to me from my right and said, "Al what do you think that that thing is that she's wearing?" I said, "I don't know, it looks like a sort of a martingale on a horse," you know, that goes on the front there, and he said, "Yeah." I said, "maybe, it might be a clitoral stimulator or something." And

he said, “You seem to be terribly knowledgeable about these sorts of things.” And as he was talking and the voice, I turned around and it was the priest who married Jan and I.

28:30 And I said to him, “What are you doing here, this is an occasion of sin?” He said, “Well I want to know what the blokes are talking about when they come to me to go to confession.” I said, “Oh yeah.” So yeah, things like that were sort of amusing, break the boredom.

So how would you have described your style as a leader?

Pretty approachable I think, pretty approachable.

29:00 I didn’t have it in me to be one of those officers who stomp around and is full of bullshit and show. I couldn’t do it. You’ve got to think of my background in Port Melbourne in the building trade, you know. I mean it’s just total anathema to me so that, you know reason and communication was what got me through and, you know you could talk to them and reason with them and…

29:30 **Were there times where you’d go hard?**

Yeah, you know that one case of charging people and there was another case where a group of them did the wrong thing and they were confined to their lines, but in each of those cases where you went hard, there was always a reason and they were not stupid people. I mean they were after all, intelligence corps people

30:00 and they had to pass an aptitude test and had a certain degree of intelligence quotient to sort of get where they were so they could always see the other side, you know. And for that reason it was pretty balmy sort of a command, yeah particularly when they had work to do. They applied themselves very well but, you know the ultimate accolade was that years after the war and getting together with, there’s one

30:30 lives at Bald Hills, one lives at Maryborough, a couple live down in Canberra. I’ve seen them all and they’ve all said, “Vietnam, the time that we all spent together was the best time that they had there.” And several of them, in fact the one in Maryborough whose the author of the book about the Coral, Lex McCauley, I think he had three tours, Lex and he said to me one Anzac Day, he said, “That was the best time I ever had with you,” you know. And it wasn’t that it was an easy time but,

31:00 you know it was a memorable time and, you know that’s my feedback. That’s what I get as feedback and I think well okay, I didn’t stuff up too much, yeah.

How did you talk about the experience to your family, coming home from the second tour?

I didn’t. I would answer questions. If they asked me

31:30 questions, I’d answer them but I didn’t go into, “Now all sit down and listen to Daddy’s war tales,” you know, no. I just answered questions as they were asked of me and I guess, you know that son of mine, Ben over there, has never heard me asked a series of questions like this, and I s’pose he’d be interested but when he said, “I would be interested in doing a story line on

32:00 what you did in Vietnam and maybe even making a movie of it.” I said, “Oh yeah,” you know “cool Ben, pour us a drink and I’ll think about it,” yeah so, you know. Yeah it’s just one man’s experience. You know what do you do? You can only answer questions. You can’t glorify anything. You can’t sort of make of it what it’s not because otherwise

32:30 you, you know you get to the stage where, I don’t know, truth seems to become legend and then that morphs into the bullshit you see on the screen, you know. You just let it go, you know and particularly after seeing the young people moving around Saigon that 80 per cent weren’t born when I left there, you think they’re not worried about it.

What was

33:00 **the experience in Singapore like?**

Again, very interesting, very interesting. It was wonderful in the sense that I had all my family there with me and it was a condition of employment that you had to have a housekeeper and you had to have a gardener and I thought this is cool, you know. That was one of the rules

33:30 that the Singapore government set down for the housing of the ANZUK [Australia New Zealand United Kingdom] Force in Singapore that you must employ gardeners and housekeepers. So that when I was given my house in Changi, which was a, it sounds pretty grim, but it was a rather delightful part of Singapore to live because it was surrounded on three sides by water, from the Straits of Lahore right round to the South China Sea, and you had breezes

34:00 all the time. It was a bit of a chore getting to work because my work was on the other side of the island but you used to drive through Yochu Kang Road went through jungle then. It’s not now. It’s all cleared and there’s bloody high rises. I went back, a terrible mess they’ve made of it, and they had fishponds and toddy tappers and it was like a Rudyard Kipling storybook every day to drive through the place so yeah, so we lived in a pleasant area and…

34:30 **What were you doing there and how long after Vietnam War was it that you were there?**

Well I left Vietnam in the end of ’70. Let me think about this, wait on, ’70, early ’71 and I went to Singapore in ’71 after a short break here in Brisbane yeah, and Ben, my youngest son was born up there, yeah, again passing

35:00 the wife in the passage, you know. But yeah, we had the housekeeping. In fact Jan said, “This is the perfect place to get pregnant. This is wonderful, tropical paradise and I’ve got help.” You know, so she could sit back and put her feet up and play the memsahib and have babies, or we had a baby. What I was doing at the time was I had

35:30 to quickly get my head around nine different sets of administration because my unit there was made up of army, navy and air force of Australian, New Zealand, UK troops so I had Poms and Kiwis working for me as well as Australians. And every one of them had his own baggage of administration, but our major task was the security of ANZUK

36:00 installations which included installations inside Malaysia because even though the Communist terrorist threat in the jungle was receding at that stage, Britain had brought in its policy of, “Let’s get up all our colonies east of Suez.” So they had this East of Suez policy which meant that Singapore was out but even though,

36:30 no Cyprus is west of Suez, yeah, so they kept Cyprus but yeah, Singapore was cut adrift. Now when that happened, the Russians, who were still prowling around the Pacific and the southern end of Asia, could see an opportunity of slipping into Singapore, a warm water port that they really needed for strategic reasons and for reasons of having their

37:00 ships serviced at the marvellous big dockyards at Sembawang there, so that strategically the Singaporeans didn’t really want the Russians there but because the Chinese, if they’re not and I think they are pragmatic, and there’s a dollar in it, they thought, “God what are we going to do?” The Russians had a very big effort

37:30 on Singapore basically activated through their trade commission and that was to gather as much strategic intelligence about facilities and personalities and all that sort of thing to, you know around the island to sort of serve their own purposes and our major task was to stop that happening. Now the Poms were on the outer because the Singaporeans didn’t like them. They’d been just cut adrift on this East of Suez policy and the

38:00 Singaporeans were looking for help somewhere and our unit was right in the spotlight so that we were able to, over a period of months, gather a bit of good evidence, photographic evidence of people passing documents to Russians and that resulted in several of them being sent to prison for 15, 20 years. And the Singaporeans are pretty heavy on that sort of stuff,

38:30 and I like to think it was instrumental in making the Singapore government realise that the information we had passed them through the internal security department was enough to sort of prevent Russia getting a foothold in our part of the world. And when you sort of see those sort of ramifications, you think well maybe it hasn’t been all a waste of time after all, you know.

Do you look at your career and think

39:00 **that now, are you sort of that philosophical about?**

Yeah I, the only thing I think I regret in my career is that I didn’t do Japanese like Greg Dodds, yeah because that culture fascinates me and I would have liked to have had a language as a string in my bow, but being the only intelligence corps officer to have commanded three units, I guess makes me unique, but it

39:30 doesn’t sort of further advance me in civvy life along the road to success. I’d much rather be able to sit here quietly and translate pages of Japanese for vast sums of money, you know, but…

Was it a satisfying career for you?

Yeah, I guess every soldier that went through the Intelligence Corps in those days I probably would have commanded at one stage or another because of the throughput. There were quite a lot of them and very friendly with most of them

40:00 and I look them up whenever I go to Canberra. They give me a call or look me up whenever they pass through here, you know, yeah.

Have you got a final comment on your war experiences?

People ask me if I’d do it again and I think I’d have to honestly say yes, because

40:30 hindsight’s useless, you know. I can remember feeling a hundred per cent alive because regardless of what people tell you, you know war is a buzz. It really is. It’s

41:00 something totally different to what you’ve ever done or seen before and, you know power lines and circumstances and whatever, they’re just different to whatever else you’ll ever experience in your life

and because your adrenalin's pumping all the time you think, "Well, hell's bells, I really know I'm alive." Whether or not overdosing on adrenaline's a good thing I don't know. I don't know whether

41:30 mountain climbers and abseilers have the same sort of post-adrenaline feelings that I have but in my case I'll never forget them, some memories good, some memories bad, and I guess that's the way it is, you know. You never, ever live at that intensity ever again. If you do, then you're facing occupational health and safety issues and it's against the law.

INTERVIEW ENDS